

Chapter 2

Reconstructing the Distant Past on Wikipedia: The Great Depression and the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Both the guidelines and the organizational structures of Wikipedia enable the active agency of Wikipedia users within the Wikipedia community. In this chapter, I examine the agency of Wikipedia users by exploring how they engage with history and contribute to the production of historical knowledge. Specifically, I focus on four case studies, four traumatic historical events that have shaped modern United States history and had a significant impact on the world.¹ My aim is not to analyze trauma as an analytical category but explore how Wikipedia users engage with history, while they write about a traumatic historical event. Trauma works as a thematic framework that characterizes the four case studies and advances an exploration of Wikipedia users' interaction with history. In other words, trauma allows a better understanding of how Wikipedians have been "touched by the past" – to borrow from Alison Landsberg – and how they produce historical knowledge.² The Wikipedia pages I will examine are the Great Depression, the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Vietnam War, and the September 11 attacks.³ In this chapter, I will explore the production of history on the pages of the Great Depression and the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, while in the next chapter I will analyze the Vietnam War and September 11 attacks. The point of that division is to show whether there are differences in users' engagement with history between the four case studies regarding the historical context of the event and users' lived experiences.

1 On trauma and history, see Michael S. Roth, *Memory, Trauma, and History: Essays on Living with the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Eelco Runia, *Moved by the Past. Discontinuity and Mutation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, History, Memory, Identity: What Remains?" *History and Theory* 55 (October 2016): 375–400.

2 Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 10.

3 See "Great Depression," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression; "Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki; "Vietnam War," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam_War; "September 11 attacks," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks

All four of these pages are part of the WikiProject United States History, a group of editors who are tasked with the coverage of topics related to the history of the modern United States.⁴ My study focuses mainly on the “talk pages” of the Wikipedia articles, as these “talk pages” reveal the discussions between the participants who contribute to the editing and improvement of the articles. As the sociologist René König has argued, “talk pages” constitute arenas where discussions about important Wikipedia issues take place.⁵ To make their action legitimate, editors make discussion posts while they edit an article.⁶ Thus, any discussion or debate in the “talk pages” refers to potential changes in the contents of the article. This means that I study the “talk pages” in connection to the main pages of the Wikipedia articles. At the same time, I use the “view history” page for each entry, which contains just the logs of all the changes (without the discussion), together with copies of older versions of the articles. The “talk pages” of the four case studies are very extensive, each discussion page on its own would constitute a topic for a potential doctoral dissertation. For that reason, I have used some samples of the discussions that took place in the “talk pages,” the most significant and representative examples, that reveal how Wikipedia editors perceive history and write about it. I examine users’ comments in their contexts by explaining their “source,” “audience,” “content,” “intention,” and “effects”.⁷

The goal of this chapter is to show that the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia is a complex process, in which Wikipedians write about history based on a combination of personal experiences, memories, personal experiences from the past, academic scholarship, and Wikipedia guidelines. Wikipedia editors do not just write about history, but they actively engage with the past by agreeing and disagreeing about history, reading books and articles, sharing their personal memories, giving justice to the past, and preventing the past from falling into oblivion. All these levels of engagement comply with the established rules and guidelines that I presented in the previous chapter and determine the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia. Of course, Wikipedians’ engagement with history is not stable but changes in each case study. It depends on the historical context of the event and the relation of Wikipedians to history. Therefore, I have divided the four cases into two chapters. In the current chapter, I study the Great

4 See “Wikipedia:WikiProject United States History,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_United_States_History

5 König, “Wikipedia. Between lay participation and elite knowledge representation,” 163.

6 Ibid.

7 For how to study comments on the Web, see Joseph Reagle, *Reading the Comments. Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web* (London, England and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

Depression and the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two historical events that belong to the earlier twentieth century; in the next chapter, I examine the Vietnam War and the September 11 attacks, two historical events of the recent past. The logic behind that division is not only chronological but relates to how Wikipedians experience historical events. I follow the theory of the historian and sociologist James Loewen. In his book on American high-school history textbooks, Loewen explores the time distinction in Eastern and Central African cultures between “sasha” and “zamani”.⁸ The former is the recent past, the “living-dead” past, which lives in “the memories of the living,” while the latter is the distant past, which is “not forgotten but revered”.⁹ Every historical event starts as “sasha” and then can be transformed into “zamani”. As I will show in the following pages, the Eastern and Central African notion that Loewen employed unveils the different levels of Wikipedians’ engagement with the production of historical knowledge. In the first two case studies, which belong to the distant past, or “zamani,” lived experience plays a lesser role, and interpretation of scholarship plays a stronger role, while in the following two historical events of the recent past, or “sasha,” editors have direct experiences from the past and try to make them part of the broader historical narrative.

The Great Depression

The Wikipedia page about the Great Depression, which began in the United States in 1929 and expanded worldwide, constitutes a significant historical article according to Wikipedia’s rating system. The article was created in 2001 and has received 11,095 total edits as of 2021.¹⁰ It was nominated as a “Social sciences and society good article” until July 2015 and has been listed as a “level-3 vital article” in History.¹¹ The article has also been supported by WikiProject Economics, the WikiProject United States, and WikiProject United States History.¹² The WikiPro-

⁸ James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me. Everything Your American History Textbook Got Me Wrong* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2005).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁰ Regarding the statistics of the Wikipedia page, see “Great Depression – page statistics,” *Wikipedia*, accessed *Wikipedia*, accessed March 11, 2021, https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Great_Depression

¹¹ “Talk:Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression

¹² *Ibid.*

ject Economics has rated the article as “B-class” on the project’s quality scale and as “High importance” on the project’s importance scale.¹³ The WikiProject United States has rated the article as “B-class” on the project’s quality scale and as “Top importance” on the project’s importance scale.¹⁴ Moreover, the page had 391,119 views in the last sixty days.¹⁵

The current contents of the main page cover several topics that range from how the Great Depression started, the reason why the crisis took place, the different theories that try to explain the Great Depression, to how the economy recovered and the socio-economic effects in all related countries.¹⁶ At the end of the page, there is a section that compares the Great Depression with the Great Recession of 2008.¹⁷ As we can see in the history of the page, the article was created on September 16, 2001, and has been edited up until November 2020.¹⁸ Apart from the textual contents of the page, there are also visual elements. At the beginning of the page, the main thing that the reader can see is Dorothea Lange’s photo, *Migrant Mother* (1936), which is placed on the right side of the article.¹⁹ The photo depicts destitute pea pickers in California in March 1936, centering on Florence Owens Thompson, a 32-year-old mother of seven children.²⁰ In the photo, there is only Thompson with two of her children, who are crying alongside their mother. The main subject of the photo, the mother, looks disappointed, desperate, and hopeless. There are also other smaller images that depict the harmful effects of the Depression. They show unemployed men outside a soup kitchen in Depression-era Chicago in 1931, a crowd gathering at the intersection of Wall Street and Broad Street after the 1929 crash, crowds outside the Bank of United States in New York after its failure in 1931, an impoverished American family living in a shanty, unemployed men marching in Toronto, and many other related scenes of the Great Depression.²¹

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 “Great Depression – page statistics”.

16 “Great Depression”.

17 Ibid.

18 “Talk:Great Depression: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Great_Depression&dir=prev&action=history

19 Ibid.

20 “Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* depicts destitute pea pickers in California, centering on Florence Owens Thompson, age 32, a mother of seven children, in Nipomo, California, March 1936,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lange-MigrantMother02.jpg>

21 For the use of images on Wikipedia, see “Wikipedia:Images,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Images>

The images coexist with graphs and statistics that present the US annual real GDP from 1910 to 1960, the unemployment rate in the US between 1910 and 1960, the money supply during the Great Depression, the Depression from an international perspective, and several other economic indicators.²² All these visual elements attribute different historical perspectives to the representation of the Great Depression on Wikipedia. On the one hand, the graphs and statistics offer a neutral and impersonal view of the event focusing on how the economy changed during that time, the fall of GDP, and the decrease in the money supply. On the other hand, the reader of the article is encouraged to realize the “devastating effects” of the economic depression through the affective practices that the pictures depict. The reader is not only informed about the Great Depression but is encouraged to think and mainly to feel the negative effects of the Depression on society and the problems that it caused. The aim of these photographs is not only to transmit the meaning of the past but to highlight the traumatic character of the Great Depression and create a sentimental relation between the past and the present.²³

However, the contents of the page have not just appeared in the main article, they are the result of broader discussion and debate between the editors involved. Also, the contents of the page is not static, but has changed over time since the creation of the article in 2001. The initial edition of the article in 2001 included only five short paragraphs, which simply provided an overview of what happened in the US in 1929, a short reference to Germany, a country that notably suffered from the crisis and which led to the rise of Adolf Hitler, and another short reference to the New Deal.²⁴ Overall, the article was inadequate, lacked detail and deeper analysis, and its prose was not professional enough for an encyclopedic article. Gradually, the article started to become more extensive and detailed. In 2003, its prose had improved together with its structure, which now

²² “Great Depression”.

²³ On the connection between history and images, see Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001); Jennifer Tucker and Tina Campt, “Entwined Practices: Engagements with Photography in Historical Inquiry,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (December 2009): 1–8; Michael S. Roth, “Photographic Ambivalence and Historical Consciousness,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (December 2009): 82–94; Elizabeth Edwards, “Photography and the Material Performance of the Past,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (December 2009): 130–50; Gregory Paschalidis, “Images of History and the Optical Unconscious,” *Historein* 4 (2003): 33–44.

²⁴ “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=340280721

included three separate sections on Roosevelt's New Deal, the influence of World War II, and the end of the Great Depression.²⁵

By clicking on the relevant “talk page,” users can view the history of the discussions that have taken place in relation to the article. As can be seen from the editing activity between 2001 and 2021, the article received most of its edits from 2004 to 2009 and 2013 to 2015.²⁶ The first discussion posts are not dated, but probably appeared in 2003.²⁷ The first comments focused on what caused the Great Depression in the United States, the different theories of explanation, how the Great Depression was expanded to other European countries, and how Roosevelt faced the crisis.²⁸ The first editor, who started the discussion thread, was Larry Sanger himself, one of the co-founders of Wikipedia.²⁹ He signed off his comments as “LMS” and wrote the following:

- (1) Removed “American” from “of American history”. Books are written about the history of the Depression in Europe . . . Wikipedia is an international encyclopedia – has to be, since it's on the Internet!
- (2) I cannot parse this sentence, so I can't fix it either: “It was an extended economic contraction that ended with the government induced World War II spending economic expansion”. I also wonder how widely- agreed upon this explanation is.
- (3) Finally – I'm no historian, so I'm just asking – was it the events in the U.S. that led to the worldwide depression? Is that widely-agreed upon as well?³⁰

Larry Sanger's comment prompted the participation of several other users on the “talk page,” who started to discuss how the Great Depression took place, when it first appeared, whether it started in the US or in another country, what the economy of the United States looked like during the 1920s, what the economic effects of the crisis were, and when the economy of the US started to recover.³¹ Some editors had different views on the Great Depression. For example, the user “mike

²⁵ See, “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=736595

²⁶ “Great Depression – Year counts,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Great_Depression#year-counts

²⁷ “Talk:Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression

²⁸ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 1,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_1

²⁹ For the debate between Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger on whether Sanger was co-founder of Wikipedia, see Dariusz Jemielniak, *Common Knowledge? An Ethnography of Wikipedia* (Stanford University Press, 2014), 156.

³⁰ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 1”.

³¹ Ibid.

dill” argued that “the events in the USA were probably the trigger for the depression, but not the real cause”.³² Specifically, “mike dill” pointed out:

The economic situation in most parts of the world was a real mess ever since the end of World War 1. The appearance of prosperity 1919–1929 was an illusion. Unemployment was high, a lot of people were poor, and most of the rich had money and shares that turned out to be either borrowed, embezzled, or worthless. The big crash was going to happen somewhere, and no matter where it happened it was going to spread.³³

The user “Jhanley” reacted to that post and argued:

I know little about the depression in other countries, but for the U.S. this is not true. The depression began to ease after the Supreme Court struck down FDR’s New Deal legislation, but after they began to uphold his legislation, the economy had another serious downturn in 1937 (I think). The economy was on an improving trend prior to our entry into WWII, but was nowhere near its pre-depression status.³⁴

Following the same line of thinking, the user “(DJK)” got involved in the discussion by sharing their readings and understanding of the Great Depression. (DJK) mentioned:

Someone who has read Frederick Lewis Allen’s “Only Yesterday” and “Since Yesterday” more recently than 40 years ago needs to work this article over. There is a great deal to be said about the extreme depth of the depression (25% unemployment in the US at one point), Hoover’s unfortunate attempts to maintain budget balance (which I believe he himself abandoned near the end of his term); the failure of the US banking system in 1932, etc.³⁵

The last two users disagreed with “mike dill” and offered different interpretations about the Great Depression. However, the discussion did not just aim to explore what had happened in the past, but aimed to change the representation of the Great Depression on the main page.

In July 2003, the editors started to express their concerns about the current form of the article, as it presented the Great Depression as a British Monetary Crisis that did not take place in the US but started in Britain and then expanded to the US.³⁶ Also, the article did not include an analysis of the factors that caused the

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ For the version of the article that existed on July 17, 2003, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=1169970

Great Depression.³⁷ On July 20, 2003, several editors started to share their disagreements about the then current version of the article and suggested ways to improve it. Specifically, the user “172,” one of the editors with the highest number of contributions to the article, argued that the article did not comply with the NPOV policies of Wikipedia and presented a right-wing view of the Great Depression, as it did not include any Keynesian analysis.³⁸ The user also criticized the article for its bias, as it did not mention all of the reasons that caused the Great Depression in the US. The other participants agreed with the statement of user “172”. One user, “mav,” responded to “172” and encouraged them to edit the article, fix the problems that existed, and to remove “the hopeless offending paragraphs,” but not to rewrite the whole article, as the work of other people would be lost.³⁹ Along similar lines, the user “FearÉIREANN,” who described themselves as a historian on their own profile page, wrote:

Having read the article I do not think the rewrite done is salvageable. Its analysis is so biased even Margaret Thatcher would have blanched reading it. It is so inaccurate and POV it is mindblowing [sic]; it is the equivalent of the IRA writing an Irish history article or Saddam Hussein (or rather his ludicrous war spokesman) writing an account of the war in Iraq. The version 172 reverted to is deeply flawed, by far less so than the rubbish which there now. IMHO we should use the version 172 reverted to as the starting point and work on it, incorporating from it the less loopy elements of the current article (I'm sure there is something in somewhere that qualifies, though a first and second glance didn't show up much). [. . .] This is to history what the X-files is to science. And keeping what is there now as a template would make wiki a laughing stock [sic] among historians of the period. Wiki has many many [sic] good points but its weakness is that some people, if no-one notices, can totally agendise an article to the point where it becomes a totally biased loopy polemic, whether extreme right or extreme left [. . .].⁴⁰

As the participants did not find the current version of the article to be sufficiently well-analyzed or the relevant details well-covered, they decided to improve the article by including a section on the causes of the Great Depression and presenting all the different explanations of the event in a neutral way. The user “172” wrote:

I've been working on the causes since we've rescued this article from the ideological hijacking. However, the causes section still requires significant work, along with every other section.

[. . .]

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 1”.

⁴⁰ Ibid. For the user's profile page, see “User:Jtdirl,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Jtdirl>

Two problems stand out above all. One is the lack of social history. Impersonal macroeconomic indicators don't tell us the whole story. Second, the article is Amero-centric (something for which I'm partially responsible).

[. . .]

If anyone's interested in internationalizing this article, I'd be interested in Latin America. I've already written a good deal on the Great Depression in Brazil for the history of Brazil article; [. . .]⁴¹

The other participants in the discussion did not disagree with that suggestion, so user "172" added a section on the causes of the Great Depression by mentioning the misdistribution of purchasing power, the lack of diversification, the credit structure, and the breakdown of international trade.⁴² Other editors, such as "mav" and "G-Man," also took part in the editing process by developing the main contents of the article, such as the introduction, the causes, and the responses.⁴³

A few years later, another important discussion thread appeared on the "talk page" of the Great Depression and this time focused both on the causes of the Great Depression and on life during the crisis.⁴⁴ In January 2005, some editors criticized the article for presenting only one theory seeking to explain the reason for the appearance of the Great Depression.⁴⁵ The user "Stirling Newberry," who also described themselves as a historian, argued that the article needed more work and the inclusion of more materials.⁴⁶ The user "172" responded to that comment by arguing:

You're quite right. One of the particular recent changes that bothers me is the insertion of "one theory holds" toward the beginning of each subsection on the origins, which can give someone the impression that these explanations are mutually exclusive.⁴⁷

Therefore, the users added the theories of the economists Milton Friedman and Anna Schwartz to the section entitled "The Federal Reserve and the Money Sup-

⁴¹ "Talk:Great Depression/Archive 1".

⁴² See the page on the Great Depression as it was developed by the user "172": "Great Depression," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=1173616

⁴³ For the revision history of the article, see "Great Depression: Revision history," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&dir=prev&offset=20030813181016%7C1285005&action=history

⁴⁴ "Talk:Great Depression/Archive 2," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_2

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* For the profile of the user "Stirling Newberry," see "User:Stirling Newberry," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Stirling_Newberry

⁴⁷ "Talk:Great Depression/Archive 2".

ply,” which was part of the broader section on the cause of the Great Depression.⁴⁸ The addition of Friedman’s and Schwartz’s theories is strongly connected to the policy of NPOV that I analyzed in the first chapter. The editors were trying to make the article more inclusive by including all the related theories that sought to explain the appearance of the Great Depression.⁴⁹

A few months later, a sentence in the main article provoked a reaction from certain users. Specifically, in the section entitled “the End of the Great Depression,” there was a sentence claiming that the President of the US, Franklin D. Roosevelt, had foreseen the participation of the US in World War II as a solution to the problems of the Great Depression.⁵⁰ In October 2005, the user “stu” brought this topic into the discussion by asking other editors if there were any sources that support this statement, because it looked “arbitrary and speculative”.⁵¹ An unregistered user, who signed their comment as “Kristopher Sandoval”, intervened in the discussion and suggested:

Though that quote indeed has no direct evidence, the idea that a war would boost global and United States economy was prevalent, and fiscally obvious. Also, through Roosevelt’s actions prewar, we can tell that he was building for the new war. The history books will tell you that we knew nothing about Pearl Harbor, when in fact we knew that the Japanese would strike by air . . . we just didn’t know where. We assumed that they would attack major ports in San Francisco, but the Hawaiiin [sic] Islands were a prime and simple target; we were caught with our pants down, yes, but Roosevelt had already started making a belt. [. . .] So in conclusion, no, we don’t have exact proof or quotes on that . . . but the circumstantial [sic] evidence is there, and pretty convincing.⁵²

This intervention prompted a strong reaction from the user “Trekphiler,” who found the previous response illogical, as no one could predict that the Second

48 See the version of the page, “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=9292546

49 This does not mean that we should not consider the several studies which have criticized Wikipedia for being biased, male-centric, Western-centric, and exclusive of “marginalized” stories. See Joseph Reagle and Jackie Koerner, ed., *Wikipedia @20*; Jemelniak, *Common Knowledge?*, 77; Elizabeth Losh, Jacqueline Wernimont, Laura Wexler, Hong-An Wu, “Putting the Human Back into the Digital Humanities: Feminism, Generosity, and Mess,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), accessed August 10, 2021, <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/cfe1b125-6917-4095-9d56-20487aa0b867#ch10>

50 “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 2”. For the version of the main article at that time, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=30066143

51 “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 2”.

52 Ibid.

World War would take place and contribute to the end of the Great Depression. The user “Trekphiler” argued:

we knew that the Japanese would strike by air . . . we just didn’t know where. We assumed that they would attack major ports in San Francisco”? Nonsense. The Japanese were expected to strike in Thailand (where a task force had been sighted), or the Soviet Union (where the Kwantung Army had been itching for a fight since 1937), or (just maybe) the Philippines (where the U.S. had been building up #s B-17s, unintentionally making a valuable target). San Francisco was never considered a target (except by racist California pols who arranged the unconscionable removals . . .). Nobody in DC expected a Japanese air attack; the war was expected to begin by subversion & sabotage, which is precisely why all the aircraft were clustered at AAF bases in HI – to prevent it. Get your facts straight.⁵³

Thus, the user “Trekphiler” removed the original sentence from the main article, which had prompted “Sandoval’s” earlier comment related to Roosevelt potentially predicting US involvement in WWII as a solution to the Great Depression.⁵⁴ This case constituted an example of how Wikipedia editors discuss the problems that can exist in a given article and try to improve it. In this case, the users realized that this sentence did not make any sense and most importantly was not based on reliable secondary sources.

Discussions on the quality of articles’ contents are common on Wikipedia. A related example took place in December 2008. The involved editors created a thread, in which they discussed the possibility of merging the contents of a Wikipedia article on the causes of the Great Depression with the main article on the Great Depression itself.⁵⁵ Specifically, the user “work permit” urged other editors to merge the two articles, as the section on the causes of the Great Depression article was very long and there was another more detailed article that focused only on the causes of the economic crisis.⁵⁶ Several other users agreed with that suggestion, as it would improve the overall analysis of the article and the coverage of the relevant causes, and it would make the two articles more consistent. These other users got involved in the discussion (Figure 5).

This discussion is a typical example of how Wikipedia users can reach a consensus and, therefore, decide to make an editing change in an article. As the edit

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ For the page after this edit had been made, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=30665272

⁵⁵ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 3,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_3 For the article on the causes of the Great Depression, see “Causes of the Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Causes_of_the_Great_Depression

⁵⁶ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 3”.

yes merge is a good idea. [Rjensen \(talk\)](#) 10:01, 1 December 2008 (UTC)

Support merge and summary per [WP:SUMMARY dissolve](#)^{talk} 05:55, 13 December 2008 (UTC)

- **Support** I think we definitely need to do something because they both fall under the "Great Depression" heading, and if someone is looking this information up they will want to know the causes. Perhaps if we provide a brief overview at the beginning of the article and then go into more depth under a specific "Causes" section. [Cajones \(talk\)](#) 17:34, 19 January 2009 (UTC)
- **Support** The section on causes in the Great Homeless article, while important, is disproportionately large and needs reorganization. The differences between the "causes" section and "Causes of the Great Depression" article is also troubling, and a merger would address this. However, care should be taken in writing the new summary, for it is vital that the basic information is well covered for the casual reader. --[Alex60466176 \(talk\)](#) 19:46, 25 January 2009 (UTC)
- **Support!** Definitely. It would help to keep the Great Depression article itself better in balance and eliminate confusion while giving the opportunity to confront and resolve inconsistencies. Of course, it will be important to ensure that the summary itself is in synch with the Causes article. -- [Will O'Neil \(talk\)](#) 20:49, 28 February 2009 (UTC)
- **Negative!** I think that it would lose something, besides where would u put the link to the causes? post to DCollins52's talk page ur opinion on this, im not signed in right now

[24.110.2.116 \(talk\)](#) 00:41, 29 March 2009 (UTC)

I'm not sure it is possible to provide just a short summary on causes of the Great Depression because of the complexity of the issue. Also, article isn't too long so I think there is no real need to remove most of the section. -- [Vision Thing](#) -- 21:04, 9 March 2009 (UTC)

I've begun by rearranging the article sections to mirror each other. --[Work permit \(talk\)](#) 02:50, 3 April 2009 (UTC)

- **Support** Though somewhat late to see, I agree with the suggestion. Could also assist in rearranging and editing work if needed. Drop a message in my talk page if need be. --[Eleman \(talk\)](#) 11:20, 14 April 2009 (UTC)

Figure 5: Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_3.

history of the article reveals, after the discussion, the user “work permit” updated the section on the causes of the Great Depression by adding information from the other Wikipedia page.⁵⁷ This example shows that Wikipedia users try to produce non-biased and inclusive historical narratives about the past and, in this case, to represent the Great Depression in a fair way. They try to do that by following the guidelines of Wikipedia and reaching a consensus about their editing choices.

As in historical scholarship, the present defines the topics of discussion about any historical event, and more significantly it provokes debate on what a historical article should look like. This is obvious in the construction of the Great Depression article. In 2008, while the financial crisis of 2008 was looming, an unregistered user commented on the “talk page” of the Great Depression article that a new economic crisis had started to appear. The user wrote:

This is just a discussion placeholder. But it will soon be a current event. The financial markets are unstable as the credit crisis is expanding daily.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ For the revision history of the article, when this discussion took place, see “Great Depression: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&offset=20090629055156%7C299257759&limit=250&action=history

⁵⁸ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 3”.

Another unregistered user replied to that comment by expressing their strong disagreement with that claim. This user wrote:

That sort of Chicken Little talk is foolish and insane if you look at any of the signs of what a “Great Depression” is. The foolishness of people seems to have no bounds. No part of the Western World is even NEAR a Depression.⁵⁹

This user did not agree with the comment that a new economic crisis was taking place at the time. Another participant then got involved in the discussion by agreeing with that opinion:

Agreed. That said I have heard media coverage of economists making statements on how the current recession could become a depression. It might be worth noting – with sources, of course – in the “Other depressions” section.⁶⁰

This third user, however, did suggest the inclusion of this potential recession in the section of the article entitled “Other depressions”.⁶¹ One more user then entered into the discussion, who agreed that a recession was taking place and criticized the previous commentators for having not realized how serious the situation was. This user argued:

You'll eat those words soon enough. Fact is the overwhelming cause of the GD was speculation on the stock market and people buying on margin. It was when the brokerage houses made margin calls that things fell apart and 1/3 of the perceived wealth evaporated. Checks and balances were put in place to limit the amount people can go on margin since then by the SEC. But . . . remember all the advertisements in the 90's about taking a 2nd mortgage out on your house at 150% of it's value. That is, in essence, going out on margin in real estate. The foreclosure notice is the margin call. This is happening RIGHT NOW. [. . .]⁶²

The discussion stopped at this point without any editing changes in the article, but a few months later a similar thread appeared on the “talk page”.⁶³ The user “Irpsit” brought up the topic of the ongoing economic crisis again. “Irpsit” wrote:

I would suggest adding a topic in this article, about the possibility that many economists predict that we can be about to enter a new Great Depression. Realize that a part of the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. For the version of the page at that time, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=243265955#Other_Great_Depressions

⁶² “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 3”.

⁶³ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 4,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_4#A_new_Great_Depression

thinkers predicts that recovery will be soon, and others predict that it should last 5 to 10 years, which then it could be called as a new Great Depression due to the similarity of changes. Maybe a list of those predictions and how the lifestyles change, would be interesting. At least this recession is already promising to last a few years if not more, in a quite more dramatic way than previous ones and with a powerful worldwide impact, unlike previous recessions.⁶⁴

This time, other users did not disagree with that argument; however, some of them did not find it historically accurate to compare the ongoing crisis with the Great Depression. The user “GreatGodOm” responded, acknowledging that many people were indeed comparing the current crisis to the Great Depression, but suggested that it would be better to wait to see if the current crisis would become a “new Great Depression”.⁶⁵ Another user offered a different interpretation of whether it would be appropriate to mention this new economic crisis within the article on the Great Depression. This user, “Mrzaius,” suggested that there should be a reference to the ongoing crisis, as any Depression constitutes a significant historical event, so it is logical to compare other related events with the Great Depression.⁶⁶ Another participant, the user “Bri bri000,” offered their own perspective by suggesting that the financial crisis was likely a result of the Great Depression itself, so a comparative study of both crises would be useful.⁶⁷ A very interesting intervention was made by the user “John Nagle,” who agreed that a crisis was taking place, but suggested that the Wikipedia editors should allow for more time to see what would happen, and then they could decide whether it was worth including this new economic crisis within the article’s contents. Specifically, “Jhn Nagle” mentioned:

In time there may be a rename. What we now call World War I was, prior to WWII, referred to as “The World War”. It’s too early to say. Usage of the phrase “second great depression” in reliable sources is picking up. [1] At some point, we may be using the phrase “First Great Depression” about the 1929 one. But not yet.⁶⁸

Finally, a few months later, on October 7, 2009, a widely-recognized editor, “Rickyrab,” included a reference to the ongoing economic crisis in the article on the Great Depression.⁶⁹ “Rickyrab” added the following to the page: “People have

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ For the profile of this editor, see “User:Rickyrab,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Rickyrab>

been taking to calling the current economic recession the “Great Recession”.⁷⁰ This claim was based on various online newspaper articles.⁷¹ In the following years, as the crisis became more evident, the editors further developed the topic; and, gradually, they created a separate section named “Comparison with the Great Recession,” which included a more extensive analysis of the relation between the two crises.⁷²

Present and contemporary developments force Wikipedia users to constantly keep Wikipedia articles updated. The computational social scientist, Brian Keegan, has highlighting this characteristic of Wikipedia by pointing out how fast Wikipedia updates its contents.⁷³ For Keegan, this is very innovative, as Wikipedia is the only encyclopedia that can cover the current news so quickly.⁷⁴ Thinking in these terms about history, the examples above reveal how the present determines the past and how Wikipedia users make connections between the past and the present.⁷⁵ By detecting similarities between historical events of the past and current developments, Wikipedia users try to decodify and make sense of any contemporary developments that have taken place.

In this manner, Wikipedia users have examined and re-examined the Great Depression in light of contemporary developments. The section “Comparison with the Great Recession” offers a comparative analysis between the two crises and, thus, represents the Great Depression in relation to the financial crisis of 2008. It is also worth mentioning that a version of the Wikipedia article entitled “financial crisis of 2007–2008” started as follows: “The financial crisis of 2007–2008, also known as the global financial crisis and the 2008 financial crisis, was a severe worldwide economic crisis considered by many economists to have been the most serious financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, to which it is often compared”.⁷⁶ As David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig have noticed in their

70 “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=318507259#Other_%22great_depressions%22

71 Ibid.

72 See, for example, the current version of the article, “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression#Comparison_with_the_Great_Recession

73 Brian C. Keegan, “A History of Newswork on Wikipedia,” *Proceedings of the 9th International Symposium on Open Collaboration* (August 2013): 1. See also Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution*, 219–20.

74 Keegan, “A History of Newswork on Wikipedia”.

75 On the relation of the present to history, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present. Time and Contemporary Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

76 That version of the article existed for several years, see “Financial crisis of 2007–2008,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Financial_crisis_of_2007%E2%80%932008&oldid=917966712 In the last year, the article has been changed and does not include that sentence any more.

survey about how Americans understand the past, “by revisiting or reliving the past they [Americans] could reinterpret it as they unearthed new sources but also as they experienced new needs in the present”.⁷⁷ This is exactly how Wikipedians engage with history. By looking at the present, they define and redefine historical knowledge and, therefore, keep Wikipedia articles up to date.

The users try to make sense of what happened in the past, express their historical understandings of the Great Depression, share their thoughts, and try to reconstruct the past in a neutral way. This does not mean that personal stories are not part of their engagement with history. In 2009, some editors expressed their worries about the way in which the end of the Great Depression was defined in the article. During that time, the main article included the following sentence: “America’s Great Depression ended in 1941 with America’s entry into World War II”.⁷⁸ The user “Jive Dadson” did not agree with the statement that the Second World War ended the Great Depression; as such, the user intervened in the discussion to offer their own perspective on the topic. “Jive Dadson” user wrote:

That’s absurd. It’s an extreme example of Bastiat’s broken window fallacy. The fact that people in the US were building bombs and bombers for destruction overseas did not bring prosperity to the US. How could it? Prosperity returned only after the soldiers did. Young men digging fox holes in North Africa and Europe did not improve the domestic economy. Ask my 90 year old mom. She used ration books to live hand-to-mouth while my father slept in the mud on Anzio Beach. Wanton destruction of goods and non-productive employment never have and never will bring prosperity. Perhaps the morons who dreamed up the Cash For Clunkers program read Wikipedia. If I sound disgusted, it’s only because I am.⁷⁹

This user challenged the argument that the Second World War had provided a final solution to the Great Depression by sharing their personal memories on Wikipedia. Specifically, “Jive Dadson” referred to the story of their 90-year-old mother, who used ration books to survive during the beginning of the Second World War. This memory of their mother seemed to contradict the version of the historical past that Wikipedia presented. In their discussion post, “Jive Dadson” also mentioned that their father had fought in the battle of Anzio during the Second World War, so it would be hypocritical to present the participation of the US in the Second World War as the final solution to the Great Depression. For this user, writing about history not only meant writing about the past, but also giving honor to those who suffered from the historical events of the past. Writing about history on Wikipedia has a performative dimension. For “Jive Dadson,” the argu-

⁷⁷ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 201.

⁷⁸ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 4”.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

ment that the Second World War signified the end of the Great Depression was disrespectful to the memories of their mother and father, who suffered from the Great Depression whilst also taking part in the war. These memories, even if they are not historically accurate, reveal information – as Michael Frisch puts it – about “how the past does or doesn’t figure in our lives, and what this in turn tells us about both history and ourselves”.⁸⁰

The user “Rjensen,” a historian, and one of the most avid contributors to historical articles, and the editor with the most edits on the article relating to the Great Depression, responded to “Jive Dadson”:

not absurd at all. Bastiat ASSUMES people are fully employed at all times. But what if only 80% of the people are fully employed at time 1 and 100% at time 2. That represents a huge jump in output. Furthermore some libertarians (like Higgs) assume that collective goods–like winning a war–are unmeasurable and thus unimportant. Observers at the time and since are agreed the American people placed a very high value on winning the war. They had a high priority on giving US soldiers the best planes, tanks, ships, uniforms, doctors, etc. They also had jobs and paychecks and could buy steak instead of beans. That’s prosperity.⁸¹

“Rjensen” challenged the argument put forward by “Jive Dadson” and argued that it is accurate to identify the end of the Great Depression with the involvement of the US in the Second World War, as the war increased the US’s demand for goods. The discussion did not continue, and the page still mentions that the beginning of World War II ended the Great Depression.⁸² The fact that Wikipedia users often share their memories to change how a historical event is represented is significant for how users engage with history and try to contribute to the production of historical knowledge, even if their memories are not historically accurate. Here, the concept of “postmemory,” as it has been introduced by the scholar of comparative literature and gender studies, Marianne Hirsch, is useful and explains the relationship between generations and traumatic events that preceded their births.⁸³ According to Hirsch, the “transgenerational transmission of trauma” is not based on a recall of the past but on a constructive process characterized by “imaginative in-

⁸⁰ Frisch, “The Memory of History,” 9–23.

⁸¹ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 4”. For the page statistics, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Great_Depression For the profile page of “Rjensen,” see “User:Rjensen,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Rjensen>

⁸² See the current version on Wikipedia and, more specifically, the section entitled “World War II and recovery”: “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression

⁸³ Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103–28.

vestment, projection, and creation”.⁸⁴ That approach to the past characterizes Wikipedia users’ relationship with the traumatic experience of the Great Depression.

In another discussion, an unregistered user shared their personal memories about how the government tried to face up to the economic effects of the Great Depression. This user created a new discussion thread just to express their own memories as a witness of the past. They wrote:

(Added: Dad and Mom told us children stories about when the government (President FDR; in order to prop up food prices ordered) kerosene poured on potatoes then dumped shiploads into the ocean to prevent them from being eaten.)⁸⁵

Though the comment does not make any historical sense, it shows that for many users Wikipedia represents a site where they can place their memories with the aim of making these memories part of the broader historical narrative. Wikipedia users appear to be “touched by history,” as Alison Landsberg has smartly put it, or “moved by the past,” as Eelco Runia has pointed out. Thus, Wikipedians try to examine and re-examine their own personal stories in relation to how a historical event is represented in the corresponding main article.⁸⁶ Often, as in this case, the comments do not receive any response, so the main article does not change. However, they offer insight into how users perceive the past and actively engage with it in order to produce historical knowledge.

In this way, the “talk pages” of Wikipedia do not only constitute an arena for editing battles about how to reconstruct a historical event but also – as Robert Wolff has argued – “sites of memory,” in which users place their memories about the past.⁸⁷ Users’ memories can challenge or confirm the representation of history in a main article. They can be historically accurate or not. They can influence how the past is represented in the main articles, but they can also remain only in the “talk pages”. So, why do Wikipedia users share their personal memories about the past? In his famous article on history and memory, Pierre Nora refers to the different kinds of memories that exist and shape our relation to history. One of them is the “duty-memory”. He writes: “The atomization of a general memory into a private one has

⁸⁴ Ibid. 107. For more details on the concept of “postmemory,” see Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After The Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁸⁵ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 6,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_6

⁸⁶ Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 10; Runia, *Moved by the Past*, xii–xiv.

⁸⁷ Robert Wolff borrows the concept “sites of memory” from the famous work of Pierre Nora: see Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de mémoire,” 7–24; Robert S. Wolff, “The Historian’s Craft, Popular Memory, and Wikipedia,” in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, 66, which is cited in Valatsou, *Ανάδυση νέων μνημονικών τόπων στο διαδίκτυο*.

given the obligation to remember a power of internal coercion. It gives everyone the necessity to remember and to protect the trappings of identity; when memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means”.⁸⁸ Nora’s “duty-memory” offers a great explanation as to why Wikipedia users share their memories about a historical event on the “talk pages”. There is an internal need to prevent specific aspects of the past from falling into oblivion. As the literature scholar, Andreas Huyssen, has argued, memory works as a “bulwark against obsolescence and disappearance” caused by the speed of age.⁸⁹ For Wikipedians, sharing their memories signifies a form of intervention in the past. The past appears reversible, as editors can change its representation on Wikipedia.

The media scholar, Christian Pentzold, has also studied Wikipedia as a “global memory place”.⁹⁰ For Pentzold, Wikipedia is a “global memory place,” where users can present and debate divergent points of view and produce a common knowledge that constitutes to the formation of collective memory.⁹¹ As he writes, Wikipedia becomes “a place where memorable elements are negotiated, a place of the discursive fabrication of memory”.⁹² Based on the concept of “communicate memory” and “collective memory,” Pentzold argued that Wikipedia’s “talk pages” work as the “floating gap,” between “fluid communicative and static collective memory” where different pages are formed.⁹³ Therefore, in the “talk pages” there is a construction of communicative recollections while in the articles a transition to forms of “cultural memory” takes place.⁹⁴ This is obvious in the examples mentioned above; however, as I will show, it does not only characterize the page relating to the Great Depression, but also those concerning other historical events.

Of course, Wikipedia is not only a site where people can place their memories and share their personal experiences. Wikipedia editors often look to historical scholarship; they read academic books and papers in order to make sense of

88 Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de mémoire,” 16.

89 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Past: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 23, which is cited in Haris Exertzoglou, *Δημόσια Ιστορία. Μια εισαγωγή* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις του Εικοστού Πρώτου, 2020), 117.

90 Christian Pentzold, “Fixing the floating gap: The online encyclopaedia Wikipedia as a global memory place,” *Memory Studies* 2, no. 2 (May 2009): 255–72. For Wikipedia as a memory place see also Jahna Ottenbacher, “Our News, Their Events: A Comparison of Archived Current Events on English and Greek Wikipedia,” in *Global Wikipedia: International and Cross-Cultural Issues in Online Collaboration*, 49–67.

91 Pentzold, “Fixing the floating gap,” 263.

92 *Ibid.*, 264.

93 *Ibid.*

94 *Ibid.*

what happened in the past and to produce historical knowledge. In 2013, a debate about when the Great Depression actually started appeared in the discussion pages on Wikipedia.

In August 2013, the user “Tfirey” edited the section entitled “Start of the Great Depression” within the main article, writing that even though the US stock prices fell on October 29, 1929, the Great Depression had started earlier in the summer of 1929.⁹⁵ This edit, however, lasted only a few hours, as the user “Binksternet,” a very active editor of articles related to history, changed the sentence to read: “Economic historians usually attribute the start of the Great Depression to the sudden devastating collapse of US stock market prices on October 29, 1929, known as Black Tuesday; some dispute this conclusion, and see the stock crash as a symptom, rather than a cause, of the Great Depression”.⁹⁶ Several editing debates then took place between “Tfirey” and “Binksternet” over the next few days and the debate moved to the “talk page” of the article.

To prove that their argument about the start of the Great Depression was correct and based on reliable sources, the user “Binksternet” made an extensive discussion post, in which they mentioned when the encyclopedia Britannica places the start of the Great Depression and what several academics, experts in economic history and economics, such as Erich Rauchway, Hamilton Cravens, Robert S. McElvaine, John Kenneth Galbraith, Dietmar Rothermund, Nicholas Crafts, have argued about the topic.⁹⁷ Thus, “Binksternet” concluded:

I hold that general mainstream thought accepts the Wall Street Crash of 1929 as the psychological turning point which signaled the end of the Roaring 20s and start of the Great Depression.⁹⁸

The user “Rjensen” also intervened in the discussion, writing:

I agree with Binksternet. The NBER series says that the HIGH POINT was in August 1929, with September and October indices slightly lower. That slight decline is not enough for a historian to date the GREAT depression. Something much more powerful was needed and

⁹⁵ For the version of the article during that time, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=569738663#Start_of_the_Great_Depression

⁹⁶ For the profile of the user “Binksternet,” see “User:Binksternet,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Binksternet> For that version of the article, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=569764628#Start_of_the_Great_Depression

⁹⁷ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 5,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_5

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

the great majority of experts point to the stock market crash in October. Note that the slight slippage found in data that NBER later compiled was invisible at the time but the stock market was news worldwide and immediately affected calculations and confidence about the future.⁹⁹

However, “Tfirey” then expressed their disagreement with this theory, arguing:

Why do their [sic] have to be ideological crazies who troll on Wikipedia? Look, recessions start at declines from peaks— it’s like car crashes, that start immediately following the last moment that there WASN’T an impact, not when the driver psychologically felt that he was in a crash. [. . .] The official authority on US recessions dates the recession as starting in August. Output began declining in August. That’s why economists consider the recession to have started in August. My entry notes the difference between what popular perception is and what economists say; your reverted version claims economists believe what the popular notion is, even though that’s obviously false and your own quotes indicate that’s false.

Still, you know what? Stay with your crazy little false story. Hey, what’s misleading the public? Personally, I don’t have the time or inclination to fight little ideological crazies.¹⁰⁰

Both “Binksternet” and “Rjsensen” responded to this comment by explaining their interpretation of the academic works they had previously mentioned above (Figure 6).

Imagine a situation in which an agreed-upon peak indicator hit its top point several years before a depression, then generally leveled off at a comfortably profitable place for many months before starting a big slide downward. In this hypothetical situation, that top point would not be considered the start of a depression, because following the top point was many months of good economic times. Also, after the downward slide hits bottom and begins to trend upward, people would still be experiencing difficult times, so a depression does not stop the moment the bottom is reached. This shows the fallacy of dating the Great Depression from only this or that economic indicator, and these factors are argued by economists. The Great Depression is larger than that; it is made up of many economic and also psychological factors. *Binksternet* (talk) 21:06, 29 August 2013 (UTC)

Binksternet says it well. The “car crash” that Tfirey is concerned with happened in late October 1929 when a lot of metal got bent out of shape....not in September when the first skid marks appeared *Rjsensen* (talk) 01:04, 30 August 2013 (UTC)

Figure 6: Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression#Start.

The discussion ended at this point, and the revised sentence “Binksternet” had added remained in the article. Even the current version of the article includes that sentence in the section entitled “Start of the Great Depression”.¹⁰¹ The reliability of the sources that “Binksternet” cited had enabled them to make the appropriate edits in the article.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression#Start

Engagement with academic scholarship and secondary sources characterizes the construction of the Great Depression article. In September 2015, a similar discussion to the above took place, this time focusing on whether a particular section of the article should be included or not. Specifically, the article included (and continues to include) a section on the role of women during the Great Depression.¹⁰² The user “DrVentureWasRight” disagreed with the existence of a separate section on women and tried to change the article by marking this section as inappropriate for an encyclopedic entry.¹⁰³ A few days later, this user wrote on the “talk page”:

This section seems to be really out of place. We don't really talk about the effects on any specific group or subgroup. I really reads [sic] like someone copied it out of a high school research paper. I recommend removing it from this page, although it might find a place on one of the country specific Great Depression pages.¹⁰⁴

The user recommended the removal of the section, which provoked a strong reaction from other involved editors. The editor “Rjensen” made the following comment, citing several academic works that have engaged with the experiences of women during the Great Depression (Figure 7).

Who is this “we” that does not want to talk about women?? Obviously some narrow economist who is unaware of the wealth of reliable sources on the great depression. Fact is the RS in many fields are publishing books and articles and chapters dealing with the experience of women in the Great Depression. In simple economic terms, since the job market was gender stratified, the employment situation for women was entirely different than for men. Perhaps the critic does not think that men should be studied either? or poor people? Are the political implications are allowed to be mentioned, about the social and intellectual dimensions? Movies? Family roles? Fertility? Try browsing: 1) “An Old Order Is Passing: The Rise of Applied Learning in University-Based Teacher Education during the Great Depression” D D'Amico - *History of Education Quarterly* 2015 2) “Population, Politics, and Unemployment Policy in the Great Depression” by M Cohen - *Social Science History*, 2014; 3) “The effects of the great recession on family structure and fertility” by A Cherlin, E Cumberworth, SP Morgan *The ANNALS* 2013 4) *Mothers in the fatherland: Women, the family and Nazi politics* by C Koonz - 2013 5) *The little girl who fought the great depression: Shirley Temple and 1930s America* by JF Kasson - 2014 -6) “Lessons from history: Surviving old age during The Great Depression in the United States” by SH Matthews, RE Dunkle - *Journal of aging studies* 2013 7) “Banking crises and mortality during the Great Depression: evidence from US urban populations, 1929–1937” D Stuckler, C Meissner, P Fishback, (2012) 8) *To Work and to Wed Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* by L Scharf - 1980; 9) “American Religion and the Great Depression” J Butler *Church History*, 2011; 10) “Women's work and economic crisis: some lessons of the Great Depression” by R Milkman - *Review of Radical Political Economics* 1976 - 11) “Surviving Tough Times: Saskatchewan Women Teachers in the Great Depression” by J Corman, C Ensslen - *Saskatchewan History*, 2012 etc etc. Rjensen (talk) 23:56, 26 September 2015 (UTC)

Figure 7: Screenshot of comment, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_6.

In this extensive comment, “Rjensen” references several academic works to make it clear that this topic has been examined by historical scholarship, and, as such,

¹⁰² For the version of the page during that time, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=680317484#Role_of_women

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 6”.

is worth including in the main article on the Great Depression. “DrVentureWas-Right” replied:

We is [sic] the Wikipedia community. Now, I didn’t say we shouldn’t talk about women. I said that it was tonally [sic] out of place in this article. We could have a section on the effects of various groups in the depression, but I suspect that would be highly dependent upon country and culture. We could also branch it off in to it’s [sic] own page entirely. That could work, but there really isn’t enough material here to make a good page. If you’re interested in adding in more detail [sic] then making a page like “Effects on Women in the Great Depression” could work well.¹⁰⁵

“Rjensen” then responded to that comment:

The GD is important because of its impact on people. These people are all males?? I think not. Wiki reports what the RS say about the GD. The material is from an advanced scholarly study.¹⁰⁶

The debate ended at this point. A few years later, the user “Rod57” expressed their agreement with the removal of the section; however, no editor responded to “Rod57” and the section on the role of women remains in the article even now.¹⁰⁷ Wikipedia users contribute to the online encyclopedia not only to place their memories or to write their own thoughts about history. They actively engage with academic scholarship, reading books and papers that are related to the topic they analyze. As René König argues, Wikipedia participants become experts through their contributions to the encyclopedia.¹⁰⁸ On Wikipedia, expertise and interest in a topic are strongly connected.¹⁰⁹ Wikipedia users start conducting research on a topic and become experts on it. By conducting research on a topic not covered in the article, such as the role of women in the Great Depression, the Wikipedia editors contribute to the growth and development of Wikipedia.

By following the academic developments of historical scholarship, Wikipedia editors try to keep Wikipedia’s contents updated and often make them more inclusive. Several studies have correctly criticized Wikipedia for its gender gap both in terms of contents and participants.¹¹⁰ The example above does not chal-

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ König, “Wikipedia. Between lay participation and elite knowledge representation,” 164.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Jemelniak, *Common Knowledge?*; Fichman and Hara, ed., *Global Wikipedia: International and Cross-Cultural Issues in Online Collaboration*; Tkacz, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*; Julia Adams and Hannah Bruckner, “Wikipedia, Sociology, and the Promise of Big Data,” *Big Data & Society* (July–December 2015): 1–5; Elizabeth Losh, Jacqueline Wernimont, Laura Wexler, Hong-

lenge these studies but shows that academic scholarship plays a significant role in how Wikipedia users produce historical knowledge about the Great Depression. To better understand this example, we should place it within the broader framework of how Wikipedia manages to face critique and ultimately become more diverse.¹¹¹ As Heather Ford has argued, Wikipedia should be seen as a space where battles over gender, language, and ideology take place.¹¹²

However, the efforts of Wikipedians to keep up with academic developments and Wikipedia's guidelines is not a simple process, it often creates intensive discussions and editing debates. The nature of the sources that Wikipedia editors engage with and accept constitutes a common topic for arguments and debates. Wikipedia users critically examine the sources that they use to develop a historical article. Also, their perceptions of the sources reveal their broader political and ideological beliefs. In December 2016, the user "Crosswords" edited the main article on the Great Depression and, more specifically, the section entitled "Economic indicators".¹¹³ In that section, there was a table that showed the change in industrial production, wholesale prices, foreign trade, and unemployment for the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Germany from 1929 to 1932 (Figure 8).¹¹⁴ However, the user "Crosswords," who wanted to show that the Soviet Union did not only suffer from the Great Depression but managed to increase its production, added the Soviet Union to the table by mentioning an increase of 85 percent in their industrial production (Figure 9).¹¹⁵ The data that the user "Crosswords" used was taken from the website "www.marx2mao.com".¹¹⁶ The next day, the users "Sagecandor" and "North Shoreman" reverted this edit, challenged the reliability of the source, and marked it as a primary source, which is not accepted in Wikipedia articles.

An Wu, "Putting the Human Back into the Digital Humanities: Feminism, Generosity, and Mess" *Debates in the Digital Humanities*; Julia Adams, Hannah Bruckner, and Cambria Naslund, "Who Counts as a Notable Sociologist on Wikipedia? Gender, Race, and the 'Professor Test'," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5 (2019): 1–14.

111 On the efforts of Wikipedia to improve its coverage of topics related to art, feminism, and gender, see Evans, et al., "What We Talk About When We Talk About Community," in *Wikipedia @20*.

112 Ford, "Rise of the Underdog".

113 For the revision history of the page during that time, see "Great Depression: Revision history," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&offset=&limit=500&action=history

114 For the version of the page, as it was before the edit, see "Great Depression," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=752041071#Economic_indicators Even now, the section has the same form.

115 For the page after the edit, see "Great Depression," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=753250524#cite_note-19

116 Ibid.

Change in economic indicators 1929–32^[18]

	United States	Great Britain	France	Germany
Industrial production	–46%	–23%	–24%	–41%
Wholesale prices	–32%	–33%	–34%	–29%
Foreign trade	–70%	–60%	–54%	–61%
Unemployment	+607%	+129%	+214%	+232%

Figure 8: Screenshot of table, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=752041071#Economic_indicators.

Change in economic indicators 1929–32^{[18][19]}

	United States	Great Britain	France	Germany	Soviet Union
Industrial production	–46%	–23%	–24%	–41%	+85%
Wholesale prices	–32%	–33%	–34%	–29%	
Foreign trade	–70%	–60%	–54%	–61%	
Unemployment	+607%	+129%	+214%	+232%	

Figure 9: Screenshot of table, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=752041071#Economic_indicators.

After several exchanges between the two sides, these users then created a discussion thread on the “talk page” of the Great Depression article in order to continue the debate.¹¹⁷ There, “Sagecandor” wrote:

Appears to be a primary source to some website: “www.marx2mao.com”. Further, appears to be same book as this [7], writings by Joseph Stalin. Is this really a reliable source for the Great Depression? Could this be an attempt at a spam link to: “www.marx2mao.com”? Do we really want to rely on WP:PRIMARY reference links like this instead of focusing on WP:SECONDARY sources for this article?¹¹⁸

For “Sagecandor,” the website “www.marx2mao.com” was not a reliable source of reference, as it was not only a primary source but referred to the writings of Joseph Stalin, a controversial historical figure. Thus, for “Sagecandor,” the website was a potentially biased source of historical knowledge that should not be used in the article.

Another editor, the user “North Shoreman,” an avid editor of historical articles and a participant in WikiProject United States History and WikiProject Military History, commented:

¹¹⁷ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 5”.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

I can't see any value in the additional source. There is no page reference and it is only placed after a section head. The person wanting to add it needs to come here and explain what info the source is supporting and where in the source that info is.¹¹⁹

A brief dialogue between the editors then followed this comment (Figure 10).¹²⁰

Thank you very much for your participation here on the talk page, [North Shoreman](#). I agree with you it is just a bare link. No book title, missing author, missing page number, missing year of publication, missing any explanation whatsoever for why the asserted cite backs up that info and fails [verification](#) to allow future users to verify it. What step to take next regarding this? [Sagecandor](#) (talk) 03:07, 8 December 2016 (UTC)

I've deleted it and invited the originator to come here for discussion. At this point he/she appears to be approaching a 3RR violation. [Torn](#) ([North Shoreman](#)) (talk) 03:09, 8 December 2016 (UTC)

Okay I think I may have reverted twice myself and so that is yet another good reason to have talk page participation and why I'm refraining from making more edits at this point in time to this page. [Sagecandor](#) (talk) 03:13, 8 December 2016 (UTC)

Stalin faked a lot of numbers. 1) Bullard 2000: "There is no person in authority, from Stalin down, who would not sign a hundred pages of false statistics and think nothing of it." 2) Skillen (2016) "Real facts, honest statistics, disappeared." 3) Marco Carynnyk, et al (1988) "Stalin announced at the Seventeenth Party Congress in January 1934 that 89.8 million tons of grain had been produced in 1933. The State Statistical Commission has recently calculated that the true figure was 68.4 million tons." [Rjensen](#) (talk) 04:18, 8 December 2016 (UTC)

Wow. That is very revealing information from those sources. Thank you ! [Sagecandor](#) (talk) 04:23, 8 December 2016 (UTC)

Figure 10: Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_5.

As shown above, the user “Rjensen” joined in the debate, arguing that a work written by Joseph Stalin could not be taken as reliable, as he “faked a lot of numbers” to misrepresent the Soviet Union’s economic situation.¹²¹ This comment prompted a reaction from the user “Crosswords,” who had originally made the edit and added the Soviet Union to the table. The subsequent exchange between “Crosswords” and “Rjensen” can be seen here (Figure 11).¹²²

yet you cant back up your own claims Rjensen with these accusations against Stalin. Fact is that the Soviet Union wasnt effected by the global financial crisis and under his lead the Soviet Union became an industrialized nation this is common knowledge that you can find everywhere in the west.—[Crosswords](#) (talk) 01:56, 12 December 2016 (UTC)

even the Russians today agree Stalin faked a lot of numbers. [Rjensen](#) (talk) 02:12, 12 December 2016 (UTC)

Figure 11: Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_5.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. For the profile page of this user, see “User:North Shoreman,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:North_Shoreman

¹²⁰ “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 5”.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

The discussion ended at this point, as the involved editors had reached a consensus. The article on the Great Depression did not change anymore, as the users reverted the edit and erased the contribution of “Crosswords”. The “sociotechnical” framework of Wikipedia with its specific guidelines and policies determines the agency and the editing activity of Wikipedians.¹²³ As Sabine Niederer and José van Dijck have argued, it is not only the human agency but “the technological tools and managerial dynamics that structure and maintain its contents”.¹²⁴

As shown above, different types of knowledge blend together on the talk pages. Personal memories, theory, historiography, guidelines, and policies characterize Wikipedians’ engagement with history and, in this case, came to define the construction of the Great Depression article. Academic scholarship and compliance with Wikipedia’s protocols and guidelines, however, also play an important role in this process. Personal experiences are limited and do not necessarily come from the Wikipedia editors themselves but from their ancestors (grandparents). These place out in the background of the article, on the “talk pages,” and do not determine the contents of the main article. As Eelco Runia has written, for a generation that has not participated in a traumatic event, commemoration or – in this case – writing about it means to deal with the absence of memories.¹²⁵ Wikipedians approach and perceive the Great Depression as a distant past, a “*zamani*,” which does not belong to the space of experience but to the space of historical scholarship. For this reason, the engagement with academic developments marks the interaction of Wikipedians with the history of the Great Depression.

The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

The Wikipedia page about the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was created in 2004 as a merge of two separate articles on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹²⁶ The page has received 8,582 edits from 2004 to January 2001 and has 573,375 views in the last sixty days.¹²⁷ The “talk page” mentions that the contents of the

¹²³ For the term “sociotechnical” system, as it relates to Wikipedia, see Niederer and van Dijck, “Wisdom of the Crowd or technicity of the content?” For “social interface,” see also Jonah Bosse-witch, John Frankfurt, and Alexander Sherman, with Robin D. G. Kelley, “Wiki Justice, Social Ergonomics, and Ethical Collaborations,” in *Wiki Writing*, 52.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1368.

¹²⁵ Runia, *Moved by the Past*, 12.

¹²⁶ Regarding the statistics of the page, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – page statistics,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

article are controversial, so some contents may be in dispute.¹²⁸ The article has been rated as a “warfare good article” and has been listed as a “level-4 vital article in History”.¹²⁹ The article has appeared in the top 25 reports two times, which means that the article was among the 25 most popular articles of the week.¹³⁰ Furthermore, it is a “featured topic,” namely a good quality collection of inter-related articles, in the History of the Manhattan Project series.¹³¹ Several WikiProjects have contributed to the development of the page, such as the WikiProject Japan, the WikiProject Military History, the WikiProject United States History, the WikiProject United States, the WikiProject Death, and the WikiProject Environment.¹³² In all these projects, the article is rated as an A-Class article.¹³³ The article had also been the subject of an academic course assignment supported by the Wiki Education Foundation.¹³⁴ The course was titled “Human Rights in Global History” and was taught at the Xavier University of Louisiana in the fall semester of 2018.¹³⁵ This collaboration between Wikipedia and academia constitutes a broader effort by Wikipedia to improve its contents and deal with the issues of equity, policy, and the lack of new Wikipedians.¹³⁶

The main article includes multiple sections on the background information of the bombings, the preparations, analysis of the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the surrender of Japan and the subsequent occupation, post-attack causali-

128 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki

129 Ibid.

130 Ibid. For the top 25 report, see “Wikipedia:Top 25 Report,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Top_25_Report

131 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki”. For the featured topics of the History of the Manhattan Project, see “Wikipedia:Featured topics/History of the Manhattan Project,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_topics/History_of_the_Manhattan_Project For what is a “featured topic,” see “Wikipedia:Featured topics,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_topics

132 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki”.

133 Ibid.

134 Ibid.

135 For the course, see “Wikipedia:Wiki Ed/Xavier University of Louisiana/Human Rights in Global History -02 (Fall 2018),” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wiki_Ed/Xavier_University_of_Louisiana/Human_Rights_in_Global_History_-02_\(Fall_2018\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wiki_Ed/Xavier_University_of_Louisiana/Human_Rights_in_Global_History_-02_(Fall_2018))

136 For the collaboration between Wikipedia and universities, see Ramjohn and Davis, “Equity, Policy, and Newcomers,” in *Wikipedia @20*; Cummings, “The First Twenty Years of Teaching with Wikipedia,” in *Wikipedia @20*.

ties, memorials, debates over the bombings, etc.¹³⁷ The page consists of visual items, such as maps, documents, US army propaganda posters, leaflets dropped on Japan, and images that depict air raids on Japan and the casualties of the bombings, their subsequent effects on both people and the environment, and the memorials in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹³⁸ Apart from the images, it is interesting that the page also includes three short pieces of footage, which show the Hiroshima ruins and survivors with burns and scars.¹³⁹ Another significant element of the page is a voice recording of President Harry S. Truman, in which he talks about the bombings of Hiroshima and describes it as a “military base”.¹⁴⁰ All these textual, visual, and audio elements offer high quality coverage of the bombings according to Wikipedia’s assessment criteria.

By looking behind the curtain, we can see that extensive debates have taken place between Wikipedia editors in relation to the main article. Several discussions have appeared on the “talk page” since the article’s initial creation. These discussions about the atomic bombings are longer than those related to the Great Depression. Here, I will focus only on the most significant and extensive discussions, as they led to more and more users taking part and contributing to the development of the page.

The first and the most important topic, with which the involved editors engaged, was the broader character of the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many participants were trying to make sense whether the atomic bombs were crimes against humanity or not, as Japan was ready to surrender, or if the bombings were terrorist attacks against the Japanese people, or genocides or massacres, or if they ultimately saved thousands of lives by ending the war. All these different points of view caused debates and conflicts between the participants.

Since the creation of the page in June 2004, the article has included a section named “Debate over the decision to drop the bombs,” in which different views on the atomic bombs have been analyzed.¹⁴¹ The section mentions that for some historians the bombs prompted the surrender of Japan, while for others, Japan was already defeated, so the bombings were not necessary, or Japan was willing to surrender but the US aimed for unconditional surrender, or the US had hidden

¹³⁷ “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ For the version of the page during that time, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=4050940

motives in dropping the bombs.¹⁴² That version of the page was created mainly by the editor “Iseeaboar”.¹⁴³ In July 2004, some users created a discussion thread on the “talk page” and started to discuss whether the bombings led to the surrender of Japan or if Japan would have surrendered even without the bombings.¹⁴⁴ The discussion started when a user claimed that there is a debate between historians on whether the second atomic bombing should have been dropped.¹⁴⁵ Specifically, an anonymous user cited a link from the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, which is no longer available, to show this debate between historians about the atomic bombs.¹⁴⁶ That comment triggered the participation of other users in the discussion, who shared their own understandings of this historical event. The users mentioned different theories about the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and discussed potential “what ifs” to better understand what had happened in the past.¹⁴⁷

However, their comments did not aim to provoke any substantial editing of the article, as the article already included a section on the existing debates about the atomic bombings. The users just felt the need to discuss all the possible scenarios by conducting their own secondary research and finding secondary sources to support their arguments. The involved users shared their own beliefs about why the US dropped the atomic bombs. Their goal was not to impose their own findings and explanations on other users. Instead, they aimed to develop the section on the debates further by providing a more detailed analysis with more sources.¹⁴⁸ In the next days, the users added more details to the section by adding several sources that supported their different theories.¹⁴⁹ Gradually, the discus-

142 Ibid.

143 For the revision history of the page, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&dir=prev&limit=500&action=history

144 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 1,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_1

145 Ibid.

146 Ibid. The link was, most likely, to the following and refers to a review of the book, *The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb*, written by Dennis D. Wainstock, https://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/schrag/wiki/index.php?title=The_Decision_to_Drop_the_Atomic_Bomb

147 For the “what if” in history, see Richard J. Evans, *Altered Pasts. Counterfactuals in History* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013); Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (New York, NY: Books Groups, 1999).

148 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 1”.

149 See the related edits in the revision history of the page: “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/>

sion contributed to the overall development of the section, as the editors created two separate subsections, “Opposition to use of atomic bombs” and “Support for use of atomic bombs”.¹⁵⁰ The two subsections included extensive lists of those figures who supported or opposed the use of atomic bombs with specific references to their works and arguments. In the subsection “Opposition to use of atomic bombs,” there was a reference to the argument that the atomic bombs have been considered as “crimes against humanity,” “war crimes,” and “acts of terrorism”.¹⁵¹

Some months later, in January 2005, a new discussion thread appeared in which some users expressed their disagreement with the statement that the atomic bombings were “acts of terrorism”.¹⁵² Specifically, the user “Philip Baird Shearer” wrote:

and some people think that “it’s turtles all the way down”. This is a classic weasel worded sentence. Is there any agreement that in a declared war during the middle of the 20th century that states could commit terrorism against the enemy, because any military action against an enemy could be construed to be an attempt to terrorise [sic] them. Was there any legal definition in this area as to degree or type of action as to what constituted state terrorism in 1945?¹⁵³

The comment of this user prompted a reaction from another user, “Silverback,” who argued:

If there was a definition of terrorism during war at the time, the Atomic bombings would fit it. The intent was to end the war through terror. It wasn’t the military damage done at Hiroshima and Nagasaki that ended the war. It was terrorism and a war crime and justified in the minds of those that ordered it, and probably even justifiable today although lack of respect for international law leaves it unamended to accomodate [sic] for such justifiable terror. Nagasaki though is more difficult to justify.¹⁵⁴

Another user then got involved in the discussion and expressed their strong opposition to the use of the word “terrorism” to describe the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This user, “Noel,” wrote:

index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&dir=prev&limit=500&action=history

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, that version of the page, “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=7153551#Debate_over_the_decision_to_drop_the_bombs

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 3,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_3

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

The goal of terrorism (to the extent it has one – it's often just plain nihilism) is to induce psychological changes in the target population. That was not, AFAIK, the main goal of the atomic bombings, as much as they had any explicitly stated goals, other than furthering the surrender of Japan. I just had a 30-minute look through my reasonably extensive collection of books on the subject of the bombings, but I can't find anything on what explicit goals the US had – can you point to any?¹⁵⁵

The debate continued (Figure 12).

A willingness to "surrender" is quite a psychological change in this particular target population. It destroyed any heroic visions of resistance to a long siege of their island, they weren't to be allowed that honor, they were to be incinerated like rats by a flame thrower. An offshore demonstration would have been spectacular, but might have left doubt about our moral willingness to use it. The Japanese were not afraid of fire bombings anymore, they thought their fire breaks prepared them to survive them. Perhaps the second bomb was to create in their minds the impression that they might not have the time to formulate a strategy for continuing the resistance against this weapon. Ashes can't think.--
Silverback 00:37, 7 Jan 2005 (UTC)

But it wasn't the population as a whole who were resisting surrender; rather, it was mostly the Army.

Your comments, while certainly colourful, don't answer my question: other than (overall) furthering the surrender of Japan, do you know of any documentation of exactly what the explicit goals of the US were in dropping the bombs? i.e. any details on how they hoped the bombings would accomplish this goal? I was rather surprised that I couldn't find anything on this point, despite a search. One would think that people getting ready to deploy a new weapon would have considered what it would bring them. Noel (talk) 01:19, 7 Jan 2005 (UTC)

Well, I have heard military targets cited retrospectively. The population as a whole was preparing to resist attack, with mobilized women and children training to kill with farm implements if need be. U.S. leadership definitely expected the dropping of the bombs would lead to surrender, it is a safe assumption that they did not think they had completely destroyed any capability that Japan had to resist. The dropping of the bombs was terrorism and the mass-murder of innocents, and quite possibly justified by the usual means, net lives saved. Frankly, as someone (now reformed), responsible for the taking of far more innocent lives myself, I think the atomic and fire bombings are overemphasized. I have knowingly voted for Senators, representatives and a president who supported the Food and Drug Administration, so I bear personal responsibility, undiminished by the anonymity of the secret ballot, for the million plus innocent lives lost by delaying access to life saving drugs such as beta blockers and clot busters (i.e. TPA and streptokinase). I've long viewed myself and most others as mass-murderers. By the time the leadership was making the decision to drop these bombs, they were already responsible for the deaths of over 500,000 innocent american civilians who were conscripted, frankly, what are a few "foreigners" after that? I doubt there was much moral hand wringing, and things have arguably turned out for the best, unless one considers the moral outrage at the use of atomic weapons may have contributed to the failure to use them to bring a pre-emptive end to the cold war and the 10s of millions of lives it cost.--
Silverback 08:18, 7 Jan 2005 (UTC)

Figure 12: Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_3.

As the discussion comments reveal, even though the article follows the policy of NPOV and refers to the theory that views the atomic bombings as terrorist attacks, users intervened in the discussion to share their own historical understandings and their beliefs about what had happened. These users made historical arguments to enable their own perceptions of the past to become part of the main article. For this reason, the discussions about the atomic bombings and the concept of terrorism continued, with various users citing legal precedents from the period, the Nuremberg charter, the Hague Convention, the resolutions of the League of Nations, and the General Assembly of the United Nations, to support

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

their arguments and persuade the involved editors to change the main article.¹⁵⁶ These discussions and debates between the users continued over several days; however, they did not lead to any substantial editing changes being made to the article itself.

The policy of NPOV motivates Wikipedia users to actively write about history and cover all the possible points of view about a historical event. This idea is confirmed on the “talk page” of that article. Users try to shed light on all possible aspects of the past and provide a balanced historical narrative about a traumatic event. However, to integrate all historical points of view, users should also seek out secondary sources, make reliable historical arguments, and try to convince other editors that their points are worth including in the main article.

A few months later, in August 2005, a similar discussion appeared on the “talk page,” when the user “Uncle Ed,” a regular contributor to Wikipedia, who has also served as a Mediator, an Admin, and a Bureaucrat on Wikipedia, cited an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, which argued that, as a Japanese attack was expected, the dropping of the atomic bombs resulted in the least possible number of casualties that any attack could have had.¹⁵⁷ The user shared that argument with the aim of making it part of the relevant section on the theories in support of the atomic bombings. As the user clarified, they did not mean to suggest that the main article should adopt that theory, but rather that it should incorporate it as an existing point of view.

That comment provoked several other responses, most of which found the idea that a Japanese invasion was expected to be extremely problematic (Figure 13).¹⁵⁸ As shown above, the user challenged the idea that an invasion of Japan was “expected” and, therefore, that the atomic bombings aimed to prevent the attack from taking place. This debate between the users about the “expected” character of a potential Japanese invasion made the user “Taku,” a user of Japanese ancestry and with a Ph.D. in Mathematics, as mentioned on their profile page, and one of the top editors of the page, edit the introduction to the article.¹⁵⁹ In the first paragraph,

156 Ibid. See also the following sections: “Legal Precedents,” “Discussion of legal precedents,” “Wanton destruction,” “A question about Hague IV,” and “International Court of Justice”.

157 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 4,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_4#Imbalanced_arguments_on_justification For the profile page of this user, see “User:Ed Poor,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Ed_Poor

158 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 4”.

159 For the profile page of this user, see “User:TakuyaMurata,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:TakuyaMurata> For the top editors of the page, see “Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki

We have some difficulty with a source that says this outcome "was expected". Expected by whom? I have no problem with reporting a notable opinion to that effect, but use of the passive voice, as in the quotation from the *Wall Street Journal*, would be dubious. [JamesMLane](#) 16:44, 5 August 2005 (UTC)

Expected by pretty much everybody with experience fighting the Japanese, I should think. There hadn't been a case when they *hadn't* fought to (virtually) the last man, and often ending with a mass suicide. But the invasion of Kyushu was no longer the likely alternative to using the bomb:

"Even with the full ration of caution that any historian should apply anytime he ventures comments on paths history did not take, in this instance it is now clear that the long-held belief that Operation Olympic loomed as a certainty is mistaken. Truman's reluctant endorsement of the Olympic invasion at a meeting in June 1945 was based in key part on the fact that the Joint Chiefs had presented it as their unanimous recommendation. ... But this evidence also shows that the demise of Olympic came not because it was deemed unnecessary, but because it had become unthinkable." [Why Truman Dropped the Bomb?](#)

—[woods](#) 19:09, 5 August 2005 (UTC)

James - see [Operation Downfall](#) (which is a featured article). It contains a rather extensive and very well documented list of casualty projections. →[Raul654](#) 00:35, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

To make the argument Ed's referring to, you need to make two points: That without the bombings, there would have had to be an invasion, and that the invasion, if it had occurred, would have cost many lives. I think "expected by pretty much everybody" is true as to the second point but not the first. There shouldn't be any passage in the article that assumes that the bombings averted an invasion. For example, Ed's phrase about the effect of the bombings "compared to the alternative" assumes that there was only one alternative. [JamesMLane](#) 17:35, 6 August 2005 (UTC)

Figure 13: Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_4#Imbalanced_arguments_on_justification.

there had been the following statement: "One of the primary reasons given for the use of the bomb was that it would force Japan to surrender unconditionally, and make the planned invasion of Japan unnecessary".¹⁶⁰ "Taku" removed the words "make the planned invasion of Japan unnecessary".¹⁶¹ Another user, "Raul654," intervened and reverted the edit multiple times.¹⁶² The editing conflict then moved to the discussion page. The user "Taku" explained that they removed this part from the introduction because it was both a controversial and not particularly well-supported argument.¹⁶³ "Raul654" agreed with the unexpected character of the bombings and the following exchange between these two users took place (Figure 14).¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ For the version of the page before the user's edit, see "Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=20378464

¹⁶¹ For the version of the page after the edit, see "Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=20378624

¹⁶² For the revision history of the page during that time, see "Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Revision history," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&dir=prev&offset=20050417113031%7C12433608&limit=500&action=history

¹⁶³ "Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 4".

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

Erm, because the stated reasons were "explicitely" to avoid the invasion of Japan. Not mentioning it is a glaring omission. →Raul654 01:17, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

Where can I find this explicitly stated reason? I know many people claim that the bombings saved many American soldiers. But that is different from saying (1) the primary reason is to force Japan to surrender and (2) doing so avoids the invasion. We don't have to make a causal connection between (1) and (2). -- Taku 01:26, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

Would you care to state a single way in which dropping the atomic bomb to force Japan to surrender is different from dropping it to avoid the (imminent) invasion? →Raul654 01:30, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

Sorry for sounding rude, but I think it is you who have to give us a source. I am just suggesting that at least we wait until you provide one. I do agree with you but it is not necessarily an accepted theory. So we need a source to back that.

For example, one might say, rightly or not, that the invasion was not going to happen anyway so the bombing has nothing to do with the invasion. Besides this, as I said above, why do we have to venture about the connection between the surrender and the invasion in the intro? Why is making the connection between the surrender and the bombing insufficient? in the way it was done before. --- Taku 01:48, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

"Stimson's crucial role in the use of the Atomic bombs against Japan began with Truman's accession. The policies and actions that brought a Japanese surrender without an apocalyptic battle in the homeland are Stimson's legacy" - in short, the use of the Atomic bomb, which was urged by Stimson, prevented the invasion of Japan. (John Ray Skates, the Invasion of Japan, 236) The point is so obvious that the author does not even state it directly. →Raul654 01:59, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

Also, to answer your 2nd question - because as I said above, not mentioning the impending invasion of Japan when talking about the use of the atomic bombs is a GLARING omission, almost as bad as the version of **Adolf Hitler** that didn't mention world war II in the introduction. →Raul654 02:01, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

No, no, this is what people are saying that the bombing prevented the invasion *after* World War II. I need an explicit statement as you claimed that states the bombing was going to be used to both (1) force the surrender and (2) avoid the invasion. Also for the second one, I don't think your analogy is right; as we had conflict, the links between the bombing, the surrender and the invasion are not necessarily clear. And I am saying that it would be sensitive for us to avoid the venture on this in intro.

I hate confrontation, but please pay attention to subtleties. The old intro says that the bombing was going to be used for the purpose of forcing the Japanese to surrender. In other words, it does not say it did force the surrender. I agree that, in retrospect, the surrender made the invasion unnecessary but there is a subtle but important difference between the stated reasons for the use of the bombing prior to the actual bombing and what happened afterward. And, in general, as it is a delicate issue why and how the Japanese surrendered, we should stay away from venturing in discussing this issue (Japan's surrender) on the intro of this article. -- Taku 02:07, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

Part of the justification was clearly to stem off an invasion. I think my version, which lists the possibility as well as notes that the bombings were and continue to be controversial.

In any event, you are way out of line with five reverts, claiming consensus when it is clearly you against five different editors. *Knock it off.* --Fastfission 02:31, 6 August 2005 (UTC)

Just for teh record, fastfission's qualified version of the intro is totally fine by me. →Raul654 02:44, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

I don't think the intro is a place to discuss those possibilities and controversies. Also, in wikipedia I don't think we accept a new change because more people like the change than the others. There had been a debate on intro before, and we had reached some consensus by now; I am saying that you cannot ignore that. -- Taku 02:36, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

Figure 14: Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_4#Imbalanced_arguments_on_justification.

From this point, the discussion did not continue any further, and the page did not include reference to the “unexpected” invasion of Japan within its introductory paragraph. These examples are typical of how Wikipedia editors engage with secondary sources and adhere to Wikipedia’s policies to make historical arguments and, therefore, to edit the Wikipedia articles appropriately. Wikipedia users do not only use “talk pages” to share their personal thoughts and memories, but to make historical arguments based on secondary sources and Wikipedia guidelines. In addition, the continuous intervention of other users on the “talk pages” makes it clear that Wikipedia articles are never final nor static written products, but are always in a state of constant flux.

The secondary sources, with which Wikipedia users actively engage, do not only include articles, books, and papers but also visual media, such as images and

videos. Wikipedians get involved in discussions and debates about what visual details they should add or remove from any article. In February 2006, the article concerning the atomic bombings contained several images that depicted topics related to the dropping of the bombs, such as the mushroom cloud from the nuclear explosion over Nagasaki, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Canada, a map of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the burns on the victims, destroyed buildings and landscapes, the Nagasaki Peace Park, and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial.¹⁶⁵ However, many users found the existence of so many pictures in the article excessive and brought this matter up on the relevant “talk page”.¹⁶⁶ Specifically, the user “Ten Dead Chickens” or “TDC,” one of the top editors of the article, wrote that “there are way too many pictures in the current article” and suggested reducing them.¹⁶⁷ An anonymous user responded to that comment by adding:

Yes, definitely [sic]. Also, do people REALLY need to see the burns on that victim? Seriously, many schools in my area view this page. That picture (the first one under, “Japanese realization of the bombing”) is just grisly.¹⁶⁸

As mentioned above, the main article contained a picture that showed a Japanese victim of the atomic bombings with burns on her body.¹⁶⁹ For the anonymous user, that picture did not serve the educational aim of Wikipedia. Their comment made other editors express their own opinions about the existence of these images in the article (Figure 15).

As the discussion above reveals, some users felt that the picture showing the burns should be removed because it is not necessarily educational and is also quite disturbing; but for others the picture’s inclusion was appropriate, as it served to highlight the atrocities of the bombings and their effects on Japanese people. In the end, the picture with the victim remained in the main article, and

¹⁶⁵ For a version of the page in January 2006, see “Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=37668033

¹⁶⁶ “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 6,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_6#Too_many_pictures

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ For the image, see “File:Gisei32.jpg,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gisei32.jpg>

Part of learning about atomic warfare is learning about what it can do. Those pictures are educational. We shouldn't censor ourselves. --AaronS 03:38, 16 February 2006 (UTC)

I whole heartedly agree. I think it would be an absolute disservice to the users of Wikipedia and anyone beyond to not educate them on the atrocities of war by showing the effects of nuclear warfare. It can be very easy to disassociate mortality figures on a website from the actual pain and suffering caused as a result of these actions. It's not a game, after all. --User:alexthecheese 13:31, 20 February 2006 (GMT)

Hm. When folks begin to speak of *atrocities* and *educating people*, I catch a hint of propaganda. Personally, I don't have anything against the photographs; they are presumably real, unlike some of the text material. But if their purpose is to *educate people*, well, I wonder about motives. This is not Hyde Park Corner, after all. --Cubdriver 13:50, 20 February 2006 (UTC)

The purpose of an encyclopedia is to educate. There are nowhere near to many pictures. Still, two have been removed, namely two maps that seem very useful, so I suggest putting them back. DirkvdM 09:00, 21 February 2006 (UTC)

The purpose of an encyclopedia is not to shape opinions, which seems to be the kind of education that interests some contributors here. That said, the more photos the better. I trust the posters applauding photos of injured Hiroshima citizens would likewise endorse photographs of literal atrocities at Nanjing, on the Burma-Thai Death Railroad, and in the Bataan Death March for example. --Cubdriver 19:20, 21 February 2006 (UTC)

Cubdriver, it seems that you're being argumentative for the sake of being argumentative. There's a debate about the pictures in this article, and someone spoke generally about "the atrocities of war" and you go off on a tangent accusing people of spewing propaganda and questioning their motives. Someone else talks about *maps*, and you start throwing Japanese war atrocities into the mix. Why not wait until someone *actually* talks about making a POV change to the article before you start circling the wagons and shooting at POV injuns?

KarlBunker 20:38, 21 February 2006 (UTC)

As I say, the more photos the better, but "educating people about the atrocities of war" is not their purpose, even if we make the debatable assumption that the atomic bombings *were* an atrocity. The photo originally under question showed radiation injuries; someone objected to it as distasteful; someone defended it as necessary to educate the lumpenproletariat. No, that's not why the photograph is valuable, and if it's there for that purpose, then it *ought* to come out. The one agenda is as dubious as the other, perhaps more so. --Cubdriver 21:42, 21 February 2006 (UTC)

I certainly agree with most of that. I would only suggest two things: 1) that it doesn't really matter what an editor's motivations are; it's the content that matters, and 2) that someone might use "the atrocities of war" simply to refer to "the really bad things that happen in a war", rather than making any accusation about the legitimacy of a particular act. KarlBunker 01:14, 22 February 2006 (UTC)

The only picture we currently have of any of the victims ([this one](#)) is one which is often reprinted and is not very disturbing at all, relatively speaking (looks like a bad sun burn). Personally I think one could make the argument that there are not *enough* pictures of victims -- most of the pictures of the results of the bombing are of empty cities and make it look as if people were all vaporized instantly, a conception about nuclear war that downplays the actual long-term damage of nuclear warfare (a nice discussion of this by a historian is in Spencer Weart's *Nuclear Fear*, for those interested). But personally I find the other victim pictures *a bit too graphic* for an NPOV encyclopedia article, so I think the current one will have to do. Personally I prefer the *non-false colored* version of the current one (I doubt the color choices are based in any fact), but am not willing to battle back and forth over it. --Fastfission 02:51, 22 February 2006 (UTC)

Anonymous (Yes, same guy as before): Perhaps you could put a warning on those pictures (make them links) and put them under a section with a warning that they may be disturbing?

Figure 15: Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_6#Too_many_pictures.

the user "Ten Dead Chickens," who had started the discussion thread, removed the pictures depicting the maps of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹⁷⁰

Wikipedia users not only collect knowledge from books, papers, articles, and pictures that they have found on the Internet, but also share items, photographs, or the broader historical knowledge they have collected by visiting museums and historical sites. They try to make their personal experiences part of the main articles on Wikipedia. In August 2007, the user "Aude" created a discussion thread to share their experiences from having visited the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Mu-

¹⁷⁰ For the version of the article after the removal of the pictures, see "Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=38781839

seum and the Nagasaki Peace Park.¹⁷¹ More specifically, this user wanted to share some photographs that they had taken during their visit to Nagasaki, in order to improve the historical coverage of the article and to add some more details about the atomic bombings. “Aude” made three comments demonstrating their willingness to contribute to Wikipedia (Figure 16).

I notice this page is protected, so definitely won't make any edits. I spent yesterday in Nagasaki, including time at the A-Bomb Museum and Peace Park. Have numerous pictures. When I have the time, will upload them to Commons for use here under cc-by-sa. Spent time last week in Hiroshima, including some time at the museum and peace park there, with many pictures. I'm heading back to Hiroshima this afternoon and will be there for a few more days. So, if there is anything else in Hiroshima that needs a picture, please say so.

For now, my pictures (mainly of Nagasaki and Hiroshima) are on Flickr in this set: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/kmf164/sets/72157601080401307/> I will try to take time later today to upload them to commons. Something here may be useful for this or other articles. --Aude (talk) 02:16, 10 August 2007 (UTC)

Also, I don't have time to look at the RFC in detail now, but notice it's about the death figures. The City of Nagasaki keeps official numbers on this. The current total for Nagasaki is 143,124. (I have a picture which shows this) I'll look again for numbers for Hiroshima. --Aude (talk) 02:20, 10 August 2007 (UTC)

I'm looking at the booklet for the Nagasaki Peace Ceremony yesterday. It includes the Nagasaki Peace Declaration by Tomihisa Taue (Mayor of Nagasaki). It says "the intense heat rays and severe blast winds, together with enormous amounts of radiation, claimed 74,000 lives and inflicted terrible injuries on 75,000 others" These are immediate deaths. When added together with deaths from a-bomb illnesses later, the total is 143,124. --Aude (talk) 06:15, 10 August 2007 (UTC)

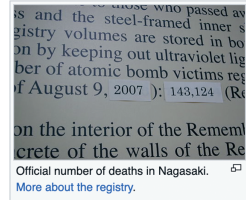


Figure 16: Screenshot of comments, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_14.

The user “Aude” used their personal visit to Nagasaki to shed more light on the coverage of the atomic bombs by adding photographs and providing information on controversial topics, such as the number of the victims. The user posted the picture above in the discussion, which came from the Nagasaki National Peace Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bomb Victims, calculating the number of victims to be 143,124 as of August 9, 2007.¹⁷²

After “Aude” posted that picture, many users started to participate in the discussion and accept or challenge the number of the victims that the picture displayed. The following discussion took place (Figure 17). This discussion shows how Wikipedia editors can even use their personal experiences, from travels abroad or visiting museums, to produce historical knowledge. Some of the involved editors did not accept the number of deaths unquestioningly, or at least raised doubt as to which victims were included in this figure. Another interesting point is that even if

¹⁷¹ “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 14,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_14

¹⁷² Ibid. For the picture that the user “Aude” posted, see “File:Nagasaki deaths.jpg,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nagasaki_deaths.jpg

Does anyone else notice that the figure has changed, the tape is pretty obvious. How many times has it changed, and where did the new info come from to make the changes? [Anybody](#) 05:03, 12 August 2007 (UTC)

They added the number of past 12 months death of after-effects sufferers. I think they do this every year.[Oda Mari](#) 05:12, 12 August 2007 (UTC)

The increasing victim count includes anyone who was in the city and has died, for any reason, since the bombing. [Torturous Devastating Cudgel](#)

It's the number of names in the registry, with 3,069 names added in the past year. These are people who died of radiation illnesses, and not other reasons. [\[20\]](#) [--Aude](#) (talk) 20:44, 14 August 2007 (UTC)

Does Japan have any scientific documentation that explains the basis for concluding that all the people they keep adding to this total really died from A-bomb-related causes? Is there any explanation as to why these numbers are so much higher than the numbers from RERF (an organization whose documentation is readily available for peer review)? [Oralloy](#) 08:34, 20 August 2007 (UTC)

I have a hard time believing that 62 years after the bombing, any death can be reliably attributed to radiation exposure.[Torturous Devastating Cudgel](#) 22:50, 14 August 2007 (UTC)

Both cities have their database. [\[21\]](#) [\[22\]](#). [Oda Mari](#) 10:09, 20 August 2007 (UTC)

This issue comes up often, every anniversary the mayors make speeches and the AP and Reuters report the number of [Hibakusha](#) who died the prior year as casualties of the atomic bomb. As [Oralloy](#) mentions above there's quite a discrepancy between RERF's > 428 deaths since 1950 and the various other figures for casualties due to radiation (i was half listening to HBO's new documentary the other night which claimed 160,000 fatalities from radiation since 1946.) It sure would be nice to find some kind of definitive statement and fill this hole in the article.—[eric](#) 21:35, 20 August 2007 (UTC)

Figure 17: Screenshot of comments, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_14.

the user “Aude” had realized that the page was “protected” from edits and modifications at that time, they still wanted to share the photographs from the Nagasaki Bomb Museum and the Nagasaki Peace Park. This suggests that Wikipedia users not only engage with history to place their own understandings of history in the main article, but they also feel the need to share and discuss their findings and thoughts. The “talk page” of a Wikipedia article becomes a space where editors define and redefine a historical event by (re)examining all its different aspects and all the available sources that will enable editors to offer better coverage.

By having a personal relation to a historical event or to related resources, Wikipedians present themselves as experts in a historical topic. In other words, Wikipedians claim that they have a more reliable knowledge than the other involved editors, thus their arguments can offer a better understanding of what happened in the past. In December 2008, the user “Jane McCann” created a discussion thread to criticize the atomic bombing article for being “west centric”.¹⁷³ The user “Binksternet,” who is one of the top editors of the article and frequently contributes to historical topics, questioned this critique of “Jane McCann” by asking them what

¹⁷³ “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 18,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_18

needs to be changed.¹⁷⁴ These comments prompted an anonymous user to participate in the discussion:

I speak Japanese and have been to the Hiroshima Bomb Museum in Hiroshima, and the majority of what is written in this article is similar or the same to the Japanese viewpoint.¹⁷⁵

The anonymous user did not agree with the first comment by “Jane McCann” that the analysis of the article presented a western point of view. The user challenged that idea through their own knowledge of the Japanese language and their visit to the Hiroshima Bomb Museum. The user also shared their personal engagement with Japanese culture to make it clear that the article represents this history in a manner similar or identical to how Japan represents the atomic bombings in the Hiroshima Bomb Museum.

Though these Wikipedia users did not have direct experience of this historical event, as they were not alive at the time when the bombings took place, their visits to museums, historical sites, or other related spaces legitimizes them to make historical arguments and persuade other involved editors about how to best edit Wikipedia pages. The scholar of translation studies, Henry Jones, has noticed a similar pattern in his article on the role of translation in the creation of Wikipedia content by examining the construction of the article on “Paris, France” on the English-language version of Wikipedia.¹⁷⁶ For Jones, there are two different dimensions. On the one hand, there are many members who, because they live in or near Paris subscribe most strongly to their own personal narratives about the place, based for the most part on their direct perceptions and lived experiences of their daily environment.¹⁷⁷ On the other hand, there are people from all over the world, some of whom have never visited Paris, so often they think about the French capital from Hollywood depictions and write about the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame Cathedral, Montmartre, etc.¹⁷⁸ The lived experience, even if it is (re)mediated and not directly connected to the historical event, gives editors the authority to talk about the past and redefine its representation on Wikipedia.

In May 2013, the user “Ghostofnemo” edited the introduction of the atomic bombing article, which included information about the numbers of victims, and added the following sentence: “In contrast, the number of civilian victims of Japa-

174 Ibid.

175 Ibid.

176 Jones, “‘Wikipedia,’ Translation, and the Collaborative Production of Spatial Knowledge,” 265.

177 Ibid., 283.

178 Ibid.

nese democide during the war has been estimated at 5,424,000, which does not include military deaths”.¹⁷⁹ The user wanted to show that whilst the US was responsible for killing thousands of people through the dropping of atomic bombs, Japan itself was responsible for killing even more victims. When this sentence appeared in the article, other editors reverted the change immediately.¹⁸⁰ The user “Ghostofnemo” repeated the same edit, another editor then deleted it, and a debate started on the “talk page” of the article.

On the discussion page, the user “Ghostofnemo” created a thread with the title “Irrelevant to compare deaths caused by Japanese occupations?” and wrote:

An editor deleted a line comparing the death tolls from the atomic bombings with the civilian (non- military) death toll caused by the Japanese occupations of other countries (more than 5 million). Here is the diff of the deletion: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&diff=553648763&oldid=553601701 What do other editors think? It seems relevant to me, and necessary for a neutral point of view, because looking at the deaths of the atomic bomb victims in isolation gives an unbalanced view of historical events. Ghostofnemo (talk) 07:15, 6 May 2013 (UTC) If an article on the battle of the Little Big Horn only mentioned the losses of General Custer’s men, and didn’t mention the invasion and massacres of native Americans leading up to the battle, it would give readers a distorted picture of the conflict – i.e. that the U.S. soldiers were massacred for no apparent reason. Wow, I just checked that article and it doesn’t mention anything about the conflicts leading up to the battle! Wikipedia, got to love it.¹⁸¹

The user “Nick-D,” one of the top editors of the article and a member of the Wiki-Project Military History, strongly disagreed with that edit and argued that the comparison between the deaths caused by Japan and the atomic bombs does not make any sense.¹⁸² The user “Ghostofnemo” pointed out that the comparison provides more context on the dropping of atomic bombs, and thus, it should be

¹⁷⁹ For the version of the page after the edit, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=553601701

¹⁸⁰ For the revision history of the page in May 2013, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&offset=20131012033813%7C576811411&limit=500&action=history

¹⁸¹ “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 21,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_21

¹⁸² For the profile page of the user, see “User:Nick-D,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Nick-D>; “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 21”.

placed in the main article.¹⁸³ The user “Boundarylayer,” another top editor of the page, gave a different perspective to the discussion. For them, the material should not be placed in the introduction of the article but maybe in a separate section.¹⁸⁴ “Binksternet” intervened and agreed that the comparison should not be placed in the introduction of the article, as the numbers are very “simplistic” and do not provide any context.¹⁸⁵ “Nick-D” responded by posting an extensive comment:

No, that's not what I'm getting at at [sic] all I'm afraid. I don't think that we need to include figures on the number of deaths the Japanese were responsible for here because it's simply not relevant to the topic of the article, and encourages false comparisons. There's a huge literature on why the US dropped the atomic bombs, and the decision to do so had almost nothing to do with the number of people the Japanese had killed: the focus was almost entirely on the hope that the bombs would end the war and avoid the expected huge number of American casualties which would result from the invasion of the Japanese home islands. The US wasn't seeking revenge, and didn't decide that the wickedness of Japan's policies made the atomic bombings morally permissible, it just wanted to shock the Japanese leadership into admitting that the country was defeated. Much of the literature on the bombings also notes the change in the US Government's attitude to bombing over the war, starting from a strong emphasis on precision bombing to avoid civilian casualties, and slowly moving towards an acceptance of area attacks which deliberately targeted civilians. To a significant degree, the atomic bombings were seen as a continuation of the huge raids which had destroyed Tokyo and most of Japan's other cities in the final months of the war (though there was always a realization [sic] that destroying entire cities with a single bomb was a significant escalation of these attacks). Similarly, the great majority of people in the Japanese cities had nothing to do with the war crimes and killings committed by Japanese forces, so to imply a connection is false. To the extent that there was a debate over the comparative morality of the bombings, it took place after the war, and is better covered in the Debate over the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki article.¹⁸⁶

The debate became even more intense when “Ghostofnemo” wrote that there is a tendency in Japan to ignore the victims killed by the Japanese and only remember the deaths caused by the Americans. For this user, Wikipedia should present the “reality” of both countries. Specifically, “Ghostofnemo” argued:

I think it's relevant to mention the victims of Japan's military in this article to put the death toll from the atomic bombings into context. In Japan, there is a tendency to ONLY focus on the victims of the atomic bombings, and to COMPLETELY overlook the much higher death tolls inflicted on civilians during Japanese occupations of other countries. Japan, innocent

183 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 21”.

184 For the profile page of the user, see “User:Boundarylayer,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Boundarylayer>; “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 21”.

185 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 21”.

186 *Ibid.*

victim, America, evil slaughterers of civilians. The reality, which Wikipedia should reflect, is that both countries are guilty of committing huge war crimes.¹⁸⁷

That argument inspired the user “Nick-D” to use their own personal engagement with the history of Japan and their visit to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in order to question the argument put forward by “Ghostofnemo”. “Nick-D” pointed out:

From what I saw during my visit to Japan and the works I've read about Japanese perspectives of the war, your claim that Japanese people generally believe that their country did nothing wrong and were “victims” is not at all correct (the much-visited Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum is very clear on the point of Japanese misconduct, for example).¹⁸⁸

“Ghostofnemo” made some comments to that post to express their disagreement and pointed out the lack of reference to the US victims that Japanese soldiers killed during WWII. The debate ended at this point and the edits proposed by “Ghostofnemo” were permanently removed from the article.

A similar incident took place in December 2016, when a debate started on the “talk page” and challenged the placement of a picture in the main article.¹⁸⁹ The picture depicted the atomic cloud over Nagasaki.¹⁹⁰ The user “Boundarylayer,” previously mentioned above, challenged the historical accuracy of this picture, as the cloud did not look like the cloud seen in the film footage.¹⁹¹ For this user, the cloud was more likely to be either city fire clouds or a post-detonation fire.¹⁹² Another user, “Hawkeye7,” the editor with the most edits to the page and a historian with a Ph.D. in military history, responded to this by arguing that the picture was a finding from secondary research, so it followed all Wikipedia’s guidelines and, more specifically, came from the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum.¹⁹³ In other words, the picture constituted a reliable historical source. At this point, the user

187 Ibid.

188 Ibid.

189 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 23,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_23

190 For the picture, see “File:Atomic cloud over Nagasaki from Koyagi-jima.jpeg,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Atomic_cloud_over_Nagasaki_from_Koyagi-jima.jpeg For the version of the page before the discussion, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=755212172

191 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 23”.

192 Ibid. For the profile page of the user “Hawkeye7,” see “User:Hawkeye7,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Hawkeye7>

193 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 23”.

“Nick-D,” writing to support the use of the image in the article, referred again to their own visit to Japan:

There’s a photo of a similar view of Hiroshima following the bomb taken from Kure at the Kure Maritime Museum (aka the Yamato Museum). Unfortunately I didn’t take a photo of the caption.¹⁹⁴

“Boundarylayer” then offered an extensive reply by questioning the role of museums as an always reliable source of historical knowledge.¹⁹⁵ In a part of their answer, the user mentioned:

Look, it is pretty obvious this photo is incorrectly labelled. Moreover it fails basic logical timing. Are we really going to take it on face value that someone was standing with a 1930–40s camera, ready to snap the mushroom cloud of the Nagasaki bomb, during the brief few seconds it was this low to the ground? Really? I’m incredulous. If the photo were of the mushroom cloud-stem, I wouldn’t be so skeptical, but it fairly clearly is of a cloud-cap. In any case, the museums have been corrected numerous times pushing photos that are clearly mis-identified. We’ve already detailed in the article how the corresponding Hiroshima museum was wrong twice already, when it came to 2 separate photographs. So the museums are not exactly a reliable source when it comes to photograph identification, are they? However I understand wiki-rules and thus I will try and see if I can generate a WP:RS. More on that below.¹⁹⁶

Wikipedia editors do not passively consume history, even if it comes from an academic or an institutional place. They actively engage with what they find either digitally or physically. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen have pointed out that Americans trust eyewitnesses more than television or movies, feel closer to the past in museums because the artifacts are authentic, and feel unconnected to the past in history classrooms.¹⁹⁷ In the examples mentioned above, Wikipedians’ engagement with history is not a one-dimensional process. Museums and historical sites provide Wikipedians with information about the past and legitimize them to make historical arguments. Wikipedians then bring their thoughts and arguments into any related discussions on the site. They receive feedback from their fellow Wikipedians, get involved in debates, and thus construct a historical article.

The debate continued with “Nick-D” asking “Boundarylayer” for sources that could substantiate their claims. “Boundarylayer” replied:

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*.

[. . .] From my own research, browsing the Nagasaki museum. They state the photo was taken 15 mins post detonation, photographed at Koyagi jima(that's about 12 km South-West^ of the Nagasaki hypocenter). By cameraman Hiromichi Matsuda. [. . .] Now, I don't know how familiar [sic] you are with nuclear detonations, or mushroom clouds, but if you are a bit rusty: For devices of this yield range(~20 kiloton) and under perfectly calm surface wind conditions, the cloud reaches its max height of ~ 8 km in about 5 minutes and then begins to rapidly lose its shape when approaching around the 10 minute mark. After 20 mins it is totally unrecognizable, with the mark-1 eyeball, as ever having been a mushroom cloud. [. . .] So the actual "atomic cloud", would've been diffuse and well out of frame when he captured the scene over Nagasaki. While no firestorm at Nagasaki occurred (unless you're author Lynn Eden) the fires were still pretty intense^^ as city-fires go and the city did burn down over about a day or so. This cloud is likely to be from those conventional fires. [. . .] Honestly, it is pretty apparent that the 2 Japanese museums leave a lot to be desired when it comes to honestly conveying the facts, they seem obsessed with not doing a damn [sic] bit of research. Which is almost criminal in its sloppiness . . . and just think, someone is actually getting paid to work there? . . . Jesus wept.¹⁹⁸

This user not only challenged the validity of the picture but also the role of the museum in the production of historical knowledge. They did not simply accept how the Japanese museums had contextualized the source but went even further and conducted their own research in order to explain what the picture showed. The other involved editors agreed with this analysis and the sources that "Boundarylayer" cited. Thus, the discussion ended, and the editors permanently removed the picture.

On Wikipedia, there is not just one form of engagement with the past, rather it can take shape in multiple different ways. Throughout all these levels of engagement, a user's individual agency is activated. The past is always in constant discussion and negotiation. Benjamin Filene has written about the "outsider history-makers," who work outside museums and universities and engage with history based on their enthusiasm, and "for [whom] the past is not remote and dead but a comfortable companion".¹⁹⁹ Though Filene refers to non-digital agents, such as genealogists, reenactors, and heritage tourism developers, Wikipedians also fit this framework and become "outsider history-makers," who look for academic sources, share their experiences from their visits to museums and other historical sites, post photos and claim expertise in a historical topic. Other Wikipedians often challenge them, question the reliability of their arguments, ask for more

¹⁹⁸ "Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 23".

¹⁹⁹ Benjamin Filene, "Passionate Histories: 'Outsider' History-Makers and What They Teach Us," *Public Historian* 34 (2012): 12. Rosenzweig and Thelen make a similar point for those engaging with history outside schools. For them, history in the classroom was dead and gone, see Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 110–13.

sources and more reliable historical arguments, and therefore construct a historical narrative.

However, as is the case with the Great Depression, due to the sheer length of time that has passed since the dropping of the atomic bombs, there are obviously no Wikipedia editors who were alive at that time and able to share any direct experiences from this historical event. Instead, there is only the (re)mediated reality as presented by museums and other historical sites. Wikipedians have access to the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki through secondary sources – both written and visual – and their own personal visits to related museum exhibitions or historical sites. The historical past of Hiroshima and Nagasaki seems distant and, therefore, the personal memories or experiences of Wikipedians do not characterize how Wikipedians perceive this history or aim to write about it. Wikipedia editors approach this historical event from a critical standpoint and get involved in the various discussions and debates about its representation on Wikipedia. Their engagement is mainly the result of secondary research and not of personal reflection