

Chapter 5

Writing History on Wikipedia: Insights from Wikipedia Editors

All the Wikipedia pages analyzed in the previous chapters are the results of Wikipedia users' engagement with history. Any examination of that engagement depends on the lenses that we focus on it. In the previous sections, the application of quantitative or qualitative approaches led to multiple results and different arguments. However, it would be impossible to understand how historical knowledge is produced on Wikipedia without asking its main protagonists: Wikipedia editors. In this chapter, I investigate the experience of those Wikipedians who create and edit historical pages on Wikipedia. Where previous chapters focused on the comments of Wikipedia editors on the "talk pages" of Wikipedia articles, or on data that appears on editors' profile pages, the research of this section is based on an online survey. The chapter asks Wikipedia editors themselves how and why they chose to get involved in the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia.

Specifically, the chapter provides an overview of Wikipedia users' engagement with history, their editing experiences, the reasons why they edit, their historical interests, their criteria to edit or create a historical page, their personal relation with the historical topics they edit, their educational background, their collaboration with other editors, and their activity within any – history related – WikiProjects. It is worth clarifying that I have not correlated the survey responses in order to formulate different typologies of Wikipedians. Instead, the main goal of this section is to explore how and why Wikipedians engage with the production of history by asking the editors themselves. The results of the survey, and the stories that the participants shared in their answers, reveal four main characteristics about Wikipedia editors' engagement with historical knowledge. Firstly, Wikipedia users do not perceive editing or writing about history on Wikipedia as merely an activity to collect and disseminate historical knowledge. Instead, they view their editing activities more dynamically, as an enjoyable and pleasurable practice that allows them to explore the past and, in turn, to provide a better history to the public by writing, reading, and researching historical topics that they are passionate about. Secondly, Wikipedia users choose to edit or create historical pages related to topics that they are both interested in and curious to explore further. Their predetermined knowledge about a subject does not determine what historical topics they will edit or create. Instead, a variety of factors, such as the significance of a historical topic, existing errors within an article, the availability

of sources, and the lack of information in the contents of a given article, define their editing choices to an important extent. Thirdly, most Wikipedians have a personal connection to a particular topic or period of the past, which they have chosen to investigate further. The past has an intimate meaning in their lives and encourages them to transform it into history. Fourthly, for most editors, the production of historical knowledge is the result of collaborative work. However, this collaboration is not only limited to the spaces provided by the various WikiProjects; it also takes place in the spaces related to the articles themselves and any associated “talk pages”.

In the historiography of public history, there is a tendency to view the public as a consumer of historical information or as a passive receptor of historical changes that take place. This perception of the public has underestimated the active agency of the public in the construction of history. At the same time, the historiography of Wikipedia itself, to an important extent, has ignored the role of Wikipedians in the process of historical knowledge production and mainly focused on the results of that process, Wikipedia’s contents. This chapter shifts the focus from the consumers to the producers of history, and, in this case study, the Wikipedia editors, who constantly create and update Wikipedia’s articles, and have transformed Wikipedia into a public and digital source of knowledge. By studying the stories of Wikipedians, this chapter examines both how and why Wikipedia editors contribute to the production of historical knowledge.

Design and methodology of the survey

Like Wikipedia itself, the methodology for this survey was both participatory and collaborative. Multiple steps have been followed in terms of the design of the survey and the recruitment of the participants. The initial plan was to recruit Wikipedia editors who were members of the WikiProject United States History.¹ The WikiProject United States History has 92 active participants and 23 inactive participants.² As Wikipedia outlines, WikiProjects are groups of people who collaborate to improve Wikipedia by focusing on a specific thematic topic area, task, or part of the encyclopedia.³ The WikiProject United States History is dedicated to improving

¹ “Wikipedia:WikiProject United States History,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_United_States_History

² *Ibid.*

³ “Wikipedia:WikiProject,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject>

the coverage of topics on United States history.⁴ The idea was to focus on editors of Wikipedia pages related to the history of the United States since the topics that have been covered in the previous chapters – the Great Depression, the Vietnam War, the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the September 11 attacks – are also associated with the history of the United States. In addition, my plan was to follow the structure and logic of Wikipedia in how I recruited participants for the survey, and the WikiProjects constitute concrete communities of editors interested in specific historical topics and thematic areas.

The survey included the following open-ended questions: (1) How long have you been an editor on Wikipedia? (2) Why do you write about history on Wikipedia? (3) What are your historical interests in Wikipedia? (4) What are the criteria you choose to create/edit a specific historical page on Wikipedia? (5) Do you have any personal relation/identification with the topics that you choose to edit? (6) Do you have any educational background in history or other related fields? (7) How does your participation in the WikiProject work and how do you collaborate with other Wikipedians and members of the WikiProject? Because of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) restrictions, the survey was limited to participants who reside in the United States and are 18 years of age or older.

Regarding the process of recruitment, I created a Wikipedia account and started to share the survey link by posting it as a message on the “talk pages” of both the WikiProject’s members and of the WikiProject itself. Over the next two weeks, a few users responded to the survey, almost 20 participants out of the 92 active members. At the same time, some users got in touch privately to inform me that the WikiProject United States History was not particularly active and suggested that I look at more active WikiProjects related to history, such as the WikiProject Military History and the WikiProject Women in Red. The WikiProject Military History covers topics related to military history, while the WikiProject Women in Red covers topics on women’s biographies, issues, and works.⁵

As the response rate continued to remain low and I realized that there were more active WikiProjects, which also covered themes related to United States History, I decided to change the target group and to recruit members from the WikiProject Military History and WikiProject Women in Red. Over the next two weeks, almost 80 Wikipedia editors from the WikiProject Military History and WikiProject Women in Red took the survey and answered all the questions. In total,

⁴ “Wikipedia:WikiProject United States History”.

⁵ See “Wikipedia:WikiProject Military history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Military_history; “Wikipedia:WikiProject Women in Red,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Women_in_Red

100 editors responded to the survey since I sent the first messages to the members of the WikiProject United States History.

Regarding the limitations of this study, in order to take the survey the participant should reside in the United States and should not be older than 65 years old. The recruitment limitation to only US-citizens was a result of the IRB review process that the survey went through. Even though, according to Wikipedia, most editors (twenty percent) reside in the United States, there are many editors from Europe, Asia, Russia, Latin America, etc.⁶ However, the inclusion of non-US citizens would have made the research process far more complicated, as it would require the approval of multiple agencies, which are responsible for the protection of human subjects in different locations.

Experience, education, and the historical interests of Wikipedia editors

Before we go any further and explore how and why Wikipedia editors engage with the production of historical knowledge, it is necessary to consider the demographics of the respondents, as this can reveal significant information in terms of their respective profiles and their relation to Wikipedia. More specifically, three of the questions I asked the participants were: How long did they actively write on Wikipedia? Did they have an educational background in history or any other related fields? What were their historical interests on Wikipedia? The answers to these three questions can help us better understand the respondents of the survey and reveal useful information about the editing experience of Wikipedians and their relation to history as a research subject. As Table 1 illustrates, 44 users have been editing Wikipedia for 8–15 years, 21 users for 4–7 years, 18 users for more than 16 years, and 16 users from a few months up to 3 years. Taking into account that Wikipedia was created in 2001, Table 1 makes it clear that most participants of the survey are experienced editors. Almost 62 users out of the 99 respondents have been engaging with the production of knowledge on Wikipedia for more than eight years.

Another question that was asked of the respondents to the survey was whether or not they had any educational background in history or any other related fields. As Table 2 shows, of the 99 participants, 40 Wikipedians confirmed that they did

⁶ Regarding the demographics of Wikipedia users, see “Wikipedia:Wikipedians/Demographics,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedians/Demographics>

have a degree in History, at undergraduate or graduate level, or at the very least had a minor in it. 38 editors had not studied History at any educational level, and 21 had studied a related field belonging to the humanities or social sciences, such as Political Science, Literature, Sociology, Anthropology, etc. At first glance, it seems unexpected that the largest portion of respondents had studied History academically. One potential explanation for this result is that those who had studied History were more aware of how historical research takes place, and thus they took the survey. Another explanation could be that a significant number of editors who are also members of WikiProjects related to history have an educational background in History. However, if we combine the two other categories, those who have not studied history and those who have studied a related field, this amounts to 59 editors. Almost 60 percent of the respondents do not have any education in History, but they are interested in history and are devoted to the coverage of historical topics on Wikipedia.

Another important characteristic of the respondents is that they have multiple historical interests, ranging across different topics, areas, chronological periods, and geographies. When it comes to the production of historical knowledge, this is a significant difference to academia, where historians are specialized in a specific chronological period and geographical area. Furthermore, academic historians tend to have studied history professionally and they are not used to collaborating with people who have either not studied history or any other related field in order to produce historical scholarship. As Table 3 outlines, Wikipedia editors cover a great variety of historical topics and themes. Most editors appear to be interested in US History, Military History, and Women's History, as those areas obviously correspond to the WikiProjects in which most of the recruited respondents participate. However, their historical interests are not only limited to those three categories but also include multiple other thematic areas, ranging from Political History, Local History, Art History, to Japanese History, African American History, and Sports History. These categories appear in the participants' responses and show how Wikipedians express their historical interests and try to classify them into broader thematic areas.

Based on the four tables, we can conclude that most participants in the survey have been editing articles on Wikipedia for between 8 to 15 years, have not studied History academically, and are mostly interested in US History, Military History, and Women's History as a result of the WikiProjects in which they are involved. There is no connection between their education and the historical interests they pursue on Wikipedia. Their responses about their interests cover a great variety of historical topics and themes, while their responses about their education show that most editors have not studied History at either an undergraduate or graduate level.

Table 1: How long have you been an editor on Wikipedia?

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1. 0–3 years – 16 users
 2. 4–7 years – 21 users
 3. 8–15 years – 44 users
 4. 16 + years – 18 users
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Table 2: Do you have any educational background in History or any other related fields?

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1. Yes – 40 users
 2. No – 38 users
 3. Related field – 21 users
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Table 3: What are your historical interests on Wikipedia?

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1. US History – 27 users
 2. Military History – 20 users
 3. Women's History – 13 users
 4. Political History – 9 users
 5. Biographies – 8 users
 6. World War II – 7 users
 7. Ancient History – 6 users
 8. Social History – 6 users
 9. Local History – 5 users
 10. Art History – 4 users
 11. British History – 4 users
 12. Early Modern History – 4 users
 13. European History – 4 users
 14. History of Religion – 4 users
 15. History of the Middle East – 4 users
 16. Japanese History – 4 users
 17. Medieval History – 4 users
 18. World War I – 4 users
 19. African History – 3 users
 20. Archaeology – 3 users
 21. Asian History – 3 users
 22. Chinese History – 3 users
 23. German History – 3 users
 24. Native American History – 3 users
 25. Sports History – 3 users
 26. African American History – 2 users
 27. Cultural History – 2 users
 28. Diplomatic History – 2 users
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Table 3 (continued)

29.	History of Communism – 2 users
30.	History of Natural Disasters – 2 users
31.	History of Science – 2 users
32.	History of the Balkans – 2 users
33.	History of the Byzantine Empire – 2 users
34.	Islamic History – 2 users
35.	Islamic History – 2 users
36.	Labor History – 2 users
37.	Romanian History – 2 users
38.	Caribbean History – 1 user
39.	Economic History – 1 user
40.	Ethiopian History – 1 user
41.	French History – 1 user
42.	Geological History – 1 user
43.	History of Animals – 1 user
44.	History of Crimes – 1 user
45.	History of Explorations – 1 user
46.	History of Literature – 1 user
47.	History of Migration – 1 user
48.	History of Spaceflight – 1 user
49.	History of the American Left – 1 user
50.	History of the Mongol Empire – 1 user
51.	History of the Ottoman Empire – 1 user
52.	History of Uniforms – 1 user
53.	Indian History – 1 user
54.	Korean History – 1 user
55.	Legal History – 1 user
56.	Music History – 1 user
57.	Naval History – 1 user
58.	Nicaraguan History – 1 user
59.	Rural History – 1 user
60.	Russian History – 1 user
61.	Urban History – 1 user
62.	Vietnam War – 1 user

Reasons for writing about history on Wikipedia

There is an obvious but – unfortunately – neglected question about Wikipedia editors’ involvement with the production of historical knowledge: Why do they spend their time writing about history on Wikipedia? To get a fuller sense of how historical knowledge is produced on Wikipedia, we need to better understand the reasons why Wikipedians decide to write about history.

In response to the question about why they write about history on Wikipedia, the most common answer from the largest number of respondents was that they enjoyed reading, writing, and conducting research about history. This type of response appeared in 58 comments from the Wikipedians surveyed. "I love learning, research and writing, and WP gives me the opportunity to do all three," one Wikipedia user mentioned. They went on to say: "When I was in college and would get an assignment to do a research paper, I would go to the library and start that very day. Plus, I'm good at it". Another participant wrote, "I enjoy it, I like to get good history out there," and a Wikipedia user interested in biographies added, "I enjoy writing non-fiction and doing research. Wikipedia [sic] has been a productive outlet for those hobbies which seems like it benefits others. I also like the idea that my work sees the light of day". Engaging with history on Wikipedia appears to be an enjoyable activity that allows editors to read, write, and conduct research about history. It enables them to expand their historical interests and investigate more historical topics and themes. As one Wikipedian explained, "I like to read about history. I like researching historical topics and sharing historical information that is not available on Wikipedia". Along similar lines, two other editors stated: "I write about history on Wikipedia as I enjoy it," and "I enjoy studying and writing about history in my spare time". The largest number of respondents, it seems, engage with history because they enjoy multiple aspects of historical knowledge production, such as writing, editing, and researching historical topics. As another editor wonderfully revealed: "I find it enjoyable to research long-forgotten settlements, and [sic] bring them back to life".

The practice of editing and creating historical pages on Wikipedia also appears to be an entertaining and pleasurable activity. "From a young age I have enjoyed history very much," writes one Wikipedia user, "When other kids were outside playing, or inside playing video games, I was reading, consuming historical knowledge before I was even in middle school. I am not sure why it is so pleasurable [sic] and entertaining to learn about and discuss history, but nevertheless my interest in history is very high. This is why I both contribute to and read history on Wikipedia". A further user suggests that "It's fun, I [sic] learn things, and I help others learn," and another reveals that "Its [sic] one of my favorite subjects. I love to learn how people in the past were very much like us". Their involvement in the production of historical knowledge, then, appears to be a fun activity, a hobby with which Wikipedians love to engage. "I've been personally interested in history since middle school. Wikipedia editing about history is thus an extension of my hobby," one Wikipedia editor explained. Editing or creating historical articles on Wikipedia constitutes a manifestation of the passion that many Wikipedians have for history as a subject. "I'm drawn to editing topics I'm interested in, and history has long been a passion of mine," wrote another Wiki-

pedia user. Wikipedia provides a public space, where users can pursue their passions and engage with what they love. This is reflected in many responses, where several participants use terms such as “love,” “hobby,” “fun,” “entertaining,” “passion,” and “enjoy”. As one editor mentioned, describing their engagement with history, “I have no means by which to publish a book easily and with Wikipedia I can use my love of history”. Likewise, another editor wrote: “History is a subject I love to study, and it is an opportunity to make the knowledge more widely available to people”.

Wikipedia users write about history on Wikipedia not only because it is a fun and pleasurable activity that they love to do, but also because they want to provide “better history” on Wikipedia. This reason appeared in 37 comments and constituted the second most frequently cited factor that prompted these users to take part in the production of history on Wikipedia. For many users, history on Wikipedia requires corrections and updates, and, therefore, they engage with historical articles to provide better historical knowledge about the past to the public. Many users expressed the need to correct the past, expand upon it, and represent it in a better way. As one editor mentioned: “Sometimes I see history that is either so sparse or so bad I feel a compelling need to either expand it or correct it”. “I feel strongly that people should have free access to accurate and properly sourced information,” another user reported. As professional historians do, Wikipedia editors participate in the production of historical knowledge to fill in gaps that exist in their areas of specialization. They detect inaccuracies and misrepresentations of information, and they decide to edit historical articles or create new ones. “I started because I found some wild inaccuracies in my area of specialization (US Air Force and predecessors),” clarified one Wikipedia user, “I continued primarily because of the incompleteness of articles in this area”. Another Wikipedia editor explained, “I started off just casually cleaning up incorrect or poorly substantiated material on Wikipedia that irked me and gradually became a regular contributor”. A further user added, “I started by writing about things that were not in Wikipedia or were not well covered. I continue to fill in blanks and improve references”. One of the most interesting answers came from another editor, who wrote: “I believe that a complete and accurate understanding of history is essential to being a good citizen”. For this user, providing better history on Wikipedia and having access to it is essential for someone to be a good citizen. In many responses, good knowledge of history does not only mean a good understanding of the past, but also a better awareness of the present. Wikipedians feel obliged to produce historical knowledge that is accurate, complete, and based on reliable sources.

However, providing better history does not only signify that the historical knowledge will be more accurate, but that it will also offer a more balanced historical narrative about the past. In other words, for many Wikipedians better history

means non-biased historical articles. As one Wikipedia editor wrote, concerning their engagement with historical writing on Wikipedia, “I specifically work to reduce systematic biases and increase Wikipedia’s coverage of historically marginalized groups”. Another editor added, “[I write] to redress the imbalance of writing on women’s history”. These editors see their participation in Wikipedia as a practice to redress the biases around women’s history, indigenous people’s history, the history of social minorities, the history of the non-western world, and other neglected historical topics. As one editor put it, “[I write on Wikipedia] to reduce the load of BS, usually political, but sometimes based on gender, ethnicity, etc”. Another editor stated: “I want to encourage more understanding of topics often dismissed or overlooked, like Indigenous history, women’s history, the history of defunct institutions, rural society, etc”. A further editor, who writes about Japanese history on Wikipedia, pointed out: “I felt I was helping contribute to combatting Eurocentrism and so forth”. The problems that characterize Wikipedia articles, such as bias, gender imbalance, Eurocentrism, etc., do not appear to turn users away from the site. Instead, these existing issues seem to motivate users to not only remain active but also strive to provide a better history of the past. As one user put it: “The history of my region is poorly represented, and largely written from the perspective of the coloniser [sic], not the people whose history it is. So it’s important for me to make this better, in some small way”.

The third reason why Wikipedia editors decide to write about history on Wikipedia is to make history more accessible to the public. It is not only important to produce accurate historical knowledge about the past but also to share it with the public. Wikipedia provides that opportunity, as it is a digital public space to which anyone can have access. These Wikipedians consider this opportunity valuable, which they then take up to both produce “better history” and disseminate it to a broader audience. This underlying reason appeared in 21 comments from the respondents. For example, one editor, outlining why they write about history on Wikipedia, explained it quite simply: “To pass on what I know”. Another goes into more detail: “I write about history to make the knowledge I receive [sic] as a graduate student accessible to as many people as possible (for free, online). I believe that this is an important step in making formerly ‘gatekept’ knowledge more freely accessible”. Two other editors said: “I feel like I should share the knowledge I have, and in turn help others find the information they are looking for,” and “In order to inform a wider audience about interesting, often obscure, details and events”. The significance of making history accessible to the public is obvious throughout many of the comments. Editors see Wikipedia as a digital space where they can share their own writings about history and disseminate them to the public. As one editor put it: “I want to be a part of something greater than myself”. Another user added: “Once something is on Wikipedia, it is also much

easier to find (than, say, in an old book or newspaper article), so I'll also write with the hope it makes historical information more accessible to others". Wikipedians are aware that the historical knowledge they produce will be stored in a digital and public encyclopedia, which is visited daily by millions of users. Therefore, they will make "the historical record available for public consumption".

Preventing history from getting lost or being forgotten constitutes the fourth reason why Wikipedians participate in the production of history. For 13 respondents, history on Wikipedia cannot be easily lost, as it is posted online in a digital space to which the public has constant access. For this reason, Wikipedians feel obliged to produce historical knowledge and store it on Wikipedia, as they wish to prevent the past from falling into obscurity. As one editor argued: "I am a skilled, experienced, retired writer and I want to add new historical entries to Wikipedia, specifically about women who made a difference in their time but are in danger of having their stories lost if they are not added to Wiki". Writing about history on Wikipedia signifies a way to honor the memory of people who died in the past and whose stories should not be lost, especially those who belong to social minorities and communities underrepresented on Wikipedia, such as women, black people, indigenous people, labor workers, immigrants, etc. "I feel that often people forget where we come from if the information isn't easy to access," one editor writes, "I try to also write about BIPOC history since that history isn't as recorded/in our collective concious [sic]". Another argues: "It's a way of paying back the working-class people of Britain who paid for my education".

For many Wikipedia users, the production of history on Wikipedia plays an important role in what people learn from history and remember about the past. Wikipedia "helps us remember people and events that deserve to be documented," one editor notes. Another editor, who was interested in naval history, writes: "I feel like every ship did it's bit for country [sic] and deserves to not be forgotten, no matter how insignificant it may seem". Wikipedia works as a space where users can contribute to the preservation and remembrance of the past. In this way, the public will learn about the past and will not repeat the mistakes of the past in the future. As one Wikipedia editor pointed out: "I would like to report that it is from some high ideals in the service of humanity, perhaps from Santayana's idea that 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'". Many editors expressed the need to write about histories that should not be lost or forgotten. The online encyclopedia offers them the opportunity to collect and disseminate the histories of the past, so they will not "get lost to eternity," as one user mentioned.

Writing about history on Wikipedia not only means shedding light on distant events of the past but also investigating historical topics and themes strongly connected to the lives of Wikipedia editors. This line of reasoning appeared in 6 comments. Some editors see Wikipedia as a chance to explore their family history

and to learn more about their intimate pasts. For example, one Wikipedian explained: “I am interest [sic] in an ancestor, Lord Alfred Milner”. Another editor described their engagement with historical writing on Wikipedia in the following terms: “I found it a useful means to apply knowledge I had gained in the course of researching family history, and then to continue learning and extend my curiosity and knowledge to new areas”. It is not only the history of their families but also the broader historical events in which their families have been involved that inspires these editors. “My father was a World War II combat vet,” one user explains, “I became interested in history at a young age, especially World War II. I started reading about the war; causes and courses”. Their personal experiences of the past lead some Wikipedians to investigate further and turn their experiences and memories into historical knowledge. “I used to fly combat in an airplane with about the same performance as World War I aircraft,” another editor revealed, “This led me to write about WWI aces, as well as the so-called Laotian Civil War”.

The responses of Wikipedia users emphasize that, for most Wikipedians, writing about history on Wikipedia constitutes an enjoyable and pleasurable activity, which includes the practices of reading, writing, doing research, and learning about history. This means that Wikipedia enables users to discover their own research interests, and read and write about topics that they both enjoy and love to learn about. In addition to this, many Wikipedians see writing about history as an activity designed to provide more complete, less biased, and accurate historical knowledge to the public. Not only do they wish to write about the past, but they also want to provide a more inclusive historical narrative about the past. They consider their engagement with history as a means to better educate all online visitors to the encyclopedia and, importantly, to prevent many historical stories from getting lost or being forgotten.

Table 4: Why do you write about history on Wikipedia?

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| 1. | Enjoy reading, writing, and researching history – 58 comments |
| 2. | Provide better history on Wikipedia – 37 comments |
| 3. | Make history more accessible to the public – 21 comments |
| 4. | Prevent history from getting lost or being forgotten – 13 comments |
| 5. | Conduct research on their personal and family history – 6 comments |
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Criteria for Wikipedians to create or edit a historical article

In the section above, I investigated the reasons why Wikipedia editors write about history on Wikipedia. This question focused on the broader engagement of Wikipedia users with history on Wikipedia but did not necessarily shed any light on the criteria Wikipedia editors follow when choosing to edit or create specific historical pages. The next section explores this criteria, examining when Wikipedians decide to approach a historical topic on Wikipedia, and how and why they choose one historical theme from another.

The most common criterion (39 comments) appears to be Wikipedia editors' personal interest in the topic they edit or create. In most responses, Wikipedians argued that they choose a topic based on whether they have an interest in it. In many comments, personal interest seems to be a broad, umbrella term that usually determines Wikipedians' first encounter with the relevant themes and topics they wish to further investigate. It is "Generally something I have an interest in," writes one editor. Another explains: "I am usually working on one article [sic] and I will read something in my research that I am I want to [sic] learn more about. I will look to see if there is a Wikipedia article, and if not, I will put that subject on a list. I also read books and get ideas". Other frequent comments were: "Anything that interests me," "They are interesting to me," "It is of interest to me. I wish to read about it," "If they are about a topic I am interested in," "The only criteria I have is that it grabs my interest," "I find the topic interesting enough to sink time into it," etc. This criterion governs most editors' decisions on what to examine and study on Wikipedia. However, personal interest is a fairly vague term and does not reveal much about Wikipedia editors' editing choices.

The significance and notability of a topic is the second most frequently cited criterion, appearing in 26 comments. For many editors, the topic they intend to cover should be an important one. As some editors mentioned in their responses, when considering writing about a topic they often ask themselves: "Is this topic 'noteworthy'?" "Does it meet notability guidelines," "Does it have broader importance: for example, is the event or person a 'model' for some other place or person?" One editor also points out: "I choose to write articles on topics that do not currently have an article, and are topics that I feel are significant or particularly notable". The criterion relating to notability complies with the notability policy of Wikipedia, which states that editors should create a new article about a topic that is deemed to be significant.⁷

⁷ For more information on the policy of notability, see: "Wikipedia:Notability," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability>

The third most frequent criterion, when it comes to editing or creating pages, is to correct existing errors or any potential misinformation within a Wikipedia article. This criterion appeared in 24 responses. For example, one editor, who is interested in military history, stated that they start editing an article if they feel that “it needs more information” or “it needs better sources or a piece of information needs to be backed up by a source”. Many editors take advantage of the fact that Wikipedia allows for the constant revision of its contents. In this way, these users become engaged with the production of historical knowledge by trying to improve the contents of Wikipedia articles. Similar answers were also given by other participants. “I chose to devote time to two pages of women who wrote Latin [. . .] because their pages were either very incomplete or missing some info that I could fill in based on my area of expertise (Latin/classical languages),” said one editor, who is interested in women’s history. Another user mentioned that they were often prompted to act “If the page looks sparse and needs some help or doesn’t exist. Sometimes there will be a lot of unsourced information that I notice that I feel needs a lot of help and always use my own words and/or quoted material with inline references in order to improve the article”. All these users approach a historical article because they want to improve its contents about history, further develop its historical narrative, and to add more and better sources. However, they are not only motivated by a desire to include more relevant information. These users are also devoted to technical tasks, such as the correction of spelling and grammar mistakes. As one editor explained: “I usually rewrite existing articles that are badly out of date, have a recognizable bias, contain error, are under or badly referenced, contain original research, that kind of thing. [. . .] I’m a remodeler, not a builder. If an article is in bad shape, I’m there”. Another Wikipedia user wrote: “I leave the major revisions to those with the time to do that. I only rarely make any large edits anymore. Mostly its [sic] fixing typos, misspellings, clumsy grammar, and the like”.

Wikipedia editors can edit or create a historical page if they have adequate sources to support their historical arguments. The availability of sources is the fourth most frequently cited criterion, appearing in 22 comments. “Availability of high-quality sources (good newspaper articles or peer-reviewed journals) that strike my personal interest” was what one editor stated was their criteria to edit a historical article. A similar response was given by another editor interested in women’s history: “I look for good reference material, for good causes that these women pursued, for women outside the U.S. (mostly), for interesting stories that make for an interesting entry”. Another user devoted to the coverage of historical weather events outlined the need to “have plenty of information on [the] subject, [for a record of the event to] be on some type of historical archive, and [to] have interviews with people or [other forms of] documentation such as images of the

event”. Another editor gave a more detailed answer about the availability of sources being a criterion to edit a Wikipedia page: “Finding good sources. We often prefer historical works written by professional historians, but they are not always available. Then we might have to rely on a variety of primary sources (administrator reports, travelogues, etc.) and sift them to find the highlights [sic]. Another problem is when history is contested, even by professional historians. Then Wikipedia guidelines requires [sic] we present all viewpoints. Finding the right balance between them requires judgement [sic]”. The availability of verifiable sources is also heavily stressed in one of Wikipedia’s policies, which states that articles on Wikipedia should be based on verifiable sources and published information.⁸ For Wikipedia editors intent on following this policy, then, the availability of sources becomes a significant prerequisite when choosing to start editing an article. Wikipedia does not allow editors to conduct original research, so they need to turn to secondary sources to study a topic further and produce historical knowledge.⁹

The fifth criterion for Wikipedians when it comes to selecting an article for editing is because they want to investigate neglected historical events, topics, or figures of the past. References to this criterion appeared in 20 responses. “I like to create/edit pages on events or people who are important but either neglected or misinterpreted in modern discourse,” wrote one editor, who is interested in the history of the Balkans. Another editor said that they were most often motivated “when I realize there is a huge gap of knowledge that screams out to be filled”. Along similar lines, one Wikipedia user noted: “I’ll usually write about a person or subject I consider to be ‘missing’ from Wikipedia”. Editors look at the gaps that exist on Wikipedia and aim to fill them by adding more articles or updating existing ones.

The least frequent criterion (10 comments) relates to the knowledge that Wikipedians already have of a topic. “The main subject is something I’ve [sic] very knowledgeable about, so I will sometimes click through wiki-links to see what needs doing,” wrote one editor. Another user referred to having “Some amount of background knowledge of the topic”. It is apparent that only a few Wikipedians chose to edit or create a historical page based on the knowledge they already have about a certain thematic area, research subject, or time period. This is interesting as it suggests that editors prefer to find a topic, which they are interested in and passionate about, and then explore it further by reading and writing about it as opposed to simply transmitting any knowledge that they already had. They

⁸ For the policy of verifiability, see: “Wikipedia:Verifiability,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability>

⁹ For the policy of no original research, see “Wikipedia:No original research,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No_original_research

see Wikipedia as a place where they are able to both learn about the past and to produce history themselves. Their knowledge about a subject does not determine what pages they will edit or create on Wikipedia. It is their curiosity, their personal interest in a topic, and their willingness to investigate it more fully that defines their editing choices to a large extent. After this, the significance of a historical topic, the existing errors in an article, the availability of sources, and the broader epistemological gaps are the relevant factors that guide editors' decisions over which historical article they will aim to further develop.

Table 5: What are the criteria you choose to create or edit a historical page on Wikipedia?

1.	Personal interest in the topic – 39 comments
2.	Significance/notability – 26 comments
3.	Correcting existing errors and misinformation in the Wikipedia articles – 24 comments
4.	Availability of sources – 22 comments
5.	Neglected historical events, topics, figures, etc. – 20 comments
6.	Knowledge of the subject – 10 comments

Personal relation to the historical topics that Wikipedians write about

Tables 4 and 5 illustrate the reasons why Wikipedia users write about history and the criteria they use to choose a topic for editing. Based on their comments, they have developed multiple perceptions of history and different perspectives about what needs coverage on Wikipedia. One more question that the participants of the survey were also asked was if they have any personal connection to the historical topics they choose to edit or create. Most of them answered that they do have a personal association with the historical articles they edit or create. As Table 6 shows, 58 users admitted having some form of relation to the historical topics with which they engage, while 37 users rejected any personal association with the articles they edit. Table 6 provides an overview of whether these users have a personal connection to the past or not. Nevertheless, their comments are not simply yes or no answers but reveal crucial details about how editors encounter the past and the role that history plays in their personal lives.

“I served in the U.S. military in Korea for several years as a Korean linguist,” writes one Wikipedia editor interested in Korean history, “I was ignorant and naive back then, and didn’t think much about why I was there until after I left. After I left the peninsula, I found myself wondering about the conditions that led to the Korean War and ultimately my arrival in Korea. That curiosity drove me to

study Korean history”. This is by no means an exceptional response to the question. Many editors are influenced by their personal experiences from the past, which prompts them to investigate these experiences more fully and make them part of Wikipedia’s historical knowledge. “I spent 30 years in the Army Medical Department,” explains another editor interested in military history, “20 years of it as a trained military medical historian. I served in two of the organizations whose articles I worked on [. . .].” Another user, also interested in topics related to military history, added: “I come from an extensive military family (36 members). I myself am military of 3 years and a former cadet of 6 years”. Similarly, a further editor revealed: “My father fought in the Second World War, and I’ve made a couple of minor edits to events in which he participated. My edits are based on sources other than ‘stuff my dad told me’”. It is not only their own personal connection to historical events of the past but also their families’ experiences that attract some editors to the topics they choose to edit. As one user, who writes about the history of World War II, stated: “Numerous family [sic] fought in the Second World War. As part of my family research, I study the Second World War. This links into what and why I edit on the wiki”.

Wikipedia editors do not only edit articles based on their personal connection to a specific event of the past. Their identities and personal beliefs are also factors that make them choose topics for further development. “I’m a woman who wonders why women’s history isn’t better covered,” writes one user. “My person(al) relation is only through my studies and that I identify as a woman,” adds another user who is also interested in women’s history. A further editor commented: “I am a woman and I like to edit articles on women’s history. The two cultures I enjoy editing the most are Roman history and Norse history, probably because I’m half Spanish half Swedish”. Gendered and national identities determine Wikipedians’ encounters with history and their engagement with Wikipedia. Their identities define the historical topics to which these users contribute. As one editor interested in women’s and indigenous history wrote: “I’m a woman who attended a women’s college, so that played a part in that specific interest [. . .] I’m Bahamian-American and I live near two federal tribal reservations. I speak Irish, so I read a lot of Irish-language media and get information from there that I want to share”. The identities of Wikipedians are formed and influenced by their experiences of the past, which are crucial for both how they perceive historical knowledge and their desire to produce and disseminate it to the public.

However, it is not only their identities but also their personal beliefs that shape their historical interests within the Wikipedia community. For example, one editor interested in the history of socialism and communism pointed out: “As a communist, learning about the history of the socialist movement is a useful tool in being able to apply methods and practices that could help affect material

change in my society". Another editor responded in a similar manner: "I was once a major-party candidate (unsuccessful) for the state legislature, and I edit about legislators and legislatures. I am an official in my union, and I edit about labor history. I'm left-of-center by American standards, and I edit about the history of the American left. I used to work in my state's revenue department, and I edit articles about some tax-avoidance schemes and scams". Ideologies and personal beliefs are both vivid and present in the lives of these editors and, thus, define their historical interests on Wikipedia.

Another form that editors' personal relation to the past can take is their connection to the place they were born, grew up in, or have lived near. "Yes, I often write about Australian topics, and I am Australian," responded one editor. "I often edit pages on local landmarks that are geographically close to me because I have some background knowledge on the topic already, and know where to find reliable sources," explained another. It is not only about the places where people come from or have lived but also the places they have visited. "I've gone on vacations just to take photos of places, which I add to Wikipedia articles," answered one editor interested in the history of cities in the United States. "I have lived in Japan so that connects me to topics on Japan," another editor interested in Japanese history noted. A further user stated: "My only personal connections with most of the subjects that I write about are geographical in nature, as they are related to a place that I have lived or am familiar with (Maryland, D.C., Virginia, West Virginia, etc.)". Wikipedia editors are fascinated to cover historical topics related to places they have either lived in or have visited. Both the knowledge and the personal memories they have from their connections to those places affect them and make them interested in developing related Wikipedia articles. "It's my history, my region's history," as one editor put it.

Another manifestation of Wikipedians' personal relation to the topics they edit or create is their family history or, more broadly, the history of their relatives. Experiences and memories that have marked these users' family history often sees them devoted to the coverage of related topics. Judging by the responses, the examination of these topics helps certain users to better explore the history of their ancestors, encourages them to create a historical entry on Wikipedia or improve an existing one, and, ultimately, allows them to honor the memory of their families. As one Wikipedian illustrated: "In some cases, I have relatives who were participants as soldiers in World War II battles to which I have made minor edits. While studying abroad in Greece, I met an elderly relative who remembered Allied bombing raids against the occupying Axis forces during World War II that killed Greek civilians, several of whom she knew personally. (That particular bombing is not documented in any academic sources I can find, but it appears in Greek and English-language blog sources – one of the reasons that I do

not always dismiss blog references, although I prefer other sources when possible). [. . .] So, I would say that yes, my family background and my choices of what to study early in life have perhaps affected what I am most interested in and capable of writing about now, but I don't necessarily have to personally identify with a topic in order to contribute something". The problem of sources was also evident in a response by another user, who wanted to cover topics related to their family history but could not find any reliable sources: "So far I have rarely edited articles on topics that are somehow related to my ancestors, mainly due to the lack of access to reliable sources. I will definitively try to do so if the opportunity arises, as I see this as an opportunity to honor them". Editors interested in their families' history seek to maintain a balance between their personal connection to the topic and their desire to produce an accurate historical narrative. They try to find reliable sources, as Wikipedia demands, and to produce non-biased historical knowledge about those topics. As one editor mentioned: "When it comes to genealogy or history that my ancestors were involved in, I will try to contribute as best as I can. I try to avoid bias and to be as clear as possible in whatever personal only connected articles I work on". Another editor explained: "Because I had been working quite intensively in family history, I had read histories of places and times where family members had been. I worked to introduce such updated information into relevant articles on Wikipedia". The fact that some Wikipedians have a personal association with the pages they edit does not prevent them from writing about them; however, they try to ensure that their edits and contributions remain within the appropriate framework that Wikipedia has created.

Even though Wikipedians' personal relations to the topics they decide to edit did not come up in the previous sections (see Tables 4 and 5), when the respondents were directly asked whether or not they did have a personal connection to the topics they choose to edit, most of them answered yes. Wikipedia's policies and guidelines, however, state that a personal association with a topic is not allowed. It is possible, then, that many of these users chose not to disclose their personal association when discussing the reasons why they write about history on Wikipedia or outlining their criteria when it comes to editing/creating historical articles.

At the same time, it is apparent that the past has a significant presence in the lives of Wikipedians. This presence of the past can take multiple forms: a direct experience from the past, a family memory related to the past, their identities, personal beliefs, the places where they have lived or visited, the history of their families and their ancestors. This point would seem to comply with the study of Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, who showed that the past has an intimate

presence in the lives of American people.¹⁰ This presence makes Americans turn to the past to answer questions about the present, such as where they come from, where they are going, who they are, and how they want to be remembered.¹¹ Rosenzweig and Thelen’s argument characterizes how Wikipedia editors understand the past and engage with it to produce historical knowledge.

However, in Rosenzweig and Thelen’s work, the interviewees feel close to the past when they are in museums or at family gatherings. At these settings, they can identify themselves as being in the past due to their proximity to historical objects and other family members, who presumably share family histories, and with whom they can develop personal relationships.¹² On Wikipedia this does not happen. Editors are members of a digital and impersonal community, often they do not personally know each other and have probably never met their co-editors, there are no authentic artifacts of the past, and having a personal relation to the topic they edit is not encouraged by Wikipedia. Nevertheless, Wikipedians’ responses reveal that they go beyond what Wikipedia encourages, develop personal connections to historical topics that they want to examine further, and, even more significantly, they do not only turn to the past in order to understand themselves and build relationships but also to contribute to the production of historical knowledge. This is more attuned to what the historian, Benjamin Filene, has argued about the “outsider history-makers” (genealogists, reenactors, heritage tourism developers), who view the past as a living and emotional resource that makes them create passionate histories.¹³ Therefore, on Wikipedia, the presence of the past is not an individualistic matter, as it leads to the collective action of providing better history and making historical knowledge more accessible to the public.

Table 6: Do you have any personal relation/ association with the topics that you choose to edit?

1.	Yes – 58 users
2.	No – 37 users

¹⁰ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12, 40.

¹³ Filene, “Passionate Histories: ‘Outsider’ History-Makers and What They Teach Us,” 11.

A collaborative production of historical knowledge

All the participants of the study are members of three WikiProjects, the WikiProject United States History, the WikiProject Military History, and the WikiProject Women in Red, or at least this was how the recruitment process took place. Another question respondents were asked was how their participation in the WikiProjects works when they edit or create a historical article on Wikipedia. Do they write alone and independently? Do they collaborate with other Wikipedians or other members of the WikiProjects? Based on their responses, I created Tables 7 and 8 and tried to explore how their engagement with the production of historical knowledge takes place. According to Table 7, most Wikipedians (40 users) edit alone, 25 users edit as members of the WikiProject, in which they participate, and 18 users edit both independently and as members of a WikiProject.

These results illustrate that even though Wikipedia promotes the WikiProjects as groups of contributors “who want to work together as a team to improve Wikipedia,” they do not always practically serve that purpose – at least not in the view of most interviewees.¹⁴ Many respondents mentioned that they “seldom, if ever” make edits through a WikiProject, or revealed that they mostly work by themselves. “Mostly on my own with references I have or that are available online,” “mostly solo, with some collaboration with other editors,” “mostly solo, collaboration online,” “I usually am pretty independent and do not collaborate with anyone,” “I tend to do things on my own,” “I tend not to collaborate,” “I generally do not collaborate directly with other project members,” are some of the answers the respondents gave to describe their non-participation in WikiProjects and the independent character of their editing activities. WikiProjects work in terms of being communities of people who share common interests in historical topics and themes, but not necessarily as groups of people who work together and edit articles collaboratively. As two editors put it: “I am a member of some projects, but so far in my experience there isn’t really that much direct collaboration” and “I am more of a ‘lone wolf’ and do not collaborate. I have joined some groups, but I don’t see much of a community that motivates me to make frequent edits”.

On the other hand, some editors who actively participate in WikiProjects revealed in their responses some useful information on the role of WikiProjects in the production of historical knowledge. One editor, probably a member of the WikiProject United States History, offered a detailed observation on their participation in the WikiProject:

14 “Wikipedia:WikiProject”.

My participation in WikiProject United States History has been limited to tagging relevant article talk pages so that those pages will be linked with the WikiProject, and can therefore be patrolled, rated for classification and importance, and monitored by more active users in the project. Most of the articles that I write fall within the topic of United States History, so I ensure they include the template for this WikiProject on their talk pages. I tend to write about United States History articles, and then ensure that they are properly linked with this WikiProject. In addition, as part of my participation in WikiProject West Virginia, I classify and rate the importance of West Virginia-related articles, and add the WikiProject United States template (and classification and rating) where appropriate. I find that the WikiProjects are especially helpful for prioritizing article improvement based on their importance and significance, and being able to monitor activity across a broad array of articles of related interest (i.e. articles for deletion, etc.)

A similar experience was shared by another editor, a member of the WikiProject Military History:

The most active WikiProject of which I am a member is WikiProject Military History, and I've been a member of it since the year I joined Wikipedia. I currently serve as a "coordinator" for the project, which is an informal leadership position decided annually by vote. Most intra-project collaboration involves sharing general advice with one another, or offering minor suggestions such as what template might best fit an article. Since "military history" is such a broad subject area, members will specialize, so sometimes if I an [sic] encounter (for example) a US Civil War subject that I think needs improvement, I'll point it out to one of our members who is really knowledgeable in that area and ask for their help or advice. People will come to me for questions on Cold War African military history. As a project coordinator, I do have some additional responsibilities such as conducting formal reviews of other editors' content for internal quality ratings (any editor can do this, but the coordinators are expected to help more in this respect).

In many comments, WikiProjects appear as communities of people who share common interests, review, rate, and classify articles relevant to the project, discuss problems with other members, ask for advice and suggestions. Of course, those activities can result in collaborative editing, but this does not characterize the engagement of most Wikipedians with the WikiProjects.

Even though WikiProjects do not appear in the main to be collaborative spaces, it should be noted that most Wikipedians generally argue that their editing activities are not solitary but collaborative. According to Table 8, 39 users reported that their engagement with the production of history on Wikipedia is the result of collaboration. 24 users found their involvement solitary, and 13 users argued that their engagement can be both collaborative and solitary depending on the circumstances. Most participants explained that they often collaborate with other Wikipedians when they edit an entry on Wikipedia, but that this collaboration tends to take place within the articles themselves or in the related "talk pages," not typically in the communities of the relevant WikiProjects. This does

not necessarily mean, of the 39 users who deemed their work on Wikipedia to be collaborative, that many editors do not often collaborate with other members of WikiProjects. Instead, it shows that many Wikipedians work together within the general framework of the article they are trying to improve. As one Wikipedia editor described: “Most of my direct and most intensive collaboration has been done outside the project, however, and this usually happens by chance, when I stumble across another editor who happens to be interested in improving the same article I’m working on”. This approach is evident in many comments, as can be seen from the following responses: “My collaboration generally involves a few other editors on specific articles or topics,” “We use the talk page and notify other editors for discussions, and participation can be anything from minor edits to creating new pages,” etc.

The main point here is that the process of historical knowledge production on Wikipedia is collaborative for most editors, but as the responses of Wikipedians reveal, it is not only limited to the communities of the related WikiProjects that Wikipedia has established. Instead, editors work on their own, choosing articles based on their historical interests and their intimate connections to the past. They collaborate with other Wikipedians while they work on the same article and often use the WikiProjects to find resources about their historical inquiries, to ask for suggestions, or to share their worries.

Four characteristics appear in Wikipedia editors’ comments and define their involvement with history. First, for most Wikipedians, writing about history on Wikipedia signifies a fun, enjoyable, and pleasurable activity. They contribute to the production of history because they enjoy the practices of reading, writing, doing research, and learning about the past. They pursue their historical interests and become experts in historical areas and topics. At the same time, many Wikipedians engage with the production of history because they want to provide a more complete, less biased, and accurate historical narrative to the public. They take advantage of Wikipedia’s digital and public character to store their histories and disseminate them to the public. Therefore, they educate visitors to Wikipedia and prevent the past from getting lost or being forgotten. Second, Wikipedia editors decide to create or edit a historical page on a topic which they are interested in and passionate about in order to explore it further. Their preexisting knowledge about a subject does not define their editing choices; instead, it is their curiosity, their personal interest, and their willingness to examine the topic more deeply.

Third, Wikipedians turn to the past because it has a significant presence in their lives. The presence of the past can take multiple forms: a direct experience from the past, a family memory related to the past, their identities, personal beliefs, the places where they have lived or have visited, the history of their families and their ancestors. All these dynamic relations to the past make it clear that

most Wikipedians have a personal connection to the topics that they want to explore further and to make part of Wikipedia. However, they hesitate to make that clear in their responses about why they engage with history on Wikipedia and what their criteria is when deciding to edit a page. Fourth, writing about history on Wikipedia is mainly a collaborative practice, but that collaboration does not only take place within the existing WikiProjects, it also happens on the articles they edit and their related discussion pages.

Table 7: Do you edit articles as a part of the WikiProject or do you edit independently?

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|----|-----------------------------|
| 1. | Editing alone – 40 users |
| 2. | In a WikiProject – 25 users |
| 3. | Both – 18 users |
-

Table 8: Is editing on Wikipedia the result of collaboration or solitary work?

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- | | |
|----|--------------------------|
| 1. | Collaborative – 39 users |
| 1. | Solitary – 24 users |
| 3. | Both – 13 users |
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