

# Conclusion

In 2021, the American Historical Association published a study on how the American public perceives and understands the past.<sup>1</sup> The study was based on a national survey of 1,816 people and signified the most current overview of the public's view on history since the important work of Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, published in 1998.<sup>2</sup> According to AHA's study, 46 percent of respondents turn to Wikipedia to learn about history and acquire a historical understanding of the past. Wikipedia was ranked higher than other historical activities, such as "Historic site visit," "Museum visit," "Genealogy work," "Social media," "Podcast/radio program," "History lecture," and "History-related video game". Almost half of the respondents confirmed that they use Wikipedia as a source of historical knowledge. These findings combined with the appropriation of Wikipedia's corpus by ChatGPT and Wikipedia's partnership with the most central search engine in the digital world, Google, and other digital assistants, such as Siri and Alexa, make it clear how crucial Wikipedia's role is in how the public learns about history and makes sense of the past.<sup>3</sup>

Wikipedia is not only significant because people constantly visit its contents and consume historical knowledge but also because it allows the public to get actively involved in the production of its contents. In the digital world, many projects have tried to use the model of Wikipedia and apply it for other purposes.<sup>4</sup> Even academic digital history projects, digital heritage and museum projects have been created according to the technologies and the crowdsourcing model of Wikipedia. However, most of them have failed to become self-regulated communities in

---

<sup>1</sup> Pete Burkholder and Dana Schaffer, "A Snapshot of the Public's Views on History," *Perspectives on History*, August 30, 2021, accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/a-snapshot-of-the-publics-views-on-history-national-poll-offers-valuable-insights-for-historians-and-advocates/>

<sup>2</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Gertner, "Wikipedia's Moment of Truth," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2023, accessed August 25, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/18/magazine/wikipedia-ai-chatgpt.html>. For more information on Wikipedia's collaboration with Google, Siri, and Alexa, see Ford, "Rise of the Underdog".

<sup>4</sup> For example, some attempts by Wikimedia Foundation to use the Wikipedia model for other projects have failed. See Adrienne Lafrance, "The Problem With WikiTribune," *The Atlantic*, April 25, 2017, accessed August 25, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/wikipedia-the-newspaper/524211/>; Gian Volpicelli, "Wikipedia's Jimmy Wales wanted to save journalism. He didn't," *Wired*, April 16, 2019, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/jimmy-wales-is-having-another-crack-at-wikitribune>

the way that Wikipedia has.<sup>5</sup> Only Wikipedia has managed to become a successful platform based on the crowdsourcing model, without advertisements, and been able to keep its contents free. As of January 2024, Wikipedia includes 55 million articles in 309 languages and, according to the web traffic analysis company, Similarweb, Wikipedia was the 7th most visited website worldwide in December 2023.<sup>6</sup> This dimension of Wikipedia illustrates the significance of the public within the Wikipedia community. Wikipedia editors are the agents who have managed to make Wikipedia a self-regulated community and a public source of historical knowledge, which is dominant in the digital world and determines people's encounters with history to an important extent.

This book examined those two dimensions of Wikipedia. On the one hand, it shed light on Wikipedia's setup, its guidelines, methods, policies, and power structures that shape historical knowledge production. On the other hand, this study placed Wikipedia editors at the center of historical inquiry and investigated how they view history and why they contribute to the production of historical knowledge. By following multiple methodologies and using different kinds of data, such as Wikipedians' comments, personal data, and survey responses, this project focused on the dynamic role of Wikipedia editors and examined their involvement in the creation and editing of Wikipedia articles related to history. This work presents Wikipedia as a digital and public space that allows users to engage with the past actively and creatively by discussing it on the related "talk pages". This does not mean that all discussions result in editing changes in the main entry, as the transformation of discussions to historical knowledge goes through a process of control and bureaucracy that Wikipedia has established. In this process, some more experienced editors have a more powerful position than others. In other words, the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia resembles a filter into which editors pour their memories, experiences, emotions, personal stories, and academic scholarship. All these then flow through the "sociotechnical" system of Wikipedia and result in the creation or editing of a Wikipedia article.

Specifically, in Chapter 1, I explored how Wikipedia has managed to become a self-regulated community and a public space where people can discuss, create, and edit historical articles. The digital structure of Wikipedia, including its policies, guidelines, hierarchy, and sub-communities, encourages dynamic participation on Wikipedia and active engagement with the production of historical knowledge. At

---

<sup>5</sup> For a specific crowdsourcing project and its failure, see Graham, Massie, and Feuerherm, "The HeritageCrowd Project: A Case Study in Crowdsourcing Public History," 228.

<sup>6</sup> "Wikipedia:Size comparisons," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 9, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Size\\_comparisons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Size_comparisons); "Top Websites Ranking," *Similarweb*, accessed January 9, 2024, <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/>

the same time, Wikipedia creates a multilayered system of bureaucracy and surveillance that does not allow all users to have the same power within the Wikipedia community and, thus, determine the production of historical knowledge in the same way.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I studied four different case studies that relate to traumatic events of modern United States history – the Great Depression, the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Vietnam War, and the September 11 attacks – in order to examine the agency of Wikipedia users and their engagement with the production of history. I showed that the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia is a complex process, in which Wikipedia editors do not just write about history but 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 obscurity. Wikipedians do not only base what they write about history on their memories or on the passive consumption of other popular forms of history, but also based on a combination of personal experiences, academic scholarship, and Wikipedia guidelines. However, the four case studies revealed differences in Wikipedians' engagement with history. In the first two case studies, which belong to the distant past, lived experience played a lesser role and interpretation of scholarship played a stronger role. In the other two case studies, which belong to the recent past, editors relied more on their direct experiences of the past and tried to make these experiences part of the broader historical narrative.

In Chapter 4, I applied a quantitative approach to Wikipedians' involvement with the production of historical knowledge and examined the Wikipedia community as a network, in which editors are the nodes and the connections between editors, who contribute to the creation and development of Wikipedia pages, are the edges. By measuring those connections, I revealed the structures of power and hierarchy that shape the production of history on Wikipedia. I also discerned the interests of Wikipedia editors, who edit articles related to history, and their respective identities as they are promoted within the Wikipedia community. I argued that a few experienced editors and veterans, as well as some non-human agents and bots, are for the most part responsible for the creation of Wikipedia articles. These two kinds of editors control the production of historical knowledge to a large extent.

In Chapter 5, I conducted an online survey with Wikipedia editors who create and edit articles related to history. By placing the voices of Wikipedians at the center of my research, I presented 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 choose to edit, their educational background, their

collaboration with other editors, and their activity within the – history related – WikiProjects.

Apart from the main results of the study, this book tried to contribute to the historiography of public and digital history by investigating one of the most central public and digital sources of historical knowledge that has generally been neglected by historians. A better understanding of how history is constructed on Wikipedia, and why Wikipedia constitutes a successful crowdsourcing project that attracts the public and produces historical narratives, can help both academic historians and practitioners in museums, archives, and cultural heritage institutions to design more successful digital history and public history projects.

At the same time, this book investigated the public as an active producer of history rather than as a passive consumer.<sup>7</sup> It did not view the public as a single entity; instead, it highlighted the multiple publics of Wikipedia, their interests, their education, their different roles in the production of historical knowledge, and their various relations to the past.<sup>8</sup> By exploring Wikipedians' stories and experiences from their involvement in Wikipedia, this study tried to follow David Dean's suggestion for a public history that will not only be for and about the public but also by and with the public.<sup>9</sup> As the librarian Phoebe Ayers has wonderfully put it: "When I look at a Wikipedia article, I see the people behind it – the generous, quirky, enthusiastic souls that write and curate Wikipedia".<sup>10</sup> Wikipedia users produce historical knowledge online by engaging with the past, sharing their personal stories, opinions, memories, and emotions about history, getting involved in debates and discussions, collaborating with other Wikipedians, and by complying with the established hierarchies, guidelines and policies of Wikipedia.

---

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed analysis of how the public has appeared in the historiography of public history, see Apostolopoulos, "What is the Public of Public History? Between the Public Sphere and Public Agency," and Joanna Wojdon and Dorota Wiśniewka, ed., *Public in Public History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> On the use of "publics" instead of "public," see Dean, "Introduction," in *A Companion to Public History*, 3–4.

<sup>9</sup> David Dean, "Publics, Public Historians, and Participatory Public History," in *Public in Public History*, ed. Joanna Wojdon and Dorota Wiśniewka (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), 2–3.

<sup>10</sup> Ayers, "Wikipedia and Libraries".