

Isaac Campbell

Professor Marshall Kean

ENG 1021-11A

16 April 2025

Wikipedia: Today, a Reliable Source

The current consensus within academia and professional research is that Wikipedia is not a reliable or credible source of information. However, even despite the status quo opinion, Wikipedia in the present day is a reliable source of information due to the position and systems of reputability it has built up over the years.

Firstly, Wikipedia editors have always strived to provide quality information first and foremost. In 2005 - two decades ago - Nature published a study on Wikipedia's content, citing it as going "head-to-head" with Encyclopedia Britannica in terms of quality (Jemielniak). That is, even before its systems were fully built up, and before the onset of its titanic user base, Wikipedia's content was comparable to that of a formal, fact-checked encyclopedia. Additionally, Wikipedia editors often have sound credentials; a survey in 2011 found that most are well-educated and 61% have at least a college degree (Jemielniak & Aibar). Scholars have also created initiatives to contribute to Wikipedia; in 2011, the president of the American Sociological Association, Erik Olin Wright, called for the improvement of Wikipedia's sociological articles, and instructors have also begun to introduce Wikipedia editing as a form of instruction in their courses (Jemielniak & Aibar).

Nowadays, the sheer number of people who use Wikipedia is beneficial to its credibility; Wikipedia is one of the top ten most-visited websites on the Internet (Fallis). Because thousands of eyes pass over every article per day, any blatantly false information or vandalization of articles

is quickly noticed by users, and is promptly corrected or reverted. That is to say, good-faith editors outnumber bad actors, and articles become more verifiable as a result. Furthermore, on top of human editors, there are also bots with machine learning algorithms who spot vandalization on articles and automatically revert those changes (Jemielniak). These ideas have been tested by researchers via inserting plausible errors into articles and monitoring the response time - on average, it takes just a few minutes for this type of vandalism to be corrected (Fallis). The effect of the good-faith majority can be seen particularly in debated scientific topics; articles on climate change tend to reflect scientific consensus rather than more conspiracy-oriented positions (Jemielniak & Aibar).

In addition to scrutiny by regular users after its publishing, there is also the scrutiny articles go through while they are being created; for example, each Wikipedia article must be written from a neutral point of view, which is one of Wikipedia's three core content policies (Cunneen & O'Neil). For the sake of remaining neutral, if there is no consensus on which claims are true about a certain topic, the article must instead mention that people believe differing claims about the topic (Fallis). In addition, cited sources must come from a third party, and articles may only be made if there is reliable third-party coverage of the topic (Cunneen & O'Neil). This scrutiny continues even after an article's publishing; edits to follow style guides, the editing or removal of citations, and content disputes are discussed through each article's Talk page (Cunneen & O'Neil). Finally, if articles do not meet certain standards (i.e. in neutrality or accuracy), they are marked at the top of their page with their respective issue (Fallis). Issues could include lack of citations, the presence of original research, or a non-neutral point of view.

In some circumstances, pages may be locked from edits using Wikipedia's protection system. There are different levels of protection; for instance, semi-protection prevents

unregistered users from making edits, while extended-confirmed protection prevents accounts less than 30 days old and with under 500 edits from editing an article (Wikipedia contributors). Political articles and articles about debated scientific topics are often locked in this manner.

If one remains skeptical about the information on Wikipedia, they may cross-reference information in an article by using its History page; all edits to an article are saved on this page (Cunneen & O'Neil). An observer can spot differences between two versions of a page, and from there spot inaccuracies or vandalism that may be present. Additionally, if one does not wish to use an openly editable article, they can refer to aforementioned protected articles, or use a Featured article. Featured articles are articles that meet sufficiently high standards of quality to be specially featured on Wikipedia; as a result, they are implicitly more reliable than regular articles (Fallis).

Some may stress that, because there are contributors who lack credentials for or expertise in the topics they write about, inaccurate information may be present in those topics' articles. However, with enough contributors from different backgrounds, these gaps in knowledge often even themselves out; as Linus's Law says, "given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow" (Jemielniak). Furthermore, Wikipedia is built on systems of collaboration; the remaining contributors who do possess credentials and/or expertise can correct any remaining inaccuracies, and work with other editors through the article's Talk page for larger changes.

One may also raise that certain articles are controversial and/or highly debated, and therefore may be unreliable due to a high number of edits. However, articles on topics that can be described in this way are usually locked using Wikipedia's aforementioned protection system. As said previously, political articles (such as on Donald Trump) and articles about debated scientific topics (such as on climate change) are often locked in this manner. Therefore, only those with

discernment and a history of genuine interest in providing information are allowed to edit; those who go to make changes in the heat of the moment or for personal convictions are prevented from doing so.

Overall, due to its number of users, its generous amount of standards and regulations, and its range of systems to aid accuracy and reliability, Wikipedia is a reliable source of information in the present day. It should not be treated as unreliable as it is by academics solely because anyone can edit; often, people choose to purvey reliable information rather than to vandalize and misinform, as evidenced by the usage of Wikipedia's systems and the faith towards its policies.

Works Cited

- Fallis, Don. "Toward an Epistemology of Wikipedia." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science & Technology*, vol. 59, no. 10, Aug. 2008, pp. 1662–74. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.ccco.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/asi.20870>. Accessed 16 Apr. 2025.
- Cunneen, Rachel, and Mathieu O’Neil. "Students Are Told Not to Use Wikipedia for Research. But It’s a Trustworthy Source." *The Conversation*, 4 Nov. 2021, theconversation.com/students-are-told-not-to-use-wikipedia-for-research-but-its-a-trustworthy-source-168834. Accessed 16 Apr. 2025.
- Jemielniak, Dariusz. "Wikipedia: Why Is the Common Knowledge Resource Still Neglected by Academics?" *PubMed Central*, 3 Dec. 2019, pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6889752/. Accessed 16 Apr. 2025.
- Jemielniak, Dariusz, and Eduard Aibar. "Bridging the Gap between Wikipedia and Academia." *Journal of the Association for Information Science & Technology*, vol. 67, no. 7, July 2016, pp. 1773–76. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.ccco.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/asi.23691>. Accessed 16 Apr. 2025.
- Wikipedia contributors. "Wikipedia:Protection Policy." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 Apr. 2025, en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Protection_policy&oldid=1284331874. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

Letter to the Editor

Despite the status quo and current academic standards stating otherwise, I affirm that Wikipedia in the present day is a reliable source of information. As the internet and its userbase has grown, the standards of Wikipedia's content have increased as well. There are many conventions and regulations that each article follows, as well as a huge amount of scrutiny from those who read articles. There are "Talk" pages on each article specifically to discuss large changes and how information is presented, as well as to discuss current and new evidence and how or whether it should be implemented in an article.

One may raise that, because anyone can edit an article, misinformation can be propagated through an article, or an article may be vandalized. These points would have had more weight about 10 years ago; they are very much all still possible cases, but due to the titanic userbase on Wikipedia today, the desire for truthful, qualitative information far outweighs either the mischievous desire to vandalize an article or the malicious desire to spread misinformation. Additionally, if a user is concerned about the information they may receive from an article, they may resort to the systems of security for select articles: some articles have a Protected status, where they cannot be edited by new users, and other articles are marked as Good or Featured, where they cannot be edited without majority approval of a change. These thereby increase the reputability of an article for both their security and scrutinization.