

## 2 From Anarchy to Wikiality, Glaring Bias to Good Cop: Press Coverage of Wikipedia's First Two Decades

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Media coverage of Wikipedia has radically shifted over the past two decades: once cast as an intellectual frivolity, it is now lauded as the “last bastion of shared reality” online. To increase diversity and digital literacy, journalists and the Wikipedia community should work together to advance a new “wiki journalism.”

“Jimmy Wales has been shot dead, according to Wikipedia, the online, up-to-the-minute encyclopedia.” That was the opening line of a blatantly false 2005 news report by the online magazine the *Register*.<sup>1</sup> Rather than being an early example of what we may today call “fake news,” the report by the tech site was a consciously snarky yet prescient criticism of Wikipedia and its reliability as a source for media. Wales was still alive, of course, despite what it had briefly stated on his Wikipedia entry, but by attributing his death to English Wikipedia, the *Register* sought to call out a perceived flaw in Wikipedia: on Wikipedia, truth was fluid, and facts were exposed to anonymous vandals who could take advantage of its anyone-can-edit model to spread disinformation.

Over the past twenty years, English Wikipedia has frequently been the subject of media coverage, from in-depth exposés to colorful features and critical op-eds. But if you randomly sample the words used to describe Wikipedia from the headlines in this period, you might conclude that the press has no idea what it thinks about the free internet encyclopedia. Should we refer to it as “the hive” as the *Atlantic* did in 2006 or rather as the “good cop of the internet” as the *Washington Post* did in 2018? Is Wikipedia “impolite” as the *New York Times* claimed in 2008 or rather a “ray of light” as the *Guardian* suggested in 2018?<sup>2</sup> Is there a logical progression to how the press has described Wikipedia over the past two decades, or does seemingly every reporter possess a dramatically different opinion?

Both of us are journalists who have regularly covered Wikipedia in recent years, and before that we were frequent consumers of knowledge on the site (like many of our journalist colleagues). Press coverage of Wikipedia during the past twenty years has undergone a dramatic shift, and we believe it's important to highlight how the media's understanding of Wikipedia has shifted along with the public's understanding. Initially cast as the symbol of intellectual frivolity in the digital age, Wikipedia is now being lauded as the "last bastion of shared reality" in Trump's America.<sup>3</sup> Coverage, we claim, has evolved from bewilderment at the project to concern and hostility at its model, to acceptance of its merits and disappointment at its shortcomings, and finally to calls to hold it socially accountable and reform it like any other institution.

We argue that press coverage of Wikipedia can be roughly divided into four periods. We have named each period after a major theme: "Authorial Anarchy" (2001–2004/2005); "Wikiality" (2005–2008); "Bias" (2011–2017); and "Good Cop" (2018–present). We note upfront that these categories are not rigid and that themes and trends from one period can and often do carry over into others. But the overall progression reveals how the dynamic relationship between Wikipedia and the press has changed since its inception and might provide further insight into how the press and Wikipedia will continue to interact with each other in the internet's knowledge ecosystem.

In short, we argue for what we term "wiki journalism" and the need for media to play a larger role in improving the general public's "Wikipedia literacy." With the help of the Wikimedia Foundation and the Wikipedia community, we claim that the press can play a more substantial role in explaining Wikipedia to the public and in serving as a civilian watchdog for the online encyclopedia. Encouraging critical readership of Wikipedia and helping to increase diversity among its editorship will ensure greater public oversight over the digital age's preeminent source of knowledge.

### **Authorial Anarchy (2001–2004/2005)**

When Wikipedia was launched in 2001, mainstream media as well as more technology minded outlets treated it as something between a fluke and quirky outlier. With quotes from cofounders Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, early coverage tended to focus on what seemed like Wikipedia's most novel

aspects: how it is written by anyone, is edited collaboratively, is free to access, and in the case of tech media, extends the culture of open software development to the realm of encyclopedias.

"Anyone who visits the site is encouraged to participate," the *New York Times* wrote in its first piece on Wikipedia, titled "Fact-Driven? Collegial? This Site Wants You." Reports like these laid out the basic tenets of English Wikipedia, focusing on how collaborative technology and the volunteer community regulated what was termed "authorial anarchy."<sup>4</sup> Many of these reports included a colorful lede ("What does Nicole Kidman have in common with Kurt Godel?" Hint: Both have Wikipedia articles) showcasing the quirky diversity of content on the new site, where "you don't even have to give your real name" to contribute.<sup>5</sup>

Despite Wales's lofty claims that Wikipedia was creating a world in which everyone could have "free access to the sum of all human knowledge," throughout the early 2000s mainstream media remained skeptical toward Wikipedia.<sup>6</sup> Reports from 2002–2003 mostly documented with some surprise its rapid growth in scale and scope as well as its expansion into other languages. *MIT Technology Review* ran a report called "Free the Encyclopedias!," which described Wikipedia as "intellectual anarchy extruded into encyclopedia form" and "a free-wheeling Internet-based encyclopedia whose founders hope will revolutionize the stodgy world of encyclopedias"<sup>7</sup>—then still dominated by the Enlightenment-era *Britannica* and its more digital savvy competitor *Encarta*.

Repeated comparison with *Encarta* and *Britannica* is perhaps the most prominent characteristic of early media coverage, one that will disappear in later stages as Wikipedia cements its status as a legitimate encyclopedia. *MIT Technology Review*, for example, unironically claimed that Wikipedia "will probably never dethrone *Britannica*, whose 232-year reputation is based upon hiring world-renowned experts and exhaustively reviewing their articles with a staff of more than a hundred editors."<sup>8</sup> The demise of the status of experts would later become a hallmark of coverage of Wikipedia (discussed in the next section), but its seeds can be found from the onset: for example, in its first *exposé* on Wikipedia in 2004, the *Washington Post* reported that *Britannica's* vaunted staff was now down to a mere twenty editors. Only a year prior, Wikipedia editors noted that the prestigious paper "brushed off" Wikipedia almost entirely and instead focused on CD-ROM encyclopedias<sup>9</sup>—all the rage since *Encarta* launched a decade earlier and

mounted what seemed at the time to be the bigger threat toward *Britannica*. Within a year, however, the newspaper's take on Wikipedia changed dramatically, and it was now concerned by the long-term effect of Wikipedia's success, suggesting "the Internet's free dissemination of knowledge will eventually decrease the economic value of information."<sup>10</sup>

At the end of 2005, this tension between the English encyclopedia of the Enlightenment and that of the digital age would reach its zenith in a now infamous *Nature* news study that compared Wikipedia and *Britannica* (also discussed in chapter 13). Published in December 2005, *Nature*'s "Internet Encyclopaedias Go Head to Head" found Wikipedia to be as accurate as its Enlightenment-era competitor based on experts' comparisons of randomly selected science articles.<sup>11</sup> News that Wikipedia successfully passed scientific scrutiny—that its ever-changing content was deemed to be as reliable as the static entries of a vaunted print-era encyclopedia like *Britannica*—made headlines around the world.<sup>12</sup> The *Nature* study was the final stage in a process that peaked in 2005 and cemented Wikipedia's shift from a web novelty whose value was to be treated skeptically at best to a cultural force to be reckoned with.

In March 2005, Wikipedia had crossed the half million article mark, and some intellectuals began to discuss the "the *wikification* of knowledge."<sup>13</sup> Wales, increasingly an internet celebrity, took his pitch about "a ragtag band of volunteers" revolutionizing encyclopedias to *TED*.<sup>14</sup> In the widely popular talk, titled "The Birth of Wikipedia," Wales failed to reference Sanger, who had left the project in 2002. In the early days Sanger was a leading voice that spoke to the internet community from which Wikipedia's first volunteers were enlisted, penning guest blog posts as part of early outreach efforts. However, as the 2005 *TED* speech symbolized, Wikipedia was now mainstream and no longer aiming at early internet adopters but rather the general public—and Wales had taken on the role of public face of the project.

Tellingly, 2005 was also the year that the Wikipedia community first began recording its coverage in the media in an organized fashion. Initially focused on instances of "Wiki love" from the press, in 2005 the community created categories like "America's Top Newspapers Use Wikipedia" for its early press clippings.<sup>15</sup> The *Signpost*, the online newspaper for English Wikipedia, was also founded in 2005 to report on events related to Wikipedia.<sup>16</sup> Over time the community grew increasingly conscious of its public

role, and by 2006 an organized index of all media references to Wikipedia was set up—first with a list for every year and then, as coverage swelled, one for every month as well.<sup>17</sup> Categories were also created for times when Wikipedia was cited as a source of information by mainstream media<sup>18</sup>—a rare reversal of roles that highlighted the mutually affirming relationship between Wikipedia and the media that would develop over later periods.

Indeed, 2005 was to be a key year for Wikipedia: it saw its biggest vindication—the *Nature* report—alongside its biggest vilification—the so-called Seigenthaler affair. John Seigenthaler, a journalist and friend of US President John F. Kennedy, had his Wikipedia article falsely accuse him of playing a role in the president's and the president's brother's assassinations. The error—introduced by an anonymous editor—was eventually erased by Wales himself, but it was online for a number of months and garnered numerous negative headlines for the open encyclopedia and its collaborative model.<sup>19</sup> The author of the *Nature* study made a point of addressing the “Wikipedia Seigenthaler biography incident,” writing in the report that in his view “such high-profile examples are the exception rather than the rule.”<sup>20</sup> The fallout even caused Wikipedia to reform its policy on articles dealing with the biographies of living people,<sup>21</sup> arguably the first example of successful media-driven public pressure on the community-run encyclopedia.

By 2005, Wikipedia was no longer quirky. Now it was to be viewed within a new framework which contrasted its popularity with its accuracy and debated the risks it posed.<sup>22</sup> The *New York Times*, for example, claimed that the Seigenthaler “case triggered extensive debate on the Internet over the value and reliability of Wikipedia, and more broadly, over the nature of online information.”<sup>23</sup> In the next phase, Wikipedia's effect on the popular understanding of truth would be the overriding theme.

### Wikiality (2005–2008)

Stephen Colbert launched his satirical news program the *Colbert Report* with a segment dedicated to what would be dubbed 2005's word of the year: *truthiness*.<sup>24</sup> “We're not talking about truth, we're talking about something that seems like truth—the truth we want to exist,” Colbert explained.<sup>25</sup> He even urged viewers to take the truth into their own hands and “save” the declining populations of elephants in Africa by changing their numbers

on Wikipedia, causing its server to crash. The wider point resonated.<sup>26</sup> “It’s on Wikipedia, so it must be true,” the *Washington Post* wrote that year.<sup>27</sup> Wikipedia was no longer taken to be just another website; it was now a powerhouse undermining intellectual institutions and capable of changing our very perception of reality.

Colbert followed up his infamous segment with another potent neologism: *wikiality*. “Wikiality,” he charged, was the reality created by Wikipedia’s model, in which “truth” was based on the will of the majority and not on facts. This was a theme that had a deep political resonance in post-9/11 America, buoyed by the presidency of George W. Bush and the rise to prominence of Fox News—and Wikipedia was increasingly cast as providing its underlying intellectual conditions. This framing peaked in 2005 and 2006 but was omnipresent when Wikipedia launched in 2001, when for example “populist editing” was selected as one of the year’s “big ideas.”<sup>28</sup> The culture of *truthiness* and the *wikiality* it created were taken to be the real-world manifestations of the Wikipedia philosophy—and the fallout was taking on an increasingly political undertone. “Who is *Britannica* to tell me that George Washington had slaves? If I want to say he didn’t, that’s my right,” Colbert charged. “Thanks to Wikipedia, it’s also a fact. [We’re] bringing democracy to knowledge.”<sup>29</sup>

During 2006–2009, the dominance of Wikipedia’s encyclopedic model was solidified. In 2008, the *New York Times* published a “eulogy” for print encyclopedias and flagged the need to understand the “epistemology of Wikipedia” and the “wikitruth” it bred.<sup>30</sup> Wikipedia’s underlying philosophy—its model’s effects on the very nature of facticity—was now deserving of more serious and critical examination. *MIT Technology Review* ran a piece on “Wikipedia and the Meaning of Truth,” asking “why the online encyclopedia’s epistemology should worry those who care about traditional notions of accuracy.”<sup>31</sup> The manner Wikipedia constructed knowledge and offered an alternative justification to that of expert-based print encyclopedias was taking central stage.

Concerns that Wikipedia’s epistemological model was replacing expertise loomed large. In 2006, the *New York Times* debated the merits of “the nit-picking of the masses vs. the authority of the experts,” and the *Independent* asked: “Do we need a more reliable online encyclopedia than Wikipedia?”<sup>32</sup> In a report that profiled Wikipedians, the *New Yorker* wondered: “Can Wikipedia conquer expertise?”; and Larry Sanger, who had left the project by

then, lamented “the fate of expertise after Wikipedia.”<sup>33</sup> Though largely negative, these in-depth reports also permitted a more detailed treatment of Wikipedia’s theory of knowledge. Articles like Marshal Poe’s “The Hive,” published in the *Atlantic’s* September 2006 edition, laid out for intellectual readers Wikipedia’s history and philosophy like never before.

Epistemic and social fears of Wikipedia were also fueled by Wikipedia’s biggest public media storm to date—the so-called Essay scandal of 2007, in which a prolific Wikipedia editor profiled by the *New Yorker* was revealed to be a fraud. The user Essay claimed to be a professor of theology but turned out to be a twenty-four-year-old college dropout, Ryan Jordan. Jordan’s outing prompted a rare correction from the magazine and made headlines.<sup>34</sup> It even spurred calls to reform Wikipedia.<sup>35</sup> The fact that Jordan held an official status within Wikipedia’s community seemed to echo an increasingly accepted political truism: facts were being manipulated by those with power.

During 2004 and 2005, Wikipedia dealt with a number of media storms regarding errors in its political content: notably, the articles of George W. Bush and John Kerry during the 2004 presidential election.<sup>36</sup> The ambiguity of the election’s contested results reverberated on Wikipedia in the form of “edit wars,” and political vandalism continued to plague Wikipedia throughout Bush’s second term, turning his article into one of the “most controversial” ever.<sup>37</sup> Knowledge was increasingly being politicized, and much of Capitol Hill was banned from editing Wikipedia anonymously during 2006 after politicians’ articles were whitewashed in what the *Washington Post* called “wikipolitics.”<sup>38</sup> During this period Wikipedia also first faced allegations of having a liberal bias—for example, by “evangelical Christians” who opened a conservative *wiki* of their own.<sup>39</sup> Reports like these helped grant social currency to the claim that knowledge was political like never before.

The politicization of knowledge, alongside a proliferation of alternative wikis—exacerbated in part by Wales’s for-profit website Wikia, launched in 2006—all served to highlight the *wikiality* of America’s political and media landscape.<sup>40</sup> It was at this time that the first cases of “citogenesis”—circular and false reporting originating from Wikipedia—appeared. These incidents showed how dependent classic media was on Wikipedia—and therefore how politically vulnerable and unreliable it was by proxy. They included reports that cited the unfounded claim regarding Hillary Clinton’s being

the valedictorian of her class at Wellesley College, an error born from false information introduced to her Wikipedia article.<sup>41</sup> The edit wars on Bush's Wikipedia page highlighted the online encyclopedia's role in what the *New York Times* termed the "separate realities" existing within America.<sup>42</sup>

By 2007, Wikipedia was among the top ten most popular websites in the world. Though it was a nonprofit, it enjoyed the top spots on Google's search engine results, sparking concerns of a "googlepedia" by internet thinkers.<sup>43</sup>

Wikipedia was now a primary source of knowledge for the information age, and its internal workings mattered to the general public.<sup>44</sup> Coverage shifted in accordance. Reports began to focus on the internal intellectual battles raging within the community of editors. For example, the *Guardian* wrote about the two different encyclopedic schools of thought active on Wikipedia—the "deletionists," who want to delete low quality articles, as opposed to the "inclusionists," who are more forgiving.<sup>45</sup> For the first time, coverage of Wikipedia was no longer monolithic, and the community was permitted diverging opinions by the press. Wikipedia was less a unified publisher and more a vital discursive arena. Policy changes were debated in the media, and concerns over Wikipedia's "declining user base" were also covered—mostly by Noam Cohen, who covered the encyclopedia for the *New York Times*.<sup>46</sup> Wikipedia was now a beat, its worldview fully embedded within our social and political reality. The question was what was it telling us, who was writing it, and who was being excluded.

### **Bias (2011–2017)**

In February 2011, the *New York Times* ran a series of articles on the question "Where Are the Women of Wikipedia?" in its opinion pages. These 2011 articles have very different headlines than the paper's coverage of Wikipedia in the prior decade. Between roughly the years 2006 to 2009, reporting focused on the reliability of Wikipedia's model, with headlines like "Growing Wikipedia Refines Its 'Anyone Can Edit' Possibility" (2006) and "Without a Source, Wikipedia Can't Handle the Truth" (2008).<sup>47</sup>

By 2011, however, the press coverage had zeroed in on the site's gender imbalance. Headlines were much more openly critical of the community itself than in the past, with a series published in the *New York Times* calling out "trolls and other nuisances" and Wikipedia's "antisocial factor."<sup>48</sup> Press



coverage had shifted from the epistemological merits of Wikipedia to legitimate concerns about bias in its contributor base.

The 2011 series about gender on Wikipedia followed a 2010 survey conducted by the United Nations University and UNU-MERIT that indicated only 12.64 percent of Wikipedia contributors were female among the survey's respondents.<sup>49</sup> Although the results of that study were later challenged,<sup>50</sup> the fact that the study received an entire series of articles indicates how the results struck a cultural nerve. What did it say about Wikipedia—and internet knowledge generally—that a disproportionate number of the contributors were men?

One could argue that this shift—from grappling with the underpinnings of Wikipedia's model of knowledge production to a critique of the actual forces and output of the *wiki* way of doing things—symbolized an implicit acceptance of Wikipedia's status as the preeminent source of knowledge in the digital age. Media coverage during this period no longer treated Wikipedia as an outlier, a fluke, or as an epistemological disaster to be entirely rejected. Rather, the press focused on negotiating with Wikipedia as an existing phenomenon, addressing concerns shared by some in the community—especially women, predating the Gamergate debate of 2014.

Press coverage of Wikipedia throughout the period of 2011 to roughly 2017 largely focused on the online encyclopedia's structural bias. This coverage also differed markedly from previous years in its detailed treatment of Wikipedia's internal editorial and community dynamics. The press coverage highlighted not only the gender gap in percentage of female *contributors* but also the gender gap in the *content* of biographical articles and the efforts by some activists to change the status quo. Publications ranging from the *Austin Chronicle* to the *New Yorker* covered feminist edit-a-thons, events to increase and improve Wikipedia's content for female, queer, and women's subjects, linking contemporary identity politics with the online project's goal of organizing access to the sum of human knowledge.<sup>51</sup> In addition to gender, the press covered other types of bias such as geographical blind spots and the site's exclusion of oral history and other types of knowledge that did not meet the Western notions of verifiable sources.<sup>52</sup>

During this period, prestigious publications also began profiling individual Wikipedia contributors, giving faces and names to the forces behind

our knowledge. “Wikipedians” were increasingly cast as activists and recognized outside the community. The *Washington Post*, for example, covered Dr. Adrienne Wadewitz’s death in 2014, noting that Wadewitz was a “Wikipedian” who had “empower[ed] everyday Internet users to be critical of how information is produced on the Internet and move beyond being critical to making it better.”<sup>53</sup> The transition from covering Wikipedia’s accuracy to covering Wikipedians themselves perhaps reflects an increased concern with awareness about the human motivations of the people contributing knowledge online. Many times this took on a humorous tone, like the case of the “ultimate WikiGnome” Bryan Henderson whose main contribution to Wikipedia was deleting the term “comprised of” from over 40,000 articles.<sup>54</sup> Journalists (including the authors of this chapter) have continued this trend of profiling Wikipedians themselves.

A 2014 YouGov study found that around two-thirds of British people trust the authors of Wikipedia pages to tell the truth, a significantly higher percentage than those who trusted journalists.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, journalists were increasingly open to recognizing how crucial Wikipedia had become to their profession: with the most dramatic decline in newsroom staffs since the Great Recession, Wikipedia was now used by journalists for conducting initial research<sup>56</sup>—another example of the mutually affirming relationship between the two.

As more journalists used and wrote about Wikipedia, the tone of their writing changed. In one of his reports for the *New York Times*, Noam Cohen quoted a French reporter as saying, “Making fun of Wikipedia is so 2007.”<sup>57</sup> When Cohen first began covering Wikipedia, most people saw Wikipedia as a hobby for nerds—but that characterization had now become passé. The more pressing concern, according to Cohen, was “seeing Wikipedia as *The Man*.”<sup>58</sup> Overall, press coverage of Wikipedia during this period oscillates between fear about the site’s long-term existential prospects<sup>59</sup> and concern that the site is continuing the masculinist and Eurocentric biases of historical encyclopedias. The latter is significant as it shows how Wikipedia’s pretenses of upending the classic print-model of encyclopedias have been accepted by the wider public, which, in turn, is now concerned or even disappointed that despite its promise of liberating the world’s knowledge from the shackles of centralization and expertise, it has in fact recreated most of the biases of yesteryear.

### Good Cop (2018–Present)

In April 2018, Cohen wrote an article for the *Washington Post* titled “Conspiracy Videos? Fake News? Enter Wikipedia, the ‘Good Cop’ of the Internet.”<sup>60</sup> For more than a decade, Cohen had written about Wikipedia in the popular press, but his “Good Cop” piece was perhaps his most complimentary and it signaled a wider change in perception regarding Wikipedia. He declared that “fundamentally ... the project gets the big questions right.”

Interestingly, Cohen’s “Good Cop” article is not unique for its positive press treatment of Wikipedia during this period and marks the latest shift in coverage of Wikipedia, one that embarks from the issue of *truthiness* and reexamines its merits in the wake of “post-truth” politics and “fake news”—2016 and 2017’s respective words of the year.

The *Wall Street Journal* credited English Wikipedia’s top arbitration body, Arbcom, with “keep[ing] the peace at [the] internet encyclopedia.”<sup>61</sup> Other favorable headlines from 2018 and 2019 included “There’s a Lot Wikipedia Can Teach Us About Fighting Disinformation” and “In a Hysterical World, Wikipedia Is a Ray of Light—and That’s the Truth.”<sup>62</sup> Wikipedia was described by the *Atlantic* as “the last bastion of shared reality” online, and for its eighteenth birthday, it was lauded by the *Washington Post* as “the Internet’s good grown up.”<sup>63</sup>

What caused press coverage of Wikipedia to pivot from criticizing the encyclopedia as “the man” to recognizing Wikipedia’s importance as the *good cop*? Several factors converged to cast Wikipedia in a more favorable light. Since the election of President Trump in the United States, the mainstream press has expressed concerns about whether traditional notions of truth and reality-based argument can survive under an administration that is infamous for lying and for its so-called alternative facts. The “truthiness” culture of intellectual promiscuity represented by the presidency of George W. Bush had deteriorated into the post-truth culture of the Trump White House. Wikipedia’s procedural answers for the question “What is a fact?,” initially hailed as flawed, could now be taken in a different light.<sup>64</sup>

Wikipedia’s emphasis on a neutral point of view and the community’s goal to maintain an objective description of reality represent an increasingly striking contrast to politicians around the world whose rhetoric is not reality-based.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the Wikipedia community’s commitment to

sourcing claims (exemplified by Wikipedia's community ban on the *Daily Mail* in 2017 and of Breitbart News Network in 2018) highlighted how Wikipedia's model was seemingly more successful than the traditional media in fighting "fake news."<sup>66</sup>

In 2018, Wikipedia locked horns with some of those who were considered supportive of Trump and the "post-truth" discourse, including Breitbart and even Russian media. The so-called "Philip Cross affair"<sup>67</sup> saw a British editor face an accusation that he was in fact a front for the UK's Ministry of Defense or even the American CIA, claims that were parroted out by both Sputnik News and Breitbart, with the latter all but declaring war on the online encyclopedia (running no less than ten negative reports about it in as many months, including headlines like "Wikipedia Editors Paid to Protect Political, Tech, and Media Figures" and "Wikipedia Editors Post Fake News on Summary of Mueller Probe").<sup>68</sup> The year 2018 also saw the clearest example of Russian intervention in Wikipedia, with Russian agent Maria Butina being outed by the community for trying to scrub her own Wikipedia page.<sup>69</sup>

The shift toward more positive press treatment of Wikipedia also overlaps with a general trend toward negative coverage of for-profit technology sites. In recent years, Facebook, Google, Twitter, and YouTube have been chastised in the press for privacy violations and election hacking and for being a platform for hateful content. But Wikipedia has largely dodged these criticisms. Complimentary journalists have noted the site's rare position as a nonprofit in the most visited websites in the world—the only site in the global top ten that is not monetized with advertising or by collecting and selling personal information of users. Journalists have also praised Wikipedia's operating model. As Brian Feldman pointed out in a *New York Magazine* piece titled "Why Wikipedia Works," the site's norms of review, monitoring by a community of editors, and deletion of false information and inflammatory material seems vastly superior to the way social media platforms like Twitter fail to moderate similarly problematic content.<sup>70</sup>

It's important to note that even during this period of relatively favorable press coverage of Wikipedia, newspapers have still been publishing highly critical articles. But the focus has been on reforming Wikipedia's governance policies rather than rejecting its underlying model of crowdsourced knowledge.<sup>71</sup> For example, Wikipedia received significant media attention in 2018 when Donna Strickland won a Nobel Prize in physics and, at the

time of her award, did not have a Wikipedia page; an earlier entry had been deleted by an editor who found that Strickland lacked sufficient notability, despite the fact her two male co-laureates had pages for the same academic research that earned the three the prestigious award. But note how the press coverage of Strickland did not dispute Wikipedia's underlying premise of community-led knowledge production. Rather, press coverage was continuing the structural critique from the previous phase. Further, by this era the Wikimedia Foundation had increasingly begun speaking publicly about matters of concern to the Wikipedia community. When it came to the Strickland incident, the Wikimedia Foundation was not overly apologetic in its public statements, with Executive Director Katherine Maher writing an op-ed for the *Los Angeles Times* titled "Wikipedia Mirrors the World's Gender Biases, It Doesn't Cause Them."<sup>72</sup> Maher challenged journalists to write more stories about notable women so that volunteer Wikipedians have sufficient material to source in their attempt to fix the bias. Maher's comments, in other words, advocate further awareness of the *symbiotic* relationship between the media and Wikipedia.

The Strickland incident is in some ways an outlier during a time of relatively favorable press coverage of Wikipedia. How long will this honeymoon period last? One indication that the pendulum will swing back in a more critical direction is the coverage of large technology companies that rely on Wikipedia. The press widely covered YouTube's 2018 announcement that it was counting on Wikipedia to counteract videos promoting conspiracy theories when there had been no prior notice to the Wikimedia Foundation regarding YouTube's plans. Journalists also wrote—at times critically—about Facebook's plan to give background information from Wikipedia about publications to combat "fake news," about Google's use of Wikipedia content for its knowledge panels, and how smart assistants like Siri and Alexa pull information from the site.

Prominent tech critics have questioned whether it is truly appropriate to leverage Wikipedia as the "good cop" since the site is maintained by unpaid volunteers and tech companies are using it for commercial purposes. But from a news perspective, it might not matter so much whether it's fair or prudent for technology companies to leverage Wikipedia in this way—the appearance of partnership is enough to spur a news story. The more it seems as if Wikipedia has become aligned with "*Big Tech*," the more likely the encyclopedia will receive similarly adverse coverage.

## Conclusion

Over the span of nearly two decades, Wikipedia went from being heralded as the original *fake news*, a symbol of all that was wrong with the internet, to being the “grown up” of the web and the best medicine against the scourge of disinformation. This process was predicated on Wikipedia’s epistemological model gaining social acceptance as well as the erosion of status of mainstream media and traditional knowledge sources. Comparisons with older encyclopedias have all but disappeared. More common are appeals like Maher’s request following the Strickland affair that journalists aid Wikipedia in the attempt to reform by publishing more articles about women. This dynamic highlights how Wikipedia is now a fixture within our media landscape, increasingly both the source of coverage and the story itself.

Understanding the mutually affirming dynamic between media and Wikipedia opens up a rare opportunity to engage the public directly with some of the issues underscoring “fake news”—from critical reading of different sources to basic epistemological debates, issues that were once considered too academic for mainstream media are now finding their place in the public discourse through coverage of Wikipedia. For example, reports about Strickland’s lack of a Wikipedia article helped make accessible the feminist theory regarding knowledge being “gendered.” The idea that history is *his*-story was highlighted in debates about Wikipedia’s gender bias, with the dire lack of articles about women scientists being easily explained by the lack of historical sources regarding women. Meanwhile, reports about Wikipedia being blocked in countries such as China and Turkey have allowed for a discussion of the politics of knowledge online as well as a debate regarding the differences among Wikipedias in different languages and their local biases. Detailed and critical reports like these are part of a new subgenre of journalism that has emerged in the past years, what we term “wiki journalism”: coverage of Wikipedia as a social and political arena in its own right.<sup>73</sup>

Nonetheless, much more can be done—by journalists, the Wikimedia Foundation, and even the Wikipedia community of volunteers. Though Wikipedia’s technology purportedly offers fully transparency, public understanding of Wikipedia’s processes, bureaucracy, and internal jargon is still a massive obstacle for would-be editors and journalists alike. Despite its open format, the majority of Wikipedia is edited by a fraction of its overall editors, indicating the rise of an encyclopedic elite not too dissimilar in

characteristics than that of media and academia. To increase diversity in Wikipedia and serve the public interest requires journalists to go beyond “gotcha” headlines. Much of the popular coverage of Wikipedia is still lacking and is either reductive or superficial, treating Wikipedia as a unified voice and amplifying minor errors and vandalism. Many times, reports like these needlessly politicize Wikipedia. For example, after a vandal wrote that the Republican Party of California believed in “Nazism” and the error was aggregated by Alexa and Google, reports attributed blame to Wikipedia.<sup>74</sup>

Instead of focusing on these, media should work to increase Wikipedia literacy, dedicating more coverage to the project's inner workings and policies. Although the Wikimedia Foundation has taken steps to make press contacts available in recent years, there is still much work to be done to enhance communication between Wikipedia and the media. For example, the Wikimedia Foundation refuses to comment on content disputes (claiming they are an internal community issue), and journalists looking to cover Wikipedia have no official spokesperson to talk to for background or practical instruction. Jimmy Wales serves as a *de facto* figurehead for the online encyclopedia, but only a privileged few enjoy informal exchanges with Wikipedia's “benevolent dictator.”<sup>75</sup> A more formal media relations policy should be developed specifically for Wikipedia by the Foundation. Creating a special status for *wiki journalists*, for example, granting them read-only status for deleted articles and censored edits—a right currently reserved for official administrators—could help reporters better understand the full context of edit wars.

The community must too be more open to working with media and take a much less aggressive approach to external coverage of their debates. Many times, editors are reluctant to speak to reporters and are antagonistic toward unversed users who have come to mend an error or bias they have read about in the media. Wikipedia editors must accept their social role and not just allow the media to highlight problems within their community but proactively flag issues, help reporters sift through countless debates, and find the truly important stories instead of limiting themselves to internal forums and demanding journalists and the public fix Wikipedia themselves.

Together, journalists, the Wikimedia Foundation, and the community can help increase critical digital literacy through deeply reported coverage of Wikipedia. High-quality *wiki journalism* would not treat Wikipedia as a monolithic agent that speaks in one voice but rather would seek to

understand the roots of its biases and shortcomings. This will serve to highlight the politics of knowledge production instead of politicizing knowledge itself.

### Notes

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