



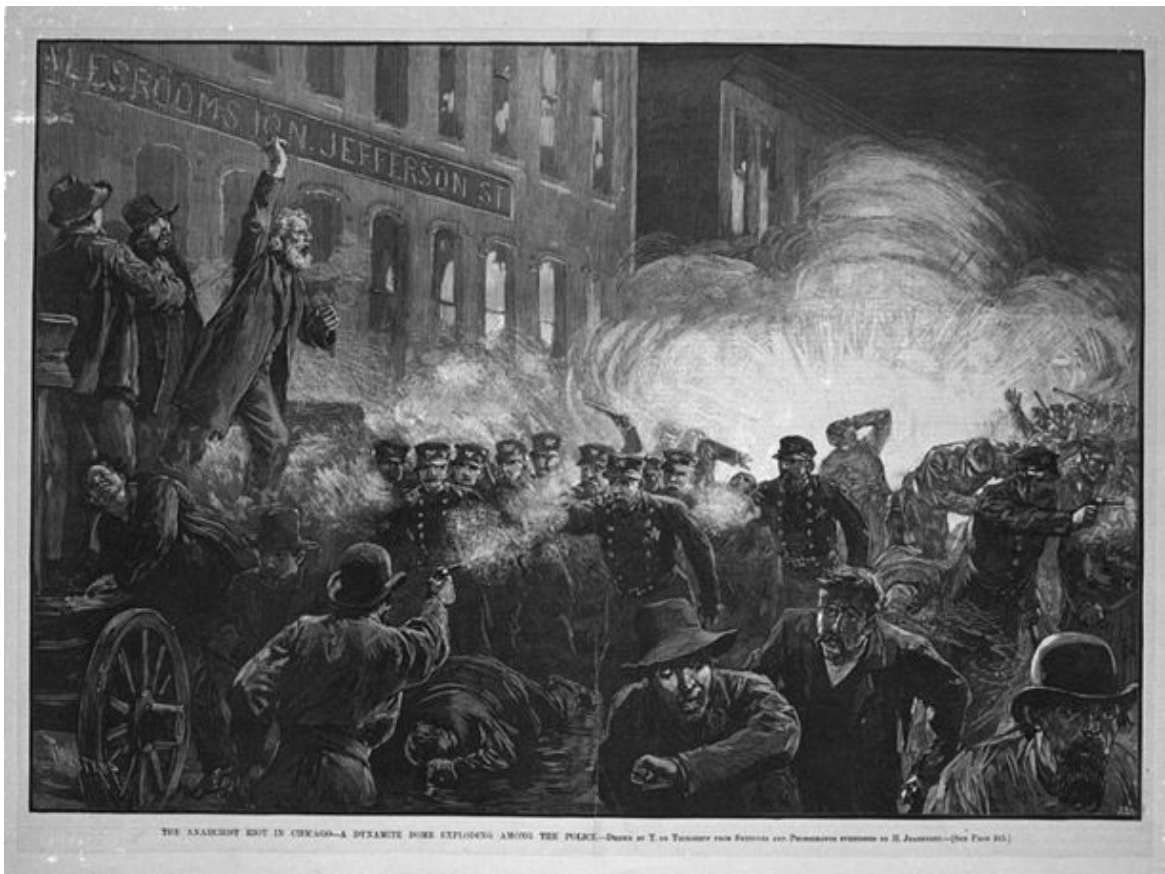
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Does Wikipedia Have an Accuracy Problem?

By Rebecca J. Rosen

Yes, but only because history is in a constant state of revision.



Timothy Messer-Kruse is an Expert with a capital E on the matter of the Haymarket affair, one of the most important events in American labor history. Heck, Mr. Messer-Kruse has even written [a well-regarded book on the resulting trial](#) of eight men, seven of whom were sentenced to death (and four of whom were executed). He has, by his own account, spent years trying to find out what happened during that trial, and, in particular, answer the question of why it lasted for six weeks if, as is

commonly understood, the prosecution "did not offer evidence connecting any of the defendants with the bombing," to quote an earlier draft of history from Wikipedia.

In the course of his research, Messer-Kruse found that this was "flatly wrong." He took to Wikipedia to correct the passage, but his edits were denied by the Wikipedia gatekeepers. As Messer-Kruse explains in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

One hundred and eighteen witnesses were called to testify, many of them unindicted co-conspirators who detailed secret meetings where plans to attack police stations were mapped out, coded messages were placed in radical newspapers, and bombs were assembled in one of the defendants' rooms.

In what was one of the first uses of forensic chemistry in an American courtroom, the city's foremost chemists showed that the metallurgical profile of a bomb found in one of the anarchists' homes was unlike any commercial metal but was similar in composition to a piece of shrapnel cut from the body of a slain police officer. So overwhelming was the evidence against one of the defendants that his lawyers even admitted that their client spent the afternoon before the Haymarket rally building bombs, arguing that he was acting in self-defense.

So I removed the line about there being "no evidence" and provided a full explanation in Wikipedia's behind-the-scenes editing log. Within minutes my changes were reversed.

The problem? Wikipedia's "undue weight" policy, which says that "articles should not give minority views as much or as detailed a description as more popular views." This is an important policy, one that guides Wikipedia non-expert volunteers in weighing the edits of a minority view. And often, in many debates about history -- particularly one that has relevance to today's partisans -- one expert can vehemently disagree with other experts. Telling the difference between a personal hobby horse and a legitimate inaccuracy is not just a matter of rote fact-checking, but of judgment. Wikipedia's undue weight policy is a way of using scholarly consensus to pass those judgments.

But what if, as in the case of the Haymarket trial, the minority view is right? How is Wikipedia to recognize when the status quo is wrong?

Digging into Wikipedia's logs on the changes, it's clear that the entry's gatekeepers did not handle the situation optimally, chiding Messer-Kruse for his manners and not incorporating the new research into the article, even as a minority viewpoint. But it's also worth noting that the expectation that Wikipedia would quickly reflect such a dramatic change in a well-known historical narrative is a very, very high bar.

Messer-Kruse himself says that the original, incorrect claim appeared in the (presumably) college-level textbook he was teaching in one of his classes. Additionally, he notes that, "Scholars have been publishing the same ideas about the Haymarket case for more than a century. The last published bibliography of titles on the subject has 1,530 entries."

When new research emerges that contradicts an accepted version of history, the earlier books, textbooks, and paper encyclopedias don't change over night. The process of how history is taught and

revised over time is a slow one, whether in a book, online, or in people's minds. If Wikipedia hesitated to change its article ahead of the scholarly consensus, that is an artifact of academia's own inability to quickly adopt a new consensus, not a failing of Wikipedia.

This isn't to say that Messer-Kruse's edits shouldn't have been reviewed with more care or seriousness, but just a note that the whole fracas reflects that though people will rant and rail over Wikipedia's faults, we hold this massive experiment in collaborative knowledge to a standard that is higher than any other source. We don't want Wikipedia to be just as accurate as the Encyclopedia Britannica: We want it to have [55 times as many entries](#), present contentious debates fairly, and reflect brand new scholarly research, all while being edited and overseen primarily by volunteers.

Since Messer-Kruse wrote his piece in *The Chronicle*, the Wikipedia article has been fixed and a reflective and serious conversation has taken place on the article's "talk" page. This is all to Wikipedia's enormous credit. Wikipedia is and will always be a work in progress. But this is the case not because the effort is fundamentally broken, but because the work of historians is also a messy one, and Wikipedia reflects that. With the work of both Wikipedians and historians like Messer-Kruse, over time the record is set straight.

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<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/02/does-wikipedia-have-an-accuracy-problem/253216/>

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