

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

## The Chronicle Review

[Home](#) [Opinion & Ideas](#) [The Chronicle Review](#)



February 12, 2012

### The 'Undue Weight' of Truth on Wikipedia

*By Timothy Messer-Kruse*

For the past 10 years I've immersed myself in the details of one of the most famous events in American labor history, the Haymarket riot and trial of 1886. Along the way I've written two books and a couple of articles about the episode. In some circles that affords me a presumption of expertise on the subject. Not, however, on Wikipedia.

The bomb thrown during an anarchist rally in Chicago sparked America's first Red Scare, a high-profile show trial, and a worldwide clemency movement for the seven condemned men. Today the martyrs' graves are a national historic site, the location of the bombing is marked by a public sculpture, and the event is recounted in most American history textbooks. Its Wikipedia entry is detailed and elaborate.

A couple of years ago, on a slow day at the office, I decided to experiment with editing one particularly misleading assertion chiseled into the Wikipedia article. The description of the trial stated, "The prosecution, led by Julius Grinnell, did not offer evidence connecting any of the defendants with the bombing. ... "

Coincidentally, that is the claim that initially hooked me on the topic. In 2001 I was teaching a labor-history course, and our textbook contained nearly the same wording that appeared on Wikipedia. One of my students raised her hand: "If the trial went on for six weeks and no evidence was presented, what did they talk about all those days?" I've been working to answer her question ever since.

I have not resolved all the mysteries that surround the bombing, but I have dug deeply enough to be sure that the claim that the trial was bereft of evidence is flatly wrong. 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 explanation: "You must provide reliable sources for your assertions to make changes along these lines to the article."

That was curious, as I had cited the documents that proved my point, including verbatim testimony from the trial published online by the Library of Congress. I also noted one of my own peer-reviewed articles. One of the people who had assumed the role of keeper of this bit of history for Wikipedia quoted the Web site's "undue weight" policy, which states that "articles should not give minority views as much or as detailed a description as more popular views." He then scolded me. "You should not delete information supported by the majority of sources to replace it with a minority view."

The "undue weight" policy posed a problem. 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.

"Explain to me, then, how a 'minority' source with facts on its side would ever appear against a wrong 'majority' one?" I asked the Wiki-gatekeeper. He responded, "You're more than welcome to discuss reliable sources here, that's what the talk page is for. However, you might want to have a quick look at Wikipedia's civility policy."

I tried to edit the page again. Within 10 seconds I was informed that my citations to the primary documents were insufficient, as Wikipedia requires its contributors to rely on secondary sources, or, as my critic informed me, "published books." Another editor cheerfully tutored me in what this means: "Wikipedia is not 'truth,' Wikipedia is 'verifiability' of reliable sources. Hence, if most

secondary sources which are taken as reliable happen to repeat a flawed account or description of something, Wikipedia will echo that."

Tempted to win simply through sheer tenacity, I edited the page again. My triumph was even more fleeting than before. Within seconds the page was changed back. The reason: "reverting possible vandalism." Fearing that I would forever have to wear the scarlet letter of Wikipedia vandal, I relented but noted with some consolation that in the wake of my protest, the editors made a slight gesture of reconciliation—they added the word "credible" so that it now read, "The prosecution, led by Julius Grinnell, did not offer credible evidence connecting any of the defendants with the bombing. ... " Though that was still inaccurate, I decided not to attempt to correct the entry again until I could clear the hurdles my anonymous interlocutors had set before me.

So I waited two years, until my book on the trial was published. "Now, at last, I have a proper Wikipedia leg to stand on," I thought as I opened the page and found at least a dozen statements that were factual errors, including some that contradicted their own cited sources. I found myself hesitant to write, eerily aware that the self-deputized protectors of the page were reading over my shoulder, itching to revert my edits and tutor me in Wiki-decorum. I made a small edit, testing the waters.

My improvement lasted five minutes before a Wiki-cop scolded me, "I hope you will familiarize yourself with some of Wikipedia's policies, such as verifiability and undue weight. If all historians save one say that the sky was green in 1888, our policies require that we write 'Most historians write that the sky was green, but one says the sky was blue.' ... As individual editors, we're not in the business of weighing claims, just reporting what reliable sources write."

I guess this gives me a glimmer of hope that someday, perhaps before another century goes by, enough of my fellow scholars will adopt my views that I can change that Wikipedia entry. Until then I will have to continue to shout that the sky was blue.

*Timothy Messer-Kruse is a professor in the School of Cultural and Critical Studies at Bowling Green State University. He is author of The Trial of the Haymarket Anarchists: Terrorism and Justice in the Gilded Age (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and The Haymarket Conspiracy: Transatlantic Anarchist Networks, to be published later this year by the University of Illinois Press.*

Add a comment

Log in to post

with your Chronicle account:

Don't have an account? [Create one now.](#)  
Or log in using one of these alternatives:



Showing 40 of 424 comments

Sort by  Follow comments: by e-mail by RSS

Real-time updating is **paused**. ([Resume](#))



**operalala** 8 months ago

In your 2011 edit:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Malik\\_Shabazz&diff=1111111111](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Malik_Shabazz&diff=1111111111)

instead of providing a counterargument to a cited quotation, you removed and replaced it.

From the research that went into your book, you should have a wealth of material to draw on to support your edits.

You need to cite your sources, just like a term paper, or not complain when it gets handed back to you.

[Ed. 2/15]

Some of the comments below are just off the map. This is how it works:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual\\_of\\_Style/Lead\\_section](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style/Lead_section)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual\\_of\\_Style/Lead\\_section](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style/Lead_section)

[Ed. 2/17]

Some pointers for academics who would like to contribute to Wikipedia:

1. "On the internet nobody knows you're a professor."

If you're used to deferential treatment at your home institution, you'll be treated like everybody else in the Wide Open Internet. This skepticism is a good thing - after all, some prankster could easily create an account using your name and pretend to be you.

2. It helps to use an anonymous screen name (e.g. "haymarketscholar") for a couple of reasons:

a) This makes it easier to cite your own published work without alarming other editors. If they see a "ProfSmith" citing Prof Smith all over the place, their first reaction will be to think that this is a narcissistic self-published wingnut.

b) The anonymity can serve as a reminder that you're just one editor among millions in the Wide Open Internet.

c) It shifts the focus from the Wikipedia editor to the cited "reliable sources", i.e. the real "gatekeepers" in any field, such as peer-reviewed journals and the academic press.

3. Wikipedia is all about citing reliable sources, which academics are awash in.

4. Academics need to recognize the difference between the plurality of academia and the singularity of a Wikipedia article:

College professors are generally free to teach their own points of view, even if these views are not taken up by the majority - exposure to diversity is part of a student's education, and the protection of tenure safeguards this. But an encyclopedia has just one entry on any given subject: although the various points of view should be stated, collective decisions will be made on the overall arc of the article, which inevitably will not coincide with any one person's views, any more than an overall department or conference will.

(Also, aside from raw numerical accuracy, most academics know better than to claim they have the "truth".)

I would like to add a comment about this incident, however.

In 2009, "Gwen Gale" and others told MesserKruse to read the instructions, which he proceeded not to do ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Malik\\_Shabazz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Malik_Shabazz)).

Then in Aug 2011, the conversation between "Malik Shabazz" and MesserKruse ended on a very positive note, with MS sitting down and reading TMK's book ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Gwen\\_Gale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Gwen_Gale)).

I really find TMK's public tantrum over this entirely out of measure, and unbecoming a professor.

[Ed. 2/23: added points 4) and 2c) above]

(Edited by author 8 months ago)

92 people liked this.

**marka** 8 months ago in reply to operalala



Wait a minute. He claims to have cited primary sources - but potentially erroneous secondary sources are the standard? By these measures, Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, etc., wouldn't have been mentioned in their own time - but Biblical entries should get top billing because they have been cited by many? Or Stalinist & Maoist propaganda, because they have been cited many times?

And as his student says, if the prosecution spent numerous days at trial, what, indeed, were they talking about? On its face, the Wiki entry is clearly erroneous. A judge & jury found the evidence 'credible.' Who says it wasn't, and what is their evidence?

278 people liked this. [Like](#)



**steven\_w\_fussell** 8 months ago in reply to marka

I think Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, etc., would have been included in the Wiki definitions of their day had Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, etc., taken a moment to add their assertions to the argument and earn adherents based on the weight of the evidence they presented. Had they insisted on adjudging their evidence superior and contradictory to all other evidence, they would have had to complain in the Chronicle of their day.

22 people liked this. [Like](#)



**TheFrequentPoster** 8 months ago in reply to steven\_w\_fussell

One more reason not to trust Wikipedia!

104 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Christopher Burd** 8 months ago in reply to marka

Wikipedia permits, but frowns on, citing primary sources, because otherwise the autodidactic cranks will flood it with their own, idiosyncratic interpretations. So, practically speaking, you're limited to interpretations that a significant number of reputable authorities have supported. It's not a perfect system, and it's certainly open to abuse, but it's still a reasonable position.

69 people liked this. [Like](#)



**mike stone** 8 months ago in reply to Christopher Burd

Yes.. it's much better to rely on an echo chamber of mutually self-reinforcing cranks.

228 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Shawn H Corey** 8 months ago in reply to Christopher Burd

What a bunch of nonsense. Not using primary sources is using hearsay. It's only the "due weight" of the primary sources that count. Anyone can publish enumerable secondary sources and overwhelm the truth by shouting the loudest. This is NOT credible reporting.

136 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Hal O'Brien** 8 months ago in reply to Christopher Burd

**mike stone**: Arguably, a peer-reviewed journal where original research is published is also "an echo chamber of mutually self-reinforcing cranks." Again, it

may have its flaws, but if you have another method (and can persuade others to your point of view so they use it), I look forward to your contribution.

**johnsawyer** FrequentPoster: Congratulations! You win this week's Palin-Cleese "That Isn't an Argument" Award.

**Shawn H Corey** : A closer analogy is, an encyclopedia (*any* encyclopedia, including, say, *Britannica*) is more like an appellate court -- it doesn't do finding of fact. It weighs and presents what's happened in venues that *do* fact finding. An encyclopedia is also not a journalistic venue reporting the news, so I'm not sure why "credible reporting" is a consideration.

26 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Gregory\_Sadler** 8 months ago in reply to marka

I think you're right that if Wikipedia was the dominant meta-information source at the time of, say Galileo, the sheer amount of sources citing Biblical entries -- or rather more likely, citing Aristotle's Physics -- would have drowned his own claims out. Darwin, I'm not so sure -- evolution was talked about in many circles long before he started making claims about it.

It bears pointing out that the same dynamic would also lead to anti-religious claims being supported by a wealth of supposed evidence, which on examination turns out to be entirely secondary sources, often citing each other as authoritative, or primary sources that end up relying on bare assertion, rather than scholarship.

This dynamic occurred long before Wikipedia came on the scene -- something I noticed while carrying out my own research work -- getting course material ready for students on controversial matters, mainly -- in Religious Studies. You could find a secularist author or an author from a religious group opposed to the one being criticized for doing, asserting, believing, teaching, covering up. . . X making a claim, then providing references. Tracking those down, you'd find they'd cite further references, which then cited further ones, and eventually, you'd find a dead end -- no actual sources at all, or you'd find it made in some tendentious, hopelessly unscholarly work. (btw, a good work discussing the production of these sorts of "documents", with respect to anti-Catholicism, is Billington's "The Protestant Crusade" -- and the same sort of "awful revelations" type literature was generated, often employing the same tropes and characters, several decades later to attach the Latter Day Saints)

The real problem is that, after a while, it looks like there is in fact a long-built scholarly consensus on the matter in question, since those who have something to say about it are more or less all on the same page -- then you add in more popular web-pages, blogs, etc., and you've got a trope that now "everyone knows" to be the case -- and to be well-established as the case.

Wikipedia's model doesn't seem particularly well-suited for handling those sort of situations.

29 people liked this. [Like](#)



**tporges** 8 months ago in reply to operalala

I don't see a "tantrum" anywhere in this article, or in the professor's described behavior. He cited (and supplied) primary sources in contradiction of an obvious untruth. The gatekeepers acted like high-handed traffic cops. Citing a bunch of internal legal gobbledegook as justification for bad behavior is supposed to make Wikipedia look good? Just who is having the tantrum, here?

It's pertinent that Wikipedia constantly receives "corrections" from true believers, many of which are buttressed with ample citations from Western Island Press books, BUT if one result of this is that any correction of a bien-pensant error (one that, if you think about it for a moment, becomes obvious) gets tagged as a probable "wing nut" attack on verifiable truths, then Wikipedia has crossed the line into cult territory, itself.

And once again, just because you've had unpleasant experiences with overbearing PhDs (and anybody within shouting range of Newt Gingrich knows what that's like), that doesn't mean that any academic researcher should be assigned the burden of your animus. Lighten up, Francis.

151 people liked this. [Like](#)



**drangie** 8 months ago in reply to operalala

"Some pointers for academics who would like to contribute to WP:

1. "On the internet nobody knows your a professor."

Your position would have more credibility if you learned the difference between the possessive "your" and the contraction "you're."

98 people liked this. [Like](#)



**operalala** 8 months ago in reply to drangie

Obviously, I do know that. But thank you for the heads up, as we mere humans do make typos from time to time.

25 people liked this. [Like](#)



**andyk** 8 months ago in reply to operalala

Typo?? This falls into the same category of typo as writing "aint got no" instead of "doesn't have any".

18 people liked this. [Like](#)



**operalala** 8 months ago in reply to operalala

muscle memory, actually

9 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Serious Hat** 6 months ago in reply to drangie

the ad hominem fallacy, we meet again.

4 people liked this. [Like](#)



**nadienne1** 8 months ago in reply to operalala

1. "On the internet nobody knows you're a professor."

Doesn't the wiki-crowd admonish professors (and experts, etc) for complaining about wikipedia rather than trying to influence it?

If I understand correctly, the attitude surrounding wikipedia's creation--an attitude that can be found in wikipedia's dna structure, it seems--is deliberately and blatantly anti-authoritarian, even hostile to the idea that there can be an authority on a subject. One manifestation of this is that all feedback/information is weighted as "equal," at least in theory. There are benefits to this, but one huge disadvantage is the consequence: specious thinking flourishes, but demonstrations of acuity (acuity for acuity's sake being a trait encouraged and recognized primarily by authoritative academe, though not by all of academe) are silenced. They have to be. Acuity can't be systematically differentiated from nonsense.

In short, we may have more sway with wikipedia if we stop thinking like professors.

17 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Steve Midgley** 8 months ago in reply to nadienne1

I don't think you've got that quite right. Wikipedia doesn't weigh "all feedback/information" as equal, rather it (tries to) weigh the majority of published views more heavily. In short it tries to represent the consensus of knowledge/truth/facts. It is not where leading edge ideas are published and shared, in short it is an encyclopedia. In

that sense, it's hard for professors to participate b/c they are often in the business of creating truth, not regurgitating consensus (and I mean that in a good way).

17 people liked this. [Like](#)



**nadienne1** 8 months ago in reply to Steve Midgley

Wikipedia uses a formula to justify what can be included. In the formula, one source is equal to another, and so it's possible to have a situation where five flawed sources outweigh one voice of reason that disagrees with the others.

That's the fundamental problem with Wikipedia: there is no human authority at the top deciding when to bend the rules and when to adhere to them. All our soundness of reason matters not; what matters is numbers. If Wikipedia reguritates consensus, that is only a happy byproduct of its systematic, efficient, streamlined, anti-authoritarian (and ultimately dehumanizing) process for disseminating information.

19 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Joshua Carlson** 8 months ago in reply to operalala

Wikipedia's combination of bizarre, arcane rules and hyper-vigilant article sentries are unbecoming any organization outside of a Kafka novel. It's no wonder that even an articulate, published, capital-E Expert has trouble maneuvering it.

37 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Clint Lalonde** 8 months ago in reply to operalala

"2. It helps to use an anonymous screen name (e.g. "haymarketscholar") for a couple of reasons..."

I disagree that anonymity is a good strategy for academics on Wikipedia. Anonymity makes it more difficult to validate reliable information and can be used as an obfuscation technique. We should be striving for more transparency on the web as a whole, not more anonymity.

18 people liked this. [Like](#)



**operalala** 8 months ago in reply to Clint Lalonde

I do agree about transparency, but I really want to emphasize that WP is not about qualifications or "validating information" per se; it's all about citing reliable \*sources\*. Academics will naturally have their hands on such sources, but the validators/gatekeepers are the same as ever - peer-reviewed journals and academic publishers, not the WP editors.

3 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Steve Midgley** 8 months ago in reply to Clint Lalonde

I agree in principle to your point, but in practice wikipedia editors will very often jump on new entries if it is obvious that a person is promoting their own viewpoint. It's not a great aspect of wikipedia culture, but there are a lot of cranks out there so it's kind of inevitable.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



**shipspassing** 8 months ago in reply to operalala



You may just have provided an illustration of everything that's wrong with wikipedia, including the absurd length of some articles, the obsessive footnotery. (The[citation needed] cat[citation needed] sat[citation needed] [deleted unverified offensive] map[897]) and the ludicrous touchiness of habitual editors and moderators. You may, but since my eyes went at the halfway point from all the gallimaufry, I may never know.

8 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Alex Zorach** 7 months ago in reply to operalala

You make a lot of good points, and I agree with a lot of what you are saying.

I strongly disagree with your comment about making an anonymous account though. I think that in general, it is best to refrain from adding sources that you have a vested interest in. I think that if you want to influence wikipedia, it is best to create a profile and be open about your identity, potential conflicts of interests and biases. I actually recommend putting your full name in your profile.

I've found that having an established track record of high-quality edits goes a long way.

Often, when people see a new edit that they don't like, they look at who added it, often to check if it's vandalism or sloppy scholarship.

While I do think in an ideal world, it is best for the ideas to stand on their own, because Wikipedia can be potentially anonymous, I think many editors are skeptical of new editors and accounts with very little edit history. If you come onto Wikipedia and make no edits other than citing your own paper or book in a single article, it just looks really bad.

4 people liked this. [Like](#)



**rossweisse** 7 months ago in reply to Alex Zorach

<< I've found that having an established track record of high-quality edits goes a long way. >>

Unfortunately, if those edits contradict the Received Wisdom, they won't stay up very long, high-quality or no. Even fixes to grammatical errors may be overturned if the WikiCops don't want a particular article changed in any way.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Alex Zorach** 1 month ago in reply to rossweisse

This has never been my experience, and I edit quite heavily at times.

I find that assuming good faith goes a long way. Occasionally, people (including myself) make hot-headed edits, but if you continue to assume good faith and also point to relevant policies, if your edits really are in line with the spirit of Wikipedia's guidelines and policy, then I find they will always get through in the end. That has always been my experience.

[Like](#)



**arydborg** 7 months ago in reply to operalala

I have become very critical of aspartame used in diet soda. In researching this on Wikipedia I even found an article titled "aspartame controversy". My feeling is that regardless of whether the stuff is good or bad an article titled "controversy" should tell both sides. Not so.

Wikipedia has no problem with supportive research even if it is industry sponsored. On the other hand any research against aspartame must meet impossibility high hurdles. US government sources not acceptable.... harvard law school... not acceptable. As for me. First a 3 month topic ban then a one year topic ban.... even thought I have posted a complete wikipedia article (Chopmist Hill listening site)

Science is not done by consensus. It is done by individuals and wilkipedia is a throwback to the the Spanish Inquisition. The really sad part is that US Congressmen use it to research "facts"

3 people liked this. [Like](#)



**jwhab309** 8 months ago

Thank you. I was not aware that quality research was unacceptable in Wikipedia land. Very unfortunate indeed.

221 people liked this. [Like](#)



**aearon43** 8 months ago in reply to jwhab309

I'm pretty sure that's not what the article said.

39 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Seth Huber** 8 months ago in reply to jwhab309

Wikipedia is not the correct place to publish your research.

61 people liked this. [Like](#)



**heinrich66** 8 months ago in reply to Seth Huber

It isn't a question of publishing your own research. It's a question of Wikipedia breaking its own rules. When it comes to the piece above, the author was able to cite non-controversial documentary evidence that supported his claims. The evidence was presumably legitimate (i.e. it came from the Library of Congress) and the prevailing mainstream view (no evidence presented at the trial) owed more to a lack of existing research than opposing evidence.

Nonetheless, the Wikipedia "gatekeepers" decided his edits weren't permissible. That implies that Wikipedia editors are qualified to make interpretations and issue judgments on the meaning of all historical research. Not even history professors, usually specialists, are qualified to weigh in on the state of research on every single historical topic. Yet Wikipedia editors do this every day -- deciding what the state of research is, interpreting what the academic consensus is (without being trained academics). It is absurd.

447 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Rob Crawford** 8 months ago in reply to heinrich66

"the prevailing mainstream view (no evidence presented at the trial) owed more to a lack of existing research than opposing evidence"

I beg to differ -- the prevailing view owes more to the political necessity of the bombers being falsely accused, and their punishment being unjust. Wikipedia is defending this "pravda" because it's more useful than the actual truth.

55 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Hal O'Brien** 8 months ago in reply to heinrich66

The editors in question are deferring to "history professors, usually specialists," in that Mr. Messer-Kruse's views don't appear to have gained traction with said specialists, given the preponderance of publications. However, as your own inexpert opinion appears to have been shaped by taking Mr. Messer-Kruse's arguments at face value, you're now excoriating those same editors for their deference to "history professors, usually specialists."

I hope you can see the irony. But that's only speculation on my part.

14 people liked this. [Like](#)



**heinrich66** 8 months ago in reply to Hal O'Brien

The "irony" here is only to be found in your view that the study of history is totally reducible to he said/she said. As the piece above indicates, the author (a historian) was entitled to a more reasonable treatment of his views since at one point a) they were published; b) they were not greatly controversial. At the very least Wikipedia could have taken note of his research and mentioned his non-controversial findings in passing, as it does in many entries.

I'm curious, though: did you learn to argue and reason on the internet? Is an appeal to some superficial "irony" your only trope -- the only trick you have in your bag?

93 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Hal O'Brien** 8 months ago in reply to heinrich66

*"The 'irony' here is only to be found in your view that the study of history is totally reducible to he said/she said."*

Such a pity that's not my view, nor have I written so. I invite you to quote me where I have.

*"As the piece above indicates, the author (a historian) was entitled to a more reasonable treatment of his views..."*

That use of "entitled" is perhaps more revealing than you intend.

*"At the very least Wikipedia could have taken note of his research and mentioned his non-controversial findings in passing, as it does in many entries."*

There is no single person as "Wikipedia" to take such note. Have you tried doing it yourself?

*"I'm curious, though: did you learn to argue and reason on the internet?"*

No. Formally, boarding school and a small liberal arts college. Informally, 20 years' marriage to someone with a masters in philosophy. Not that either is relevant -- If someone who has learned to argue and reason on the internet says  $2+2=4$ , are they wrong? If someone who has learned to argue and reason at the feet of Socrates (or Alonzo Church) says  $2+2=5$ , are they right? Background isn't necessarily the variable.

*"Is an appeal to some superficial 'irony' your only trope -- the only trick you have in your bag?"*

I would say not, but then I would, wouldn't I? At this point I have many other posts in the thread -- readers may judge for themselves.

19 people liked this. [Like](#)



**dhwonk** 8 months ago in reply to heinrich66

Ah, that's where you're wrong, Heinrich. It's a case of Wikipedia \*supporting\* their (not "its;" WP is a collective, not a single entity) own rules, and they are, on the whole, good rules. On the one hand, Wikipedia is an Encyclopedia, it is a place for the uninitiated to go for a quick, consensus overview of a topic. It is not a place for experts to debate scholarly minute or present original research.

On the other hand, it is precisely WP's peer review policies that preclude citations of original sources. I don't doubt the author's credibility for a moment, but if he were maliciously fraudulent he could easily cite a fictitious source, perhaps even in a fictitious archive. Or he could simply present a very lopsided view of the historical evidence--say, only quoting from the prosecutor's personal notes. The hoax might go uncovered for years or even decades (it's happened) depending on how long it took before another specialist decided to revisit the same topic in the same archive. Better to avoid the problem entirely by confining the discussion to establishing consensus, not establishing fact.

WP's policies serve to keep WP close to its mission--which is really the mission of any encyclopedia--and to allow the group to respond quickly to problems. To borrow

an apt analogy from another poster, Wikipedia is the appellate court of knowledge (perhaps even the Supreme Court of knowledge); it does not have original jurisdiction or make determinations as to findings of fact.

The fact is that Wikipedia is a peer reviewed publication with strict editorial guidelines and double-blind review. The author blatantly ignored--in fact flagrantly flaunted--the editorial policies and then failed the peer review. The problem is that the author assumes--all evidence to the contrary--that the editors of WP are not his peers. He openly insults them and then goes on to complain condescendingly that he does not receive preferential treatment from them.

One wonders how AHR or JAH would respond to similar behavior. One suspects they might respond similarly.

23 people liked this. [Like](#)



**heinrich66** 8 months ago in reply to dhwonk

It is amazing to see people tying themselves into knots to defend what is patently indefensible.

Wikipedia is not "peer-reviewed". In theory, the information presented in its many entries are based on a certain judgment or interpretation as to what the "consensus" is on a topic at a given moment.

In \*practice\*, which is much more important, topics and entries are jealously guarded by certain individuals who are not experts, who do not have to reveal their real names, and who cybersquat on the topics as if it is their turf.

My point, which ought to be obvious, is that these so-called editors cannot possibly make competent judgments as to what the "consensus" in a so-called discipline is without belonging to that discipline. If they succeed in pointing out that consensus, it is only ever by accident.

Take the news item that went around recently about the discovery that early Man had interbred with Neanderthals. As soon as the research suggesting it came out, the "consensus" changed overnight. But the record of that consensus in terms of publishing history, of peer-reviewed articles -- where were all the articles proving the new consensus? There weren't any. There hadn't been enough time.

Like everything else nowadays, Wikipedia is basically and essentially flawed. It's a money-making scheme that hadn't made much money and that follows "rules" when it's convenient to Wikipedia.

116 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Hal O'Brien** 8 months ago in reply to heinrich66

@heinrich66: *"It is amazing to see people tying themselves into knots to defend what is patently indefensible."*

It's refreshing to see someone so unflinchingly honest about themselves. Either that, or it's depressing to see someone write with such complete lack of self-awareness. It's tough to say.

*"Like everything else nowadays, Wikipedia is basically and essentially flawed."*

The optimist believes we live in the best of all possible worlds; the pessimist fears this is true. Which is to say, at least you write as if you're conceding there's nothing better.

EDITED TO ADD: More than anything, you're sounding like a medieval squire insisting that citizen armies on foot will never be able to take on armored cavalry. That the combination of lifelong training, sheer expense, and noble birth will never be viably threatened, no matter how those commoners conduct themselves or what their record in the field might be.

Past performance is no indication of future results, as the finance guys say... But it's the way to bet.

9 people liked this. [Like](#)



**clubchampion** 8 months ago in reply to heinrich66

"The author blatantly ignored--in fact flagrantly flaunted--the editorial policies and then failed the peer review."

-----  
"flouted," not "flaunted"

25 people liked this. [Like](#)



**lighttofruth3** 7 months ago in reply to heinrich66

There is a single-issue editor on Wikipedia's tennis articles who insists that the French Open prior to 1925 was not a major, even though major authorities such as the World Almanac and the Encyclopedia Britannica listed them as such. Then this editor insisted on applying his own self-appointed rules, claiming that the French was not "open" to non-French. Oops, the very first French Open in 1891 was won by a Brit. Scratch that. Well, the tournament wasn't really an open yet, was it? Well, neither were the other three, but the historical fiction of attributing their history as that of past champions is not questioned, even when it's been cited that the first US "Open" in 1881 was limited to Americans only. So the facts are being doubly distorted here, first by incorrectly applying a policy to the French data, then not applying that same policy to the American, Australian, and British data.

The real point of Messer-Kruse's article is that there are many editors on Wikipedia who, though unenlightened as to the facts of the subject, have too much time and too much ego to allow positive editorial correction to occur. These editors become experts in one thing: gaming the Wikipedia system, citing Wiki policy when it suits them but ignoring it when it does not. Of course, "otherstuffexists" is just one of many "policies" that help Wikipedes avoid any sense of objective fairness. Fairness is not required; hypocrisy is perfectly fine, so long as it involves "consensus"...which in most cases, really is nothing more than one or two strident editors with a POV bias and a lot of editorial time on their hands.

21 people liked this. [Like](#)

[Load more comments](#)

Copyright 2012. All rights reserved.

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037