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Wikipedia, the people's encyclopedia

If anyone can write and edit Wikipedia, how do we know it's accurate?

January 13, 2013 | By Sue Gardner

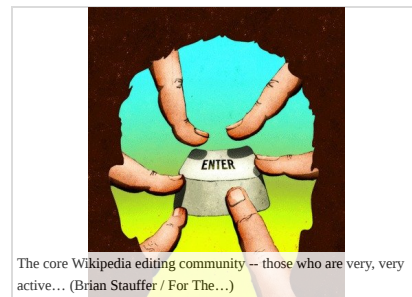
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Wikipedia is the encyclopedia anyone can write and edit (yes, even you!), but most people don't think much about who performs those tasks. With half a billion people around the world relying on Wikipedia for information, we should.

More than 1.5 million people in practically every country have contributed to Wikipedia's 23 million articles. Actually, that last figure isn't quite accurate, since more than 12,000 new entries are created every day. Eight articles were created in the last minute. The authors are poets and professors, baristas and busboys, young and old, rich and poor.



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It's crazy. An encyclopedia is one of humankind's grandest displays of collaborative effort, and Wikipedia takes that collaboration to new levels, with contributors from pretty much every ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic background, political ideology, religion, sexual orientation and gender. The youngest Wikipediaian I've met was 7, a boy in Tel Aviv who makes small edits to articles about animals and children's books. The oldest I've met was 73, a retired engineer who writes about the history of Philadelphia, where he's lived for half a century.

My most recent cab driver in San Francisco, a middle-aged guy who I think was Eastern European, told me he edits, although I don't know on what topics. I don't know of a comparable effort, a more diverse collection of people coming together, in peace, for a single goal.

But beneath that surface diversity is a community built on shared values. The core Wikipedia editing community —

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those who are very, very active — is about 12,000 people. I've met thousands of them personally, and they do share common characteristics.

The first and most defining is that Wikipedians, almost without exception, are ridiculously smart, as you might expect of people who, for fun, write an encyclopedia in their spare time. I have a theory that back in school, Wikipedians were the smartest kids in the class, kids who didn't care what was trendy or cool but spent their time reading, or with the debate team, or chess club, or in the computer lab. There's a recurring motif inside Wikipedia of preteen editors who've spent their lives so far having their opinions and ideas discounted because of their age, but who have nonetheless worked their way into positions of real authority on Wikipedia. They love Wikipedia fiercely because it's a meritocracy: the only place in their lives where their age doesn't matter.

Wikipedians are geeky. They have to be to want to learn the wiki syntax required to edit, and that means most editors are the type of people who find learning technology fun. (It's also because Wikipedia has its roots in the free software movement, which is a very geeky subculture.) The rise of the dot-com millionaire and the importance of services such as Google, Facebook and Wikipedia have made geekiness more socially acceptable. But geeks are still fundamentally outsiders, tending to be socially awkward, deeply interested in obscure topics, introverted and yet sometimes verbose, blunt, not graceful and less sensorily oriented than other people.

Nine of 10 Wikipedians are male. We don't know exactly why. My theory is that Wikipedia editing is a minority taste, and some of the constellation of characteristics that combine to create a Wikipedian — geeky, tech-centric, intellectually confident, thick-skinned and argumentative, with the willingness and ability to indulge in a solitary hobby — tend to skew male.

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Although individual Wikipedians come from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds, we tend to live in affluent parts of the world and to be relatively privileged. Most of us have reliable Internet connectivity and access to decent libraries and bookstores; we own laptops and desktops; we're the product of decent educational systems, and we've got the luxury of free time.

Wikipedians skew young and are often students, concentrated at the postsecondary level. That makes sense too: Students spend their reading, thinking, sourcing, evaluating and summarizing what they know, essentially the same skills it takes to write an encyclopedia.

Like librarians and probably all reference professionals, Wikipedians are detail-obsessed pedants. We argue endlessly about stuff like whether Japan's Tsushima Island is a single island or a trio of islands. Whether the main character in "Grand Theft Auto IV" is Serbian, Slovak, Bosnian, Croatian or Russian. Whether Baltimore has "a couple of" snowstorms a year or "several," whether the bacon in an Irish breakfast is fried or boiled, whether the shrapnel wound John Kerry suffered in 1968 is better described as minor or left unmodified. None of this makes us fun at parties, but it does make us good at encyclopedia writing.

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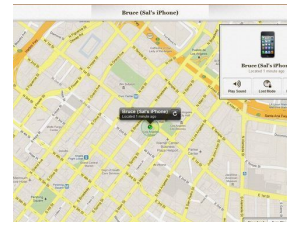
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