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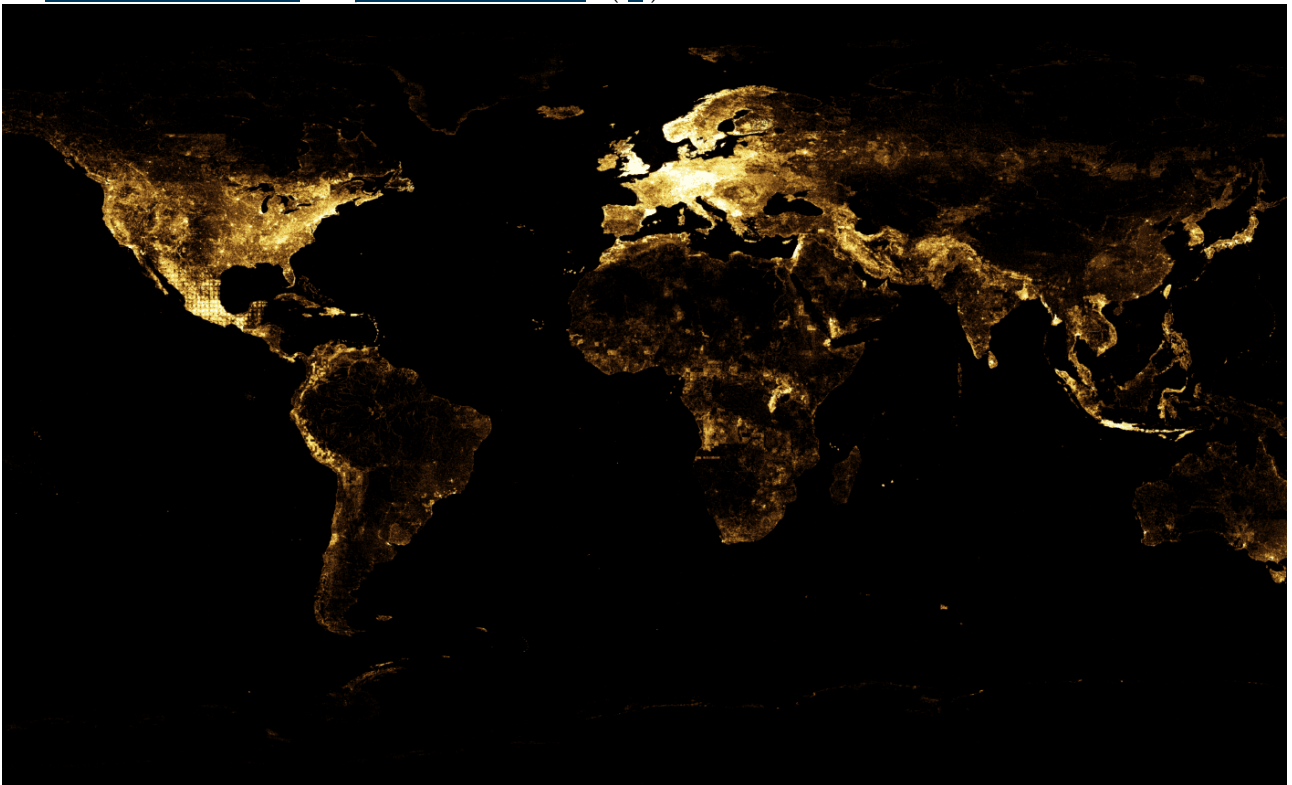
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History on Wikipedia: A Non-neutral World

La storia su Wikipedia: un mondo non neutrale | *L'histoire dans Wikipédia: un monde qui n'est pas neutre*

BY [BIANCHI, ROBERTO](#) ON [JANUARY 20, 2022](#) · (2)



Abstract:

Over the course of the past twenty years, Wikipedia has developed into the most widely used online encyclopedia. Written and maintained through a model of open collaboration, the platform therefore plays an important role in the collective production and popularization of knowledge. While this development gives rise to promising opportunities for historians, for example for a digital public history, it also entails a number of challenges. The article argues for a differentiated, critical discussion on the potential pitfalls and benefits.

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Languages: Italian, English, French

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In 2006, Roy Rosenzweig invited historians to engage with Wikipedia for the sole reason that their own students were using it. Today, 15 years later, the participation of historians in the largest and most widespread collaborative platform for the collective production of knowledge is unknown. The relationship between historical research and Wikipedia continues to be controversial because of the ‘five pillars’ and the difficulties in examining the entries.

Inevitable Comparison

Twenty years after its birth, in 2021, there is a vast scholarly literature on Wikipedia and its history; yet we still have some difficulty in understanding how much attention there is among historians towards this free and collaborative online encyclopedia which, as we read on its presentation page, “is a free content, multilingual online encyclopedia written and maintained by a community of volunteers through a model of open collaboration, using a wiki-based editing system. Individual contributors, also called editors, are known as Wikipedians. It is the largest and most-read reference work in history, and consistently one of the 15 most popular websites ranked by Alexa; as of 2021, Wikipedia was ranked the 13th most popular site”.

It is difficult to say exactly how many and who are the scholars who actively participate in the editing of historical entries, or whether researchers and teachers are mainly consumers of the encyclopedia or also contribute to its creation and to what extent. In Italy, in recent years, many articles and books have been published on the subject, although it was with some delay that the academic community began to pay attention to the phenomenon; in the international arena, *Wikipedia studies* have been discussed for some time, and it should be remembered that about fifteen years ago

Roy Rosenzweig pointed out that historians would have to deal with Wikipedia, “one reason professional historians need to pay attention to Wikipedia is because our students do”, although an anonymous historiography, collective and not subject to peer review was “unimaginable in our professional culture”.

Scholars, professors and researchers continue to adopt a variety of attitudes, ranging from those who ban Wikipedia because it is considered unstable by nature and written according to amateur methods, to those who call for interventionist choices with appeals to participation or even ideological writing. The fact remains that it is now impossible not to take into account the challenge launched by this operating reality, which is well established and has reached a stage of solidification of the confused magma that characterized it in its early years, as Andrew Lih had already pointed out.

Historicisation of the Present

Wikipedia is the main source of information for a huge number of readers, with its 55 million entries, 6.4 of which are in English (with more than a thousand administrators and 27 million registered users) and 1.7 in Italian (in ninth place in terms of quantity in October 2021, with an average monthly growth of about 10,000 entries for almost 2.2 million registered users and 117 administrators), for a total of 312 active language editions: a number far greater than that of the 193 Member States of the United Nations. About ten years ago, “the online encyclopaedia was nominated for the UNESCO World Heritage List, underscoring its status as a global cultural phenomenon”, as José van Dijck observed, and in the meantime the Wikipedia Foundation has also become a not insignificant economic entity that in 2017 declared a budget of about 120 million dollars. In March 2021, the launch of Wikimedia Enterprise was announced, “a commercial product designed to sell and deliver Wikipedia’s content directly to Big Tech companies”, as the website states.

This massive use of the encyclopedia for a wide variety of purposes, and not only for researching strictly historical information, contributes to introducing Wikipedia contents and methods of communication into the widespread

culture, despite the well-known disclaimer “Wikipedia makes no guarantee of validity” placed on the opening page. Within the “new apocryphal gospel of the telematic generation of the beginning of the millennium” (Miguel Gotor’s definition) we find hundreds of thousands of pages on historical topics, but the historical *ratio* presides over all the entries by virtue of their *notability*: the concept that guides the attribution of a content’s “encyclopedicity”, because it is assumed that a topic is notable if it has already been significantly treated by reliable sources independent of the subject; in other words, if it has already been in some way “historicized”. The idea of timeliness, of Wikipedia’s ‘direct grasp’ of reality, also puts strong pressure on the historicisation of present time. At the same time, this public space now constitutes an innovative way of producing history on the web, which follows some principles of *digital public history*. Deborah Paci recently pointed out that never before, and not only in quantitative terms, has an endless number of “non-experts” been able to produce and disseminate historical content in a space regulated by the Five Pillars of Wikipedia, which must be constantly checked and which lend themselves to discussions that are not yet closed.

Faith in the Npov

In order to examine the presence of history in Wikipedia, we can follow the paths offered by the various thematic and chronological portals, with their numerous ramifications for each different language edition. In fact, however, the chain of associations between entries determines a prioritising effect, defining the boundaries and relevance of a more general topic, which may be significant for those who approach the encyclopedia with a view to an exercise or public discourse, but the very articulation of categories and subcategories lacks solid guidelines and remains entrusted to the associative sensitivity of the user. It is therefore necessary to quickly recall the ideology and practice of the functioning of the Wikipedian world, starting from the *neutral point of view* (Npov: a principle included among the Five Pillars and defined as non-negotiable), the prohibition of including original research content in the articles (*no original research*, Nor: because Wikipedia proposes itself as a *tertiary source*) and the principle of *verifiability* (V) with reference to sources.

The Npov encompasses in an acronym, made up of simplified prescriptions, centuries of historical and philosophical reflection on the links between subject and object in the act of knowledge, without ever referring to them in any way. Wikipedia makes the principle of neutrality, rather than objectivity, its founding myth, and ends up adhering to a dated and traditional concept of history that is factualist and consensual. The chronologies and discussions of the individual entries provide endless evidence of the users' 'act of faith' towards the ideology of the Npov, without which the whole project would have no basis on which to stand. While in the community there seems to be a consolidated faith in the 'bare facts' and the utopia of a world in which knowledge is produced by all and accessible to all, in 2011 *Larry Sanger* himself distanced himself from the creature he founded with *Jimmy Wales*. In his opinion, Wikipedia has contributed to the consolidation of a pervasive anti-intellectualism that has completely delegitimised the role of expertise and the importance of learning as memorisation. Clearly, these are issues that have also been discussed elsewhere and that have marked the way of doing and studying history in the transition from the 20th to the 21st century.

This is another reason why various essays and articles have carefully examined the history of Wikipedia entries, philologically, trying to cast a glance at the boundless background that presides over every page of the encyclopedia, of this virtual marketplace that is the result of the work of real members of a large intellectual community, innervated by ideals and capable of regeneration, even if it is always crossed by tensions, marked by *edit wars* and punctuated by political or ideological conflicts of various kinds.

Studying Wikipedia

As several examples show, a systematic analysis of all the historical entries in the encyclopaedia – i.e. the background from which the negotiations that led to a final, and in any case always provisional, draft emerge – would be an impossible and perhaps even senseless task. The only way to proceed is by means of cores, monitoring individual 'hot' entries or entries on which we have a frame of reference regarding events, literature, public usage.

Another way of proceeding in the analysis of Wikipedia is the comparison between different language editions of general overview pages on major topics. We have done this on the entries dedicated to the First World War for various language editions, noting a significant process of progressive convergence of entries as the centenary of the event approaches. However, it should be remembered that the encyclopedia continues to be written mainly by Europeans and Americans.

In conclusion, it must be remembered that any research hypothesis must nevertheless come to terms with a source that is quite anomalous for historians, because it is perpetually changing: the entries are never definitive and stable, but constantly open to rewriting and modification. The process of developing themes through additions and glosses is far removed from an idea of history as a discipline of context. Yet it is desirable for scholars and researchers to be directly involved in writing and rewriting Wikipedia, or at least to make an effort to get to know its rules and ideology, so as to train reader-consumers to make a conscious use of the online encyclopedia, one that is critical but not biased, perhaps also capable of recognising the emerging *creative commons* and its political potential.

Further Reading

- Bianchi, Roberto, and Gilda Zazzara. “La storia formattata. Wikipedia tra creazione, uso e consumo.” *Passato e presente*, no. 100 (2017): 131–155.
- Lih, Andrew. *The Wikipedia Revolution: How a Bunch of Nobodies Created the World’s Greatest Encyclopedia*. New York: Hyperion, 2009.
- Barbe, Lionel, Louise Merzeau, and Valérie Schafer (eds.). *Wikipédia objet scientifique non identifié*. Nanterre: Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2015.

Web Resources

- Academic studies about Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academic_studies_about_Wikipedia (last accessed 2 December 2021).
 - Wu Ming. “La narrazione della storia in Wikipedia: pratiche, ideologie, conflitti – di Nicoletta Bourbaki”: <https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/2019/07/la-narrazione-della-storia-in-wikipedia/> (last accessed 2 December 2021).
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Wikidata map image generated on 06 April 2018 © [CC-0](#) via [Commons](#).

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[Enrica Salvatori](#) / [Deborah Paci](#)

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Tags: [Collaboration](#), [Language: French](#), [Language: Italian](#), [Social Media](#), [Wikipedia](#)

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1.

[Colombini, Alessandro, OPR](#)

January 20, 2022 • 19:02

Italian version below. To all readers we recommend the automatic [DeepL-Translator](#) for 22 languages. Just copy and paste.

[OPEN PEER REVIEW](#)

A Fascinating Case Study

Reflecting on the dialectic – or the absence of this – between the typically Wikipedia method of fixing knowledge and historical science is a luxury, and the scarcity of reflections on this issue integrates the parallelism with luxury goods. Using Wikipedia is for many, disturbingly close to everyone; understanding Wikipedia seems to be of interest to few and to move even fewer people. It is precisely for this reason that the following work must be interpreted according to the key not necessarily of historical interest, or professional curiosity, but of social sensitivity: studying – as historians – the User Generated Content platforms means investigating the validity of answers that are now received by the vast majority of history questions, questions posed by those who cannot afford the luxury of criticism. This is the first great merit of this article, primarily social merit.

The 2006 work of Roy Rosenzweig^[1], a pioneering reflection on the field, is the starting point for the Wikipedia studies from a historiographical point of view and this can also be seen in the article: when quoted directly, or when evoked indirectly as with the right thoughts on the constant change

of the Wikipedian product (never a final one by its nature). It is this continuous transformation of the content that is analyzed, like an archival envelope that is never the same every time you take it in your hands, which makes the Wikipedian world “maddeningly difficult” to face, as Rosenzweig argued, and which perhaps condemns it to a little palatability as a research field. Even more important, then, that 15 years after Rosenzweig’s article and more than 20 years after the birth of Wikipedia, it is now considered “impossible not to take note of the challenge launched by this operating reality”.

Already present in Rosenzweig and rightly taken up in this work some severe considerations on the Neutral Point of View, a concept that it would be enough to start using in the French equivalent regard, upon which Foucault said everything yet about it[2], to make it explode in all its contradictions. The Neutral Point of View is not only unscientific and inadequate, but it is also problematic in a decisive way if it is inserted in a context where those who think the past starting from a question of the present not only have the pleasure of research and the curiosity of the human yesterday, but he is also a professional with social duties, such as the preservation of a post-1945 political system that unites all of Europe, a system that arose only and exclusively thanks to the destruction of experiences such as the fascist and National Socialist one. Even if we pretend that interpretation did not play such a central role in science like historical science, where “most of the pieces of the mosaic are lost forever” – as Serge Grusinzi said[3] -, the NPOV would still be inadequate: inadequate for an approach to yesterday that arises from a desire of protection of today, which characterizes (or should characterize) the work of historians.

Particularly accurate is this work also on issues such as the “enterprise” dimension of the platform created by Jimmy Wales, a dimension detached from the banal “search for strictly historical information”; this is a thought that allows us to understand what we have in front of us, and therefore to approach it with awareness without which a work of analysis and criticism would completely miss the mark. A mark that the author hits in full instead, with the suggestion to investigate the public aspect of topics, and therefore of entries, which are defined as “hot”: it is precisely here that we must investigate to weigh on the balance of the public use of the story the Wikipedian ability to talk about the past. The needle, which will be able to carry out its work only and exclusively thanks to a multidisciplinary approach, will oscillate between Michael Frisch and Jürgen Habermas.

Furthermore, the use of certain terminology in the text is also appreciable, which helps to clarify what Wikipedia is: “ideology”, an incredibly apt expression to indicate the complex of Wikipedian Pillars and guidelines and introduced in *La storia formattata* (Bianchi, Zazzara)[4], and “virtual square” to define the Wikipedia environment, an extremely interesting interpretation proposed by Lorenzo Filipaz[5]. It is thus, between ideologies and squares, that Wikipedia turns into a fascinating case study for a historian. In addition, clearly, to an urgency that can no longer be postponed.

[1] R. Rosenzweig, *Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past*, «The Journal of American History», XCIII (2006), n.1.

[2] M. Foucault, *Nascita della clinica. Una archeologia dello sguardo medico*, Einaudi, Torino 1998.

[3] S. Gruzinski, *Abbiamo ancora bisogno della storia? Il senso del passato nel mondo globalizzato*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2016, p. 61.

[4] R. Bianchi, G. Zazzara, *La storia formattata. Wikipedia tra creazione, uso e consumo*, «Passato e Presente», XXXV (2017), n. 100, p. 141.

[5] L. Filipaz, *Wi-chi? Battaglie per il sapere in rete*, «Zapruder, storie in movimento», I (2016), n. 39, p. 148.

Riflettere sulla dialettica – o sull’assenza di questa – tra il metodo di fissaggio del sapere tipicamente wikipediano e la scienza storica è un lusso, e la scarsità di riflessioni su questo tema integra il parallelismo con i beni di lusso. *Usare* Wikipedia è per molti, in un numero che si avvicina inquietantemente al *tutti*; *comprendere* Wikipedia sembra interessare pochi, e muovere ancor meno persone. È proprio per questo che il seguente lavoro a mio avviso deve essere interpretato secondo la chiave non necessariamente dell’interesse storico, della curiosità professionale, bensì secondo quella della sensibilità sociale: studiare – da storici – le piattaforme User Generated Content significa indagare la validità delle risposte che ricevono ormai la stragrande maggioranza delle domande di storia, domande poste da chi non può permettersi il lusso della critica. Questo è il primo grande merito di questo articolo, un merito in primis sociale. Il lavoro del 2006 di Roy Rosenzweig[1], una riflessione senz’ombra di dubbio pionieristica, è il punto di partenza per gli *Wikipedia studies* approcciati dal punto di vista storiografico e ciò lo si nota anche nell’articolo: quando citato direttamente, o quando evocato indirettamente come con le giuste riflessioni sul perenne cangiantismo del prodotto (mai finale per sua natura) wikipediano. È questa continua trasformazione del contenuto che si analizza, come una busta d’archivio mai uguale ogni volta che la prendi tra le mani, che rende il mondo wikipediano “maddeningly difficult” da affrontare, come sosteneva Rosenzweig, e che forse lo condanna ad una poca appetibilità come campo di ricerca. Ancora più importante quindi, che a 15 anni dall’articolo di Rosenzweig ed a più di 20 dalla nascita di Wikipedia, si ritenga ormai “impossibile non prendere atto della sfida lanciata da questa realtà operante”.

Presenti già in Rosenzweig e giustamente riprese in questo lavoro alcune severe considerazioni sul *Neutral Point of View*, concetto che basterebbe iniziare ad utilizzare nel corrispettivo francese di foucaultiana memoria *regard*[2] per farlo esplodere in tutte le sue contraddizioni. Il *Neutral Point of View* non è solo ascientifico ed inadeguato, ma è anche problematico in maniera determinante se lo si inserisce in un contesto dove chi restituisce il passato a partire da una domanda del presente non ha solo il piacere della ricerca e la curiosità dello ieri umano, ma è anche un professionista con dei doveri sociali, come la tutela di un sistema politico post-1945 che accomuna tutta Europa, un sistema sorto solo ed esclusivamente grazie alla distruzione di esperienze come quella fascista e nazionalsocialista. Anche se l’interpretazione non rivestisse un ruolo così centrale in una scienza come quella storica, dove “la maggior parte delle tessere del mosaico risultano perdute per sempre”[3], il NPOV sarebbe comunque inadeguato: inadeguato ad un approccio allo ieri che nasca da un desiderio di tutela dell’oggi, che caratterizza (o dovrebbe caratterizzare) il lavoro degli storici. Particolarmente puntuale il lavoro in esame anche su temi come la dimensione “enterprise” della piattaforma creata da Jimmy Wales, dimensione avulsa dalla banale “ricerca di informazioni di tipo strettamente storico”; questa è una riflessione che ci permette di capire cosa abbiamo di fronte a noi,

e quindi di approcciarsi a ciò con una consapevolezza senza la quale un lavoro di analisi e critica mancherebbe completamente il segno. Segno che l'autore colpisce in pieno invece, con il suggerimento di indagare l'aspetto *pubblico* di argomenti, e quindi di voci, che vengono definiti "caldi": è proprio qui si deve indagare per *pesare* sulla bilancia dell'uso pubblico della storia la capacità wikipediana nel parlare di passato. L'ago, che potrà svolgere il suo lavoro solo ed esclusivamente grazie ad un approccio multidisciplinare, oscillerà tra Michael Frisch e Jürgen Habermas.

Inoltre, apprezzabile anche l'utilizzo di una determinata terminologia nel testo, che aiuta a chiarire cosa sia Wikipedia: "ideologia", espressione incredibilmente azzeccata per indicare il complesso di Pilastri e linee guida wikipediane e introdotto in *La storia formattata* (Bianchi, Zazzara)[4], e "piazza virtuale" per definire l'ambiente Wikipedia, chiave di lettura estremamente interessante proposta da Lorenzo Filipaz[5]. È così, tra ideologie e piazze, che Wikipedia si trasforma in un affascinante caso di studio per uno storico. Oltre, chiaramente, ad un'impellenza non più rimandabile.

[1] R. Rosenzweig, Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past, «The Journal of American History», XCIII (2006), n.1.

[2] M. Foucault, *Nascita della clinica. Una archeologia dello sguardo medico*, Einaudi, Torino 1998.

[3] S. Gruzinski, *Abbiamo ancora bisogno della storia? Il senso del passato nel mondo globalizzato*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2016, p. 61.

[4] R. Bianchi, G. Zazzara, *La storia formattata. Wikipedia tra creazione, uso e consumo*, «Passato e Presente», XXXV (2017), n. 100, p. 141.

[5] L. Filipaz, *Wi-chi? Battaglie per il sapere in rete*, «Zapruder, storie in movimento», I (2016), n. 39, p. 148.

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2.



Gil, Tiago Luís, OPR

February 02, 2022 • 17:19

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OPEN PEER REVIEW

A collaborative critique of Wikipedia?

After reading a "History on Wikipedia: a non-neutral world", what one feels is a great thirst for more information, which is perhaps simultaneously a great merit and weakness of the article. However, it would be unfair to demand additional details for a piece that does not intend to be an encyclopedia on the subject, to play with the paper's central theme. The article addresses a crucial topic: Wikipedia, or more precisely, "the presence of history in Wikipedia", which is justified for several reasons, many of which are pointed out in the text itself, such as the current significance of Wikipedia and its weight in online searches. One factor that appears discreetly in the text must also be underlined: the way in which wiki frames our thinking and, consequently, research in history, both as a source of factual data and in the reproduction of old-fashioned concepts regarding

historical studies (this point is further developed in the article). That said, there is no doubt regarding the relevance of the paper.

The strong point of the article is treating Wikipedia as a complex object. The paper does not demote the portal with the disdain with which many colleagues adopt towards it – since it is very far from well-evaluated scientific dissemination vehicles (prominent journals and prestigious publishing houses). Nevertheless, neither does it adopt a posture of romanticizing the collaborative aspect of the initiative. Being a complex object, the wiki deserves to be examined in its entrails and subjected to different observation instruments.

The article highlights critical elements of the wiki, such as the effect of the idea of notability (in the choice of the entry's creation and the hierarchy of the themes), the effects of the "Five Pillars", particularly the 'Npov', and the logic of writing and rewriting entries through additions and glosses. Finally, it points out ways to study the wiki, based on dense investigations of specific "hot" entries. As the author says: "The only way to proceed is by means of cores, monitoring individual 'hot' entries or entries on which we have a frame of reference regarding events, literature, public usage."

I'm not sure it's the only way. I think it's possible to find so many other ways to study the wiki's production, re-editing, and consumption. But this is not my central point. I understand that the main problem of the article is the abundance of themes (as I listed above) and slight consequent lack of depth of the central points that, it seems to me, would be associated with the criticism of the "Npov" pattern (seeing the title of the article). I believe that the final part, dedicated to a summary of studies on history in Wikipedia, could be removed in favor of analyzing the contradictions between the current state of historical knowledge (based on theoretical, methodological and epistemological principles) and the pillars of the wiki, maybe – I underline – maybe through some concrete examples or some other story like the one involving Larry Sanger. I imagine examples like this abound.

The methodological aspects of the study of the wiki, both in history and in any other discipline, would deserve to be dealt with in greater detail perhaps in another paper. The complexity of the research object called Wikipedia, which is stressed in the paper, could be invoked to justify the creation of conferences, work teams, or observatories on the topic, which historians have largely neglected despite its current significance. In the same way that the wiki is a collective product, we should create collective forms of critique of the content, which would bring benefits to the whole of society.

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