

Presidential Column

February 11, 2011

Launched in 2001, [Wikipedia](#) is now the most commonly used source for general reference on the Internet. It ranks fifth among the world's most visited websites and contains over 17 million articles in multiple languages. The English version alone is read by 13 million people a day. Wikipedia's unique and remarkable feature is that it is the largest collaboratively produced knowledge repository that has ever existed. It **can** potentially be edited by any of the two billion people worldwide (30% of the global population) with access to the Internet.

It is clear that **Wikipedia** is the general public's primary source of expert knowledge, including psychological science. Unfortunately, the quality of information about psychological science in **Wikipedia** is uneven and for many of our most central theories, methods and discoveries it says not much that is of interest or importance. To change this state of affairs I am announcing the [APS Wikipedia Initiative \(APSWI\)](#) which is aimed at improving the state of knowledge about the discipline.

In my first column in September I reminded us that the strength of this organization is its members and their contributions. The APS **Wikipedia** Initiative offers an unprecedented opportunity for researchers, educators and students to dramatically increase public understanding and appreciation of psychological science, and in the process, help achieve a more complete and accurate representation of our science.

Why Wikipedia?

I believe in the **Wikipedia** initiative because like many of **you** I believe that **free** access to knowledge is a right. Although I'm unlikely to use **Wikipedia** to learn about psychology, I do use it regularly to learn about all sorts of things I know far less about. For this reason I support it by using it and contributing to it. I gain from **Wikipedia** when I desperately need to know the early history of hollandaise sauce, **but** also look forward to its 'article of the day' which is automatically sent to my mailbox. It is a rare day when I don't open it at all, which is more than I **can** say about anything else that arrives regularly in my inbox. In just the month of November alone I learned about Minnie Pwerle, an Aboriginal artist; the Manchester Mark 1, a computer that successfully computed Mersenne prime numbers in 1949; and the failed Gunpowder Plot to kill James I. All this in only three days out of thirty!

How **can** one not be impressed with well-written and educational 'featured articles' that turned out that way because dozens of people contributed their expertise on common and esoteric subjects, struggled to reach consensus (succeeding in most cases), and did so by baffling economists yet again by doing it for no monetary compensation, and in addition, by doing it anonymously.

Many of us complain regularly and justifiably about the lack of recognition of our science outside the borders of our own discipline within the academy and certainly outside of it. We say that people don't seem to **have** an accurate understanding of what we do, and that we **have** far less influence in matters that shape the state of the world than we think is deserved. We wonder how it **can** be that there are no

psychologists among the president's science advisors.

The causes of this state of affairs that lie outside our own control are not my concern here. **But** to the extent that we **can** ourselves be spokespeople about what we **have** discovered, what we theorize about, who our heroes are — who better to explain that than us? Who more credible to do so than us? It is my belief that we **can** dramatically increase the public's understanding of our discipline and its appraisal. I want to persuade **you** that we **can** do so by contributing in a variety of ways, one of which is through a **free** and open medium that is available to all of us in the form of **Wikipedia**.

Some Facts About Psychology on Wikipedia

There are 5691 articles associated with the Project on Psychology at **Wikipedia**. Of those, only a third **have** even been assessed through Wikipedia's peer assessment. We must change this. Of the roughly 935 articles that **have** an assessment of medium or higher importance, only 2% are above 'B' level, only 9 **have** ever been featured, and only another 9 **have** 'Good Article' status. We've got to improve this.

Start by looking at the most basic **Wikipedia** entries in your own area of expertise, and **you** will see the problem immediately. Although some articles are great (see the articles on [autism](#) or [confirmation bias](#)), many are stubs, with hardly any content (e.g., see the articles on [moral reasoning](#) or [Stanley Schacter](#)). The vast majority of entries do not present information in the form in which **you** teach and think about it.

It is my belief that **Wikipedia** and its successors are here to stay as the go-to place for the majority of individuals worldwide who want to understand our science. The 157 psychology stub articles currently on **Wikipedia** that **have** medium or higher importance ratings received an average of 64,000 visitors per day, showing the demand for them. I point out three audiences in particular that will benefit more than most by our getting involved in improving psychology science knowledge on **Wikipedia**: high-school and undergraduate students who are studying psychology; policy makers and journalists who use and write about our work; and the large numbers of people in countries where the mind sciences are nonexistent or poorly taught and hardly researched.

Remember, **anybody can** contribute to **Wikipedia**. **You** don't **have** to be the noted authority on a topic to be invited and cajoled into contributing to encyclopedias that are published with gold lettering on the spine. **You** know the books I mean — the number of such volumes on various topics in psychology has proliferated over the years. My colleagues tell me that they are invited to contribute to over half a dozen different encyclopedias each year and I **have** no doubt that that is because publishers **have** correctly figured out that there's money to be made by selling these tomes to libraries. I myself **have** contributed to such volumes that will sit on library shelves gathering dust.

Instead of (or in addition to) writing for these types of publications, why not contribute to **Wikipedia**, a growing, evolving information repository? **Wikipedia** is a non-profit initiative and it is ready and available for us to start typing. On **Wikipedia**, **you** will, if **you** participate in APS's initiative, create a new entry, or take an existing one and re-do it. **You** will, if **you** remain engaged, correct your own mistakes when **you** discover them. **You** will become a teacher to the world about a piece of

psychological science — a single concept, a small discovery, a unique method, a deserving person.

You may even get interested enough that **you** will add new material all the time to your chosen entries, and do so at whatever hour of night **you** wish! **You** will take what may **have** seemed to be somebody's perfectly passable entry and bring it to perfection with the right sentence or two. **You** could supply new, more compelling, examples. **You** could diversify the content by showing that a particular view isn't the only one that exists. **You**'ll add a table or figure that others **can** use in their own teaching; or contribute in many other ways that will change the extent to which our colleagues in other disciplines and the public come to understand us and this science.

Join the APS Wikipedia Initiative!

We took the first step last summer by inviting a committee of three experts to evaluate the state of psychological science in **Wikipedia**, and more importantly to offer suggestions for how we might create an engagement between us (the contributors) and **Wikipedia** (the repository). The goal was to undertake a review and generate proposals that would serve as the basis of an initiative that would last beyond the single year of my presidency. I am deeply grateful to Robert Kraut who is at the Human-Computer Interaction Institute at Carnegie Mellon University, Amy Bruckman from the College of Computing at Georgia Tech, and Brian Nosek at the Department of Psychology at University of Virginia. Each has a history of engagement with open source media and for each of them the Internet is an integral part of their research programs.

Their initial report and the conversations I've had since with Robert Kraut **have** allowed me to recognize the challenge and opportunity before us, and has propelled APS to create a **Wikipedia** Initiative to demonstrate its belief that this is where the power of its membership **can** be brought to bear. For this reason APS will support and manage a portal to provide novice editors a smooth entry into the process of creating and editing on **Wikipedia**. For this reason, Robert Kraut and post-doctoral researcher Rosta Farzan, for both of whom this is a deep commitment, will provide instruction where needed, point out opportunities, and make connections to the community of **Wikipedia** editors who work on entries relevant to our science. Our goal is to increase and sustain the number of knowledgeable volunteers who contribute. **To make this possible, APS is calling upon its members, faculty, and students, to support the Association's mission to use the power of Wikipedia to represent scientific psychology as fully and as accurately as possible.**

In next month's column, we'll talk about exactly what **you can** do to participate fully because APS will provide instructions and gather a community.