Harnessing the Power of Wikipedia for Scientific Psychology: A Call to Action

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As I wrote in my December column, Wikipedia provides an immense opportunity to teach about psychological science. Wikipedia is massive, with over 3.5 million articles in the English version alone. It is the most commonly used general reference source on the Internet — but its articles vary tremendously in quality. Because we recognize the power of Wikipedia as well as its unrealized potential for our science, APS is launching the APS Wikipedia Initiative (APSWI) to improve the quality and quantity of the information about psychological science presented in Wikipedia. In this column, I’ll focus on what you and APS can do together, with some focus on the logistics.

We know, more so than other scientists, that initiatives based on voluntarism often don’t succeed. They fail, in part, because the practical steps — what to do and how to do it — are simply not clear, or don’t even exist. In the absence of practical information, even those of us who are motivated to contribute give up out of the frustration of trying to work with an unfamiliar electronic platform. This is where APS and its collaborators will play a visible role.

In discussions with Wikimedia Foundation to understand the conditions that will ensure the success of our initiative, we learned that a large part of its success will lie in the availability of a clear path to contribute — including clear instructions about how to make and edit Wikipedia articles, the existence of a community that can work collaboratively, and availability of regular updates on the advances we are making.

Our first goal is to recruit and support knowledgeable contributors. APS has established an online portal to provide the smoothest possible entry into the process of creating and editing Wikipedia articles.
The portal includes:

- Tutorial materials introducing Wikipedia, the Wikipedia community, and the editing process;
- Tools to match APS members and students to appropriate volunteer opportunities in Wikipedia; and
- Easy ways to connect contributors to fellow volunteers and to Wikipedia experts

Robert Kraut and Rosta Farzan, both of Carnegie Mellon University, are leading the technical aspects of the APSWI. We are indebted to them for their time and commitment to this project. We are also relying on materials and insights developed in the Wikimedia Foundation’s US Public Policy Initiative and the Wikiproject on Colleges and Universities.

Who Can Contribute?

You, the professor reading this column, are crucial to the initiative. You can contribute as an individual by evaluating articles in your area of expertise (but you also have another more important role as teacher, which I will get to). You, the graduate student reading this column, and your fellow students (even those who are not APS members … yet!) in any of the over 6,000 degree-granting programs in psychology, are among the most valuable candidates for contributing to Wikipedia. You are passionate about your chosen field of expertise, and you — perhaps even more than your advisors — are probably outraged when you see that your area of research is represented poorly or not at all.

The likely most effective way to generate contributions, in my opinion, is to include writing for Wikipedia as part of college and graduate-level courses. In this way, professors and students in a class can begin to populate Wikipedia on the topic of the course, taking advantage of the built-in expertise
that is contained in that collective, in a semester long time frame. Writing Wikipedia entries from scratch, editing entries, or evaluating them can be a worthwhile learning experience in a standard classroom. Such work can teach students so much — that even the simplest ideas are hard to communicate to general audiences; that logic, strength of argument, flow and clarity of writing, citations of the appropriate literature, and, above all, accuracy need to be mastered in order to be a member of this guild. My request is that for any course that you are about to teach this semester and beyond, that you consider adding contribution to Wikipedia as part of the course’s requirements.

The same opportunities hold for research groups that gather for weekly lab meetings. It is my hope that in settings like these, graduate students and postdocs will take on the responsibility of generating lists of the concepts closest to their own work that ought to be a part of the Wikipedia repository, and that they will work collectively toward populating these entries on concepts, methods, techniques, theories, and people. Undergraduate and graduate students in research methods courses may specifically search for key concepts on validity, measurement, and specific scales that can be created and improved on Wikipedia.

It should be clear that professors have a second important role to play (besides making their own contributions): supervising the writing for Wikipedia and enabling the teaching of writing in the form of Wikipedia entries in course assignments. I hope it is obvious that such an assignment is valuable in itself by teaching students how to reason and write, but that it also serves a purpose larger than the course. Course work can now have a life outside the course, on the Internet, in the form of material that is publicly shared and lives on in perpetuity. Designating Wikipedia contributions as course credit may indeed produce high-quality contributors that will reach the status of featured articles or ‘A’ level articles that will be intrinsically rewarding. I will be utterly gratified if this path of classroom and laboratory collectives adding to psychology in Wikipedia takes off and becomes common practice. It will be fitting that a repository of knowledge that is the work of millions is also more likely to succeed through the work of collectives engaged in the act of learning.

To facilitate this, the APSWI portal will provide introductory materials suitable for students and sample assignments, which professors can use to help them get started. In addition, during our annual convention this May, APS will offer demonstrations on using Wikipedia assignments in the classroom, to share best practices and help support professors. The portal will also include new material for the classroom, in time for the new academic year in September.

HAPPY 10TH BIRTHDAY WIKIPEDIA
On January 15, 2011 Wikipedia celebrated its 10th birthday. Wikipedia has over 17 million articles (3.5 million in English) making Wikipedia the largest encyclopedia in the history of encyclopedias.

With 1,000 new articles added daily to the English version, and more than 100,000 active volunteers editing the site each day—the number of entries online are truly limitless. While early critics predicted Wikipedia would become a hackers’ paradise, mistakes are caught almost immediately; the number of Wikihackers who would damage an article are far outweighed by the editors cleaning up posts.

So what are Wikipedia’s goals for its second decade? Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales wants to see Wikipedia in every language of the world and hopes to open an international office in India. Another priority in line for Wikipedia is to diversify the editor base, continuing to provide people around the world with accurate, free and fast information.

This information appeared in the January 12, 2011 Washington Post article “Wikipedia is turning 10, and founder Jimmy Wales has big plans” by Monica Hesse.

Knowing What To Do and How To Do It

Identifying what psychological content on Wikipedia needs work can be difficult. Also, different areas and different entries may need different types of work. Besides adding missing articles, necessary tasks might include reviewing existing articles, correcting errors, improving coverage, adding information about new findings and theory, improving the writing for a general audience, adding citations, and adding illustrations.

The APSWI portal includes software to match volunteers’ interests and expertise with work needed in Wikipedia. The software will allow you to describe your expertise via a questionnaire and uploads of representative articles or syllabi, and then will point you to articles in Wikipedia that could benefit from your expertise.

Also, while making a simple edit in Wikipedia is actually quite easy, you may not know the steps involved. You especially may not initially understand how to add more complex content (e.g., a citation or illustration). Wikipedia is also an institution with its own social structure (e.g., WikiProjects), tools (e.g., article watch-lists), norms (e.g., that articles must express a neutral point of view), and policies (e.g., the 3-revert rule, limiting how frequently volunteers can undo each others’ edits). Understanding these quirks can make you a more effective contributor. To help you, the portal provides tutorials, support for registering a Wikipedia account, exercises for creating a personal page or learning how to create references, and pointers to a “sandbox” where you can try out edits in a risk-free environment.

Coordinating and Communicating

Wikipedia has coordination mechanisms, in the form of WikiProjects — groups of editors who collaborate to improve collections of pages devoted to the management of specific topics. There already exists a psychology WikiProject, with about 130 members working on about 6,000 articles. We have created an area on the WikiProject_Psychology project page where APSWI volunteers can interact with project members. Although you can join this group, I encourage you to enter through the APS portal,
which collects relevant information from WikiProject Psychology and the U.S. Public Policy Project, as well as additional information to help you become an editor swiftly and with ease.

Motivating Contributions

Why should you, as a research psychologist or a graduate student, spend your time on Wikipedia entries, translating psychological science for a general audience? Because Wikipedia articles are co-authored, with tens or even hundreds of editors working on each article, contributors don’t get authorship credit for their contributions and cannot cite their contributions on their resumes. Wikipedia and other similar initiatives run on the good will of volunteers who work in the public good and out of a sense of professional responsibility. These motivations challenge simple notions of compensation and even public recognition. But to augment these altruistic motivations, APSWI will publically recognize the efforts of effective volunteers through “leaderboards” to highlight the amount and types of work volunteers are doing. In addition, APS will recognize exceptional contributions and the articles that have improved because of APSWI volunteerism.

Things You Can Do Right Now

Are you ready to participate in this experiment to build and give away what we know in order to educate the world about the ideas and discoveries of psychological science? From the many reactions the first column on this has received, I think there is no question that we are ready as a field. But it begins with individual effort. Here is what you can do now:

Visit the APSWI Portal and register to volunteer: www.psychologicalscience.org/APSWI

Start browsing Wikipedia for your favorite topics.

Write to me with ideas about this particular initiative and how you think we can make it succeed (banaji@psychologicalscience.org).