
Military History on the Electronic Frontier: Wikipedia Fights the War of 1812



Richard Jensen¹

Abstract

Wikipedia has become the world's dominant educational resource, with over four million articles in the English language edition that reach hundreds of millions of readers. Wikipedia is written by and for the benefit of highly motivated amateurs. Military history is one of its strengths, with over 50,000 articles and over 700 well-organized volunteers who prevent mischief and work on upgrading quality. They rely on free online sources and popular books, and generally ignore historiography and scholarly monographs and articles. The military articles are old-fashioned, with an emphasis on tactics, battles, and technology, and are weak on social and cultural dimensions. This essay examines how the 14,000 word article on the "War of 1812" was worked on by 2,400 different people, with no overall coordinator or plan. Debates raged as the 1812 article attracted over 3,300 comments by 627 of the most active editors. The main dispute was over who won the war.

Wikipedia stands tall on the electronic frontier. It is by far the most popular information source for military history and for practically all forms of internet-accessible information. In terms of daily usage, it ranks in the top ten

1. The author appreciates the advice of D'Ann Campbell, Mike Cline, Richard Ellefritz, David Goodman, Desmond Morton, and Diana Strassmann, as well as Wikipedia editors Dank, Dwalrus, Narson, Shakescene, TFD, and Tito Dutta. Earlier versions of this essay were presented to the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation 2010 conference in Toronto and the Wikimania 2012 conference in Washington, a world conference for Wikipedia editors.

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internet sites in the world just below Facebook and search engines like Google. About 13 percent of all internet users worldwide look at Wikipedia. In August 2012 Wikipedia ranked near the top in usage among all websites; it was ranked number five in Switzerland; number six worldwide, and in the U.S.A., Italy and France; number 7 in Canada; Australia, Germany and India; number eight in Britain and Pakistan; number nine in Russia, Mexico, Poland and Spain; number 10 in Japan; and number 78 in China, where the government is hostile. It is especially popular among high school and university students, but much less so among people over sixty-five. There are over 100 different language versions of Wikipedia—each with its own distinctive articles. This article deals only with the English version, which is by far the largest and most used. If someone uses Google to search for information, most likely the first choice will be the relevant Wikipedia article. With over four million articles, the encyclopedia has an astonishing range of topical coverage. Our main concern here, however, is not with who uses Wikipedia, but with how its articles on military history get written, using the “War of 1812” article as a case study. Wikipedia represents a radical new way to write history: “crowdsourcing.”² The “War of 1812” article itself runs 14,000 words, but over 3,000 different people had a hand in writing it. Furthermore, 600 people wrote over 200,000 words of commentary debating the text of this one article. Who they are and how and why they did it will reveal the inner workings of Wikipedia.

A third goal is to explain the rules of the game that have spontaneously evolved on the electronic frontier, in what constitutes an informal democratic community. One of the main complaints heard about Wikipedia is its lack of authority, because “anyone can edit.” This article will explain the mechanisms in place that exert authority over articles. The “War of 1812” article, along with a discussion about Wikipedia editors and the rules they do or do not abide by, will provide insight into the nature of Wikipedia and the quality of the world’s most heavily used information source. The historiography of Wikipedia is facilitated since each article is linked to ancillary information that can be highly revealing. Each article has a “Page history” which contains a “Page view statistics” link showing the number of visits to that page for every day since December 2007.

Table 1 shows the audience numbers for selected articles related to 1812 and military history generally in April 2012 and April 2008. Of course some people return to the same page over and over, so the number of different readers is lower. While some articles have gone up in popularity (“Napoleon”) and others have gone down (“Thomas Jefferson”), the overall picture is one of stability with a small decline across the four years. Although overall Wikipedia usage continues to grow, that is not the case with military history topics.

Table 2 shows where the “War of 1812” article fits among the most popular articles in military history. It ranks number 59, putting it in the same league as “Battleships” and “Benito Mussolini,” which perhaps will seem about right to scholars.

Teachers and historiographers are concerned with who reads Wikipedia and how they use the information they acquire there. That perspective is not of much

2. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crowdsourcing#Definitions>.

Table 1: Audience for articles: 2008-2012

Article	Visits April 2008	Visits April 2012
Biographies tied to 1812		
Thomas Jefferson	559,000	237,000
Andrew Jackson	189,000	150,000
George Washington	361,000	307,000
Isaac Brock	9,500	9,600
Tecumseh	27,300	41,900
Laura Secord	9,250	9,200
Duke of Wellington	31,000	46,100
Napoleon	93,100	269,000
Topical		
History of the United States	69,100	69,900
History of Canada	31,200	27,500
Military history	13,300	8,650
Battle of New Orleans	29,100	30,400
Wars		
War of 1812	181,200	172,000
American Revolutionary War	178,000	164,000
American Civil War	451,000	412,000
World War II	951,000	862,000

Table 2: 1812 has medium popularity among military history articles

Rank among Military history articles in Wikipedia	Article
57	Benito Mussolini
58	Joan of Arc
59	War of 1812
60	Battleship
61	Harry S Truman
62	Spartacus
63	AK-47

concern inside Wikipedia, for it is operated by and for the benefit of the editors.³ Only readers who write comments are listened to, and fewer than one in a thousand comments. The Wikipedia culture evolved with very little top-down supervision. The Wikimedia Foundation owns all the Wikipedias in the world, and operates the servers that they reside on. It is a not-for-profit foundation whose revenue is raised primarily through annual appeals by founder Jimmy Wales. While it takes a keen interest in legal issues such as copyright and libel, the

Wikimedia Foundation otherwise exerts very little control over the content of its encyclopedias. That task is handled by the “Wikipedia community,” which in practice means a self-selected group of a couple thousand editors. The community operates through consensus and does have a slim structure, including written rules,⁴ 1,500 elected administrators with special powers,⁵ regional and national chapters,⁶ and projects that deal with topics such as military history.

A central concern in the community has been disruptive behavior. “Anyone can edit” is an invitation for troublemakers and vandals who make thousands of foolish changes to articles every hour. Most of these are kids who make “Kilroy was here” comments, which are quickly “reverted” (i.e. removed). More important is how the active editors behave. About 90 percent of them are male, and 27 percent are under age twenty-one—13 percent are in high school—and nearly all are anonymous, with no controls by parents or professors on what they write.⁷

3. Andrea Forte, Vanessa Larco, and Amy Bruckman, “Decentralization in Wikipedia Governance,” *Journal of Management Information Systems* 26, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 49–72. See also Elinor Ostrom, “Collective Action and the Evolution of Social Norms,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 137–158.

4. See “Wikipedia:Policies and guidelines” at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Rules>.

5. See “Wikipedia:Administrators” at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Administrators>.

6. Germany has a strong chapter that handles the German-language Wikipedia. There is no nationwide U.S. chapter, but Washington and New York have active chapters and others are being formed. There is a small Canada chapter. See http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wikimedia_Canada and http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wikimedia_New_York_City.

7. For profiles of editors, see “Semi-annual survey of Wikipedia Editors: April 2011” at http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/WP_2011_Editor's_Survey_-_Topline.pdf.

Frontiersmen are always young, male and ready to stand their ground and the Wikipedia editors exemplify the culture of frontier individualism that Frederick Jackson Turner identified with Jacksonian Democracy in the antebellum Old Southwest:

What they objected to was arbitrary obstacles, artificial limitations upon the freedom of each member of this frontier folk to work out his own career without fear or favor. What they instinctively opposed was the crystallization of differences, the monopolization of opportunity and the fixing of that monopoly by government or by social customs. The road must be open. The game must be played according to the rules. There must be no artificial stifling of equality of opportunity, no closed doors to the able, no stopping the free game before it was played to the end. More than that, there was an unformulated, perhaps, but very real feeling, that mere success in the game, by which the abler men were able to achieve preëminence gave to the successful ones no right to look down upon their neighbors, no vested title to assert superiority as a matter of pride and to the diminution of the equal right and dignity of the less successful.⁸

Wikipedia administrator David Goodman has noted, “The frontier mindset survives in the behavior of people on the net in settings like ours, where they think themselves similarly free from conventional institutional restraints, and the world is open in front of them to exploit and to remake as they choose.”⁹ Wikipedians identify the threat of “arbitrary obstacles, artificial limitations” with the academic hierarchical structure that privileges scholarly achievements. Wikipedia editors almost never claim authorship of published scholarly books and articles. That sort of expertise is not welcome in Wikipedia; editors rarely mention that they possess advanced training or degrees. Indeed the use of anonymous usernames breaks the link between the outside hierarchical academic world, where reputation is accumulated through degrees, appointments, and academic honors, and Wikipedia’s hyperequalitarianism. Back east they had political leaders like Harvard professor John Quincy Adams, but the frontier was the domain of Davy Crockett and Andy Jackson. Wikipedia editors will boast like river boatmen about their output: how many years they have worked on the encyclopedia, how many tens or hundreds of thousands of edits they have made.¹⁰ They pride themselves in adhering to Wikipedia’s NPOV rule: all articles must reflect a Neutral Point of View, and POV, or bias, is a misdemeanor that is regularly removed.¹¹ The one major link to the outside world is the requirement that all text be verifiable based on reliable secondary sources, with a preference for traditional published scholarship.¹²

Frontier disputes were often resolved by shoot-outs, which in the Wiki world translates to edit wars. There is a well-developed system for spotting and

8. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1920), 342.

9. David Goodman to Richard Jensen, 26 August 2012.

10. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:JSTOR>.

11. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:NPOV>.

12. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:RS>.

stopping edit wars.¹³ The frontiersmen created their own system of justice.¹⁴ One technique was to set up claim clubs that asserted informal ownership of farmlands and mining claims. That approach is forbidden by Wikipedia rules to the effect that no one owns an article, and that behind-the-scenes collaboration is frowned upon. A famous frontier technique was the lynch mob, but Wikipedia has instead adopted a more organized, less emotional, less ad hoc approach that more closely resembles the vigilantes and regulator posses that dealt systematically with frontier criminals. The Wikipedia community uses kangaroo courts where the accused are brought before a self-constituted jury, operating without formal rules or defense counsel.¹⁵ The severest penalty is a ban (exile)¹⁶ for a period of time, or permanent banning.¹⁷ Some offenders are put on probation and assigned a probation officer called a mentor.¹⁸ The American frontier was not renowned for setting up arbitration panels or employing dispute mediators; however the electronic frontier does use arbitration and for the 1812 article we will look at official mediation as a successful method of conflict resolution in Wikipedia.

Wikipedia has evolved its own evaluation process that honors the best articles in terms of internal criteria. The criteria for “Good” articles” are, that they are “written very well, contain factually accurate and verifiable information, are broad in coverage, neutral in point of view, stable, and illustrated, where possible, by relevant images with suitable copyright licenses.” In mid-2012, out of all four million articles 15,572 are honored as “Good articles” and 3,619 have won top honors as “Featured articles.”¹⁹ Articles can lose their honors—over 2,000 have been delisted from the “good” category. The “Warfare” category boasts 1,937 “good” articles—including hundreds of articles about specific warships. There are 56 “good” articles about warships of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.²⁰ The separate “History” category contains only 905 “Good” articles, showing that the enthusiasm of Wikipedians clearly runs along military channels. To return to the frontier metaphor, the land is run by and for the editors who are self-sufficient farmers of information crops. They do not gain by selling their product, and anyone suspected of writing articles for pay on behalf of public relations for an entity comes under deep suspicion.²¹ As a result, knowing how many people read an article, or how its

13. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Edit_wars.

14. Lawrence M. Friedman, *A History of American Law*, 3rd ed. (New York: Touchstone, 2005), 275–78.

15. At one point Wikipedia had defense counsels; they were too effective in finding loopholes and were disbanded. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Association_of_Members%27_Advocates.

16. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Banning_policy.

17. Compare the antebellum Old Southwest: “Posses rode from town to town, tearing down grogshops, burning bordellos. Parties of Regulators linked forces through all the counties of Kentucky, hanging outlaws, horsewhipping and deporting.” Robert M. Coates, *The Outlaw Years: The History of the Land Pirates of the Natchez Trace* (New York: Macaulay Co., 1930), 43.

18. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Mentor#Involuntary_mentorship.

19. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Good_article For more details, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Good_article_criteria.

20. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Good_articles/Warfare.

21. See the conflict of interest rules at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:COI> and

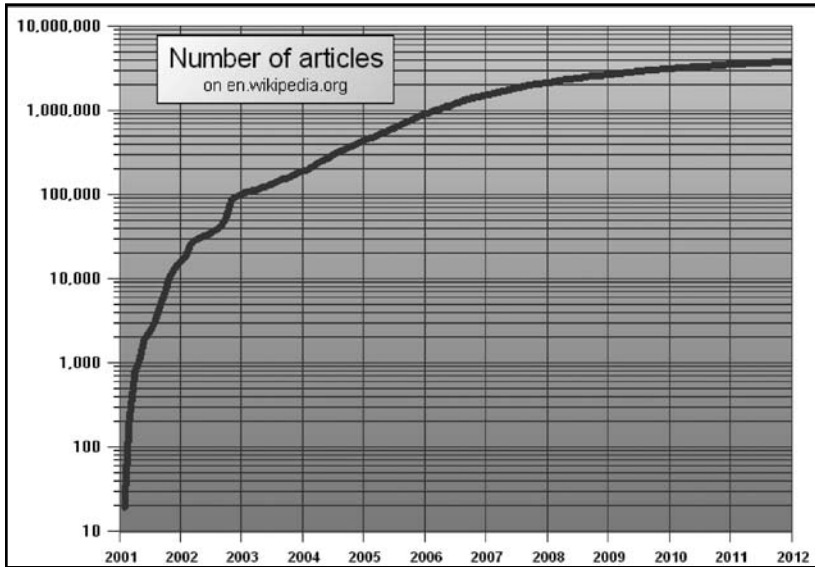


Chart 1: Wikipedia growth: number of articles*

audience has grown or fallen, or how useful it has been to the general public is not among the criteria used to evaluate quality.

Most of the major articles in Wikipedia were written in 2006–2007, and have gotten relatively little attention from editors since then. The busiest season was the summer of 2006, when 2,000 new articles appeared every day.²² After an encyclopedia reaches 100,000 articles, the pool of good material shrinks. By the time one million articles are written, it must tax ingenuity to think of something new. Wikipedia passed the four million article mark in summer 2012.

Chart 2 (next page) shows the monthly numbers of edits to the most important article on military history, that on World War II. It suggests that the heavy work of writing took place in 2006–2007. Since then the main articles have seen some additions—small problems are fixed, better citations have been added, timelines and information boxes have been plugged in, and links to newer articles have been embedded. Editors now pour their energies into minor issues of formatting.

In the paper encyclopedia world, old age meant obsolescence and declining sales; very expensive new editions were required to remain competitive. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* in the 1920s resolved the problem by dropping entirely

the method of watching for violators at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Paid_Advocacy_Watch and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Paid_Advocacy_Watch/Editor_Registry.

* From “Number of articles” at <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/80/EnwikipediaArtLog.PNG>.

22. See <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Enwikipediagrowth.PNG>.

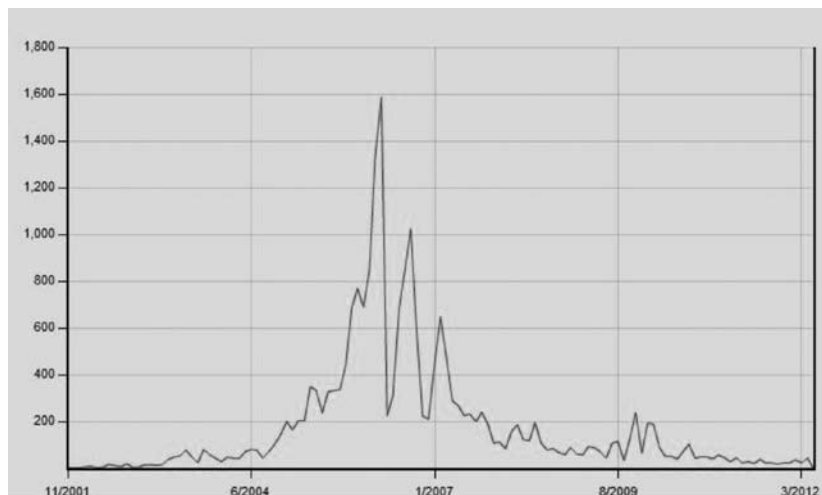


Chart 2: Edit history for World War II: edits per month 2011-2012

new editions and instead making small annual revisions, telling customers the set was up-to-date. The downside was the difficulty of convincing customers to buy a complete new set every few years. However, *Britannica* and its spinoff projects such as *Great Books* were not much read outside schools; those individuals who did buy them did so to display intellectual pretensions and conspicuous consumption. The solution at *Britannica* and its rivals was to offer upscale expensive bindings that represented conspicuous consumption, and sell yearbooks that updated statistical information, and gave detailed coverage to events of the year, such as sports, obituaries, new celebrities, and elections.

At Wikipedia meanwhile, with its growth era closed, many editors have lost interest. The numbers keep falling as more and more have had their say and moved on. Others grew frustrated as they battled over the precise wording of old articles. For example, R-41, a Canadian specialist on modern European politics, writes:

I have edited Wikipedia since 2007 and have had my fair share of good times, bad times, and wasted time. I have quit Wikipedia in the past out of frustration, but have returned out of curiosity. It is an interesting hobby, albeit one that can be addictive in that I can get too attached to spending too much time editing. Moreover I have found myself embroiled in edit wars in which I and another user become completely intransigent to accepting each other's point of view - both my fault and theirs.²³

The pool of editors continues to shrink, and the Wikimedia Foundation, which sponsors Wikipedia, has commissioned research to find explanations and has set

23. See User R-41 home page, retrieved 6 August 2012 at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:R-41>.

up educational programs to interest university students in becoming editors.²⁴ A major goal of the Wikimedia Foundation is to get as many readers as possible to become editors, and thus gain a sense of ownership. However, very few readers do any editing—fewer than one per 1,000—and only a small fraction of them make as many as ten edits. Most of the one-off edits are trivial. The likelihood that new readers will do any editing has sharply declined in recent years. Considering just the “War of 1812” article, there were 434,000 viewers in the first three months of 2008, and that produced 256 people who decided to make a change in the article. In the first three months of 2012 there were far more viewers (623,000) but only 28 people made an edit. Of the 256 who got started in early 2008, just one remains active in 2012. He is Lacrimosus, an Australian who began editing in 2004 on other articles. By 2012 he had made 15,000 edits covering a wide range of interests. For example, in July 2012 he contributed edits to the articles on Batman (1989 film), cooking oil, the Olympics, Bourbon Street, Beowulf, Richard Nixon, the Battle of Austerlitz, and “Courage the Cowardly Dog.” (The last is an American TV cartoon series that has been in reruns since 2002.)²⁵ The Wikimedia Foundation has an educational program to turn undergraduates into editors. It may be easier to turn them into history professors. Of course, freshman surveys are not designed to produce historians, chemists, or CEOs; instead these courses help freshmen expand their knowledge and research skills, and help them understand how specialists think and do research. Editing Wikipedia articles as part of an undergraduate class project is just like any other writing assignment except there is a real global audience for the students’ work.

As of spring 2012, about 3,300 very active editors contributed more than 100 edits per month. They add new material and also monitor millions of articles for vandalism. This is a 31 percent reduction from spring 2007 when there had been 4,800 very active editors. There are more and more readers of Wikipedia, but they have less and less new to add.²⁶

The article on the “War of 1812,” as Chart 3 (next page) reveals, had its greatest activity level in 2007. By mid-2012 it contained 14,000 words of main text, four maps, sixteen illustrations, and 169 footnotes. It has a short bibliography (not annotated); a longer bibliography on the war constitutes a separate article. The article contains 619 links to other Wikipedia articles; in turn 7,000 articles are linked to it. There is nothing innovative; the article covers the same topics as comparable articles in paper-based encyclopedias. For example, the “War of 1812” article in the 2010 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is signed by leading scholars David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler. It includes 3,200 words, two maps, five illustrations, no footnotes, a short annotated bibliography and links to 57 other *Britannica* articles. The “War of 1812” article in *Britannica* is briefer than its Wikipedia counterpart, yet is well done, and is especially clear on the causes of the war. However, it is sketchy on military and naval affairs. Some of the other

24. See “Wikipedia Education Program” at http://outreach.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_Education_Program.

25. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Contributions/Lacrimosus>.

26. <http://stats.wikimedia.org/EN/TablesWikipediaEN.htm>.

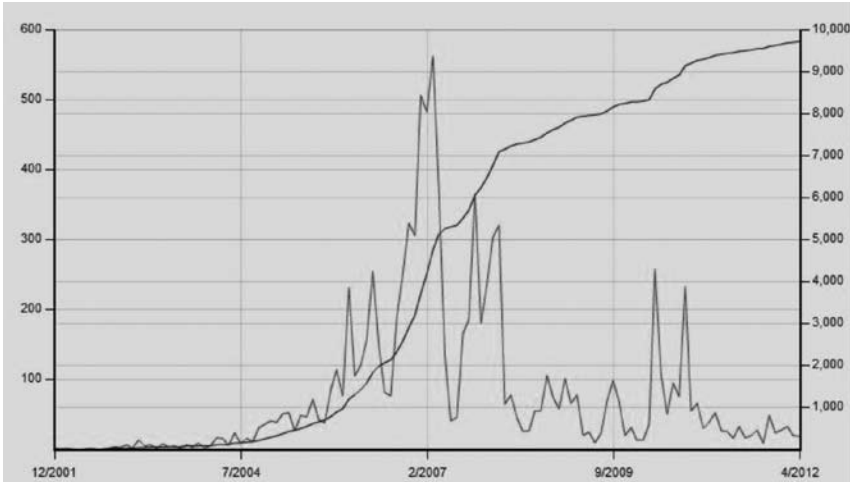


Chart 3: Edit history for “War of 1812”: edits per month 2011-2012 and cumulative edits

Britannica articles it links to are more problematic. *Britannica*’s “Canada” article says very little about the war and is much more interested in the precise national boundary line. It makes strange assertions: “The War of 1812 can largely be traced to the Anglo-U.S. rivalry in the fur trade” and “the cause of the Canadian fur trade and of the Indians remained the same: preserving the wilderness.” This type of commentary would not last long on Wikipedia.

Wikipedia’s “War of 1812” article was born in December 2001 when user The Epopt copied about 2,000 words from the “American War of 1812” article in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1910). The old encyclopedia was out of copyright, and carried the prestige of weighty articles. The 1812 article concentrated entirely on combat operations, and was strikingly weak on the causal, diplomatic, political, and other dimensions of the war. Like other pioneers, The Epopt had a very wide range of interests and created many new articles, especially on naval affairs. He lost interest in Wikipedia in the summer of 2009 after making over 14,000 edits.²⁷ The new article on the War of 1812 had a slow start. It took a year before it grew, when one editor added 200 words on the causes of the war. That was Simon Pulsifer, a Canadian who gained media publicity for adding thousands of new articles; he now has over 105,000 edits.²⁸ Pulsifer studies history at the University of Toronto. Among his best articles are those on the Military History of Canada; History of Central Asia; Italian Renaissance; 1993 Canadian Election; and Mercantilism. Pulsifer seems to have lost interest in Wikipedia in late 2011.

By spring 2004 the 1812 article had 4,000 words, and was gathering momentum as chart 3 shows. The most striking characteristic of the “War of 1812”

27. See http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:Contributions/The_Epopt&dir=prev&target=The+Epopt.

28. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Pulsifer.

Table 3: Most active editors on “War of 1812”^{}**

	# edits to articles	# edits to Talk	First edit to 1812	Last edit to 1812
Rjensen	337	190	2006 Jan	2012 Aug
Dabbler	185	50	2005 June	2012 June
Tirronan	139	308	2007 July	2012 Feb
Narson	123	102	2007 June	2009 Oct
HLGallon	115	16	2005 Sept	2012 Apr
Bkonrad	107	34	2004 Apr	2010 Nov
Driftwoodzebulin	106	133	2006 Nov	2008 May
Botteville	105	46	2010 Sept	2010 Sept
DWalrus	83	97	2009 Mar	2012 Apr
Sunray	81	90	2005 Feb	2011 Sept
Deathlibrarian	66	347	2006 May	2012 Jul

piece is its degree of collaboration. By mid-2012, 2,403 different people had made 9,796 edits since the article first appeared in 2001. A fourth of the edits were minor matters, such as correcting a typo; a third were made by anonymous people, typically students, who never took the trouble to obtain a Wikipedia account.

As is typical in Wikipedia, a small number of people did most of writing. Table 3 shows that the eleven most active editors have made 1,447 edits or 15 percent of the total. Their edits generally were much longer and more substantive in content than those made by other people. They became involved with the article at different times, chiefly in 2005-2007, with only two entering the fray after 2008. Simultaneously they were busy on the “talk” pages of the article, with a total of 1,185 comments on the article and its editing and content issues.

In striking contrast to academe, anonymity is prized at Wikipedia; few usernames or user pages reveal a person’s real name or email address (however, it is possible to send them email). Rjensen –the author of this article--has been the most active editor on “The War of 1812” with 337 edits and counting. I am a retired professor of American history, with an interest in political and military history as well as historiography. I taught military history but never wrote on the war of 1812, and usually skipped over it in my lectures. Working on Wikipedia was

^{**} See http://toolserver.org/~daniel/WikiSense/Contributors.php?wikilang=en&wikifam=.wikipedia.org&grouped=on&page=War_of_1812# accessed 28 August 2012.

most rewarding because it opened up a very large, new audience, and it required me to learn a great deal of history—historians learn best by lecturing on a topic and do even better by writing about it.

Dabbler is the second most active with 185 edits. His range of interests is demonstrated by his 10,300 edits on other articles since 2004. Those contributions reveal a distinctly British set of tastes with a keen interest in the naval history of the Napoleonic era, as well as English literature and his personal sport: *Isle of Man*, *War of 1812*, *Rudyard Kipling*, *Trampoline*, *Oscar Wilde*, *Battle of Trafalgar*, *Mount St. Helens*, and *Horatio Nelson*.²⁹ Dabbler has no professional training in history; his interest was inspired when as a boy he devoured the novels of C. S. Forester. An ancestor served on the North America station during the War of 1812. He writes, “I enjoy the whole process of being able to add something to the record, or refine the details where I have managed to garner some knowledge which has not yet been added. I find that article vandalism while annoying is not so frustrating as persistent POV [Point of view] pushing, especially when I have worked hard to find and provide references for what I have written.” He spends five to fifteen hours a week editing articles and says, “Providing original material will probably go down as my interests are covered, refining and repairing maybe [will] continue at the same level as now, at least as far as I can see.”³⁰

Tirronen, at number three, is a naval history and Napoleonic wars buff who began editing in 2005 and retired from Wikipedia in spring 2012 after making 4,100 edits. His top interests were *Battle of Borodino*, *Battle of Waterloo*, *War of 1812*, *French invasion of Russia*, *Battle of Jutland*, *Zumwalt-class destroyer*, *the Hundred Days*, *Battle of New Orleans*, *Battle of Leipzig*, *T-34 tanks*, and *Christianity and violence*.³¹

Narson, number 4 in edits, is a recent history graduate student in Britain with a “specialism in Fascist and extremist thought, especially in light of political religion ideas.” He explains on his Wikipedia talk page that he is “happy to converse on gender studies, military history and various others.”³² Narson began editing in 2005 and overall has 5,300 edits to his credit, chiefly in 2007–2008. Narson’s interests focus on naval history broadly conceived: *War of 1812*, *USS Liberty incident*, *East India Company*, *Falklands War*, *2007 Iranian seizure of Royal Navy personnel*, *Falkland Islands*, and *United States Marine Corps*. Like many highly active editors, his relationship with Wikipedia has its ups and downs, and is characterized by several gaps of a month or more with no edits. “I retired from Wikipedia ...due to disenchantment with the dispute Resolution process....It was more and more difficult to deal with the growing antipathy to expert contributors, including outright hostility from administrators to cover up their own errors.”³³ He was referring not to the article on 1812 but to a complex dispute on the *Gibraltar* article.³⁴

29. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Contributions/Dabbler>.

30. Dabbler to Jensen, 20 July 2012.

31. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:Contributions/Tirronan&target=Tirronan>.

32. <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User:Narson>.

33. NARSON email to Jensen, 9 July 2012.

34. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Arbitration/Requests/Case/Gibraltar/Workshop#Proposals_by_User:Narson and for his edits see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Contributions/Narson>.

The most remarkable evidence on the collaborative nature of Wikipedia editing comes on the talk page. Every article has one, where anyone can comment on or complain about the article. In its decade of history the 1812 talk page attracted 627 people, who made a total of 3,363 comments. They aggregate 208,000 words, and just 15 editors did half the commenting. The most active contributor was Deathlibrarian, an Australian who specializes in imperial military history. More than anyone, he worked to neutralize text that seemed too biased toward the American viewpoint.³⁵ While the style of the old military history would refight the battles day by day, we can focus instead on what did not happen, and what the main disputes were about.

What did not happen to the “War of 1812” article were serious violations of Wikipedia rules. Copyright violation is strictly forbidden, although the rules seem highly uncertain about fair use rights.³⁶ When the Wikimedia Foundation set up a program in India to incorporate editing in university classes, there was so much blatant cutting and pasting from textbooks that senior Wikipedia editors were outraged and the experiment was shut down by the Foundation in midstream.³⁷ Overall, edit wars are a major problem; like emails, instant editing seems conducive to flame wars. Wikipedia condemns the practice; editors who reverse each other four times in a row are punished. The “War of 1812” article has been relatively free of conflict; the debates have been vigorous but civil as the flames did not spread across the border.

A basic Wikipedia rule forbids “original research.” In sharp contrast to academe, ideas dreamed up by the editors are not welcome. Every statement has to be based on published reliable sources. Allegations that an editor had a new thought or synthesized a fresh idea from several different books are serious matters. While citations from primary sources are allowed, their use is strictly controlled.³⁸ “NPOV” (neutral point of view) is a Wikipedia rule that is often broken. The rules say editors are obliged to remain neutral regarding debates in the reliable sources; all serious viewpoints should be represented. Most editors are unfamiliar with the historiography and have only vague ideas of current debates among scholars. The NPOV rule is mostly used against partisan language.³⁹ Many articles are plagued by ownership issues. That is, a handful of established editors strongly resist any new additions.⁴⁰ They promptly revert (erase) additions made by new arrivals. Although ownership is not allowed by the rules, and collaboration behind the scenes is not allowed, the owners sometimes informally act in concert. Academics who experiment with their first edits are likely to encounter the problem when their edits get reverted for no clear reason. The “War of 1812” does not have this problem, but it is widespread elsewhere and is an instance of sclerotic editorial old age.⁴¹

The central theme of the 1812 talk page is who won the war. Canadian historian Desmond Morton finds it a tiresome subject, for “both sides tell their kiddies that

35. See for example the lively debate at http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:War_of_1812&diff=prev&oldid=378143633#The_US_Repulsed_an_Invasion.3F.

36. See “Wikipedia:Non-free content”.

37. “India Education Program/Analysis/Independent Report from Tory Read”.

38. “Wikipedia:No original research”.

39. For an example of POV language under debate, see “Talk:Embargo Act of 1807”.

40. “Wikipedia:Ownership of articles”.

41. For an example of owners resisting new edits, see Talk:History of Montana.

they won it. And both sides are probably telling some of the truth, which is unusual when you have official history.”⁴² The Canadians claim victory over the invaders; the Americans proclaimed their second independence. Canadian military historian C. P. Stacey remarked that the 1812 war it is “an episode in history that makes everybody happy, because everybody interprets it differently.” Americans think they humbled the world’s greatest naval power, Canadians think that they “turned back the massed might of the United States,” and “the English are happiest of all, because they don’t even know it happened.”⁴³ J. C. A. Stagg traces the ambiguity back to Henry Adams, who stressed that the participants lacked a clear understanding of why it started, and that its conduct reflected much human folly and led to unintended consequences. By writing with style and wit, says Stagg, Adams created a sense of confusion and incoherence about the “War of 1812” and its significance that remains with us to this day.⁴⁴ In a 2009 poll of Canadians, 37 percent said the war was a Canadian victory, nine percent said the U.S. won, and 15 percent called it a draw. Four Canadians in ten said they knew too little to comment. These were primarily younger people who had little exposure to the war in school, as military and political history has been phased out of the curriculum.⁴⁵ While the teachers may have added commentary, the older textbooks did not claim Canada won the war.⁴⁶ Ontario shows by far the most interest because after the war it became an iconic event in British Canadian memory as it cemented ties to the Empire and rejected the United States. Half of Ontarians believe Canada won. The war was never iconic in Quebec, where only eight percent say Canada won; the Francophones pay little attention.⁴⁷ Canadian textbooks give the war less and less attention every year, while giving the First Nations (Indian peoples) more and more attention. Even so the textbooks underplay the Indian role in the war. Tecumseh, for example, drew more attention in Canadian textbooks fifty years ago.⁴⁸ While Tecumseh is now largely ignored in Canada, he has become an American symbol of an admired leader.⁴⁹ In November 2011, *Maclean’s* magazine in Canada ran a cover illustration showing American and Canadian soldiers in 1812 garb glaring at each other, with the caption, “DAMN YANKEES: The New War of 1812.” The cover itself says, “It was a victory that made us a nation. Now the Americans are rewriting history to claim they won.”⁵⁰

42. Quoted in Randy Boswell, “Victory in War of 1812 remains debatable,” *Canwest News Service* December 10, 2009.

43. C. P. Stacey, “The War of 1812 in Canadian History,” in Morris Zaslow and Wesley Turner, eds., *The Defended Border: Upper Canada and the War of 1812* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1964), 331.

44. J. C. A. Stagg, *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5.

45. J. L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998).

46. George W. Brown, *Building the Canadian Nation* (Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1942), ch 8.

47. Boswell, “Victory in War of 1812 remains debatable.”

48. W. L. Morton, *The Kingdom of Canada: A General History from the Earliest Times* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 201.

49. R. David Edmunds, “Tecumseh, the Shawnee Prophet, and American History: A Reassessment,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1983): 261–76.

50. Peter Shawn Taylor, “Damn Yankees are trying to steal our victory in 1812,” *Maclean’s*, 11 October 2011. No Indians are mentioned in the article.

The editors engaged in vigorous debate over the victory question and finally appealed to Wikipedia's mediation process. Under the guidance of Wikipedia's "Mediation Cabal" in 2009, 13 different drafts of the article were debated over a two-month period, with over 300 comments by 15 editors from the US, Britain, Canada, and Australia. The drafts and discussions total 32,000 words (on top of the 208,000 in the talk page).⁵¹ The result was a compromise that tried to disentangle the victory issue by dividing the "reliable sources" (major secondary works) into three schools. Four dozen footnotes were included to guide the readership.

The agreed-upon text appears in the section on "Memory and historiography."⁵² The context is set in terms of today's memory of the war:

During the 19th century the popular image of the war in the US was of an American victory, and in Canada, of a Canadian victory. Each young country saw her self-perceived victory as an important foundation of her growing nationhood. The British...paid little attention.... By the 21st century it was a forgotten war in the U.S., Britain and Quebec, although still remembered in the rest of Canada, especially Ontario."

The article reports that all historians agreed that: "Ending the war with neither side gaining or losing territory allowed for the peaceful settlement of boundary disputes and for the opening of a permanent era of good will and friendly relations between the U.S. and Canada."

And that: "The native Indians were the war's clear losers, losing land, power and any hope of keeping their semi-autonomous status."

The article then reports on interpretations held by a majority of historians:

The war ended in stalemate...militarily inconclusive. Neither side wanted to continue fighting since the main causes had disappeared and since there were no large lost territories for one side or the other to reclaim. With two centuries of peaceful and mutually-beneficial intercourse between the U.S., Britain and Canada, these historians often conclude that all three nations were the 'real winners.'

Finally it reports two minority viewpoints: "British victory and an American defeat. ...British achieved their military objectives in 1812 (by stopping the repeated American invasions of Canada) and that Canada retained her independence of the United States."

And,

The British won by losing no territories and achieving their great war goal, the total defeat of Napoleon.

The U.S. won by

(1) securing her honour and successfully resisting a powerful empire once again, thus winning a "second war of independence"

51. See transcripts from 11 November 2009 to 10 January 2010.

52. See "7 Memory and historiography" at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_of_1812#Memory_and_historiography.

- (2) ending the threat of Indian raids and the British plan for a semi-independent Indian sanctuary—thereby opening an unimpeded path for the United States' westward expansion
- (3) stopping the Royal Navy from restricting American trade and impressing American sailors.

The compromise solution effectively ended the threat of edit wars and established an era of peace, although individual raids on the article remained a possibility. The current version of the article has been slightly revised since the compromise was reached in November 2009.



Source of photo: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Couplandart.jpg>

Continuing the theme of memory, section 8 of the article includes a photograph of Douglas Coupland's "Monument to the War of 1812," which opened in downtown Toronto in 2008. The article provides no interpretation—that would be forbidden "original research." At first glance the giant statue of a victorious Canadian soldier standing over a prone American soldier confirms the Ontarian folk image of their men downing the American foe. Yet a closer look shows that the artist had quite a different meaning. The two figures are toy soldiers of the sort children play with and knock over when they cry out, "I win!" That is, the real soldiers were pawns or victims of behind-the-scenes powerful men who were killing senselessly as if they were playing with tin dolls. It is actually a postmodern political monument that portrays soldiers not as heroes but as pawns, and likewise it ridicules victory as a trivial pursuit. In sharp contrast to academe, there is little anti-war sentiment in

Wikipedia articles, few articles are devoted to the peace movement⁵³ and the small Anti-war Project has been inactive since 2010.⁵⁴

The “War of 1812” is a small war and a small part of what Wikipedia has done for military history. There are 2,000 workgroups that have been organized for Wikipedia editors interested in various broad fields.⁵⁵ The Military History Project is one of the largest and most energetic of these. It enrolls over 700 editors and is coordinated by Dank and a dozen volunteers who ride herd on 51,000 different articles.⁵⁶ They are well along on their goal of upgrading 750 articles to “featured article” status, an internal Wikipedia honor that emphasizes very close attention to the rules and to consistency, and raising 2,000 more articles to “good” status. Membership is open to all and includes a useful monthly newsletter.

After reading numerous military history articles, I conclude that they compare favorably with articles in specialized history encyclopedias. Wikipedia typically has more detail, more citations, and more links. It is also easier to use. Issues of bias are minor. The recent trend is to add more and more lists, more and more petty detail. Historiographical issues are poorly handled in both Wikipedia and the traditional encyclopedias. The longest Wikipedia articles generally top out at 15,000 words, and if more space is needed there can be spinoff articles.

Wikipedia articles are choppy because they are the work of multiple contributors with no overall supervision. Originality is forbidden, but it slips in from time to time. The military articles focus on battles and technology, with less interest in strategy, diplomacy, or national politics, and very little on homefront issues involving civilians. Social history content is rare, and cultural history even rarer, but every little battle gets its own article and many thousands of generals and admirals are covered. Race issues seldom are mentioned, but Indian wars are very well covered with a distinctly pro-Indian viewpoint. There are few maps; Wikipedia cannot use copyright material unless the original artist practically gives the product away free to everyone.⁵⁷ Wikipedia is so heavily committed to “free” content that editors are sharply restricted in what they can use. Furthermore the Wikipedia Foundation will not fund any editing projects nor any professionally drawn maps.

Wikipedia’s tone is old fashioned and amateurish. The active editors seem comfortable with the sort of books one finds at Barnes and Noble, which means recent popular titles are favored, and older monographs are overlooked. However, editors can quickly ransack recent books using the search engines in books.google.com and amazon.com in order to include snippets from recent books; we can call that drive-by scholarship. There is a strong bias in favor of free online materials, especially newspaper or magazine stories, even about historical topics. “America History and Life” cites 1,400 articles on the War of 1812; very few are cited in Wikipedia. In all of Wikipedia about 290 articles cite *The Journal of Military*

53. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_peace_activists.

54. It had seventy-two members. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Anti-war and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Anti-war/Members.

55. See “Wikipedia:WikiProject” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Military_history/Popular_pages.

56. See Wikipedia:WikiProject Military history at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Military_history

57. See “Wikipedia:Non-free content” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Fair_use.

History.⁵⁸ Very few editors know or have access to scholarly journals. The most active editors deplore their lack of access to JSTOR (Journal Storage) because they see how necessary journals are for upgrading the quality of articles. A major change was underway in 2012, as JSTOR, Questia, HighBeam and other online textbases donated hundreds of annual subscriptions to Wikipedia editors. The dry, encyclopedic style favored by most editors means quotations or anecdotes from first person accounts are rare. Factual errors are infrequent; vandalism is quickly repaired in the major articles, which are closely watched by the editors. For example, 653 editors are alerted on their "watchlist"⁵⁹ to every change on the "War of 1812,"⁶⁰ while 2,629 editors keep watch on "World War II."

Wikipedia is now a mature reference work with a stable organizational structure and a well-established reputation. The problem is that it is not mature in a scholarly sense. The amateurs are enthusiastic for details but cannot see the forest that has been mapped out in the historiography. The problem is less severe in military history because academia does not favor the field and much of the text writing is done by self-trained scholars. My recommendation for improving military history on Wikipedia is to set up a program to help the most active military editors gain better access to published scholarship, gain an appreciation of the historiography, and start attending military history conferences. One method would be to set up short training programs for them at a research library on the model of the masters-degree historiography course.

Some history specialties, such as military and sports history,⁶¹ are supported by large numbers of knowledgeable amateurs who eagerly contribute to Wikipedia. There is a much thinner base of amateur support for political, diplomatic, social, legal, women's and cultural history. Articles on these topics have spotty coverage and more superficial content, of the sort scholars have criticized.⁶² Many professors ban or discourage use of Wikipedia.⁶³ What has been proposed above would represent an opportunity for undergraduate majors and graduate students to learn history by writing history, while getting the satisfaction of being in print in a source that tens of millions of students and the general public read every day.⁶⁴

58. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:Search&limit=500&offset=0&edirs=1&ns0=1&ns1=1&ns9=1&ns12=1&search=%22journal+of+Military+History%22>.

59. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Watchlist>.

60. For any article, go to "Page history" and "Number of watchers." For example, http://tools.wmflabs.org/~mzmcbride/watcher/?db=enwiki_p&titles=War_of_1812.

61. Meghan M. Ferriter, "Arguably the Greatest: Sport Fans and Communities at Work on Wikipedia," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 26, no. 1 (March 2009): 127-54.

62. Roy Rosenzweig, "Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past," *Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (June 2006): 117-46; Brendan Luyt and Daniel Tan, "Improving Wikipedia's credibility: References and citations in a sample of history articles," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 61, no. 4 (April 2010): 715-22.

63. Brock Read, "Middlebury College History Department Limits Student Use of Wikipedia," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53, no. 24 (16 February 2007); Neal L. Waters, "Why You Can't Cite Wikipedia in My Class," *Communications of the ACM* 50, no. 9 (1 September 2007): 15-17.

64. Cullen J. Chandler and Alison S. Gregory, "Sleeping with the Enemy: Wikipedia in the College Classroom," *History Teacher* 43, no. 2 (February 2010): 247-57.