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## A Call to Duty: ASA and the Wikipedia Initiative

*Erik Olin Wright, American Sociological Association President*

This autumn the ASA is launching a Sociology in Wikipedia Initiative. This project has two main purposes: first, to improve the sociology entries in Wikipedia by making it easier for sociologists to become involved in writing and editing them, and second, to facilitate professors giving Wikipedia-writing assignments to students in their courses. Before I explain in more detail how the ASA initiative will advance these goals, let me say a little about Wikipedia.



**WIKIPEDIA**  
 The Free Encyclopedia

Wikipedia has become, in the decade since it first began, the

world's largest and most used general reference encyclopedia. Currently there are more than 3.7 million articles in English, more than 1 million in German and French, and more than 100,000 articles in each of 35 other languages. It is the sixth most visited website in the world and the only one in the top 10 that is nonprofit. While a few years ago many—perhaps most—academics were disdainful of Wikipedia and actively discouraged their students from consulting it, today many academics themselves consult the site for useful information (I certainly do, frequently).

And whether professors like it or not, Wikipedia is now regularly used by students as a source for term papers and other writing projects.

Before it was created, no one would have thought that the Wikipedia of 2011 would have been possible. Suppose in 2000 someone proposed the following: Let's create the most wide-ranging and widely used encyclopedia ever produced by getting several hundred thousand volunteer editors—let's call them "wikipedians"—to cooperate in writing and editing articles. We won't pay any of them; they will contribute their intellectual labor for free. And, all articles will be free to anyone in the world who has

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## Sociological Spring: Human Rights and the Discipline

*Bruce Friesen, University of Tampa*

Grassroots movements in many Arab countries are challenging the status quo, fueled in part by a collective embrace of the notion of rights that far surpasses the limited civil and political rights enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. Respect for human rights—as specified more than 60 years ago in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*—is fundamentally altering global human affairs. Human rights principles have had more of a sleeper effect in the United States, but the impact is no less pronounced. Minorities who served in the armed forces in WWII to defend the rights of those persecuted by the Nazis came home emboldened to secure for themselves the same rights at home. In short order, rights-based movements for racial and ethnic minorities, women, the LGBT community, people with disabilities, children, and others gained momentum.

Sociologists are awakening to both the analytical and activist possibilities embedded in a human rights framework. The last 10 years have seen a rapidly-growing sociological literature on the topic. New organizations and sections have been formed, including Sociologists Without Borders (*Sociólogos sin Fronteras*), the Human Rights Section of the ASA, and the ISA's Thematic Group on Human Rights and Global Justice. Representatives from the first two groups serve on the American Association for the Advancement of Science' Human Rights Coalition. New journals have been launched, such as *Societies Without Borders* and *Human Rights and Human Welfare*. Even *Secularism and Non Religion*, the world's first journal on secularism (first edition January 2012), edited by sociologist Ryan Cragun, seeks to examine ways in which social solidarity might be constructed outside of religious paradigms.

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## ICPSR Celebrates its Upcoming 50th Anniversary

*Dan Meisler, ICPSR Editor*

This piece is based on a personal history of ICPSR written by Erik Austin, former ICPSR Assistant Director who retired in 2006 after 41 years at the Consortium; interviews with Austin, former Director Myron Gutmann, former Summer Program Director Hank Heitowit, current Summer Program Director William Jacoby, and longtime ICPSR staffers Peter Granda and Mary Vardigan; and various historical documents.

All of this material and more can be viewed at [www.icpsr.umich.edu/fifty](http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/fifty). The Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) celebrates its 50th anniversary next year, but its origins go back even further than its founding in 1962. The idea for what is now the largest social science data archive in the world dates to the mid-1950s, when researchers at the University of Michigan held a series

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## Council Highlights

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- Supported outreach to invite managing editors of all sociology journals to the meeting of ASA managing editors hosted by ASA.
- Declined a proposal for a survey about manuscript review times.
- Approved an *Ad Hoc* Committee of Council chaired by Monica Prasad to work in consultation with the Publications Committee to look into manuscript review turnaround times for sociology journals.

### Constitutional Committees

- Accepted the recommendations of candidates of the Committee on Nominations, Committee on Committees, ASA Secretary, and ASA Executive Officer for 2012 elected and appointed Association positions. Invitations to members are now in progress.
- Requested that the Committee on Committees be provided with a list of Emeritus members for consideration when developing recommendations for 2013.
- Concurred with the Committee on Award's consensus to take no action on changing the name of the dissertation award.
- Recommended that award certificates be smaller sized, given the

limited wall space in many faculty offices

- Approved President-Elect Cecilia Ridgeway's selection of the following members for the 2013 Program Committee: Roberto Fernandez, David Harris, Ross Matsueda, Jane McLeod, Devah Pager, Barbara Risman, Sandra S. Smith, Robin Stryker, Kjersten Whittington; and ex-officio members Jennifer Glass (ASA Vice President-Elect), Catherine White Berheide (Secretary), and Sally T. Hillsman (Executive Officer).

### Status Committees

- Confirmed a five-year continuation of the Committee on the Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in Sociology (CSREMS) and deferred discussion of the CSREMS recommendations to the February 2012 Council meeting.
- Accepted in principle the recommendations from the Committee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities in Sociology, except for items 7 and 10 which were deferred to the next Council meeting pending specific information on cost implications.
- Approved the Committee on the Status of Women in Sociology's recommendation to include a statement about unethical conduct

in the Annual Meeting program, with the final wording of the statement to be provided by the Executive Officer at Council's February 2012 meeting based on input from the Committee on Professional Ethics.

### Minority Fellowship Program Advisory Panel:

- Confirmed support for the programmatic directions of having competitively selected Stipendiary and Non-Stipendiary Minority Fellows and developing an early Career Program for MFP Fellows who complete the PhD.
- Approved the proposed seven-year budget, to be reviewed and approved annually by Council.
- Encouraged the MFP Advisory Panel and the Executive Office to seek additional long-term support from appropriate not-for-profit, for-profit, and federal organizations.

### Sections:

- Approved the proposed bylaws for the Section on Altruism, Morality, and Social Solidarity; the Section on Inequality, Poverty, and Mobility; and the Section on Sociology of Development.
- Approved the proposal for a new section-in-formation on Consumers and Consumption.

- Approved the bylaws amendments proposed by the Section on Sociology of the Family.


**Wikipedia Project.** Affirmed efforts to place a Wikipedia portal on ASA website, which will have two primary objectives: (1) to make it easy for sociologists to upgrade sociology entries in Wikipedia, and add missing areas/topics; and (2) to offer an effectively designed way for professors to learn how to give Wikipedia assignments as coursework.

**Development.** Supported a two-year member-giving effort focused on the ASA three small grants programs (FAD, Howery, CARI) beginning January 2012, as recommended by the Council Member Giving Subcommittee.

### Business Meeting Resolutions

- Declined to adopt a Human Rights of Children resolution (presented at the 2010 Business Meeting).
- Approved immediate formation of an ad hoc committee to help develop responses to the proposed directions for change to the HHS Common Rule by the September 26, 2011, deadline (subsequently extended by HHS to October 26, 2011).

### Next Council Meeting.

Dates of the next Council meeting are February 10-12, 2012, in Washington, DC. 

## Wikipedia

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access to the Internet, and no advertisements would appear on the site to generate revenues. Before it existed this would have been considered a fantasy.

And yet, today, wikipedians can edit any existing article—adding things, correcting passages, deleting parts of articles or even entire articles. Anyone can be an editor. To improve the quality of articles over time, the most active editors have formed several thousand specialized interest groups on all sorts of different subjects to monitor articles and engage in vigorous discussions of both the style and content of entries. To deal with occasional difficult conflicts, wikipedians elect experienced editors as “administrators” to help arbitrate unresolved disputes.

### A Real Utopia

I like to think of Wikipedia as an example of a “real utopia.” It embodies ideals of equality, open access, participation, and deliberation in a domination-free environment. It has created a public good available to all. It encourages a demystification of credentialism as a source of authority. It softens the boundary between producers and consumers of information, making everyone who uses Wikipedia a potential contributor as well. It is part of a broader movement that challenges exclusionary forms of intellectual property and treats knowledge as a vital commons. It celebrates contributions rooted in motivations of intellectual curiosity and the pleasures of collaborating with a far-flung network of interested people.

But, a skeptic will ask, what about quality and reliability? It may be inspiring and surprising that

Wikipedia is produced in such an egalitarian, open way, but in the end what good is an encyclopedia if you cannot trust the information? Anyone who has used Wikipedia extensively has come upon articles that are, at best, uneven, and sometimes contain serious errors. The old *Encyclopedia Britannica*, at least, was a pretty reliable source of information. Surely if anyone can edit anything and there are no experts in charge of reviewing and rejecting articles, reliability will be a problem.

These are legitimate concerns. There are a number of things I would say in response. First, the limited empirical research on the quality of Wikipedia articles that has been done suggests that fully developed articles in Wikipedia are generally pretty reliable. A study by Jim Giles in the journal *Nature* in December 2005, for example,

reported that in a selection of science topics the error rates in Wikipedia and *the Encyclopedia Britannica* were fairly similar. Second, the problems with well-developed articles are much more commonly sins of omission than sins of commission—gaps in coverage rather than descriptive inaccuracies. This can, of course, be a serious limitation in any given article, but it does mean that the actual information in well-developed articles is generally quite accurate.

Third, the norms of Wikipedia editing push articles to have citations to reliable sources for all factual statements, and this means that that it is, in general, fairly easy to check on factual claims. This norm is in practice broadly enforced through a process of intensive peer review by the community of wikipedians. At least for any topic that

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## Wikipedia

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falls under the watch of the more than 3,000 wiki-project groups, as soon as an existing article is modified or a new article written, many Wikipedia editors are likely to scrutinize the new contribution for conformity to Wikipedia norms of documentation and to evaluate it substantively on the basis of the editors' own expertise. Networks of collaborators and participants of wiki-groups often provide almost instantaneous peer review.

Fourth, in recent years a system of grading articles for quality has developed within the Wikipedia community. The two highest levels of quality are referred to as "good articles" and "featured article." Before achieving the status of featured article, many Wikipedia editors have to review a candidate article and agree that it has achieved a high standard on a number of core criteria, including accuracy, neutrality, completeness, readability. Of the 3.7 million English language Wikipedia articles in the fall of 2011, only 3,391 had achieved the highest quality status.

The final, and ultimately most important response to skepticism about quality is this—if you discover that an article contains factual inaccuracies or significant gaps in what is covered, then the thing to do is correct the error. Enter the fray. Contribute to the public good. The reason *you* know there is a problem is because you know things about that particular subject that the editors who have worked on the article either do not know or do not deem worthy of inclusion. When this happens, if you correct the errors and fill the gaps, then you have helped make Wikipedia a better resource for everyone. Of course, the existing editors of the article in question might object to the changes you make. They might even delete your improvements, and explain on the discussion page for the article why they did so. Since you are on an equal footing with them, you can restore the edits and reply to their objections. Other wikipedians may enter the discussion, especially if the issues in play are controversial. Eventually, the

discussion ends and even if perfect consensus is not reached, the text of the article stabilizes. In general, through this process, articles improve over time.

### An ASA Sociology Wikipedia Initiative

Wikipedia has become an important global public good. Since it is a reference source for sociologically relevant ideas and knowledge that is widely used by both the general public and students, it is important that the quality of sociology entries be as high as possible. This will only happen if sociologists themselves contribute to this public good. The basic goal of the new ASA Sociology in Wikipedia Initiative is to make it easier for sociologists to do this. (See the ASA homepage for more information at [www.asanet.org](http://www.asanet.org).)

The heart of the initiative is the creation of a Wikipedia portal connected to the ASA website. This portal was designed in close collaboration with a research group at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) headed by Robert Kraut, Herbert A. Simon Professor of Human-Computer Interaction. With funding from the National Science Foundation, the CMU group developed a similar site for the Association of Psychological Sciences. The ASA project is also working with the Wikimedia Foundation—the nonprofit Foundation which manages the infrastructure for Wikipedia. The Wikimedia Foundation has, in recent years, become very interested in increasing the involvement of academics and university students in contributing to Wikipedia and so, in 2010, began a higher education project. The ASA initiative incorporates a range of utilities developed for this Wikimedia Foundation project.

The ASA Wikipedia Portal will do two main things. First, it will make it easy for sociologists to become involved in writing and editing sociology articles. The site will contain step-by-step tutorials on how to contribute to Wikipedia, as well as video discussions of Wikipedia norms and procedures. It will also contain a way to see lists of sociology-relevant articles that need improving or are missing from Wikipedia, and to add to these lists.

Second, the ASA Wikipedia Portal will provide instructions and materials for how to use Wikipedia writing as an assignment in academic courses. In the 2010-11 academic year the Wikimedia Foundation did an experiment in which professors in a number of universities were recruited to give writing assignments on public policy topics in their classes. In the summer of 2011, the Foundation held a higher education summit to discuss the results of these experiments. I attended this event and was enormously impressed by the potential of Wikipedia writing as a component of university curricula for both advanced undergraduate courses and graduate courses.

### Wikipedia in the Classroom

For undergraduates, the Wikipedia assignments make it possible for students to experience work in an academic course as contributing to some wider public purpose, rather than just fulfilling a homework requirement. Writing for Wikipedia helps demystify the pseudo-authority of material on the Internet while demonstrating the possibility of consumers of knowledge and information becoming producers as well. Perhaps most distinctively, writing for Wikipedia gives undergraduates the opportunity experience the excitement of being involved in discussions with Wikipedians around the world who will engage them on the substance of their contributions once they leave their Wikipedia "sandbox" and "go live." (The *sandbox* is where Wikipedia writing takes place before it is part of the searchable database of Wikipedia. *Going live* is putting the contribution into Wikipedia.)

For graduate students Wikipedia writing assignments affirm the importance of making the knowledge they acquire available and accessible to a wide public audience, not just other experts. In a graduate seminar I am teaching this fall on "Theories of the State," in addition to a regular seminar term paper, I have included a Wikipedia writing assignment for this reason. Sociology term papers themselves would generally not constitute appropriate Wikipedia articles since term papers gener-

ally violate the Wikipedia norm of presenting a "neutral point of view." Nevertheless, in the normal course of doing research for a term paper, students acquire descriptive information that is relevant to a Wikipedia article on a similar topic. Wikipedia writing, therefore, can be a constructive spin-off from ordinary academic work.

Of course, most professors do not have an understanding about how to write for Wikipedia, let alone how to organize writing assignments on Wikipedia for students. The Wikimedia Foundation was very aware of these barriers to adopting this kind of course assignment, and thus they created what they call "campus Wikipedia ambassadors" as a way of relieving professors of the burden of learning how to teach Wikipedia writing. Campus ambassadors are experienced wikipedians on campuses who get training from the Wikimedia Foundation on how to teach the procedures of Wikipedia writing and editing. When a professor decides to do a Wikipedia writing assignment, campus ambassadors are available to help the students in the class, both by giving presentations in class about Wikipedia writing and by being available for one-on-one assistance. In addition, there are on-line ambassadors available to provide help when the campus ambassadors are unavailable. The Wikimedia Foundation, in conjunction with the Carnegie Mellon group, have also developed online tools that make it easy for professors to track the work that students are doing on their writing projects. The ASA Wikipedia portal will contain information on all of these devices for assisting the use of Wikipedia writing assignments, and at the ASA Annual meeting in Denver in August 2012, the Wikimedia Foundation will run a professional workshop on using Wikipedia writing in the classroom.

The ASA Wikipedia Initiative is an experiment. I do not expect masses of professional sociologists to become avid Wikipedians. But perhaps there will be a steady flow of sociologists who integrate Wikipedia writing into their academic lives, both as scholars and teachers. 