



History Writing and Wikipedia

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Abstract

How do Wikipedia articles about the same topic compare across languages? Previous Wikipedia articles in writing studies have examined revision practices (Jones, 2008), ethos building (Brown, 2009), and the potential and shortcomings (Purdy, 2009; Gruwell, 2015) in Wikipedia. This project analyzes three rhetorical aspects (the introduction/lead section, the organization of the article by way of Table of Contents, and source usage and citation) of the article “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki” as it has been composed in 6 different languages: English, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese. Important findings are that the introductions and table of contents had important similarities but several notable differences, and the citation practices were very irregular and for the most part dominated by English language sources across the 6 different language versions. Finally, a case is made for the pedagogical importance of cross-language comparisons of Wikipedia.

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1. History Has Always Been Contentious

“This is the showing forth of the inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, so that neither what has come to be from man in time might become faded, nor that great and wondrous deeds, those shown forth by Greeks and those by barbarians, might be without their glory; and together with all this, also through what cause they warred with each other.”—Herodotus, *The Histories*

Although many readers would readily accept the contentiousness and complexity of history writing, briefly touching on some ancient historical writing commentary as well as contemporary issues can help readers historicize this topic. While Herodotus, recognized by many as the West’s first historian, sought to preserve in writing the deeds of the Greeks in the 5th century BCE, his histories were anything but uncontroversial. Cicero remarked in *De Legibus* that, “In the works of Herodotus, the Father of History, . . .one finds innumerable, fabulous¹ tales.” Plutarch, writing in his *On the Malice of Herodotus* nearly 200 years later, similarly remarked that “It would take many volumes to work through all [Herodotus’s] fictions and fabrications.

History writing itself was long ago defined, debated, and remarked on by nearly all of the Greek and Roman thinkers. Herodotus and Thucydides, two of the earliest Western historians, approached history differently. Herodotus “was concerned with remote antiquity and all aspects of human culture,” whereas Thucydides was more interested in

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¹ “Fabulous” here is to be taken to mean “like fables.”

“recent political and military affairs” (Kelley, p. 18). The debate about history writing was not just focused on what was appropriate content, but also focused on the style and rhetoric of history writing, as seen in the Greco-Roman rhetorician Lucian’s *How to Write History* and Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s (who was a teacher of oratory in Rome) *Roman Antiquities*. In Lucian’s *How to Write History*, he focused heavily on writing style, sources, organization, diction, and maintaining neutrality. Cicero, in his *Laws* and *De Oratore*, and Quintilian, in his *Institutes of Oratory*, connected rhetoric to history writing by discussing the importance of “truth, elegance, persuasiveness, and a concern for public benefit” (Kelley, p. 76). While a fuller review of the origins of history writing and the connection between history writing and rhetoric is beyond the scope of this article, one can see that this conversation goes back to the origins of the genre itself.

While much has changed regarding how historians do their research and how they write, history remains contentious, political, and combative. This contentiousness is represented in recent textbook controversies, both abroad and in the United States. [The History Project](http://www.thehistory-project.org) (www.thehistory-project.org) was created several years ago when students and teachers in both Pakistan and India noticed that textbooks in those countries often had very different characterizations of pivotal moments in those countries’ shared history ([The History Project](http://www.thehistory-project.org)). In the United States, Texas’s Board of Education approved new textbooks that many thought downplayed slavery and segregation (such as referring to slaves as “workers”—which the textbook publisher has since apologized for), and unfairly emphasized or deemphasized other parts of American history (Cannon, 2014; Hinckley, 2015; Rockmore, 2015).

Textbook controversies also abound in Japan regarding its role and actions in World War II (Efron, 1997; Fackler, 2015; Oi, 2013). China, South Korea, and other countries protest that Japan excuses its military action during World War II, and what magnifies this problem is that Japan’s government is directly involved in approving textbooks (Se-joo, 2014). Recently, the Japanese government went as far as to request that McGraw-Hill change a textbook commonly used in American colleges because of how it described its use of “comfort women” and its military actions during the war (Fifield, 2015). Museums can also be sites for controversy. In 2007, the Canadian War Museum had to rewrite its description of the Allied Bombing Campaign of Germany due to complaints from Canadian veterans of that campaign that it undermined, and was critical of, their contribution to the war.

The articles written on Wikipedia, like history writing itself, are also not without controversy. In fact, there’s a well developed Wikipedia page, “Criticism of Wikipedia,” that lists numerous issues with Wikipedia. The table of contents lists “Accuracy of information,” “Quality of the presentation,” and “Systemic bias in coverage” as specific areas of concern. This doesn’t mean that there are widespread problems in Wikipedia. A study by Jona Kräenbring (2014) of pharmacy textbooks with respective Wikipedia pharmacy articles showed that the accuracy of the pharmacy textbooks compared to the content of pharmacy articles was nearly 100%, and the completeness of the pharmaceutical information was also very high. However, a study by Robert T. Hasty et al. (2014), showed that 9 out of 10 medical articles on common medical issues showed “significant discord” (p. 368). Other criticisms of Wikipedia focus in on the community structure. For instance, it’s been largely argued that Wikipedia editors are heavily white and male. Specifically, studies have shown that in 2008 only 13% of Wikipedia editors were women. A follow up to that study found that in 2011 the situation had gotten worse, finding only 9% of world-wide editors were women. This is despite the fact that women visit Wikipedia at the same rate as men (Torres, 2016).

While Wikipedia has been live since 2001, James P. Purdy (2009) noted in his CCC article “When the Tenets of Composition Go Public” that Wikipedia scholarship in our field was lacking. In the 7 years since, scholars in our field have paid more attention to Wikipedia. These articles have analyzed revision practices in Wikipedia articles (Jones, 2008), examined writerly ethos in Wikipedia (Brown, 2009), explored collaboration and citation issues in Wikipedia (Purdy, 2009), and investigated how the structure and discourse of Wikipedia limits women’s participation on the site (Gruwell, 2015). Readers are undoubtedly familiar with other projects (e.g., Cummings, 2009; Purdy, 2010a, 2010b; Reilly, 2011). Two salients of research have focused on writing practices (exemplified below by a further summary of the Jones (2008) and Purdy (2009) articles) and qualitative research on the contributors to the articles (exemplified below by a further summary of the Brown (2009) and Gruwell (2015) articles).

Jones (2008), writing in *Written Communication*, examined the revision practices in several Wikipedia articles and argued the way Wikipedia is edited differs from prior composition orthodoxy. Specifically, Jones (2008) compared prior research on revision in writing studies with what he saw in 10 nominated articles for best featured article, 5 of which did become featured articles. Jones asked, “Does quality writing in Wikipedia privilege macrostructure over microstructure revisions? Do Wikipedia’s editors make revisions that do not fit in these traditional categories? And

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