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## **Sociology association encourages members to help improve Wikipedia** <sup>[1]</sup>

Submitted by [Steve Kolowich](#) <sup>[2]</sup> on November 18, 2011 - 3:00am

Erik Olin Wright didn't have time to visit to the library before submitting his paper. But he sensed the author of the book he had been assigned to critique might be going too far when she suggested that George W. Bush administration's response to the needs of black citizens after Hurricane Katrina was less "swift and efficient" than Herbert Hoover's following the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927.

So he consulted Wikipedia. A passage in the [entry](#) <sup>[3]</sup> for the 1927 flood confirmed his suspicions: the conditions at the refugee camps set up by Hoover, then secretary of commerce and head of the relief effort, were so atrocious that Hoover eventually fell out of favor with black voters, according to the entry.

Wright pulled out the passage, and pasted into his paper — duly qualified and cited, of course. A footnote contains a link to the page, and the date of access.

Properly attributed or not, that move might have meant demerits for any student with the audacity to try it. But Erik Olin Wright is not a student, and few would dare call him an intellectual slouch. A professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Wright has authored 11 books and penned dozens of articles, many of which have been published in scholarly journals. In June, Wright's colleagues elected him president of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

The paper was for a symposium at the association's 2010 annual conference and not for publication, Wright explains. He emphasizes that citing Wikipedia directly is "a practice I wouldn't particularly endorse to my students." But the Wisconsin sociologist, much of whose academic work focuses on egalitarianism in theory and practice, has thrown his new weight as ASA president behind the free, crowd-sourced encyclopedia.

In [an essay](#) <sup>[4]</sup> on the association's online newsletter (scheduled to be included in the next edition of its print newsletter), Wright this week announced the Sociology in Wikipedia Initiative: a formal call to sociologists to help improve and expand Wikipedia entries that might benefit from their expertise and consider assigning their students to do the same.

"Wikipedia has become an important global public good," Wright writes in the essay. "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.”

Not only might Wikipedia benefit from contributions by students steeped in academic research methods, but the exercise might help students learn how to read the crowd-sourced encyclopedia in the proper context, said Wright.

“What better way to get students to understand that it's actual people like them who have written this stuff, than for them to write this stuff?” he said.

Score another for the Wikimedia Foundation, which for the last year and a half has been trying to mobilize academic volunteers <sup>[5]</sup> to bolster the ranks of its contributors. It started with the foundation's public policy initiative, for which it recruited professors and “student ambassadors” to facilitate the integration of Wikipedia authoring and editing into courses on U.S. public policy. Next came the Association of Psychological Scientists (APS), which unveiled its own Wikipedia initiative — to ensure standards of currency, sourcing, and neutrality in psychology-oriented entries — in May 2011. A month later, the Wikimedia Foundation held its first higher education "summit," <sup>[6]</sup> inviting professors and citizen-editors (“Wikipedians,” in the parlance) from various fields.

Professors and students have experimented with Wikipedia for years. But the imprimaturs of the APS and now the ASA represent key endorsements that would have been unthinkable in past years, when Wikipedia was considered by many professional academics to be a pariah.

“What's happened is that many of the scholars I know can't [say] that with a straight face anymore, because they use Wikipedia themselves,” says Wright.

Apart from that citation in his 2010 symposium paper, the ASA president says he often uses Wikipedia when researching books and articles, not as a source but as a “springboard” to orient himself to an unfamiliar topic and find other, more credible sources. (For example, if Wright had a little more time to prepare his counterpoint at the 2010 symposium, he might have followed the hyperlink on the footnote to the passage he extracted from the Mississippi flood entry to its original source: a book by the historian John M. Barry.)

James Grossman, president of the American Historical Association, says he also uses Wikipedia on occasion, if never as a final source. On hearing of ASA's initiative and reading Wright's rationale, Grossman told *Inside Higher Ed* that he intends to discuss with his board whether the historical association ought to pursue a similar strategy.

Because of how interpretations of certain historical events are often wielded as justifications for contemporary political agendas, it may be particularly important for historians to act as stewards of a reference as popular as Wikipedia, which is the sixth most visited website in the world.

Asked to reflect on the evolution of Wikipedia in the minds of academics, Grossman naturally reached for a historical analogy.

“Wikipedia in some ways became the Red China of the 1950s: not recognizing it, but having to know that it's very much there,” he said. “And I think we've moved beyond that, just like we've moved beyond that with China policy. It's a major force in American public intellectual life.”

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