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Readership of Wikipedia

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Reviewed v 1

Abstract

Various sources describe Wikipedia's popularity in different ways, including by count of its users, frequency of use, and its utility as an information resource in many fields of knowledge. The Wikimedia Foundation has claimed that Wikipedia has reached billions of readers; commercial web traffic services have ranked Wikipedia as a top-10 website by popularity; and researchers analyzing demographic surveys and user behavior metrics have described Wikipedia readers in enough detail to identify general trends. Researchers note that Wikipedia traffic data is public for examination, and also that the Wikipedia volunteer editorial community invites transparency by developing ethical guidelines to encourage analysis of Wikipedia's impact. Although Wikipedia is popular and its audience metrics are accessible, Wikipedia is unlike comparable media platforms and services in that it is rarely the target of professional, expert, or sponsored content development. We review the literature describing Wikipedia, and offer commentary on the dual nature of Wikipedia as simultaneously a popular communication channel and a media outlet with little documented recognition for its success in reaching audiences.

Keywords

Wikipedia, audience, web traffic, pageview, end user, target audience

Background

Our reasons for producing this article include bringing attention to Wikipedia's media audience engagement metrics, describing Wikipedia's popularity in a scholarly format which can advance practical discussions of Wikipedia's readership, and pondering the paradox of why Wikipedia is attractive to readers but overlooked by communication professionals seeking an audience.

Methodology

The body of this article is formatted for publication as a Wikipedia article titled "Readership of Wikipedia" and conforms to the English Wikipedia's manual of style including hyperlinks to other Wikipedia articles and citations for every claim. General guides to publishing in Wikipedia include [Help:Your first article](#), [Wikipedia:Five pillars](#), [Wikipedia:Manual of Style](#), and [Wikipedia:Neutral point of view](#). A scholarly version is available in Logan et al. (2010). Note particularly that Wikipedia disallows original research as explained in [Wikipedia:No original research](#), and consequently, the text is a summary of the sources we identified and not new ideas.

We sought to identify all published scholarly, journalistic, or grey literature sources discussing readership of Wikipedia. Our search was not systematic but was an attempt to be thorough, and identified 160 sources. This report attempts to include relevant information from them all. We did not exclude any sources we found, with the exception of those which only repeated claims from other sources without adding more context. Sources were collected through July 2024.

Our process for identifying sources started by checking scholarly profiling services. The authors develop Scholia, which is a Wikipedia-based scholarly profiling service that aids in browsing and visualizing research literature (Rasberry et al. 2019). Most sources came from Scholia. We then checked other scholarly profiling services including Semantic Scholar, OpenAlex, Internet Archive Scholar, Google Scholar, and the University of Virginia Library's search system. All sources went into a bibliography (Rasberry 2024). We checked the citations of those sources to identify titles of articles which seemed to discuss Wikipedia readership, then included those in the bibliography.

To find other sources, we used general search engines including DuckDuckGo, Bing (via Ecosia), and Google. In this way, we identified journalism and grey literature sources. As a last step, we shared the bibliography with peers in the Wikipedia community to ask if anyone recalled reading anything else about the readership of Wikipedia, and we included whatever we had missed to this point. This method is in alignment with Wikipedia's own editorial recommendation at [Help:Find sources](#).

Introduction

The **readership of Wikipedia** is [Wikipedia's audience](#). Various studies have described Wikipedia as the world's most popular reference source (Okoli et al. 2014). In 2007, commentators began including Wikipedia in lists of top-10 websites by [web traffic](#) (Okoli et al. 2014). Many readers arrive at Wikipedia by following a [search engine](#), although large numbers also arrive through [social media](#) (Piccardi et al. 2023). Wikipedia is remarkable as a gateway which channels its readers to examine the sources which Wikipedia editors have cited (Piccardi et al. 2021). The reader [click-through rate](#) is about

1/30 for Wikipedia images (Rama et al. 2022) and 1/300 for reference clicks to cited sources (Piccardi et al. 2020).

Wikipedia has a global and multilingual readership (Johnson et al. 2021a). In Wikipedia, humans and technology combine to form a [social machine](#) which produces media (Lih 2009, Jemielniak 2014, O'Sullivan 2016). Since Wikipedia is a [user-generated content](#) platform, its content contributors are a portion of the readership (Antin and Cheshire 2010). Demographics including gender, country, wealth, languages used, and educational background are predictive of reader interest (TeBlunthuis et al. 2019). Researchers have especially examined reader interest in [health information on Wikipedia](#), and found that patients, medical students, and doctors all routinely consult Wikipedia (Smith 2020, Maggio et al. 2020, see also Fig. 1).

Research topics in discussing Wikipedia's readers include how many people read Wikipedia, demographics of readers, reader interest in particular categories of Wikipedia articles, the extent of Wikipedia engagement among readers, how credible readers find Wikipedia, and critiques of technological tools which interact with Wikipedia to provide additional insights to readers (Okoli et al. 2014). There is less research on Wikipedia readers than Wikipedia editors (Miquel-Ribé 2021). Research on Wikipedia readers typically examines data on reader sessions, click paths, and subject matter interest (Miquel-Ribé 2021). In the context of this research, a "[session](#)" is a visit to Wikipedia (Piccardi et al. 2023), the "[click path](#)" is the sequence of links which a reader follows in a session (Rodi et al. 2017, Wikimedia Analytics et al. 2024), and "subject matter interest" refers interest in topics as measured by [pageviews](#) (Johnson et al. 2021a, Wikimedia Analytics 2024).

Audience

Size

In 2013, the [Wikimedia Foundation](#) anticipated that there would be more than 1,000,000,000 Wikipedia users in 2015 (Agence France-Presse 2013). In the 2017 annual report, the Wikimedia Foundation prominently claimed to have served billions of readers (Wikimedia Foundation 2017, see also Fig. 2). In 2018, a report in [The Independent](#) noted that Wikipedia's own internal reporting counts 1.4 billion unique devices accessing Wikipedia every month (Barnett 2018).

Various commentators have remarked on Wikipedia's [web traffic](#) ranking in comparison to other websites. In 2005, [Jimmy Wales](#) shared that Wikipedia was a top 50 website (Wales 2006). [Alexa Internet](#) ranked Wikipedia as the 37th most popular website in 2006 (Knowledge at Wharton Podcast 2006), 11th in 2007 (Dalby 2007), 7th in 2009 (Konieczny 2010), 7th in 2015 (Davenport 2015), and 13th in 2021 (Economist 2021). For the month of December 2006, [Comscore](#) ranked Wikipedia as the 6th most popular website globally with 165,000,000 global [unique users](#) and the 9th most popular website in the United

States with 43 million unique users (Perez 2007). In 2005, [Hitwise](#) reported that Wikipedia was top-ranking reference website after [Dictionary.com](#) and the most popular encyclopedia, ahead of [About.com](#) (Burns 2005). Report in 2015 and 2023 observed declining Wikipedia traffic (Edwards 2015b, Protsiuk 2023).

Demographics

Wikipedia's global popularity and available pageview data create opportunities for researchers to measure public interest by demographic in the topics which Wikipedia covers (Jabaley et al. 2019, see also Fig. 3). A basic factor which determines whether people read Wikipedia is their ease of accessing it at all. Communities with less [Internet access](#) have fewer Wikipedia readers (Khatri et al. 2022). Countries with government [censorship of Wikipedia](#) have fewer readers (Clark et al. 2017). Some people still read and share prohibited content (Hobbs and Roberts 2018).

When readers in countries with a higher [Human Development Index](#) navigate through several articles in Wikipedia, they tend to spend more time on the last article they visit (TeBlunthuis et al. 2019). One explanation for this is that these readers stop browsing Wikipedia after finding an article which presents the information they wanted, and they are taking extra time to examine it (TeBlunthuis et al. 2019). When readers of less-developed Wikipedia language versions do not spend more time on the last article they visit, that could be an indication that their language version of Wikipedia is failing to satisfy their information need. (TeBlunthuis et al. 2019). People in the [Global South](#) tend to have longer reading sessions for reasons including their use of Wikipedia for education rather than only fact-checking, and because of differences in access to technology (TeBlunthuis et al. 2019).

Factors which influence the popularity of a given Wikipedia language version include the number of articles in that language version, the degree of Internet engagement of that language community, and the extent to which that language community already uses other language versions of Wikipedia (Khatri et al. 2022). A 2016 study generalized trends in various Wikipedia language communities by noting that current events are popular in English language Wikipedia, Japanese readers seek pop culture, Spanish readers consume more sports content, and Russian readers seek information about social media websites (Anderson et al. 2016).

Two-thirds of Wikipedia readers are men (Johnson et al. 2021a). Also, men view more articles than women in a typical Wikipedia reading [session](#) (Johnson et al. 2021a). While commentators frequently discuss [gender bias on Wikipedia](#), there are not well developed explanations for why men and women differ so much in what they read in Wikipedia (Johnson et al. 2021a). Men read more Wikipedia articles on [sports](#), [games](#), and [mathematics](#) (Johnson et al. 2021a). Women read more articles about [television shows](#) and [medicine](#) (Johnson et al. 2021a). Biographies are popular with everyone and account for a third of Wikipedia visits, but men are more likely to read biographies of men and women are more likely to read biographies of women (Johnson et al. 2021a). No strong readership trends are identified for [non-binary gender](#) people (Johnson et al. 2021a).

Representatives of Wikipedia's governance process have opposed and resisted governmental requests that Wikipedia adopt an [age verification system](#) to restrict minors from accessing Wikipedia (Vallance 2023, Vallance and Gerken 2023).

Reader behavior

Arriving and browsing

[Search engines](#) routinely rank Wikipedia highly on the [search engine results page](#) following a user [web query](#) (Lewandowski and Spree 2011, Piccardi et al. 2023). Many readers arrive at Wikipedia when they are looking for information online, and a search engine recommends Wikipedia to answer their question (Rodi et al. 2017, Piccardi et al. 2023, see also Fig. 4). Search tools which popularize Wikipedia include [Google Search](#) (Ford 2020), [Amazon Alexa](#) (Ford 2020), [Siri](#) (Ford 2020), and [DuckDuckGo](#) (Johnson et al. 2021b). Wikipedia and search engines benefit each other, as readers like seeing search engine results which include Wikipedia, and Wikipedia gains readers through search engine referrals (McMahon et al. 2017).

Active discussions in the news or [social media](#) drive traffic to Wikipedia (Moyer et al. 2021, Piccardi et al. 2021, Harrison 2022). 70% of readers end their session after reviewing the article they requested (Piccardi et al. 2023). The remaining readers access multiple Wikipedia articles by following hyperlinks in whatever text they are reading (Piccardi et al. 2023). Wikipedia articles generally receive more traffic when other high-traffic Wikipedia articles hyperlink to them (Yang et al. 2020). Readers often return to articles which they have previously read (Piccardi et al. 2023). In considering their experience visiting Wikipedia, readers report higher satisfaction than is usual for audiences of comparable media sources (Salutari et al. 2020).

General reading patterns

A 2016 survey of 5000 Wikipedia readers found that half of them were visiting Wikipedia articles on familiar topics, while the other half were learning a new topic (Singer et al. 2017). Half of the readers came to Wikipedia to read more about something they saw elsewhere in the media, or which they had just discussed with another person (Singer et al. 2017). Other commonly reported reasons for using Wikipedia included students using it to supplement their school projects, reading for entertainment or pastime, wanting to learn something new, or using Wikipedia to inform a particular decision that a person was making (Singer et al. 2017, Lemmerich et al. 2019, Petrucco and Ferranti 2020). 80% of readers were either trying to get an overview of a topic or do quick fact-checking, while 20% of readers were trying to understand a topic deeply and spent more time reading (Singer et al. 2017). On weekdays and in the daytime, readers use Wikipedia for work or school, whereas on nights and evenings, people use Wikipedia in response to media and social discussions (Singer et al. 2017). For English Wikipedia, traffic peaks every day during the afternoon in the United States (Piccardi et al. 2024).

One study examined time spent in Wikipedia by many users in various Wikipedia language versions for the one-year period starting November 2017 and ending October 2018. This study observed that the median user session on Wikipedia was 25 seconds, but the average user session was more than a minute (TeBlunthuis et al. 2019). One interpretation of this is that there are different users visiting Wikipedia for different purposes, with some leaving quickly after arrival and some having significantly longer reading sessions (TeBlunthuis et al. 2019). The total amount of time spent reading Wikipedia by all humanity in that year was about 700,000 years (TeBlunthuis et al. 2019).

Wikipedia readers include those who need to learn how to do or use things where they cannot otherwise find freely available content (Clark et al. 2017). Reading 10 or more Wikipedia articles in a session is uncommonly high reading interest, but because Wikipedia has a large audience, there are still tens of millions of sessions where readers do this (Piccardi et al. 2023). Readers tend to start their Wikipedia reading session at a popular article, and if they browse further, they tend to end their reading session at a less-developed and less popular article (Piccardi et al. 2023).

Interest in topics

Major news events and social trends result in increased traffic to related Wikipedia articles (Miz et al. 2020, Conti et al. 2020, see also Fig. 5). Similarly, when public figures are in the news, then traffic to their Wikipedia biographies increases (Goldenberg 2018). New editors may begin contributing information to Wikipedia in an attempt to reach all these readers (Zhang et al. 2019).

A 2015 study reported that pageviews to [health information on Wikipedia](#) made it the most popular source of health information, exceeding traffic to websites for the [National Institutes of Health](#), [Centers for Disease Control](#), the [World Health Organization](#), and the [National Health Service](#), as well as for [WebMD](#) (Heilman and West 2015, see also Fig. 6). A 2020 systematic review of health research concluded that Wikipedia is a popular health information resource (Smith 2020). Evidence has established that the number of patients, medical students, and doctors who read Wikipedia is large enough to establish Wikipedia as a significant channel for health communication (Smith 2020, Maggio et al. 2020, Smith 2023). Various researchers have examined Wikipedia readers to medical articles for specific topics (Jabaley et al. 2019, addshore 2020, Cao et al. 2020, Kinney and Brigo 2020). Traffic by language reflects the interest of that language community in the topic relative to the scale of that community's use of online resources. (Jabaley et al. 2019, see also Fig. 3). The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) triggered increased traffic to Wikipedia for all articles, but especially for [Wikipedia's articles about the pandemic](#) (Jahangir 2020).

Lawyers and judges read Wikipedia in their professional practice. Citations to Wikipedia and text copied from Wikipedia appear in judicial opinions (Peoples 2009, Thompson et al. 2022). People in courtrooms read and discuss what Wikipedia says to share general information on whatever topics are relevant in a trial (Gerken 2010).

Researchers can examine the popularity of Wikipedia articles in various languages by reviewing Wikipedia article pageview statistics (Lewoniewski et al. 2017). Commentators who have reviewed popular Wikipedia articles by time period or topic include [Pew Research Center](#) (Anderson et al. 2016), [Yahoo!](#) (Canal 2020), [BuzzFeed](#) (Stopera 2020), [Crunchyroll](#) (CharAznableOfficial 2020), [Gizmodo](#) (Wodinsky 2020), [First Monday](#) (Spoerri 2007), and [India Times](#) (Sharma 2021).

A study which examined hoaxes on Wikipedia reported that some longstanding hoaxes in low-traffic articles had received a total of 10,000 pageviews over years before discovery, and that high traffic articles are less likely to include hoaxes (Kumar et al. 2016).

Wikipedia as a gateway

Wikipedia articles feature image thumbnails. Readers click those images to access image metadata and higher quality image versions at a rate of 1 image per 30 article views (Rama et al. 2022). Readers are more likely to click on images that are interesting, such as those in visual arts, or which are complicated, such as maps or diagrams (Rama et al. 2022). In many media platforms, readers enjoy clicking on familiar celebrity faces, but in Wikipedia, celebrity images have lower reader engagement. Wikipedia readers more often click on portraits of less known people (Rama et al. 2022).

Wikipedia includes external links which readers may use to exit Wikipedia and access content at other websites (Piccardi et al. 2021, see also Fig. 7). When readers leave Wikipedia to access content elsewhere, they do so in equal amounts through links in Wikipedia infoboxes, the cited sources in the references section, or through the external links section (Piccardi et al. 2021).

Readers more often use external links in Wikipedia when it leads them to a site with quality content collections (Piccardi et al. 2021). Library resources are popular resources which Wikipedia readers access through exit links from Wikipedia (Piccardi et al. 2021, Szajewski 2013). Various commentators have noted that Wikipedia editors and readers prefer links to [open access](#) free resources in favor of links to closed [paywall](#) content (Murgu and Iivings 2019).

Wikipedia is unusual for being a public resource which provides general audiences with citations to scholarly sources (Guglielmi 2018). Citation use in Wikipedia is extensive (Guglielmi 2018). Readers access citations at rate of 1 per 300 Wikipedia pageviews (Piccardi et al. 2020) and follow Digital Object Identifier (DOI) links to scholarly publications at a rate of about 1 in 2000 pageviews (Maggio et al. 2017). Readers are more likely to check citations in this way for Wikipedia articles which are shorter, lower quality, presenting current events, and when the sources themselves are [open access](#) (Piccardi et al. 2020). Readers who examine the citations in the reference list often do not click through to read the original sources; instead, they verify that the cited source is from a reputable publisher or authority (Maggio et al. 2020). Wikipedia readers examine

scholarly sources for medical and non-medical topics at the same rate (Maggio et al. 2017).

Readers are also contributors

Wikipedia is a media platform which invites readers to contribute [user-generated content](#) (Antin and Cheshire 2010). Most readers simply consume Wikipedia's media without actively choosing to contribute content (Antin and Cheshire 2010). Nevertheless, because of Wikipedia's nature and design, those readers are also passively contributing to the project by increasing the [pageview](#) count of whatever they read, as Wikipedia counts the number of visitors to each of its pages (Antin and Cheshire 2010). Pageview counts signal reader interest to editors who can react by choosing to prioritize popular topics (Antin and Cheshire 2010).

Additionally, Wikipedia readers over time tend to learn about Wikipedia's mission, editorial practices, and its distinctness as a media platform (Antin and Cheshire 2010). Even without actively editing, those who use Wikipedia and learn how it works are engaging in "[legitimate peripheral participation](#)", which in Wikipedia's case means that there are a significant number of people who understand and can discuss Wikipedia without themselves being editors (Antin and Cheshire 2010). Some free-of-charge media platforms suffer from a [free-rider problem](#) of readers who never contribute, but Wikipedia has found ways to benefit from readers in ways which traditional media sources do not (Antin and Cheshire 2010). A survey of people who contribute images and photography to [Wikimedia Commons](#), which is the image repository serving Wikipedia, found that many of them became contributors after being inspired by images which they found as Wikipedia readers (Viegas 2007).

At the time of Wikipedia's establishment in 2001, concepts such as [Web 2.0](#), [social media](#), and [user-generated content](#) were new and unfamiliar ideas (Kuhne and Creel 2012, Jemielniak 2014). Descriptions of Wikipedia emphasize that readers visit Wikipedia as a website and publication, and that those readers may also become editors who produce Wikipedia content for others (Kuhne and Creel 2012). Explanations of Wikipedia include discussions of [free content](#), [human-computer interaction](#), [online communities](#), [social networking services](#), [fact-checking](#), [gamification](#), and [social machines](#) (Lih 2009, Jemielniak 2014, O'Sullivan 2016). Wikipedia's readers and Wikipedia editors have different interests (Lehmann et al. 2014). Articles may be popular with readers but lack editors interested in developing them, and conversely, may attract editorial development but be of little interest to readers (Lehmann et al. 2014).

Wikimedia ecosystem

Among the set of Wikimedia projects, Wikipedia is the encyclopedia, while each of the other projects have their own specialty focus. Images from the [Wikimedia Commons](#) image repository appear throughout Wikipedia as illustrations (Rama et al. 2022). While readers may browse the complete media collection in Wikimedia Commons, all of

Commons' media is [free content](#), and consequently, anyone can and many people do reuse this media in other publications (Heald et al. 2015, Erickson et al. 2018). Economic analysts have estimated the value of Wikimedia Commons images as billions of United States dollars, because of the market rates for [stock photography](#), the high rate of reuse from Wikimedia Commons, and the frequency with which readers encounter these images outside of the Wikimedia platform (Eveleth 2013, Heald et al. 2015, Erickson et al. 2018). A 2022 report failed to identify research about reader engagement with images from Wikimedia Commons, but claimed that the available datasets are rich with potential for examination (Rama et al. 2022).

[Wikidata](#) contributors curate the sort of data which they believe would be useful to share in Wikipedia articles, but as data in Wikidata is not easy for humans to read, much of it is inaccessible (Sáez and Hogan 2018, Hellmann et al. 2021). Wikidata tools are in development to present Wikidata content in Wikipedia, making it much more visible (Sáez and Hogan 2018, Hellmann et al. 2021). Analysis of [Wiktionary](#) demonstrates that readers use the dictionary in response to events in their media (Muller-Spitzer et al. 2015). Reviewers have imagined [Wikiversity](#) as a place where readers may learn through online classes (Friesen and Hopkins 2008, Lawler 2008, Dieb et al. 2022). Commonly, Wikiversity reports are from instructors who used the platform as part of an interactive lesson plan with students (Leinonen et al. 2009). Wishes for the readership to become editors are central to the critiques and reviews of the Wikimedia projects [Wikinews](#) (McIntosh 2008, Thorsen 2008), [Wikivoyage](#) (Elia 2018, Luyt 2021), and [Wikisource](#) (Danowski 2007, Armstrong 2010, Thomer et al. 2012, Willshaw 2021).

Technology and data

Wikipedia pageviews

Wikipedia publishes the [pageviews](#) of its articles (Lewoniewski et al. 2017, Fig. 8). Wikipedia's public reports show how many times its audience has requested any article, in any language, in any given hour (Lewoniewski et al. 2017). For example, a study of Wikipedia's coverage of climate change found that from 2017-2022, readers made 500 million visits to 4000 climate-related Wikipedia articles in 25 languages (Meier 2024).

A study in 2007 claimed that Wikipedia was so popular that its [web traffic](#) data gave insight to broad public interest on many topics (Priedhorsky et al. 2007). That study argued that Wikipedia [pageview](#) data could be the basis for [impact evaluation](#) of Wikipedia's coverage of various topics (Priedhorsky et al. 2007). Various later studies have confirmed that Wikipedia's articles are very popular, and that Wikipedia mirrors trends in public interest, and that content in Wikipedia affects public understanding broadly (Okoli et al. 2014). Wikipedia pageview counts are often high enough to serve as evidence that Wikipedia is a popular media source for many topics (Okoli et al. 2014). Also, because so many individual people use Wikipedia, its pageviews are a [statistical](#)

[sampling](#) of how many times a member of the public wants information on a given topic (Okoli et al. 2014, Glavackij et al. 2023).

Various studies have observed a relationship between Wikipedia pageviews and cultural trends in society (Kämpf et al. 2015, Chelsy Xie et al. 2019). Numerous studies have examined traffic to [health information on Wikipedia](#) (Heilman et al. 2011, Maggio et al. 2020). [News media](#) trends drive traffic to Wikipedia (Tizzoni et al. 2020).

Wikipedia as a reusable data set

[Artificial intelligence in Wikimedia projects](#) includes [data science](#) projects which use Wikipedia as a data set (Mehdi et al. 2017). Wikipedia is unusual for being a nonprofit project which shares [free content](#) which anyone can use for any purpose, and that means that people consume content which is from Wikipedia but published elsewhere (Gertner 2023). Data technology projects, including those for [artificial intelligence](#), copy Wikipedia's content, incorporate the knowledge from Wikipedia into new products, and then serve Wikipedia content to their own readers (Mehdi et al. 2017, Gertner 2023)

The [Google Knowledge Graph](#) is an example of a product which has copied Wikipedia, and which presents Wikipedia content as a [zero-click result](#) to people who do not actually visit Wikipedia (McMahon et al. 2017). An estimate by [SimilarWeb](#) reported that readers consumed Wikipedia content 3 billion times through Google Knowledge Graph in 2019 (Hinkis 2020). [ChatGPT](#) is another popular example of a product which shares Wikipedia's content (Gertner 2023). Readers who consume Wikipedia information through third-party sources are typically unaware of its origin (Gertner 2023). A 2025 report found some evidence that some readers accessed content from Wikipedia through AI services, rather than through Wikipedia, resulting in declining readership to the Wikipedia platform (Wagner and Jiang 2025).

Private data

Whereas many websites apply [computer and network surveillance](#) to their users, Wikipedia does much less of this (Arora et al. 2022). Wikipedia values [information privacy](#), and consequently, Wikipedia's governance prohibits some common types of analysis which other digital platforms allow (Arora et al. 2022). Even privately, Wikipedia does not routinely collect individuals' click path data or conventional [personal data](#) for individual users (Arora et al. 2022).

The Wikimedia Foundation took measurements of reader time spent in Wikipedia in 2017 (TeBlunthuis et al. 2019). Also in 2017, there was a survey which collected responses from 30,000 Wikipedia readers asking why they were reading (Singer et al. 2017). A 2019 survey of Wikipedia readers collected demographic data (Johnson et al. 2021a).

External tools

The measurement of traffic to Wikipedia articles can contribute to [predictive modelling](#) (Kämpf et al. 2015). Various researchers have used Wikipedia pageview reports of politicians in [political forecasting](#) of election outcomes (Yasseri and Bright 2016, Ciocirdel and Varga 2016, Smith and Gustafson 2017, Haman et al. 2021, Debus and Florczak 2022), identifying [emerging infectious disease](#) or other health interests (Bardak and Tan 2015, Sciascia and Radin 2017, Chrzanowski et al. 2021, Alibudbud 2023), or as [market research](#) on consumer interest (Mestyán et al. 2013, Signorelli et al. 2016, Khadivi and Ramakrishnan 2016, Telli and Chen 2021).

Sometimes popular technological resources arbitrarily use Wikipedia as an example for showcasing functions, and those examples drive readers into Wikipedia (Sepulveda 2022, Gault 2021, Rauwerda 2022).

Brief mentions of readership

In discussions of Wikipedia, there are sources which refer to Wikipedia's readership, but do not develop their observations into a general conclusion about the readership. One possible interesting conclusion which is absent from these sources would have been the claim, "Wikipedia is popular, and because anyone can edit it, publishing there would reach a large audience." Of the 161 sources which this project's methodology identified, 58 of those sources make brief claims about readership. It is challenging to interpret deeper meaning in individual brief mentions, but by considering them collectively, it is possible to measure some trends in the set.

Table 1 presents those sources with a categorization of the claim related to readership and a description of the focus of the article. The classification and the focus descriptions made here are based on the authors' experience as Wikipedia editors, participants in Wikipedia community discussions, and communication professional practitioners. This is not a robust classification method, but it does make some patterns more apparent.

The 8 sources on Wikipedia's web traffic rank all remark on Wikipedia's comparative position in various web traffic analytics services. The earliest identified collected source here is from 2006 and the latest is from 2021, and throughout this time Wikipedia is ranked as very popular in comparison

to other platforms. The platforms which provide web analytics reports are useful to professionals and people who care about such things discuss them in social media and ephemera, but here collected are times when that conversation entered journalism and research.

The 7 sources which list popular Wikipedia articles are "[listicles](#)", or journalism which takes the format of compiling a list. This is a popular media format for blogs and social media, but again, the sources here are media meeting this study's inclusion criteria. Wikipedia's newspaper, *The Signpost*, has published a traffic report in most issues since 2013, and this study also did not consider those due to being out of scope.

There are 19 sources which describe efforts to increase public access to information by publishing in Wikipedia. These sources presume that posting information in Wikipedia will achieve communication goals. Outside this project, there is a much larger corpus of documentation on Wikipedia editing. These writings are just the subset of those that mention readership, and most such sources do not attempt to measure or qualify the readership that publishing in Wikipedia can attain. For example, communication campaigns often have the goal of publishing without measuring when readers may find it. Among these 19 papers, 5 describe Wikipedia publishing for feminist communication, 2 for science, 5 are about student editing projects, 4 for LGBT+ projects, 1 is for heritage documentation, and 4 talk about generally sharing information as activism.

The 9 sources talking about celebrity death note spikes in web traffic to Wikipedia articles and related topics following the passing of public figures. [Wikipedia coverage of death](#) is the subject of its own research and media analysis.

11 sources remark on Wikipedia as a popular information source for some topic. The context here is to raise awareness that somehow, readers follow some media pathway that leads to Wikipedia.

4 sources are from data analytics fields which attempt to accumulate all available data, and they consider the extent to which traffic in Wikipedia is a signal that could be used to forecast trends.

Discussion

The following is commentary in response to the above Wikipedia article draft.

The text of "Readership of Wikipedia"

The text of this article is designed for publication in Wikipedia and consequently conforms to Wikipedia's editorial policies. It is a summary of information from the sources which we identified and cited.

The first section of the text describes Wikipedia's audience, including attempts to count the readers, the number of times they view a Wikipedia page, and reader demographic surveys. The second section describes what readers do when they visit Wikipedia. The third section describes the reuse of Wikipedia content to readers in other platforms, or for analyzing readers.

Wikipedia's popularity has failed to interest most communication professionals

This project's search failed to identify sources which argued that Wikipedia's popularity makes it an effective communication channel. Despite this, even in the absence of developed discourse, we argue that expert organizations which share information in the public benefit should make communication investments in Wikipedia, to the mutual benefit of Wikipedia and the advancement of the goals of any organization with content to share.

Because Wikipedia is very popular, one might expect that some process exists to encourage professional development of Wikipedia as part of a communication strategy. While there are pathways in the communication industry to get relevant content placement into newspapers, television, journals, magazines, social media platforms, and advertising, no obvious pathway exists for professional message distribution in Wikipedia.

Universities, libraries, cultural organizations like museums, nonprofit educational organizations, and government agencies all routinely design media campaigns in which their communication professionals seek to disseminate information. Because experts from such organizations have messages to share but need media channels to reach audiences, and because Wikipedia reaches an attractive audience but lacks quality content, it is imaginable that Wikipedia could be a platform where communication professionals match their media to an audience. The sources cited in this review, however, omit suggesting that Wikipedia should be part of communication strategy. Why has Wikipedia's popularity failed to interest communication professionals who have a

goal of broadly sharing general reference information, public service messaging, or other information of the sort which Wikipedia excels at delivering to relevant audiences?

One explanation could be that some aspect of Wikipedia's brand or reputation has deterred experts and professionals from contributing to it, regardless of cost/benefit analysis or the communication impact which Wikipedia offers. There is little precedent of expert organizations navigating into Wikipedia to share their content, whereas in contrast the communication industry has a marketplace where buyers can pay for services to share knowledge in other channels which sellers have designed to maximize market integration. Nevertheless, Wikipedia is reaching an audience; Wikipedia has an influential position in the media ecosystem; and there is an economy in the communication industry which sells services when possible. If there is a path for investment in Wikipedia to develop its content, then no one has yet discovered it. Because investment has supported the development of so many other resources, one might speculate that investment could help Wikipedia, but also the Wikipedia community of editors is skeptical of encroachment on its ethics, values, and the independence of its community governance process.

Where sources do address Wikipedia's popularity, they often mention it as a surprising bit of trivia to halt the discussion, rather than as a point from which to imagine further consequences. Popular journalism sources do this by reporting rankings from Internet traffic leaderboards such as Alexa Internet, Comscore, and Similarweb, all of which have named Wikipedia as a top-10 website over the years. Scholarly review articles also recognize those rankings, and sometimes remark that Wikipedia's rankings have been consistently popular for years. The medical case studies of Wikipedia do speculate that Wikipedia's popularity could be part of a strategy of public health communication; however, the sources do not identify cases where anyone has done this on a large scale or with robust analytics.

We identified two classes of publication and discourse which are tangential to the use of Wikipedia as a communication strategy to reach an audience, but which we did not include in this review because the activity's objective was something other than direct interest in readership. These are conflict of interest editing and institutional partnerships, and discussed as their own topics because they are easily imagined as activities where maximizing readership for media could be a goal.

Conflict of interest editing does not seek increased readership

Conflict-of-interest (COI) editing in Wikipedia is the use of Wikipedia for marketing of products or the promotion of organizations and biographies. Wikipedia's volunteer editorial community almost always finds COI editing as unwelcome or tolerated rather than invited, and the Wikipedia editorial process disdains and restricts such activity. Conflict-of-interest editing services target marketers and are in the absence of reader demand.

It is common knowledge that for attention seeking Internet platforms other than Wikipedia, there exist professional services for hire which promise to bring audience traffic to the client's media. This is because for all the reasons that a communication sector exists, clients are willing to pay someone who can deliver their messages and media content to a large relevant audience. One might expect that comparable services are available for Wikipedia. They do not, and there is no pool of vendors offering such service. This project's search method identified no documentation of vendors who were selling Wikipedia engagement in the way that communication professionals can disseminate messages or showcase products, social media posts, or similar. The authors are aware of Wikimedia conversation about COI editors, and because services to increase traffic are not part of that discourse, finding no descriptions of such services was unsurprising.

To understand why this is, consider Wikipedia's own documentation of COI editing including its core guideline (Wikipedia editorial community 2004), the noticeboard where users may discuss reported potential violations (Wikipedia editorial community 2006), and the list of identified vendors who offer paid Wikipedia editing services (Wikipedia editorial community 2017). This documentation almost exclusively addresses the self-promotion of people, products, and organizations. The typical paid editing client wants inclusion in Wikipedia, and is willing to accept or exploit whatever audience that can gain for them personally, without regard to Wikipedia's aim to present the highest quality and most relevant content to readers. For example, if a company sells a product, the pattern of paid services entering the Wikipedia platform demonstrates that the company will pay to have itself represented in Wikipedia, but does not sponsor the development of information about comparable competitors' products, or general reference information about how the class of products works, or what place it has in society. It is nearly unprecedented for a client to sponsor Wikipedia in a way that is not self-serving.

While it could be imaginable that paid editors survey Wikipedia and seek to integrate messaging into high-traffic articles, in practice, these services set a goal of having any Wikipedia inclusion regardless of traffic. Having promotional content in Wikipedia has benefits which do not rely on the amount of traffic that the content gets. For example, a Wikipedia biography or company profile may be low traffic, but for anyone searching for the person by name, search engines and AI services will preferentially suggest Wikipedia content to their users. In that way, low traffic Wikipedia articles still reach a highly relevant and desirable audience. Because COI editing concerns itself with client publishing rather than a focus on Wikipedia's readership, the documentation on this practice is out of scope for consideration in this review.

Expert partnerships for editing

Wikipedia editors encourage expert knowledge institutions, such as museums, libraries, archives, universities, government agencies, and research institutes, to support their staff and communities in developing Wikimedia content in their field of expertise. Although these partnerships have some of the characteristics of conflict-of-interest editing, the key distinction is sharing knowledge in the public interest and without regard for self-

promotion, rather than editing to showcase names or brands. These relationships do benefit Wikipedia readers, but usually, the benefit to Wikipedia's readers is incidental to the institution's stated reason for establishing the partnership. Much of the documentation of these partnerships is done by their staff through a role known as the Wikimedian-in-Residence, in which a person mediates collaboration between a center of knowledge and Wikipedia through a social framework analogous to an artist residency. The documentation about Wikimedian residencies contributes to the literature about expert partnerships that institutions make with Wikipedia.

Whatever the format of the collaboration, institutions which seek partnerships with Wikipedia do not typically set goals to publish content in Wikipedia with the intent to reach a large audience. Instead, they encourage Wikipedia content development for goals other than increasing Wikipedia audience engagement. As an example, consider the 2018 book *Leveraging Wikipedia*. This text presents essays from some of the most prominent commentators at the intersection of Wikipedia, libraries, and museums (Proffitt 2018). Writers in this sector discuss developing Wikipedia as a way of increasing traffic to information sources other than Wikipedia, or for publishing as a goal in itself without regard to audience engagement. Direct interest in Wikipedia's audience reading content on Wikipedia is not expressed. A common perspective of institutions is to view Wikipedia's audience as potential interested clients who might leave the Wikimedia platform to use resources elsewhere. In another example, the United States National Archives reported that content which they published to Wikipedia got millions of views, when content which they published in their own platform received thousands (Ferriero 2011). Other institutions have similarly observed that the content they publish on Wikipedia gets high pageviews on Wikipedia. In response to such stories, institutions may set goals of developing Wikipedia to increase engagement with works in their repositories, or increasing in-person foot traffic to their institution (Kelly 2023). Engagement with the institution's own hosted resources is a stated success metric (Kelly 2023). Observing Wikipedia reader engagement, except possibly as a passthrough mechanism going elsewhere, is not discussed in most institutional partnership plans.

From the Wikipedia community's perspective, any rationale which convinces experts to contribute good knowledge to Wikipedia is good, but also, many editors in the Wikipedia community take some pride in having an audience for the content they publish in Wikipedia itself. To Wikipedia's editors, user access to knowledge through Wikipedia versus the original sources is equally good, and so is giving readers easy access to both Wikipedia's summary presentations and more complete information at the original source. Because most documented expert partnership Wikipedia editing campaigns have goals which do not document Wikipedia's own readership, they are out of scope for inclusion in this review.

Challenge of situating Wikipedia among other communication platforms

It is difficult to assess the value of Wikipedia as a communication channel in the absence of comparisons with other media platforms. The cited sources here make no strong

comparisons of Wikipedia audience metrics to those of any other media platform. As examples, advertisers sell "[pay-per-click](#)" and "[impression](#)" services to drive Internet traffic.

While we identified no desire for Wikipedia to interact with paid schemes, it would be helpful for Wikipedia to communicate to those who wish to share information that Wikipedia partnership is among their marketplace options. For example, if a government agency has a budget to increase public awareness of an infectious disease, then a conventional media strategy to achieve this would be the establishment of a new informational website with complementary social media advertising to drive traffic to there. Alternatively, that government agency could sponsor development of the Wikipedia article on that disease, perhaps in collaboration with medical experts and a university. Wikipedia already gets lots of traffic, and may achieve more communication impact than a conventional media project. In cases where public interest education is the goal and a communication professional allocates a budget for media impact, then what is the comparative value of investing in Wikipedia as compared to social media, traditional public relations, or any other outreach strategy?

There is a communication sector engaged in developing content for delivery through platforms comparable to Wikipedia. A generation of well-known new media platforms includes Wikipedia; established in 2001; Facebook, 2004; YouTube, 2005; and Twitter, 2006. Some research compares all these platforms as social media (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Commonalities among these platforms are that they invite user-generated content and also that they claim a highly engaged global audience. A default assumption might be that since those other platforms have professional engagement, then comparable professional engagement exists for Wikipedia. There is a body of literature describing how social media can advance communication goals. In contrast, the sources identified in this paper do not describe communication professionals incorporating Wikipedia into media strategy.

Although sources cited in this document claim that Wikipedia has hundreds of millions of readers, there are no sources here which situate Wikipedia in the media environment by explaining the extent to which Wikipedia has a communication impact. What is the relative value of a Wikipedia pageview as compared to a pageview on another website, or an impression or engagement action in social media, or broadcast reach from traditional media? To what extent does Wikipedia influence the information ecosystem? If a communication professional plans a media campaign, then under what circumstances might Wikipedia engagement be as impactful as resource investment in other media options? That sources establish Wikipedia's popularity is helpful; but the assignment of value to Wikipedia is an unexplored process.

Conclusion

Sources establish Wikipedia as popular. Readers have positive sentiment to Wikipedia and its content. Sources characterize the demographics of Wikipedia's audience and its

readers' behavior to a level of detail which is sufficient to readily have conversations about Wikipedia's role in the consumer media environment. We did not identify sources which translate Wikipedia's popularity into media influence, nor did we identify sources which propose ways to maximize Wikipedia's communication impact. We suggest Wikipedia as an attractive target for publication, and recommend Wikipedia publishing for media strategies which have ideological alignment with Wikipedia's goals.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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Figure 1.

Wikipedia's "Pageviews Analysis" tool enables users to visualize the daily count of readers to any Wikipedia article over any time range. This example shows traffic for the Wikipedia article titled "2019-20 coronavirus pandemic" around that time, as readers became interested to learn about COVID. Public health communicators use traffic data to inform thought on Wikipedia's place in the media ecosystem. This image is public domain as documented in Wikimedia Commons at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pageviews_Analysis_2019-20_coronavirus_pandemic_24_March_2020.png.



Figure 2.

This stylized message from the *Wikimedia Foundation 2016-2017 Annual Report* states, "We are billions of readers, millions of donors, thousands of volunteers, hundreds of affiliates and partners." The organization presents these all-time metrics as evidence of the value of the encyclopedia which they steward. This image is public domain as documented in Wikimedia Commons at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wikimedia_Foundation_2016-2017_Annual_Report_billions_of_readers_detail.png

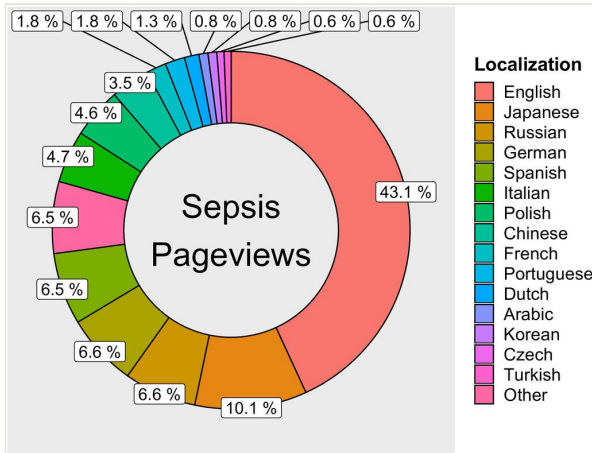


Figure 3.

English, Japanese, Russian, and German language versions of Wikipedia had the most pageviews to the article "[sepsis](#)" over the years 2015-18 (Jabaley et al. 2019). The study which generated this example claimed that this traffic was representative of similar topics across Wikipedia language versions. This image is public domain as documented in Wikimedia Commons at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wikipedia_traffic_to_article_for_sepsis_2015-2018.png.

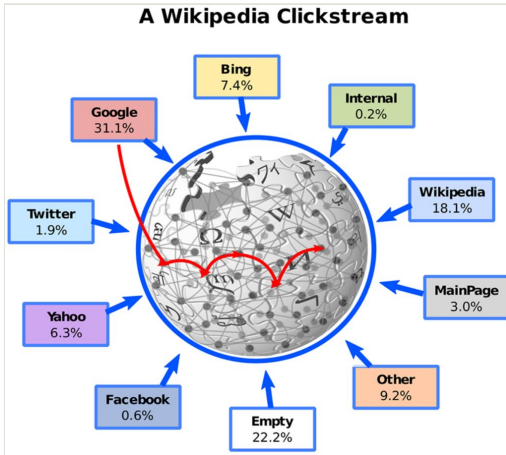


Figure 4.

Readers often enter Wikipedia through search engines. Once in Wikipedia, they click links in Wikipedia articles to access other, related Wikipedia articles (Rodi et al. 2017). This image by Rodi GC, Loreto V, and Tria F is shared with a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license as documented in Wikimedia Commons at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Search_strategies_of_Wikipedia_readers - Datasets under consideration - detail.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Search_strategies_of_Wikipedia_readers_-_Datasets_under_consideration_-_detail.png)

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Traffic report

The most viewed articles of 2023

Figure 5.

This panel from Wikipedia's newspaper, *The Signpost*, shows the January 2024 "[Traffic report](#)". Articles in this report often mirror popular topics in the media. This image is public domain as documented in Wikimedia Commons at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wikipedia_Signpost_2024-01-10_Traffic_report_-_title.png.

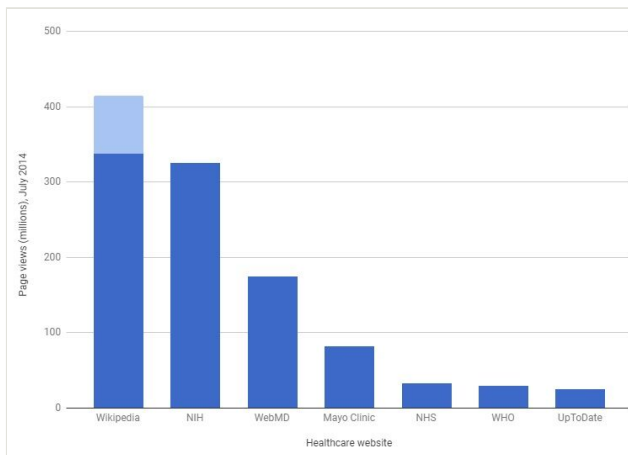


Figure 6.

An analysis in 2015 found that Wikipedia's medical information was more popular as measured by pageview data than the media offerings of other healthcare websites (Heilman and West 2015). This image is public domain as documented in Wikimedia Commons at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pageviews_to_healthcare_websites_2014.jpg.



Figure 7. Data indicates that readers use Wikipedia as a gateway to accessing information resources elsewhere (Maggio et al. 2017, Piccardi et al. 2021). This image by Tiziano Piccardi is shared with a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license as documented on Wikimedia Commons at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:TizianoWikipediaGateway.pdf&page=17> .

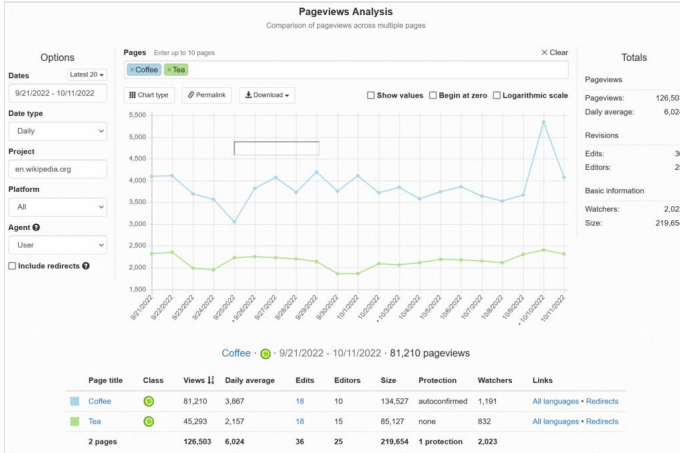


Figure 8.

The [Pageviews Analysis](#) tool is a Wikimedia web tool which gives [pageview](#) data for Wikipedia articles. Depicted here is a comparative data visualization showing that over a time period, more Wikipedia readers viewed the article for "Coffee" as compared to the one for "Tea". This image is public domain as documented in Wikimedia Commons at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pageviews Analysis - coffee versus tea.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pageviews_Analysis_-_coffee_versus_tea.png)

Table 1.

Articles in this collection make brief but significant and original claims about readership of Wikipedia. They all talk either about readers going to Wikipedia, or about editors publishing in Wikipedia to reach readers, but none of them connect these statements to a general conclusion such as, "Traffic reports indicate that Wikipedia is popular, therefore publishing in Wikipedia is reasonable as a communication strategy."

Count	Category	Focus	Citation
1	web traffic rank	ranked top 50	Wales 2006
2	web traffic rank	ranked 37 in 2006, Alexa	Knowledge at Wharton Podcast 2006
3	web traffic rank	ranked 11 in 2007, Alexa	Dalby 2007
4	web traffic rank	ranked 7 in 2009, Alexa	Konieczny 2010
5	web traffic rank	ranked 7 in 2015, Alexa	Davenport 2015
6	web traffic rank	ranked 12 in 2021, Alexa	Economist 2021
7	web traffic rank	ranked 6 in 2006, Comscore	Perez 2007
8	web traffic rank	ranked top in 2005, Hitwise	Burns 2005
9	list of popular Wikipedia articles	review from Pew Research Center	Anderson et al. 2016
10	list of popular Wikipedia articles	review from Yahoo!	Canal 2020
11	list of popular Wikipedia articles	review from BuzzFeed	Stopera 2020
12	list of popular Wikipedia articles	review from Crunchyroll	CharAznableOfficial 2020
13	list of popular Wikipedia articles	review from Gizmodo	Wodinsky 2020
14	list of popular Wikipedia articles	review from First Monday	Spoerri 2007
15	list of popular Wikipedia articles	review from India Times	Sharma 2021
16	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, science	Simons et al. 2024

17	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, feminism/science	Kutz 2022
18	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, feminism	Meyer 2022
19	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, feminism	Sentilles 2014
20	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, feminism	Sisley 2017
21	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, feminism	Edwards 2015
22	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, heritage	Marwick and Smith 2021
23	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, LGBT culture	Rasberry 2022
24	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, LGBT culture	Wexelbaum 2019
25	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, LGBT culture	Miquel-Ribé et al. 2021
26	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, activists	Konieczny 2009
27	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, activists	Duncan 2020
28	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, activists	Montez 2017
29	Wikipedia reaches audience	information sharing, activists	Gharbeia 2020 De Sabbata et al. 2021
30	Wikipedia reaches audience	student editing	Xing and Vetter 2020
31	Wikipedia reaches audience	student editing	Ackerly and Michelitch 2022
32	Wikipedia reaches audience	student editing	The American Cultures Center 2020
33	Wikipedia reaches audience	student editing	Philips 2015
34	Wikipedia reaches audience	student editing	Gharbeia 2020
35	traffic to Wikipedia	celebrity death	Steiner et al. 2013
36	traffic to Wikipedia	celebrity death	Zhang et al. 2019

37	traffic to Wikipedia	celebrity death	Shiels 2009
38	traffic to Wikipedia	celebrity death	Harrison 2018
39	traffic to Wikipedia	celebrity death	Mahroum et al. 2018
40	traffic to Wikipedia	celebrity death	Bragazzi et al. 2017
41	traffic to Wikipedia	celebrity death	Naik et al. 2021
42	traffic to Wikipedia	celebrity death	Mondia et al. 2022
43	traffic to Wikipedia	celebrity death	Goldenberg 2018
44	traffic to Wikipedia	popular interest in animals	Roll et al. 2016
45	traffic to Wikipedia	popular interest in animals	Mittermeier et al. 2019
46	traffic to Wikipedia	popular interest in animals	Mittermeier et al. 2021a
47	traffic to Wikipedia	popular interest in animals	Mittermeier et al. 2021b
48	traffic to Wikipedia	popular interest in animals	Fukano et al. 2020
49	traffic to Wikipedia	popular interest in animals	Nolan et al. 2022
50	traffic to Wikipedia	popular interest in cultural heritage	Eurostat 2016
51	traffic to Wikipedia	popular interest in natural heritage	Falk and Hagsten 2022
52	traffic to Wikipedia	popular interest in natural heritage	Guedes-Santos et al. 2021
53	traffic to Wikipedia	popular interest in uncertain topics	Sepulveda 2022
54	traffic to Wikipedia	popular interest in uncertain topics	Rauwerda 2022
55	traffic to Wikipedia	prediction of financial markets	Wei and Wang 2016
56	Wikidata traffic data for forecasting	prediction of financial markets	Gómez-Martínez et al. 2022
57	Wikidata traffic data for forecasting	prediction of financial markets	Novet 2013

58	Wikidata traffic data for forecasting	prediction of elections	Smith and Gustafson 2017
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