

# Wiki goes to war

By Mat Hardy

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When Israeli troops crossed into Lebanon in July 2006, the world's most pervasive encyclopaedia followed closely behind. Now, long after the ceasefire has been enacted, Wikipedia's contributors and readers are still fighting their own war as they strive to come up with the definitive article on the conflict.

Since launching nearly six years ago, Wikipedia has exhibited sustained growth as an internet encyclopaedic resource. Particularly over the last two years, the number of people consulting Wikipedia has risen dramatically. Yet amongst the millions of pages, the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict is one of the most revised and popular topics of all, ranking even above the Second World War. Why is this and what do Wikipedia and its daughter project, Wikinews, have to offer history, academia and journalism in their coverage of the Middle East?

## What is Wikipedia?

Wikipedia is an open source, free content, web-based encyclopaedia. Its main distinction is that its pages can be written by anyone. Ordinary members of the public can contribute to any of Wikipedia's 1.5 million 'articles' or indeed start a new article from scratch, whether or not those contributors are expert or qualified in the topic.<sup>1</sup> Any subsequent contributor may then edit, remove or add to the content of those before them. In this way, a process of peer review and fact checking occurs. Whilst the English language version of Wikipedia is the most expansive and receives about 60% of all traffic, Wikipedia editions exist in 250 different languages, though many of these have only a handful of articles.<sup>2</sup>

One of the central tenets of Wikipedia is that of "Neutral Point of View."<sup>3</sup> In every article, this goal of objectivity is striven for and much of the editing that occurs to the articles is intended to enforce this approach.

The success of Wikipedia has spawned a number of

offshoot projects that employ the much the same principles and software. Like Wikipedia, these individual 'projects' are all administered by the Wikimedia Foundation, a not-for-profit corporation based in Florida. One of these derivative projects is Wikinews, which will be examined later in the article.

## Why should we care?

It is important for both academics and media practitioners to at least be cognizant of those Wikipedia articles pertinent to their spheres of interest. (Ideally, as experts, they should also attempt to contribute to and review these articles.) The reason for this is Wikipedia's increasing utilisation and growth. Google searches are now routinely returning Wikipedia entries at the top of their results list. Many people will have read a Wikipedia article without even recognising it as such. As more Internet users read Wikipedia articles, the site's profile is raised. As this occurs, new contributors are attracted, Wikipedia grows and the cycle recurs. At the time of writing, the Wikipedia domain was the 12th most visited in the world.<sup>4</sup> (In comparison, CNN's website ranks at 35th, and the New York Times languishes at 102nd.) On a given day, 5-6% of all Internet users around the globe will view a Wikipedia page.<sup>5</sup> Around 18,000 people request page views on Wikipedia every second of the day.<sup>6</sup>

Given that amount of current usage and the likely future increase in traffic, quite clearly Wikipedia is a significant provider of web-based information, either in its own right or as an accompaniment to other content. Its increasing appearance as a reference (or source of plagiarism) in student essays will be familiar to many teachers. Links to Wikipedia content are also becoming common from online news sites by way of providing background information to stories. The thinly disguised use of Wikipedia content to inform or fill news stories is also prevalent.

With this in mind, it would seem that both academics and media professionals alike need to care about Wikipedia and its content, lest they risk dismissing the means through which a considerable portion of the web-connected world gains its information. Rejecting Wikipedia because it does not fit conventional notions of peer review or journalistic professionalism is dangerous. An examination of

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how Wikipedia has treated recent events in Israel and Lebanon offers proof of this.

### The 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict in Wikipedia

The 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict is something of a phenomenon in Wikipedia, being one of the most comprehensive international relations / current affairs articles in the whole project. It offers a good example of what Wikipedia can offer to those concerned with Middle East events.

Although it is hard to measure the objectivity of the article in concrete terms, it does seem to be very neutral in tone.<sup>7</sup> A chronology of the major events of the conflict is presented, sourced mainly from multiple news articles. Criticisms of all combatants are included, along with the source of those criticisms. Controversial or disputed claims are mentioned as being such, along with supporting evidence or refutation.

At time of writing, the Wikipedia article on the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict runs at approximately 7,000 words. There are over 200 citations to the content, mostly to news stories or data provided by NGOs. The page contains links to hundreds of other Wikipedia articles, including those covering all significant actors in the conflict, past events, the relevant UN resolutions, the religions involved and many more relevant items. There are an estimated quarter of a million words of editorial discussion about the article, archived into 33 separate pages.

However, whilst not wanting to become too mired in statistics, the true surprise in Wikipedia's treatment of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict is the number of times the article has been edited. The number of 'revisions' an article has provides an indication of the level of interest the topic generates, since revisions take more time and effort than simply reading an article. As of the beginning of December, the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict article was Wikipedia's fifth most edited article of all time. Out of over 1.5 million articles in the English Wikipedia, no international relations issue has received more attention than this.

Ranking only behind George W. Bush, Wikipedia, the USA and Jesus, the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict article has been edited more times than those pages concerned with the Second World War, Adolf Hitler and

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the 9/11 attacks.<sup>8</sup> For an article that covers what was really quite a minor Middle East clash, the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict seem to have an intriguing hold on Wikipedia users.

Therefore it must be reiterated that Wikipedia needs to be taken seriously as a reference source. Even if the vast numbers who are contributing to and reading the articles are dismissed out of hand (and they should not be), then the quality and depth of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict page itself should be testimonial to Wikipedia's worth as a resource for those interested in the Middle East.

Furthermore, in the case of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict, the comprehensive Wikipedia article fills the time and knowledge gap between news reporting of the events and the weeks, months and years that may elapse before books and scholarly articles are published.

Whilst academic reservations about citing Wikipedia as a reference are commonplace, in the case of the Middle East, the project has its worth as a 'gateway'. The lay approach allows students, journalists and the public to gain a quick overview of topics, whilst the article citations often provide an indication of what material is available for deeper study and reference, should the reader be interested in pursuing further,

more authoritative information. For the diligent researcher, Wikipedia is ideal when used in this fashion, particularly when approaching new topics where one has little prior knowledge. Given a state of little expert knowledge, the risks of gaining such an initial overview of a Middle East topic from Wikipedia would seem far less than picking a random book or journal article on the region.

The use of Wikipedia as a gateway by some though is dwarfed by its use as the sole reference source for the multitudes. Very few people have access to the expensive institutional subscriptions that provide peer-reviewed journals, nor do they have the time and inclination to read them. For this vast public, Wikipedia may be their primary source of information on the Middle East. It is free and easily accessible and for all of these reasons it must command our attention.

### What is Wikinews?

A much less well-known project under the Wikipedia umbrella is Wikinews. This is an attempt to apply the Wikipedia principles of public collaboration and objectivity but towards news reporting instead of encyclopaedia writing. Since it was launched in December 2004, Wikinews has provided about 7,400 articles, all written by its users. Two years on it is averaging about eight news articles a day, though the topic coverage can be quite disparate.

Wikinews lists some of its objectives as:

- To always provide a neutral point of view, “ensuring our reporting is as fair as possible”
- To ensure that all sources and facts are cited “to maintain the highest standards of reliability”
- To avoid opinion and commentary in its articles (“*if you want to tell the world what you think, try blogging*”).<sup>9</sup>
- To (eventually) provide an alternative to proprietary news agencies like the Associated Press or Reuters.<sup>10</sup>

Whilst Wikinews maintains that it welcomes original content from first-hand contributors, the vast majority of its stories at this stage are of the ‘synthesis’ type, where multiple news stories from traditional outlets or official press releases have been combined and re-edited.



August 28, 2007: Hands removing and reattaching jigsaw pieces of the Wikipedia logo. *The Daily Telegraph*. © Newspix / Dave Follett

### The 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict in Wikinews

Wikinews provided many news stories on the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict, starting off on the very first day of the Israeli entry into Lebanon. From this point forward there were news stories on most days of the conflict, mostly of a type that amalgamated the day's events into a single story with sub-headings. However it must be stated that coverage did not occur on every day of the conflict.<sup>11</sup> The nature of Wikinews means that articles will only be written if the contributors are

inspired to do so. If no-one feels compelled to cover a Middle East crisis on a particular day, it will be ignored.

In cases where a news story was presented, the depth and quality of the coverage varied. It is worth examining one of the more comprehensive stories provided by Wikinews on the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict, as this will illustrate some of the strengths and weaknesses of the site as a whole. The article that appeared on July 30 2006 (*ICRC: 28 bodies, 19 children, pulled from rubble after Israeli airstrike, Qana*) will serve as an apt model.<sup>12</sup>

This article is of about 1,200 words in length; longer than many news reports on the same story would have run in an online format. Accompanying this were about 2,500 words of editorial discussion, much of it debating the relative merits of various Lebanese and Israeli sources that provided the bulk of the information. The article was edited over a period of about five days, though most of the editing occurred in the first two or three days. There were 183 revisions to the story and 13 sources were cited. Most of these sources were news organisations (the BBC, Reuters, al-Jazeera, Haaretz, Washington Post) or other bodies (IDF, Red Cross). There were about 30 hyperlinks (some repeated) within the body of the text which referred on to articles within Wikipedia. Probably the most useful of these in terms of background information or curiosity value was the Wikipedia article on the 1996 shelling of a refugee compound in the same town.

The balance of the article is commendable. The incident at Qana was one of the most controversial of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict, with many claims and counter-claims made by both sides as to who was most to blame, a disputed chronology and speculation as to how accurate the reporting of the scene was. The article evolved to deal with these topics, presenting and attributing the claims without endorsing any particular side, despite some quite vehement editorial discussion.

## Strengths

In the case of the Qana article, some of the benefits of the Wikinews approach are apparent.

Firstly, the article shows the strength of Wikinews in offering a global perspective on a story. Since Wikinews contributors hail from all over the world,

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local angles and comment can be added. The Qana story contains references from leaders in France, The United Kingdom, The Vatican, Iran, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. Other Wikinews stories on the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict contain comment and reaction from even more diverse sources, such as Finland, China and Canada. These additions are helpful for gaining a wider viewpoint on how the world is reacting to events in the Middle East. The international range of such content would not typically be represented in a story provided by one's local media.

Secondly, the longevity of Wikinews represents an invaluable resource for retrospective examination. Most online news sources do not offer archive access indefinitely and/or free of charge. The fact that a year on from the events in Qana we can view the Wikinews article without impediment is a significant benefit of the project.

This longevity also applies to the editing record. The Wiki interface can display every single revision to an article. These can be viewed and compared with the prior and subsequent versions. In this way we can see how a story was developed and edited, how biases crept in or were taken out and what information may have been deleted.<sup>13</sup> Quite obviously this is a function not available in conventional media.

Thirdly, the association with the other Wiki projects allows lots of integration and cross referencing in a Wikinews story, most commonly to relevant Wikipedia articles. As discussed earlier, the best example of this in the Qana story is the link to the Wikipedia page that covers the events in the same town of 1996.

These benefits make Wikinews a useful resource for reporting events in the Middle East. However, there are inevitably some drawbacks to every system. Some of these are also apparent in the Qana article.

## Weaknesses

The first and most obvious flaw to Wikinews is that most of the content is sourced by combining news agency stories along with the same press releases they used. In this type of 'synthesis story' very little new information is on offer compared to the conventional news media. Although, as mentioned, Wikinews states that it welcomes original content, personal reporting is rare. In the case of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict, it seems non-existent. This would seem to be at odds with the project's stated aim of providing an alternative to conventional news sources.

Part of the issue with this lack of original content stems from the obsession with citation that is apparent in all Wiki projects. Since Wikinews insists that everything must be cited, it would seem an impossibility that original content could be included at all. This paradox resembles the cynic's view of academic writing: "Original research is required, as long as you can prove that somebody else has published it before." The guidelines and demands that Wikinews places upon original reporting are more stringent than most professional journalists would encounter, and it seems likely that for many prospective contributors of original reporting, this would be a disincentive.<sup>14</sup> In any case, the open editorial functions mean that even the most well-executed original reporting could potentially be sub-edited away; certainly a further discouragement. These factors are likely the cause of Wikinews' lack of original reporting from the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict, as well as in general.

The policy of Neutral Point Of View is the second major drawback to the Wikinews approach. Whilst it may seem laudable for a news producer to be neutral, the lengths to which this creed is taken in Wikinews

becomes somewhat self-defeating. In the desire to be neutral, many of the articles are over-revised to the point of ludicrousness. The Qana story, with 183 revisions is a good example of this and turns out to be Wikinews' 15th most revised story ever. Over-processed writing, lengthy but weak headlines and paragraphs verging on the artistic style of a legal document, all make for a dull read. Good writing is an essential part of news coverage and it does appear that Wikinews is 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater' in its fixation with neutrality.

The multiple revisions can also mean that Wikipedia stories are often not 'finished' until well after the event has lost currency. The five days taken to complete the definitive version of the Qana story is unusual by Wikinews' standards. However, the lesser delays (24 – 48 hours) usually exhibited are still lengthy by the standards of conventional news organisations, particularly those operating in on-line environments.

This over-processing of the content is linked to a third flaw with Wikinews; that is the lack of professional writing skills that many contributors exhibit. To be fair, many are writing in their non-native language, but this cannot be taken into account if we are judging Wikinews as a provider of English-language news content. The lack of journalistic skills provides for a weak foundation in the article writing, which is further exacerbated by the multiple revisions that the pieces go through.

A final fault that is readily identifiable with Wikinews' coverage is its unevenness. With the choice of the day's stories in the hands of an irregular band of contributors, coverage of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict was variable and narrow. A professional news organisation would devote resources according to the size of a story and its perceived importance to their target demographic. In Wikinews, the resources assign themselves according to their own interest and this results in a kind of artificial equality between major international events and local stories of limited world significance. For example, on the same day that the Qana news story appeared, the following items made up the rest of the articles on offer by Wikinews:

- *Gay teens assaulted and fined by police in Romania*

- *Cassini photographs possible lakes on Saturn's moon, Titan*
- *James Bond set at Pinewood Studios destroyed by fire*
- *Charles Kennedy rejects leadership allegations*
- *Australian PM mobbed by anti-Israel protesters.*<sup>15</sup>

Part of the challenge here may be that online communities tend to coalesce around shared passions and interests. In trying to be generalist, Wikinews perhaps does not evoke the enthusiasm that sites dedicated to a particular issue might.<sup>16</sup> If Wikinews' contributors are united only by an interest in news writing and editing, then performing these tasks on one story is much the same as performing them on another. Whatever may be the case, with such erratic content, Wikinews obviously does not provide the depth of coverage to attract a broad audience.

Overall, the flaws of the Wikinews system combine to represent formidable barriers to its utility as a news source. Whilst Wikinews does have advantages, its chances seem slim of ever being the source of choice for those interested in Middle East news and current affairs. Axel Bruns, speculating on what role Wikinews could play in global news dissemination makes an apt summary of the project's progress so far:

*In its current format...Wikinews has so far failed to answer the question 'why Wikinews?'*<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

Both Wikipedia and Wikinews have something to offer in their coverage of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict. At this stage though, Wikipedia is the more valuable of the two.

Whilst Wikipedia is not a threat to the peer reviewed publications of academia, it is definitely a competitor, not only by dint of the number of people who consult it, but the quality of some of the articles in their own right. The accessibility of Wikipedia makes it a well utilised first port of call for many students, media practitioners and members of the public. In the case of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict, the level of interest in writing and editing material within Wikipedia is phenomenal.

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In contrast, Wikinews seems unsuccessful in achieving its aims and definitely would not be a likely starting point for people seeking news about the Middle East. Its approach has some strengths, but these are outweighed by its dearth of original content and its bland style. It is however a good resource for viewing events retrospectively because of its archiving structure.

Both these two sites (and the various other projects under the Wiki Foundation) are definitely worth the further attention of academics and media professionals. Just as many professors and journalists were caught unaware by the rise of the internet and its impact, many will likely be surprised by the ascendancy of citizen-based informational sources like Wikipedia. What they now dismiss as amateur and worthless may have a direct effect on their professional spheres in the very near future. The beginnings of this can be seen in the fact that in the case of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict, the Wiki sites are providing some quite reputable and comprehensive content that can only add to people's understanding of the region.