Something Wiki This Way Comes: How collaborative editing is changing the face of online LDS apologetics

Back in 1978, I was a student at BYU, before my mission, and I found myself at the BYU Bookstore. I'd always been interested in LDS history – I was fascinated by it. I thought it was just an amazing thing. The history of the Church. So I was browsing through the stacks at the bookstore, and I ran across a book. It was a history, a biography of Joseph Smith, Jr. I thought, "This is cool, I'll take a look at this." This was the book: No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, by Fawn Brodie. Now I was in the BYU Bookstore, remember, so I pulled this book down and thought, "OK, I've never heard of Fawn Brodie, but this looks interesting," and I started thumbing through the pages. It didn't take me very long to realize that Fawn Brodie really wasn't a believer in Joseph Smith as a prophet. But she was a good writer, and she was easy to read, and so I just kept browsing through the book. Then I got back to the appendices. I think it was Appendix C that kind of stopped me cold. The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith, Jr. Now that was new to me. I'd never heard of that before. I thought, "Really?" But there was page after page of information about different people that were Joseph Smith's wives. I came to realize that there must be something to this. Brigham Young practiced polygamy, and Joseph Smith must have instituted it. I incorporated that into my view of Church history and moved on.

But that was 1978, and finding that information took a bit of work, for me to go to the bookstore and actually find the book, and find that information. Well, now its not so hard, is it? Now, we just go to our nearest computer. We go to Google. We go to our phones. We type in "Joseph Smith." And what comes up? 26,000,000 results in about one-tenth of a second. Twenty-six million results in one-tenth of a second. Now let me ask you this, because I'm sure that many of you…maybe you have "Binged," some of you have even "Yahooed," but I bet every one of you "Googles." "Google" has become a verb. And, how many of you would check all twenty-six million results? I know I haven't. What you look at on Google is what comes up on the first page, and what comes up on the first page for "Joseph Smith?" The first one, thankfully, is a Church web site "Joseph Smith." But look at what number two is: Something called "Wikipedia."

Wikipedia and Google are good "friends" in these search results. It's very likely that if you go Google and type in just about any subject, that one of the first results, if not the number one result, will be Wikipedia.

You can look up anything in Wikipedia, and I mean literally *anything*. You don't believe me? There's an article in Wikipedia titled "Intentionally Blank Page." Now, just because an article exists doesn't mean that it *ought* to exist, but in this case, somebody felt that it was notable enough that we needed a Wikipedia article about "Intentionally Blank Page."

"Uncombable Hair Syndrome." I bet that some of you have been wondering about that one, and have "googled" that, and I can assure you that if you ever do need to "google" that, that Wikipedia has an answer for you.

"Fox Tossing," a game which involves the throwing of live foxes from one person to another.

But Wikipedia is also useful. A student diagnoses his rare heart condition after being rejected by ten doctors by looking it up in Wikipedia: "Wiki Fixed Sickie."[1]

Wikipedia carries some credibility. A student a couple of years ago decided to test Wikipedia by inserting a quote…it was a phony quote, that was supposed to have come from a famous composer that had recently died. He created a quote, inserted it into that composer's Wikipedia biography, and then watched to see what would happen. What happened was, the quote ended up being attributed to the composer and was quickly copied into his obituary on web sites all over

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[1] Emma Little, "Wiki Fixed Sickie," *The Sun*, August 21, 2011. http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/3502879/Man-fobbed-off-by-10-docs-finds-cure-on-Wikipedia.html

the world. Now, to Wikipedia's credit, the Wikipedia administrators realized that the quote had no source, and they removed it. Yet, one month passed and nobody in the media seemed to notice the difference until the student himself finally came forward and said, "Hey guys, it's a fake!" And then they removed it.[2] That is the power that Wikipedia has to influence the media or any of us.

What is a "wiki?" It's not a chair that you sit on in your family room. It's a database. It's a collection of articles. It can be a very large collection of articles. Wikipedia is one of the largest collection of articles in a wiki anywhere. They have thousands and thousands of articles.

Here are three examples of wikis: We've got MormonWiki, the FAIR Wiki, and, of course, Wikipedia. MormonWiki is sponsored by the More Good Foundation, and it is a collection of articles which is intended to describe issues related to the Church in a faith-promoting manner. The FAIR Wiki is FAIR's own wiki, and I'll talk more about that later. Wikipedia is what we're going to talk about now.

The collection of articles in Wikipedia is interesting because it involves what is called "collaborative editing." Now, what happens is, let's suppose you have a Wikipedia article on "Reformed Egyptian." A person can initiate or create that article…say they're on the West Coast. The person that creates that article does his best to put together an article and source it, but then somebody else can come along from Europe, and they can edit the article. Then somebody on the East Coast can make their edits to the article. Even somebody in Asia can come in and edit the article. This is collaborative editing. You have people all over the world coming in to edit these articles together. Now, that's an interesting situation.

I would like to ask you the question, "Who in the world would use Wikipedia to learn about the Church?"

> *"[Trey] Parker and [Matt] Stone attributed a mass of their knowledge on the religion to "lots of Wikipedia time," as they put it.*

> *Shameless fanatics of the collegiate-banned online encyclopedia, Parker and Stone went on to share, "the Latter-Day Saint Church has its own Wikipedia, so they make it very easy for someone who wants to learn a lot about their church."[3]*

Well, that brings up the question, "Does the Church control LDS articles in Wikipedia?" The answer is, "They don't." Who actually creates and edits Wikipedia articles about our church? *Anyone.* Anyone who has spare time and is motivated enough to work at one of the world's most popular non-paying jobs…Wikipedia editor! And believe me, it *is* a popular job!

Is Wikipedia neutral? If you go and look on Wikipedia, and look up an LDS-related subject, will it be neutral? Wikipedia policy states that everything in the article should be Neutral-point-of-view. This is abbreviated as NPOV. That's a term you'll see thrown around, and that also means that POV means "you're biased." So, if somebody's adding POV to an article, that means they're trying to bias the article.

This is really easy when editing the article "Cat" or "Door." These are not necessarily controversial subjects, although somebody told me yesterday that "Cat" actually *is* a controversial subject. It's not so easy to maintain neutrality when editing the article "Joseph Smith" or "First Vision." *That* is when all of the fun begins.

Now I have developed a model that describes the editing process that one can see on LDS-related Wikipedia articles. It looks something like this:

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[2] "Student's Wikipedia hoax dupes newspapers: report," ABC News, May 7, 2009.
http://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-05-07/students-wikipedia-hoax-dupes-newspapers-report/1674760
[3] Kate Evans, "South Park creators make Broadway debut," *The Massachusetts Daily Collegian*, March 23, 2011. http://dailycollegian.com/2011/03/23/south-park-creators-make-broadway-debut/

Just imagine three people sitting in a circle. One of them is a believer, one of them is a critic, and the other one is a non-Mormon who really knows nothing about the Church. And imagine that they're passing that Rubik's Cube around the circle and that each one gets a chance to make three or four moves before they pass it on to the next person. And the objective of each person is, of course, to try to get their color to cross the face of that cube. That pretty much describes the editing process on Wikipedia articles about the Church.

The new editor sets sail toward the Wiki article with high hopes, thinking that he or she is well-armed. The reality is often very, very different. They don't see, buried below the surface, the wreckage of all of the past edit wars, nor do they see the nuclear sub that is ready to blast them out of the water the first time they try to land.

Wikipedia isn't just what you see on the surface. You may see an article about Joseph Smith, but the real action, the really fun stuff that occurs on Wikipedia, occurs behind the scenes on what's called the "Talk Page." If you click the "Discussion" tab up at the top, you will see page after page of discussion, and you will see archives of these discussions. As they fill up, they get moved into archives. You will see everything that was ever discussed about this article.
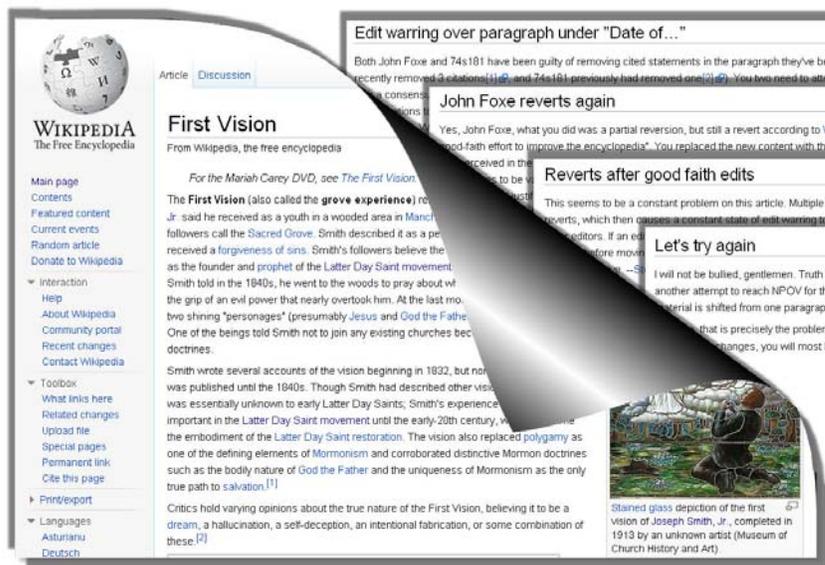
You can see things such as "Edit warring over paragraph…," or "John Foxe reverts again," "Reverts after good faith edits," and "Let's try again." Just imagine a message board which is filled with critics and believers, and then imagine that those critics and believers have to collaborate in order to produce a written article. That's Wikipedia.

Some things heard on the talk page:

> "[Y]ou are even simpler than I imagined; as far as 'guffaws' go, look in the mirror ...your lds church is more often the subject of ridicule here, by many [Wikipedia] editors."[4]

This is a rather choice Wikipedia editor who went by the screen name "Duke53," and after five years of harassing LDS editors, actually managed to get himself permanently banned. But, knowing Wikipedia, he'll be back.

From a Wikipedia administrator:

> "I'd love to ban all Mormons from editing those articles due to bias, but that's never going to happen, so in this case we just have to let the opposing parties work it out between themselves."[5]

Well, not everybody is like that. This guy comes back and goes,

> "I wonder how far your logic goes. Would you ban all scientists from editing articles about science? Would you ban all doctors from editing articles about health? Would you ban all Native Americans from editing articles about their tribes? I hope you see where this logic leads..." [6]

Now, I don't know whether that's an LDS editor or not, but he saw things as they should have been seen.

Heard on the talk page:

> "Frankly…every time you start citing Wikipedia rules, I tune them out as Mormon smokescreen."[7]

That's a curious one. "Mormon smokescreen," and at this point I'll introduce you to the editor who calls John Foxe. "John Foxe" is not his real name. It is a screen name, a pseudonym, that he uses when he edits. He is actually a professor of history at Bob Jones University, an active Evangelical, [8] and he has taken editorial control over several high-profile LDS articles, among them "Joseph Smith," "First Vision," and "Golden Plates." If you show up on one of those articles, you will, very likely, with 99% probability, have your edits reverted by John Foxe.

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[4] Wikipedia editor "Duke53," posted to the talk page of Wikipedia article "Joseph Smith," 15 January 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Joseph_Smith&diff=prev&oldid=338030693

[5] Wikipedia administrator "JzG," posted to his talk page June 11, 2007. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_talk:JzG/Archives/June_2007

[6] Wikipedia editor "Friendly Neighbor," posted to the talk page of editor JzG June 11, 2007. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_talk:JzG/Archives/June_2007

[7] Wikipedia editor "John Foxe," posted on Wikipedia article "First Vision" talk page on 23 July 2007. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:First_Vision/Archive_6#Breaking_the_collaborative_truce

[8] Michael De Groote, "Wiki Wars: In battle to define beliefs, Mormons and foes wage battle on Wikipedia," *Deseret News*, January 30, 2011. http://www.deseretnews.com/m/article/700105517

This is a typical summary of an exchange by an LDS editor seen on the talk page after he and a number of other editors were contending with John Foxe. The LDS editor summarized it like this:

A summary of the preceding discussion:

Me: *Here's a statement that gives a good balanced summary of Smith's background.*

Everyone but Foxe: *Okay.*

Foxe: *It has to mention treasure-seeking.*

Everyone else: *No, that's undue detail for the lede.*

Foxe: *Let's compromise by weakening the reference to Christianity and adding a statement about treasure-seeking.*

Everyone else: *No, that's undue detail for the lede.*

Foxe: *I'd be willing to throw out the sentence about Smith's background and just to have a statement about treasure-seeking.*

Everyone else: *[Heads explode.]*

alanyst *18:53, 11 June 2011 (UTC)* [9]

This is the best summary of interaction with John Foxe that I've ever seen an LDS editor post on the talk page.

Wikipedia has a rule that you should not perform original research:

Wikipedia articles should rely mainly on published reliable secondary sources and, to a lesser extent, on tertiary sources.

All interpretive claims, analyses, or synthetic claims about primary sources must be referenced to a secondary source, rather than original analysis of the primary-source material by Wikipedia editors. [10]

Well, what does that mean to us? It means that primary sources should not be interpreted directly. In an article about Joseph Smith this means that Joseph Smith's own words are excluded, and Wikipedia editors must rely upon what published authors say about Joseph Smith. Now that means Fawn Brodie is back, and this time she has a wiki.

No original research? So how does that end up in practice? Well, here's a line from Wikipedia article "First Vision":

"However, when in October 1830 the author Peter Bauder interviewed Smith for a religious book he was writing, he said Smith was unable to recount a 'Christian experience.'"

OK, it's a statement about what Peter Bauder said, but the wiki editor decided to add his own spin:

"Thus, either Smith did not view this early remission of sins or vision as a "Christian experience", he forgot about the experience when asked by Bauder, or Smith and Bauder somehow miscommunicated." [11]

Now, this was not written by John Foxe…this was written by a LDS Wikipedia editor. Even in his original research, which he's not supposed to do, the wiki editor neglects to consider Bauder's

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[9] Wikipedia article "Joseph Smith," Talk page archive 18, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Joseph_Smith/Archive_18

[10] Wikipedia article "Wikipedia: No Original Research." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No_original_research

[11] Wikipedia editor "COgden," edit to Wikipedia article "First Vision" November 20, 2009. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First_Vision&diff=326979723&oldid=326976733

own attitude, which is: "Among these imposters there has one arisen by the name of Joseph Smith, Jr. ," from a book called *The Kingdom and Gospel of Jesus Christ: Contrasted with That of Anti-Christ.* So, his original research, which he shouldn't have done, wasn't even accurate.

Here's how an author's opinion can become "Wikipedia fact." The source is D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*. In that book on page 322, Quinn calls the Smith family "unchurched Christians," who possessed seer stones, and a lot of other magic items. This is how that source is used in Wikipedia:

> "No members of the Smith family were church members in 1820, the reported date of the First Vision."[12]

The implication being that Joseph Smith made up his story about members of his family joining the Presbyterians in 1820. So, just because something is sourced in Wikipedia, doesn't mean its sourced *well*. It is possible to reinterpret those sources the way you want, because, Quinn never said that no members of the Smith family were church members. He said that they were "unchurched Christians."

How about synthesis? Let's take a source from Richard Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, in which he said,

> "The great revival of 1816 and 1817, which nearly doubled the number of Palmyra Presbyterians, was in progress when the Smiths arrived."[13]

We know this documented fact. Source number two, Dan Vogel, Early Mormon Documents,

> Indeed, it was the revival of 1824-25… rather than the revival of 1817 or the one he 'remembered' for 1820. "[14]

How are these sources used in Wikipedia? Wikipedia states, based on these sources, that,

> "In the Palmyra area itself, **the only large multi-denominational revivals** occurred in 1816-1817 and 1824-1825." [60][15]

The implication intended is that Joseph Smith did not experience a "revival" or "excitement of religion" in the area in 1820. This is what Wikipedia is *implying* using those sources, which are synthesized to say something that they actually didn't say.

The *Palymra Register* notes the occurrence of a Methodist camp meeting in the area in June 1820, but even this fact doesn't *quite* make it into the Wikipedia article. The Wikipedia article states that,

> "D. Michael Quinn notes a Methodist camp meeting in Palmyra in June 1818."

But deep in the footnotes, what this "fact" is sourced to is an article called **"Joseph Smith's Experience of a Methodist 'Camp-Meeting' in 1820,"** by D. Michael Quinn. So the only mention of this camp meeting in 1820 happens to be very deep within the footnotes, and it's supporting a statement in Wikipedia that actually doesn't quite match what it ought to say.

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[12] Wikipedia editor "John Foxe," edit made to Wikipedia article "First Vision" July 13, 2007. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First_Vision&diff=144397418&oldid=144305456
[13] Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, p. 36
[14] Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, pp. 26, 58-60. quoted by Wikipedia editor "John Foxe," November 17, 2007. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First_Vision&diff=172154162&oldid=172151190
[15] Wikipedia editor "Bytebear," edit made to Wikipedia article "First Vision" November 2, 2007. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First_Vision&diff=168821062&oldid=168797668

How about discrediting the sources? Often you'll find statements like this in LDS Wikipedia articles,

> "In the opinion of non-Mormon author Wesley Walters, apologists for the Mormon position treat Smith's reference …"

Now, why ask the *non-Mormon Wesley Walters* what the *Mormon apologists* think?

> "LDS apologist Milton Backman wrote that …"

> "According to Mormon apologist Larry C. Porter…"

So the word "apologist," which Wikipedia editors tend to realize is going to be misunderstood as "apologizing," makes its way into the article so that it makes it look like those that are defending the LDS position are actually "apologizing" for it. And, in fact, in many cases you will see critics labeled as "scholars," and LDS scholars labeled as "apologists."

How about using some real quotes from LDS scholars? How about this quote from LDS historian James B. Allen,

> "The fact that none of the available contemporary writings about Joseph Smith in the 1830s, none of the publications of the Church in that decade, and no contemporary journal or correspondence yet discovered mentions the story of the first **vision is convincing evidence that at best it received only limited circulation in those early days**."

OK, that's fine. That's what James B. Allen wrote. Let's see how Wikipedia reinterprets James B. Allen's quote,

> "...none of the available contemporary writings about Joseph Smith in the 1830s, none of the Church publications in that decade and no contemporary journal or correspondence yet discovered mentions the story **in convincing fashion**."

Now, wait a minute. Did James B. Allen say that there was no story of the First Vision that actually related the story in "convincing fashion?" And yet, look at the Wikipedia reference:

> James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 1 (Autumn 1966), 30

That's the reference. Now that actually existed in a Wikipedia article, but that was a bit too much even for me to take. Two Wikipedia editors[16] confronted the author on that one, and he changed it, because I think he realized that he wasn't going to get away with that one, and he said,

> "I apologize for what was almost certainly my transcription error. But I think if there's any change of meaning, it's trifling." John Foxe (13 October 2007)[17]

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[16] In my speech I mistakenly conflated my response to this issue in the FAIR Wiki with the separate event of bringing this to the editor's attention in Wikipedia by noting that "I confronted…" For my response, see: http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormonism_and_Wikipedia/First_Vision/Recorded_accounts_of_the_vision . It should be noted that the change in text was negotiated on Wikipedia by other editors ("74s181" and "Alanyst"). I have corrected this error in the transcript to read "Two Wikipedia editors…" rather than "I…"

[17] Wikipedia editor John Foxe, article "First Vision" talk page, October 13, 2007. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:First_Vision/Archive_7#Please_clarify_James_B._Allen_reference_in_the_lead

Wikipedia has a page called "Wikispeak," and it's a bit tongue-in-cheek, but it defines what we call "good faith." You're supposed to treat other Wikipedia editors as if they are editing in good faith, regardless of what they are *actually* doing.

> ### *Good faith*
>
> *A blind and uncritical acceptance of whatever nonsense the editor asking you to assume good faith has presented.*
>
> *Questioning another editor's good faith will always result in a response that to so question is bad faith.*
>
> *To point out that pointing out your questioning of the other editor's faith is bad faith is in itself bad faith, and will result in blocking.* [18]

So, in other words, you don't question the good faith of another editor. If you do question the good faith of another editor then you get kicked off.

Well, John Foxe has his definition of "good faith,"

> *"I prevented Mormon POV from being introduced into an NPOV lead. That's not only "good faith," it's commendable good faith and the upholding of the best interests of the Wikipedia community."*

See, John is not really adding his point-of-view, he's simply upholding the interests of the Wikipedia community.

How about pretending that the sources don't exist? From the Wikipedia article "First Vision," we have this,

> *"John Taylor gave a **complete account** of the First Vision story in an 1850 letter written as he began missionary work in France, and he **may have alluded** to it in a discourse given in 1859. **However**, when Taylor discussed the origins of Mormonism in 1863, he did so **without alluding to the canonical First Vision story**, and in 1879, he referred to Joseph Smith **having asked "the angel"** which of the sects was correct."* [19]

What kind of a picture have we painted here of John Taylor in Wikipedia? The picture being painted is that John Taylor initially talked about the First Vision, but somehow just decided that it just wasn't that important anymore, and this shows a gradual decrease in that importance. But let's look at John Taylor's references to the First Vision.

John Taylor is on record as explicitly mentioning the visit of the Father, and the Son at least 15 times between 1876 and 1892. Most of them are in the *Journal of Discourses*, and most of them are online, linked and very easy to find.

John Taylor's 1859 "allusion," as stated in the Wikipedia article, includes the phrase "*If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not,*" and goes on to state that "The Lord did hear him, and told him what to do." This was no "allusion," it was a reference to the canonical First Vision story.

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[18] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikispeak

[19] "without allusion to…" Wikipedia editor "John Foxe" edits to article "First Vision," September 4, 2007. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First_Vision&diff=155688471&oldid=155686193

Finally, John Taylor mentioned the First Vision twice on the same day in 1879 – one refers to "the angel" and the other refers to the "Father and the Son," but *that* doesn't get into the Wikipedia article. After being presented with all of this evidence along with all of the source citations, John Foxe responds,

> *"I accept that John Taylor mentioned the First Vision at least twice. That he did not emphasize it during his tenure as President is just as true as ever." John Foxe (21 October 2007)* [20]

Thus, a new "encyclopedic fact" is born, because that's what Wikipedia says.

From Wikispeak: the "edit summary." The edit summary is,

> *"A creative opportunity to simultaneously insult the previous editor, continue the talk page dispute, and place the verisimilitude of your edit beyond any reasonable doubt, in 200 characters or less."*

An example,

> *"replaced section with better wording mostly from Foxe; [Joseph] Smith's words are junk: POV, non-encyclopedic, and tell us nothing except about his hubris" — Wikipedia editor "**Hi540**", 20 September 2008* [21]

But you know what's funny about this? The editor that did this, "Hi540"…"Hi540" and "John Foxe" are the same person.[22]

From Wikispeak: the "edit war." What is the edit war? The edit war is,

> *"Repeatedly replacing the current error with the previous error."* [23]

And, in order to demonstrate the "edit war," I will show you a day in the life of Joseph Smith, Jr's wiki page.

- At 1:55AM Joseph Smith became opposed to animal cruelty.

- At 2:44AM Sidney Rigdon became his VP running mate

- That remained most of the day until 2:18PM, at which point an editor came and removed the comments about animal cruelty and Sidney Rigdon.

- At 6:49PM in the evening, someone came in and removed any reference to folk religion and treasure seeking.

- A few minutes later (at 6:51PM) they removed that Joseph Smith was a theocrat, politician, city planner, military leader, and polygamist, and replaced that entire sentence with "Joseph Smith was regarded as a Prophet."

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[20] Wikipedia article "First Vision" talk page http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:First_Vision. My response on Wikipedia in 2009 was to the statement made by John Foxe in 2007. John Foxe rejected changing the text and continued to support his 2007 assertion by noting that "Taylor obviously made more references to the First Vision than I had suspected. Nevertheless, those statements given above were made quite late in his life…." This, of course, contradicts the assertion that Taylor felt the vision to be less important later in his life.

[21] http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Joseph_Smith&diff=prev&oldid=239869039

[22] The sockpuppet "Hi540" was noted in Michael De Groote, "Wiki Wars: In battle to define beliefs, Mormons and foes wage battle on Wikipedia," Deseret News, January 30, 2011. http://www.deseretnews.com/m/article/700105517. The connection between "Hi540" and "John Foxe" was confirmed by Wikipedia administrators on August 17, 2011, and the sockpuppet was permanently banned from editing. John Foxe publicly apologized for using the sockpuppet to support edit warring on LDS Wikipedia articles on August 22, 2011. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Sockpuppet_investigations/John_Foxe/Archive

[23] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikispeak

- A few minutes later, 6:54PM, somebody came in and removed "regarded as a prophet," and re-added the information about Joseph being a theocrat, politician, city planner, military leader and polygamist.

- A few minutes later (6:56PM), somebody came back and added "regarded as a prophet by followers."

- A few minutes later (6:59PM), that person removed folk religion and treasure seeking once again from the article.

- A few minutes later (7:03PM), somebody added it back.

- A few minutes later (7:04PM), it was removed again.

- And finally by 7:13PM, somebody added back folk religion and treasure seeking, but kept the phrase "regarded as a prophet by followers."

So our net result on Joseph Smith's page for that day was that somebody added the phrase that he was "regarded as a prophet by followers." And that is a "Day in the Life" of Joseph Smith, Jr's Wiki page. So what you would learn about Joseph Smith might vary depending upon what time, or minute, of the day you happened to look at the article.

Richard L. Bushman, on the Wikipedia article "Joseph Smith,"

> *"What I think is the real failing of this piece is that it lacks scope. It just picks its way along from one little fact to another little fact, all of them ending up making Joseph Smith an ignoble character of some kind. … So it becomes a picky piece that isn't inaccurate, but it sort of lacks depth. It ends up being shallow, I think."* [24]

Finally I want to talk about what I call the Wikipedia "attack biography." On August 28th, 2008, an ex-Mormon comes in and edits the Wikipedia biography of one Daniel C. Peterson. You may have heard of him. If not, he has a wiki bio – you can go read about him there.

The editor removes the first paragraph of the article, which read,

> *Daniel C. Peterson is a professor of Islamic Studies and Arabic … at Brigham Young University and currently serves as editor-in-chief of BYU's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative…*

Now what could he *possibly* want to replace that with?

> *Daniel C. Peterson is a Mormon apologist and professor at Brigham Young University.* [25]

That's not all. To a 205-word article, the editor adds a new "Controversy" section comprising 451 additional words. Now the article about Daniel C. Peterson – two-thirds of it is about "Controversy." Fortunately some sane Wikipedia editors came along later and reversed all of that, but it didn't happen for a couple of months.

So, there are some choices: You can edit Wikipedia, and spend a lot of time arguing with other editors about the placement of a word, or a sentence, or a paragraph. Or, you can edit something else, and just get it to show up in Google.

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[24] Michael De Groote, "Wiki Wars: In battle to define beliefs, Mormons and foes wage battle on Wikipedia," Deseret News, January 30, 2011. http://www.deseretnews.com/m/article/700105517

[25] Modifications made by Wikipedia editor "Descartes1979" to article "Daniel C. Peterson" on August 28, 2008. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Daniel_C._Peterson&diff=234841462&oldid=234841110

So, how are we doing in that regard? Well, this is from an ex-Mormon message board,

> *Anyone else sick of Googling for evidence against Mormonism and getting results back from fairmormon, which distorts the evidence and history?[26]*

Well…I'm not tired of it! Fairmormon is the FAIR Wiki. The FAIR Wiki is another wiki, like Wikipedia, it is a collection of articles, and there's a lot in there. It is the largest online database of critical claims against the Church and responses to them. The FAIR Wiki currently contains 4556 content articles, with more added each week. It has had over 9 million views since it was created.

OK, that's great. We've got a wiki. We've got a place to put articles. We have editors that go in there and edit those articles. But, what happens in Google? Because, that's where the battle front is, isn't it? What comes up in Google? Wikipedia.

Well, let's Google a few things. Googling "Book of Mormon anachronisms." Number 1 – Wikipedia. No surprise. But, look at number 2. That's out of 7300 results. FAIR Wiki is number 2.[27]

Let's google "kinderhook plates." There's a talk about the Kinderhook plates coming up right after mine – a popular subject. It looks like 45,000 results. Wikipedia's number 1. FAIR Wiki's number 2.[28] Remember what I said earlier – you never look beyond the first page when you "google." Being near the top – that's a good thing.

But, you know what? Wikipedia doesn't always win. "Google" "adieu in the book of mormon." FAIR Wiki is number one. Wikipedia is number 2.[29]

And, sometimes, Wikipedia doesn't even show up at all. Jesus Christ "brother of Satan" ("are jesus and satan brothers"), the number 1 Google result is the FAIR Wiki.

The most popular FAIR Wiki pages:

1. Main Page (800,657 views)
2. Search for the Truth DVD (139,520 views)
3. 50 Questions to Ask Mormons (89,730 views)
4. Joseph Smith/Polygamy/Marriages to young women (57,353 views)
5. Book of Mormon DNA evidence (40,432 views)
6. Shiz struggles to breathe (35,448 views)
7. California Proposition 8 (33,199 views)
8. Jesus Christ/Brother of Satan (31,669 views)
9. Blacks and the priesthood (31,245 views)

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[26] Comment posted to the ex_Mormon subreddit discussion group.
http://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon/comments/as02u/anyone_else_sick_of_googling_for_evidence_against/

[27] Google results for "book of mormon anachronisms" obtained on March 22, 2011. Google results change continuously and may be different now.

[28] Google results for "kinderhook plates" obtained on March 22, 2011. Google results change continuously and may be different now.

[29] Google results for "adieu in the book of mormon" obtained on April 22, 2011. Google results change continuously and may be different now.

How about Google hits? What Google hits bring people to the FAIR Wiki? In other words, people typing things into Google that land them on the FAIR Wiki. This is the text that they actually type into Google that causes them to come to the FAIR Wiki.

1. "joseph smith polygamy" (1522)
2. "dan brown mormons masons" (1369)
3. "blood atonement" (791)
4. "kinderhook plates" (714)
5. "white horse prophecy" (536)
6. "mountain meadows massacre" (487)
7. "jupiter talisman" (481)
8. "emma smith polygamy" (408)
9. "ethan smith book of mormon" (347)

You're wondering what number 2 is? "Dan Brown Mormons masons." I'm telling you if Dan Brown checked the results of a Google search he'd be writing a book about Mormons and Masons right now because that is what brings people to the FAIR Wiki for some strange reason.

Well, wikis are here to stay. They are part of our lives. They are already one of the most popular sources of information on the web. They're constantly changing, and, hopefully, constantly improving. The constantly changing nature of wikis means that we need to be careful to make sure that "facts" and sources are accurately represented in whatever wiki they are in.

Finally, I'm going to give you the definition of "Wikipedia," according to Wikipedia.

Wikipedia is,

> *A sandcastle on the shore of the sea of time. Within play dramas on miniature stages, as the actors argue over the exact position of each grain of sand, unaware of the approaching tide.*

Or, more succinctly, Wikipedia is,

> *A group of 12-year-olds debating the alleged "notability" of some ancient dude called Frank Sinatra.* [30]

And I thank you for your attention.

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[30] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikispeak