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The 'Undue Weight' of Truth on Wikipedia

By Timothy Messer-Kruse

For the past 10 years I've immersed myself in the details of one of the most famous events in American labor history, the Haymarket riot and trial of 1886. Along the way I've written two books and a couple of articles about the episode. In some circles that affords me a presumption of expertise on the subject. Not, however, on Wikipedia.

The bomb thrown during an anarchist rally in Chicago sparked America's first Red Scare, a high-profile show trial, and a worldwide clemency movement for the seven condemned men. Today the martyrs' graves are a national historic site, the location of the bombing is marked by a public sculpture, and the event is recounted in most American history textbooks. Its Wikipedia entry is detailed and elaborate.

A couple of years ago, on a slow day at the office, I decided to experiment with editing one particularly misleading assertion chiseled into the Wikipedia article. The description of the trial stated, "The prosecution, led by Julius Grinnell, did not offer evidence connecting any of the defendants with the bombing. ... "

Coincidentally, that is the claim that initially hooked me on the topic. In 2001 I was teaching a labor-history course, and our textbook contained nearly the same wording that appeared on Wikipedia. One of my students raised her hand: "If the trial went on for six weeks and no evidence was presented, what did they talk about all those days?" I've been working to answer her question ever since.

I have not resolved all the mysteries that surround the bombing, but I have dug deeply enough to be sure that the claim that the trial was bereft of evidence is flatly wrong. One hundred and eighteen witnesses were called to testify, many of them unindicted co-conspirators who detailed secret meetings where plans to attack police stations were mapped out, coded messages were placed in radical newspapers, and bombs were assembled in one of the

defendants' rooms.

In what was one of the first uses of forensic chemistry in an American courtroom, the city's foremost chemists showed that the metallurgical profile of a bomb found in one of the anarchists' homes was unlike any commercial metal but was similar in composition to a piece of shrapnel cut from the body of a slain police officer. So overwhelming was the evidence against one of the defendants that his lawyers even admitted that their client spent the afternoon before the Haymarket rally building bombs, arguing that he was acting in self-defense.

So I removed the line about there being "no evidence" and provided a full explanation in Wikipedia's behind-the-scenes editing log. Within minutes my changes were reversed. The explanation: "You must provide reliable sources for your assertions to make changes along these lines to the article."

That was curious, as I had cited the documents that proved my point, including verbatim testimony from the trial published online by the Library of Congress. I also noted one of my own peer-reviewed articles. One of the people who had assumed the role of keeper of this bit of history for Wikipedia quoted the Web site's "undue weight" policy, which states that "articles should not give minority views as much or as detailed a description as more popular views." He then scolded me. "You should not delete information supported by the majority of sources to replace it with a minority view."

The "undue weight" policy posed a problem. Scholars have been publishing the same ideas about the Haymarket case for more than a century. The last published bibliography of titles on the subject has 1,530 entries.

"Explain to me, then, how a 'minority' source with facts on its side would ever appear against a wrong 'majority' one?" I asked the Wiki-gatekeeper. He responded, "You're more than welcome to discuss reliable sources here, that's what the talk page is for. However, you might want to have a quick look at Wikipedia's civility policy."

I tried to edit the page again. Within 10 seconds I was informed that my citations to the primary documents were insufficient, as Wikipedia requires its contributors to rely on secondary sources, or, as my critic informed me, "published books." Another editor cheerfully tutored me in what this means: "Wikipedia is not 'truth,' Wikipedia is 'verifiability' of reliable sources. Hence, if most

secondary sources which are taken as reliable happen to repeat a flawed account or description of something, Wikipedia will echo that."

Tempted to win simply through sheer tenacity, I edited the page again. My triumph was even more fleeting than before. Within seconds the page was changed back. The reason: "reverting possible vandalism." Fearing that I would forever have to wear the scarlet letter of Wikipedia vandal, I relented but noted with some consolation that in the wake of my protest, the editors made a slight gesture of reconciliation—they added the word "credible" so that it now read, "The prosecution, led by Julius Grinnell, did not offer credible evidence connecting any of the defendants with the bombing. ... " Though that was still inaccurate, I decided not to attempt to correct the entry again until I could clear the hurdles my anonymous interlocutors had set before me.

So I waited two years, until my book on the trial was published. "Now, at last, I have a proper Wikipedia leg to stand on," I thought as I opened the page and found at least a dozen statements that were factual errors, including some that contradicted their own cited sources. I found myself hesitant to write, eerily aware that the self-deputized protectors of the page were reading over my shoulder, itching to revert my edits and tutor me in Wiki-decorum. I made a small edit, testing the waters.

My improvement lasted five minutes before a Wiki-cop scolded me, "I hope you will familiarize yourself with some of Wikipedia's policies, such as verifiability and undue weight. If all historians save one say that the sky was green in 1888, our policies require that we write 'Most historians write that the sky was green, but one says the sky was blue.' ... As individual editors, we're not in the business of weighing claims, just reporting what reliable sources write."

I guess this gives me a glimmer of hope that someday, perhaps before another century goes by, enough of my fellow scholars will adopt my views that I can change that Wikipedia entry. Until then I will have to continue to shout that the sky was blue.

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