Crowd-sourcing of neutral information?

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Some basic facts

- Crowd-sourced encyclopedia, written by volunteers.
- Started in 2001
- Available in [282 languages](#) (languages, **not** countries!)
- 19 million articles (3.7 m English, 1.2 m German, etc. down to 100 articles in Kikuyu or Cheyenne)
- Physical infrastructure owned by Wikimedia foundation, located in USA, financed by donations (US$ 20M per year)
- Legally located in USA, follows US laws.
- All content freely available, no copyright.
- [7th most popular](#) of all websites, 365 million readers

Fundamental principles (ideals ☺)

"Imagine a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge."

- Wp is an **encyclopedia**, not soapbox, directory, free advertising, or indiscriminate deposit.
- **Neutral point of view**, balanced and impartial articles not promoting any specific agenda.
- **Free content**, freely readable, editable, reusable. Nobody owns wikipedia contents, anybody can change anything.
- **Respect and civility** in user interactions, ruled by consensus
- **Rules** beyond these fundamentals are **negotiable**, not cast in stone.

How do the ideals work out in practice?

" **Media, Communication and Human Rights"**
Critical issues here:

- freely available, neutral information
- Is free access to neutral information a human right in itself?
- Is free access to neutral information a prerequisite for exercising other human rights?
- Reading rights vs. Writing rights?
- How effective is Wikipedia in providing this?

Is Wikipedia freely available?

- In most countries freely readable.
- Likewise freely editable in many countries, but can the authorities find out who wrote what? We'll come back to that…

Not completely freely readable:

- Some non-democratic governments (notably China) sometimes block it, along with other websites with politically inconvenient content.
- Temporarily blocked once in UK, and blocking discussed for schools in US, because of "pornographic content".
- Blocked a few times in some Muslim countries because of Mohammed images and similar issues.

Is Wikipedia information neutral?

Difficult question, with different answers for different articles on different language editions.

Information is shaped by those who write it.

- Wikipedia article on a topic reflects consensus among those who care enough about the topic.
  - "Small" topics vulnerable to individual agendas.
    - "Notability" cutoff prevents too small topics.
  - "Large" topics have many who care, will reflect an "average opinion" among writers.
- Verifiability requirement important – but is it unbiased?
- Anybody **can** write, but not everybody **will.** Wikipedia writers biased sample of world population.
  - Plenty: young white men, nerds, people with computers and free time.
  - Shortage: Women, elderly, married with kids, non-white, non-technical fields, 3rd world, poor, people not computer-literate.
  - Politically: heavy bias towards people who find crowd-sourcing appealing ☺. Slightly more liberal and egalitarian than general population.

English Wikipedia demographics
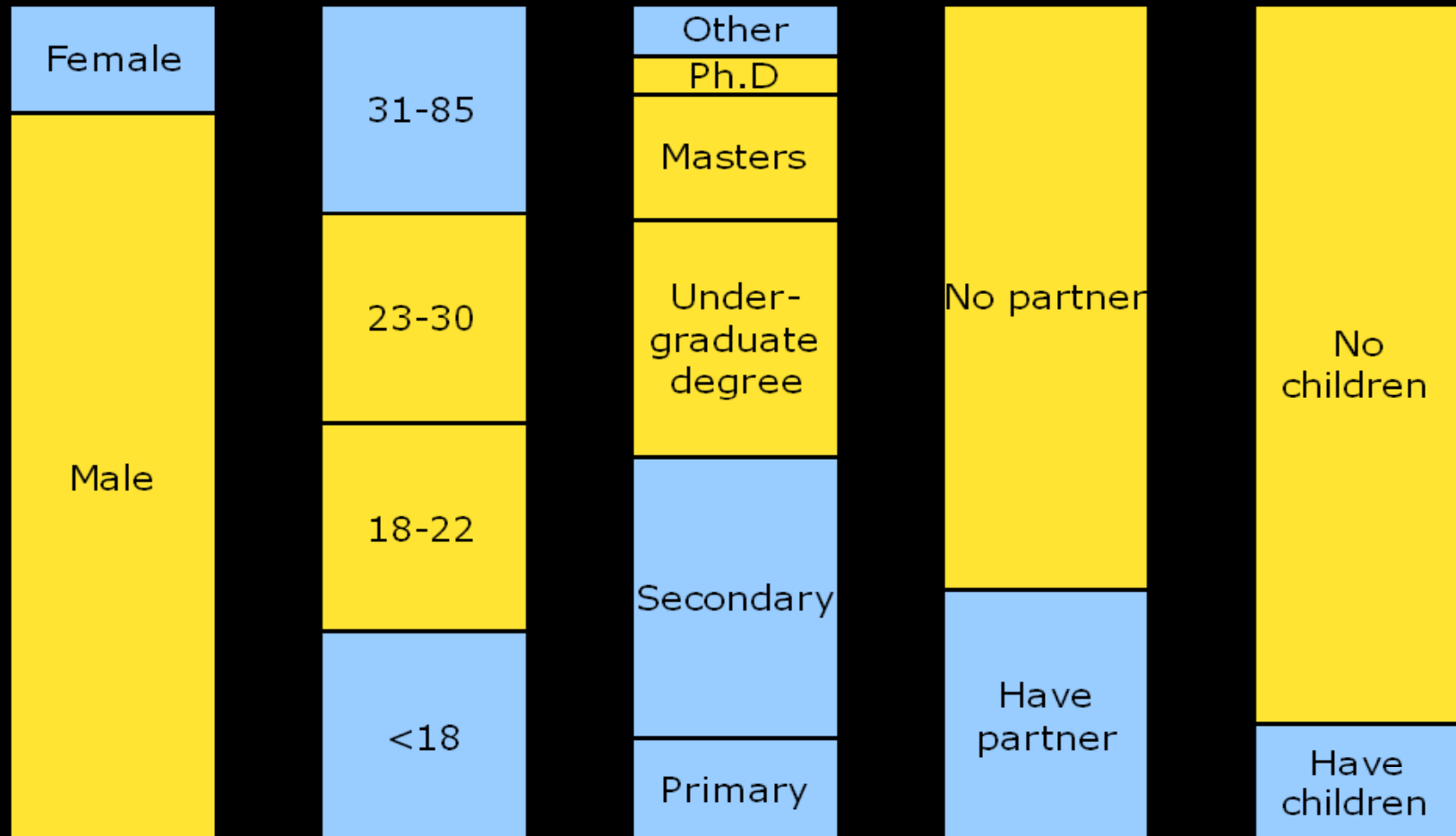
Where do the writers come from?

Relevant for politics, bias, free speech issues.

- English wp: all over the world, not just US & UK. Reflects opinion of "world internet community". Both Bush and Chavez supporters complain about bias ☺.
- Swedish wp: dominated by people in Sweden. Reflects Swedish public opinion. Typical of "old" national languages.
- Minority languages and "recently independent" languages: Writing in the language is a political statement in itself. Articles will reflect such politics. Kurdish. Chuvash. Georgian. Ukrainian?
- Chinese wp: Majority of writers **not** residents of People's Republic of China! Taiwan + Chinese diaspora in majority.
- Russian wp: Entire FSU, plus Russian communities in US, Germany, Israel. Whose opinion dominates?

Locations in Wikipedia articles
May reflect location of Wikipedia writers
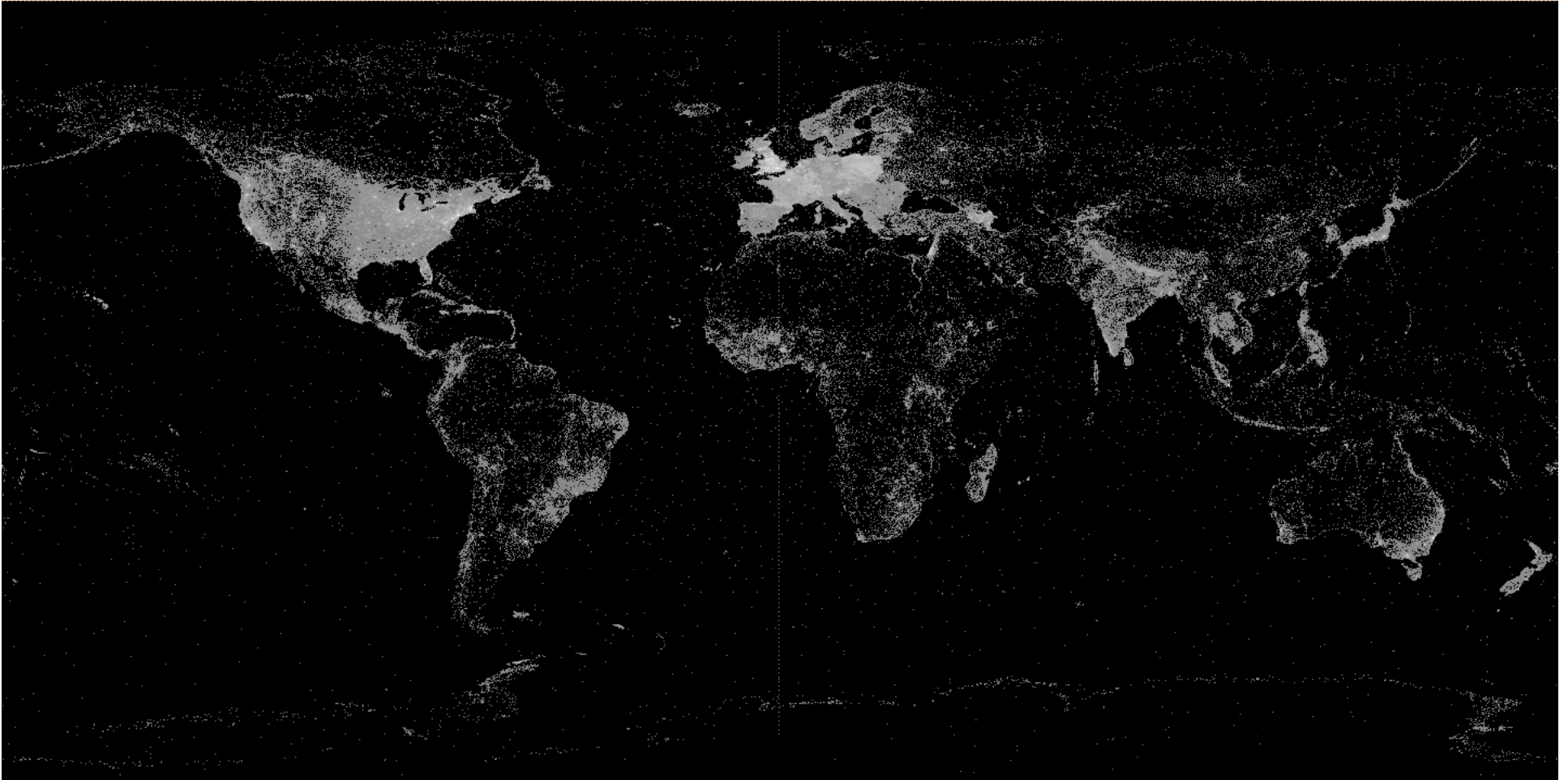
Threats to neutrality (and quality)

- Individual vandals
  - Very common, requires cleanup vigilance, but no major neutrality problem.
- Commercial advertising (from companies, but also from e.g. authors, rock bands, …)
  - As above. No major problem for political neutrality.
- Political agenda-pushers (individuals)
  - Problematic if they are subtle and/or persistent.
  - Can be influential on minor issues, where nobody else notices or cares.
- Agenda-pushers (organized)
  - Occasionally discovered, especially organizations trying to whitewash articles about themselves.
  - Could be major problem, but when discovered provokes a vigorous response from Wp administrators.
- Government intervention
  - Government requests for censorship are regularly rejected.
  - Wikipedia legally located in USA, follows US laws, may or may not cooperate with other law enforcement.
  - Wikipedia writers are identified by account name only. If no account, identified by IP number. Law enforcement can easily find writer from IP, but not easily from account name. (Account – IP connection available to a few Wikipedia officials, but they have no obligation to share info with non-US law enforcement.)
  - Open proxies and other anonymity tools not allowed on Wikipedia – too many vandals use those. This is a problem from a human-rights perspective.

Who decides what is "neutral"?

- In theory, consensus of all Wikipedia users.
- In practice, all Wikipedians are equal, but some are more equal than others ☺
- Informal hierarchy, with some formal teeth.
- The opinion of long-term heavy contributors counts more heavily towards consensus.

Who decides what is "neutral"?, pt 2

- Some users **("administrators")** are given powers to enforce consensus decisions. Elected by voting on Wikipedia.
- In practice, the administrators have a lot of power over Wikipedia content. Are they neutral?
- Large Wikipedias have 100+ administrators, and lots of people vote in admin elections. Will likely reflect community consensus well enough.
- Small Wikipedias may have just a handful of administrators – vulnerable to individual agendas or even organized takeover.
- Swedish, Russian, Ukrainian Wikipedia are large – Belarus Wikipedia is small.

Conclusion: Does Wikipedia provide free access to neutral information?

- Free access?
  - Not perfect, but in many countries close enough.
- Neutral information?
  - What is neutral? Who decides?
  - On large topics, on large Wikipedias, the information will reflect community consensus.
  - Small topics, small Wikipedias, vulnerable to bias.
  - Organized takeover of e.g. Belarus Wikipedia would not be difficult. Takeover of English Wikipedia effectively impossible.