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## **Mormonism and Wikipedia: The Church History That “Anyone Can Edit”**

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# MORMONISM AND WIKIPEDIA: THE CHURCH HISTORY THAT “ANYONE CAN EDIT”

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*Abstract: The ability to quickly and easily access literature critical of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been made significantly easier through the advent of the Internet. One of the primary sites that dominates search engine results is Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia that “anyone can edit.” Wikipedia contains a large number of articles related to Mormonism that are edited by believers, critics, and neutral parties. The reliability of information regarding the Church and its history is subject to the biases of the editors who choose to modify those articles. Even if a wiki article is thoroughly sourced, editors sometimes employ source material in a manner that supports their bias. This essay explores the dynamics behind the creation of Wikipedia articles about the Church, the role that believers and critics play in that process, and the reliability of the information produced in the resulting wiki articles.*

The fact that this [Wikipedia] article has been stable for months suggests that other Mormons have found the evidence unassailable.<sup>1</sup>

## Access to “Anti-Mormon” Literature: Then and Now

Growing up as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during the '60s and '70s, I was aware that there was a body of work called “anti-Mormon literature.” This

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1. Comment posted by Wikipedia editor “John Foxe,” responding to an LDS editor on the “Three Witnesses” Wikipedia talk page, 27 January 2009.

was understood to be a dangerous collection of literature that was capable of destroying testimonies. Encounters I had with such literature as a young person were usually limited to a few anti-Mormon pamphlets that one might come upon outside a church-sponsored event. It wasn't easy to become exposed to critical arguments: the literature produced by critics simply wasn't readily accessible to a young person. Thus I was unaware of Joseph Smith's involvement in plural marriage until I encountered at the BYU Bookstore in 1978 a copy of Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*.

Brodie was my first encounter with a truly substantial work that was critical of the truth claims of the Church. As I browsed through the book, I found myself integrating some of this new information and mentally tagging it with some degree of skepticism. But that was the late 1970s, and discovering even those few bits of information required some effort. Now our youth have access to a quantity of information that is simply astounding. Information on any LDS Church-related topic is available not only on our nearest networked computer but also on our cell phones. One evening when my family had the missionaries over to dinner, I asked them what new investigators did after they were taught the Joseph Smith story. I was told that they went home and googled "Joseph Smith." By the time the elders returned for their next visit, their investigator had perused a variety of sources containing information about Joseph Smith. Some of this information came from Church-sponsored websites. Some of it, however, came from countercult ministries determined to pull the Church from its foundations. The previously shadowy and mysterious body of anti-Mormon work is now available at the touch of a button, and it is as easy to access as the latest YouTube video.

Internet search engines, such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing, place thousands of references at our fingertips. When one googles "Joseph Smith," the search returns approximately

twenty million results in one-tenth of a second. Regardless of how many search results appear, the investigator will usually examine only the ten results that appear on the first page. Therefore, it is the goal of those who wish to spread their message to cause links to their website to appear on the first page of Google results. The closer to the top the information appears, the better the chance that someone will look at their website. For this reason, the Church now expends considerable effort to make sure that positive information appears high in search engine results. A Catholic reporter recently noted: "When you search on Google for 'Old Testament,' the first result is from Wikipedia but the second is from LDS.org. Likewise, if you search for 'church,' LDS.org appears fourth, ahead of any Catholic entry."<sup>2</sup>

Among all of the search results that may appear, there is one website in particular that dominates. This site will typically appear in the number-one position on a Google search of practically any subject. The site is called "Wikipedia."

## What Is Wikipedia?

Wikipedia is a free online encyclopedia that "anyone can edit."<sup>3</sup> Quite literally, anyone who has a connection to the Internet may choose to create an article for Wikipedia or to edit any article in its vast collection of thousands of articles. So powerful is the lure of editing this popular encyclopedia that it has the ability to "induce people to work for free."<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia addresses just about any subject imaginable, from

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2. Brandon Vogt, "What Mormons can teach Catholics about online evangelization," *OSV Newsweekly*, 2 October 2011, <http://www.osv.com/tabid/7621/itemid/8447/What-Mormons-can-teach-Catholics-about-online-evan.aspx>.

3. Quote found on the Wikipedia main page, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page).

4. Seth Finkelstein, "I'm on Wikipedia, get me out of here," *The Guardian*, 27 September 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2006/sep/28/wiki-pedia.web20>.

the mundane and obscure to the topical and controversial. In a process known as “collaborative editing,” self-selected editors from all over the world voluntarily work together to shape and craft an article until it is acceptable to the majority.

Popular thinking dictates that if enough different people collaborate together on an article, it will eventually approach a balanced and neutral state. According to Wikipedia,

The Wikipedia model allows anyone to edit, and relies on a large number of well-intentioned editors to overcome issues raised by a smaller number of problematic editors. It is inherent in Wikipedia’s editing model that misleading information can be added, but over time quality is anticipated to improve in a form of group learning as editors reach consensus, so that substandard edits will very rapidly be removed.<sup>5</sup>

In general, this philosophy tends to be effective as regards many Wikipedia articles. Errors that bring an article out of balance tend to be corrected given sufficient time, and the article progresses toward a stable and “neutral” state. However, articles dealing with highly controversial subjects, such as Joseph Smith’s first vision or polygamy, do not tend to stabilize themselves over time. These types of articles become magnets for editors who have an agenda to push. Wikipedia becomes an attractive way for such editors to “publish” their opinions with immediate worldwide visibility and considerable credibility.

## Wikipedia Culture

Wikipedia has developed its own online culture and language. It maintains its own complex set of rules and even has its own loose, informal judiciary system. When one chooses

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5. “Reliability of Wikipedia,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliability\\_of\\_Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliability_of_Wikipedia).

to edit Wikipedia, one immediately becomes immersed in its unique culture. Acronyms and rule citations are thrown about in general discussions. Expressions of kindness are called “wikilove.” An editor who goes on hiatus is said to have taken a “wikiholiday.” An editor that attempts to bias an article has added “POV” (point of view). In the eyes of the Wikipedia community, editors who add their own POV to an article are often viewed in the same manner as people who paint their houses bright orange in a community of tans and browns.

Wikipedia editors are required to treat one another in a civil manner and to “assume good faith” on the part of all other editors. This presents a challenge when dealing with editors with whom one disagrees. Criticism of the structure and content of an article is encouraged, while criticism of another editor’s editing tactics is not. The wiki editor is required to come to the negotiation without allowing the conversation to devolve into insults and personal attacks. It becomes a particular challenge to “assume good faith” when an editor is seen to be blatantly working with an agenda to spin an article in a particular direction.

### **Are Wikipedia Articles “Neutral”?**

The goal of every Wikipedia article is to achieve a state of “neutral point of view” (NPOV). Neutrality, however, tends to reside in the eyes of the beholder. One editor’s view of “neutrality” may appear to be blatant bias in the eyes of another editor. Wikipedia’s policy on article neutrality states:

Editing from a neutral point of view (NPOV) means representing fairly, proportionately, and as far as possible without bias, all significant views that have been published by reliable sources. All Wikipedia articles and other encyclopedic content must be written from a neutral point of view. NPOV is a fundamental principle of Wikipedia and of other Wikimedia projects.

This policy is non-negotiable and all editors and articles must follow it.<sup>6</sup>

Controversial subjects present a challenge to Wikipedia's goal of NPOV. When believers and critics come together to craft an article about Joseph Smith, Jr., who is to ultimately define what is "neutral"? Is neutrality even possible about such a topic unless one is utterly apathetic about it (and thus unlikely to spend much time or energy in writing about it)? Editors with polarized points of view sometimes attempt to impose their way of seeing things on an article by making controversial changes without consulting other editors first. The extended arguments that can take place over the wording in these articles can turn into what is known in Wikipedia as an "edit war." A Wikipedia editor who wishes to deal with controversial subjects must have sufficient time and determination to persist in order to outlast the opponents. One of Wikipedia's academic editors notes:

In a recent (and excellent) article in the *Journal of American History* (June 2006), "Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past," the author, Roy Rosenzweig, notes how "academics and other highly-qualified people" who were initially excited by the project were "slowly worn down and driven away by having to deal with difficult people." I refuse to be worn down and driven away.<sup>7</sup>

## The Church of Jesus Christ and Wikipedia

When one googles "Joseph Smith," the first site to appear is the Church's josephsmith.net website. The next result

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6. "Wikipedia: Neutral point of view," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:NPOV>.

7. Comment by Wikipedia editor "John Foxe," posted to the Wikipedia article "Bob Jones University" talk page on 7 July 2006, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Bob\\_Jones\\_University/Archive\\_0003#Bibb\\_Graves](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Bob_Jones_University/Archive_0003#Bibb_Graves).



is Wikipedia's "Joseph Smith" article. However, if one googles "Martin Harris," "Oliver Cowdery," "golden plates," or "first vision," the number-one result is the Wikipedia article about each topic. Thus whatever Wikipedia has to say about these subjects becomes the first thing that anyone is likely to read. This quality makes Wikipedia extremely attractive to both believers and critics who wish to promote their particular point of view in a forum that is highly likely to be taken seriously. How can an unpublished amateur guarantee that whatever he or she writes will immediately be visible to thousands of people all over the world? It is as simple as adding one's work to the Wikipedia article on the subject.

Unfortunately, such open access also encourages vandals to modify controversial articles. Anonymous editors posting from IP addresses regularly attack articles such as "Joseph Smith" in order to add ridiculous or profane modifications. Such vandalism is usually quickly spotted and corrected by other editors who monitor the article on their own Wikipedia "watch list." Vandalism occurs with depressing regularity on articles such as "Book of Mormon," "Mormon," or "Joseph Smith," with the zealous vandal often modifying the article to declare that Latter-day Saints are practitioners of a false religion or that Joseph Smith was a "convicted con-man."<sup>8</sup>

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8. For example, on 12 October 2011 an anonymous editor modified the Wikipedia article "Early life of Joseph Smith" to read "Joseph Smith, Jr. was a convicted con-man and the founder and principal prophet of the Latter Day Saint movement." The vandalism was reverted by editor "John Foxe" sixty-nine minutes later. On 7 September 2001 an anonymous editor modified the introductory line of the Wikipedia article "Book of Mormon" to read "The Book of Mormon is a fictional sacred text." The vandalism was reverted within sixty seconds. On 3 April 2011 an anonymous editor added "cocaine distributor" to Joseph Smith's list of accomplishments in the "Joseph Smith" article. This vandalism was reverted within two minutes. Generally, vandalism such as this on high profile articles is quickly taken care of by regular editors who keep articles of interest on their Wikipedia "watch list."

## Wikipedia as a Credible Source

Given the diversity of the types of editors who may choose to work on an article, how credible might a Wikipedia article be? One never knows if an article is being edited by a scholarly expert on the subject or by a young teenager in high school. In a humorous self-referential article, Wikipedia provides one definition of itself as “a group of 12-year-olds debating the alleged ‘notability’ of some ancient dude named Frank Sinatra.”<sup>9</sup> This characterization is not as far from the truth as one might think. The inclusion of a subject in Wikipedia depends upon whether or not that subject is considered “notable.” And who defines the standard of notability? The very editors who come together to create the article in the first place.

However, for noncontroversial subjects, Wikipedia can be surprisingly accurate and complete. Wikipedia is an extremely valuable resource for looking up references on a wide variety of subjects. Its uncontrolled nature, however, has caused it to be banned as a reference work by many academic institutions.

“If you look at the Encyclopedia Britannica, you can be fairly sure that somebody writing an article is an acknowledged expert in that field, and you can take his or her words as being at least a scholarly point of view,” said Michael Gorman, president of the American Library Association and dean of library services at Cal State Fresno. “The problem with an online encyclopedia created by anybody is that you have no idea whether you are reading an established person in the field or somebody with an ax to grind. For all I know, Wikipedia may contain articles of great scholarly value. The question is, how do you choose between those and the other kind?”<sup>10</sup>

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9. “Wikipedia:Wikispeak,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiSpeak>.

10. Michael Gorman, quoted by Carolyn Said in “The online credibility gap: Wikipedia article’s false claim on JFK killing stirs debate,” *SFGate*, 6 December

## Collaborative Editing between Believers and Critics

For subjects related to The Church of Jesus Christ, Wikipedia provides a unique environment in which believers, critics, and “impartial” editors must collaborate with the goal of producing a written article. The discussions involved in these negotiations are as spirited and engaging as any found on an online message board in which critics and believers interact. Negotiation over the construction of a single sentence, or even the use of a single word, can take days to resolve. Edit wars can last for months, depending upon the tenacity of the individual editors involved. Often a consensus can be reached if all of the editors involved are willing to compromise. Sometimes, however, the “winner” of such battles is the editor who has the persistence to outlast the others.

Staking out the middle ground on subjects related to Mormonism is a particularly daunting challenge. Joseph Fielding Smith once stated that there is no middle ground between “prophet” and “fraud.”<sup>11</sup> A Wikipedia article about Joseph Smith can make neither of these claims as a definitive fact, although that does not stop editors from attempting to do so. This leads to a dance of sorts between believers and critics in an effort to insert as many citations and facts as possible to support their opinion. The overall tone of the article ultimately takes on the attitude of the sum of its references and the manner in which citations are arranged. Wikipedia rules state that “Wikipedia articles should be based on reliable, published secondary sources and, to a lesser extent, on tertiary sources.”<sup>12</sup>

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2005, at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/12/06/WIKI.TMP&ao=all>.

11. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:188. “Mormonism, as it is called, must *stand or fall on the story of Joseph Smith*. He was either a prophet of God, divinely called, properly appointed and commissioned, or he was one of the biggest frauds this world has ever seen. *There is no middle ground*” (emphasis in original).

12. Statement from Wikipedia policy “No Original Research,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No\\_original\\_research](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No_original_research).

This does not, however, prevent determined editors from assembling statements from primary sources and arranging them to achieve the desired tone. Thus the Wikipedia article “Golden Plates” reads like a choppy collection of disjointed facts arranged to emphasize contradictions between primary and secondary witness accounts.

One might assume that believers could simply add supporting references from LDS scholars to balance out critical ones. Unfortunately, LDS scholars are often reclassified by critical editors as “LDS apologists.” Sources such as any LDS Church-sponsored publication are often classified as “biased” and unacceptable by Wikipedia standards. Even when LDS sources are used, critics will sometimes “cherry pick” citations that can be used to cast the Church in an unflattering light. Richard L. Bushman, whose own work *Rough Stone Rolling* is heavily referenced in Wikipedia’s “Joseph Smith” article, complains that the article “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.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite Wikipedia’s standing rule that all articles should display a neutral point of view, those who are willing to devote a substantial amount of their time to editing and maintaining Wikipedia articles will persist in having their particular point of view dominate the articles in which they are interested. This is demonstrated on the Wikipedia article “Three Witnesses,” which clearly reflects the opinion of the dominant editor, an evangelical Christian professor of history at Bob Jones University. The article is structured and referenced in such a way as to discredit the witnesses. Most of the numerous positive references to the witnesses’ experiences are minimized or ignored, while the opinions of critics are given precedence. This

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13. Richard L. Bushman, quoted in Michael DeGroote, “Wiki Wars: In battle to define beliefs, Mormons and foes wage battle on Wikipedia,” *Deseret News*, 30 January 2011.

is ostensibly done to reflect “majority opinion”—the thinking being that since the majority of humanity is not Latter-day Saint, any article should give precedence to the opinion of that majority. In the case of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, however, the majority is not even aware of the pertinent events. Thus the article simply reflects the opinion of an evangelical Christian regarding the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, resulting in an article that is predictably negative in tone and content.

### The Wikipedia “Talk Page”

The conversations on the Wikipedia “talk page” on any given article can be just as spirited as those found on any Mormonism-related message board—critics and believers argue the specific points about which they disagree. What is unique about the Wikipedia environment, however, is that the critic and believer must ultimately reach some sort of compromise and then place the resulting language in an article.

The talk page environment, coupled with anonymity, sometimes emboldens some editors to verbally abuse LDS believers. Thus we see comments such as this one from an editor in New York who posted under the screen name “Duke53”: “You 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.”<sup>14</sup> “Duke53” rarely contributed substantive input to the LDS Wikipedia articles on which he participated, choosing instead to taunt LDS editors by maintaining a picture of LDS temple garments on the Wikipedia “Underwear” page as well as on his own Wikipedia home page. “Duke53” would wait for the inevitable removal of the image by an anonymous editor, after which he would triumphantly

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14. Comment posted by editor “Duke53” to editor “Storm Rider” on “Joseph Smith” Wikipedia talk page on 15 January 2010, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Joseph\\_Smith&diff=prev&oldid=338030693](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Joseph_Smith&diff=prev&oldid=338030693).

replace it with a stern message to the presumed LDS editor stating that he or she would not be allowed to “censor” Wikipedia. “Duke53” also once uploaded an image of a temple recommend, claiming that it was not under copyright. After five years of abusive verbal harassment of LDS editors, “Duke53” was finally permanently banned from editing Wikipedia.

Such bias even occasionally extends to Wikipedia administrators. Consider this comment from Wikipedia administrator JzG “Guy”: “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.”<sup>15</sup> This expression of blatant bias did not go unchallenged, however. Another editor responded, “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.”<sup>16</sup>

### “Good Faith” Editing

Wikipedia requires that editors “assume good faith” when interacting with one another. Editor “John Foxe,” commenting to another editor on the article “Reformed Egyptian,” insisted:

I haven’t called you a liar, and I won’t. Nevertheless, your position is an attempt to deceive the reader. Find a non-Mormon who will agree that relevant material about Martin Harris’s extreme superstitiousness should be excluded from an article in which the reader

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15. Comment posted by Wikipedia administrator “JzG” to his user page on 11 June 2007, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User\\_talk:JzG/Archives/August\\_2007&diff=prev&oldid=137452565](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User_talk:JzG/Archives/August_2007&diff=prev&oldid=137452565).

16. Response to “JzG” by editor “Friendly Neighbour” on 11 June 2007, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User\\_talk:JzG/Archives/August\\_2007&diff=prev&oldid=137466315](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User_talk:JzG/Archives/August_2007&diff=prev&oldid=137466315).

has to decide between two completely different accounts of an interview. That's a simple matter of good faith.<sup>17</sup>

During a months-long edit war on the Wikipedia article "First Vision," Foxe responded to one LDS editor, "Frankly, Les, every time you start citing Wikipedia rules, I tune them out as Mormon smokescreen."<sup>18</sup> A Latter-day Saint editor objected to a modification made to the article "Three Witnesses" by Foxe, stating:

I think you have a problem recognizing when you are interjecting what you view as important or "true" versus just reporting facts. . . . Any attempt on your part to belittle the beliefs of others is rejected in toto. Furthermore, my personal beliefs are irrelevant here on Wikipedia just as yours. To attempt to make this a soap box for one's beliefs is to distort, twist, and pervert the role of Wikipedia.

To which Foxe responded, "I often have sympathy for the practitioners of false religions, but unlike you, I have no 'deep respect' for the religions themselves. That's because they're false. They're lies. 'What communion hath light with darkness?'"<sup>19</sup>

John Foxe is somewhat unique among editors of LDS Wikipedia articles. A professor of history at Bob Jones University,<sup>20</sup> this wiki editor takes his screen name from the

17. Comment by Wikipedia editor "John Foxe" to editor "FyzixFighter," posted at "Reformed Egyptian" Wikipedia talk page on 2 January 2008, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Reformed\\_Egyptian#Harris's\\_character](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Reformed_Egyptian#Harris's_character).

18. Comment posted by editor "John Foxe" to LDS editor "74s181" on "First Vision" Wikipedia talk page on 23 July 2007, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:First\\_Vision/Archive\\_6#Breaking\\_the\\_collaborative\\_truce](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:First_Vision/Archive_6#Breaking_the_collaborative_truce).

19. Conversation between Wikipedia editor "Storm Rider" and "John Foxe," posted at "Three Witnesses" Wikipedia talk page, 28 January 2009, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Three\\_Witnesses#Biographical%20Material%20on%20the%20Witnesses#Magic\\_world\\_view?](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Three_Witnesses#Biographical%20Material%20on%20the%20Witnesses#Magic_world_view?).

20. DeGroot, "Wiki Wars."

author of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (first published in English in 1563). He comments about his namesake, "Like all historians, a man of his own era, yet one who followed truth. He sometimes got the story wrong, but as his duty to God, he tried to get it right."<sup>21</sup>

Bob Jones University is a fundamentalist Christian university located in Greenville, South Carolina, that has "historically been hostile to the LDS church." Foxe became interested in LDS history while attending a summer seminar on the subject at Brigham Young University, even meeting LDS scholar Richard L. Bushman. It was at some point after this encounter that Foxe decided to edit LDS articles on Wikipedia.<sup>22</sup>

In his Wikipedia edits, Foxe emphasizes any aspect of Joseph Smith's life that would make him appear to be contradicting himself. Anything having to do with "treasure seeking" or "magic" is emphasized as much as possible. Any Wikipedia article mentioning Martin Harris must emphasize his visions and his joining of different churches throughout his life. The "Three Witnesses" articles must emphasize a "magic world view" and minimize any historical data that indicates that they never denied their testimonies of the Book of Mormon. Foxe's persistence is legendary among Wikipedia editors, and he can simply outlast any LDS editor who attempts to neutralize the article. One LDS editor provides a revealing summary of what it is like for LDS editors to work with John Foxe:

LDS editor: 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

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21. Comment by Wikipedia editor "John Foxe," posted on his own user page "User:John Foxe," at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:John\\_Foxe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:John_Foxe).

22. DeGroote, "Wiki Wars."



[lead article].

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.]<sup>23</sup>

## No Original Research

Wikipedia articles are required to rely “mainly on reliable, published 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.”<sup>24</sup> Wikipedia is intended to summarize the work of others rather than act as a forum for creating original work. In the case of contentious articles such as “First Vision” or “Golden Plates,” it is extremely tempting to take advantage of the “immediate publication” of material in order to create new interpretive material. The “no original research” rule is often ignored. This can lead to situations in which the wiki editor's own thinking is reflected in the article. Consider this example, which appears in the wiki article “First Vision” as of 18 October 2011: “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.’”

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23. Wikipedia editor “Alanyst,” comments posted on “Joseph Smith” Wikipedia talk page, 11 June 2011, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Joseph\\_Smith/Archive\\_18](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Joseph_Smith/Archive_18).

24. Statement from Wikipedia policy “No Original Research.”

There are several issues with the above statement. It does correctly represent the source, which was an interview between Peter Bauder and Joseph Smith. Bauder was attempting to expose false religions, and he notes that “among these imposters there has one arisen by the name of Joseph Smith, Jr.”<sup>25</sup> The wiki editor introduces the quotation with the word *however*, thus implying that this statement is a possible disqualifier for the validity of the first vision. Nowhere in the wiki article is it noted that Bauder was a strong critic of Joseph Smith and that Joseph may not have desired to share the experience of his vision with such an interviewer. The earliest known extant attempt by Joseph to put the vision in writing occurred two years later. In 2009, however, the LDS wiki editor added his own interpretation of this interview by drawing the conclusion that “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.”<sup>26</sup>

Not only did this blatantly violate Wikipedia’s “no original research” rule, it was also an absurd interpretation. How would Joseph *not* view a remission of his sins as a “Christian experience”? Would he truly have “forgotten” about his theophany? The simplest and most obvious explanation was completely ignored: Joseph may have simply chosen not to share the experience of his vision with an obvious enemy of the church. The wiki editor eventually recognized that the original research could not remain and removed the paragraph. The unqualified statement

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25. Peter Bauder, *The Kingdom and Gospel of Jesus Christ: Contrasted with That of Anti-Christ. A Brief Review of Some of the Most Interesting Circumstances, Which Have Transpired Since the Institution of the Gospel of Christ, from the Days of the Apostles* (Canajoharie, NY: A. H. Calhoun, 1834); republished in Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:16–17.

26. Edit made to Wikipedia article “First Vision” by LDS editor “COgden” on 20 November 2009, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First\\_Vision&diff=326979723&oldid=326976733](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First_Vision&diff=326979723&oldid=326976733).

about Joseph not recounting a “Christian experience,” however, remains in the wiki article as of September 2011.

## Qualifying the Sources

Talk page collaboration between critics and believers can lead to some rather oddly constructed prose in Wikipedia articles on topics relating to Mormonism. Thus we find the Wikipedia article “First Vision” filled with awkward qualifiers that would not normally appear in any other encyclopedia.

- *LDS member* and Columbia University Professor Richard Bushman wrote that . . .
- *LDS apologist* Milton Backman wrote that . . .
- In the opinion of *non-Mormon author* Wesley Walters, *apologists for the Mormon position* treat Smith’s reference to the “whole district of country” as if . . .
- As the *sympathetic but non-Mormon* historian Jan Shippis has written . . .<sup>27</sup>

Yet, there is selectivity in the application of these qualifiers. Note the lack of a qualifier in the earlier reference to Peter Bauder, “when in October 1830 the *author* Peter Bauder interviewed Smith for a religious book he was writing.” The prose offers no hint of whether Bauder was a believer or a critic. If Bauder were treated in the article as believing authors are treated, the sentence ought to have read “non-Mormon critic and author Peter Bauder interviewed Smith,” which then would have placed his comment about Smith being “unable to recount a ‘Christian experience’” in proper perspective. Instead, Bauder is simply granted the status of “author,” with its implications of neutrality.

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27. All examples listed are from the Wikipedia article “First Vision” as of 18 October 2011, emphasis added, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_Vision](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Vision).

## Misrepresenting LDS Sources

Wikipedia's requirement that an article be "balanced" requires the inclusion of some positive sources from faithful LDS scholars. The fact that an assertion is sourced to a Latter-day Saint reference is still no guarantee that it is accurate. During the edit war on the "First Vision" article, an assertion credited to LDS historian James B. Allen by editor John Foxe caught the attention of several LDS editors. Allen is claimed to have said that "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."<sup>28</sup>

The Wikipedia article cited Allen's 1966 essay entitled "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought."<sup>29</sup> It seemed odd that an LDS historian would claim that no reference to the story of the first vision in early writings mentioned the story "in convincing fashion," thus implying that Allen himself found none of the references convincing. However, upon examining Professor Allen's essay, we discover that his opinion was exactly the *opposite* of what was attributed to him by Wikipedia editor John Foxe. LDS editor "74s181" pointed out to him that the quotation was "inaccurate and out of context, changing the meaning" and that he was "not sure what to do with the words that were rearranged."<sup>30</sup> The actual James B. Allen quote reads, "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 con-

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28. The edit was performed by "John Foxe" on 5 October 2007, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First\\_Vision&diff=162430597&oldid=162429711](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First_Vision&diff=162430597&oldid=162429711).

29. James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 1/3 (Autumn 1966): 30.

30. Comment by "74s181" posted on "First Vision" Wikipedia talk page on 13 October 2007, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:First\\_Vision&diff=prev&oldid=164187300](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:First_Vision&diff=prev&oldid=164187300).

temporary 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.”<sup>31</sup>

Correctly noting the difference in what the word *convincing* modifies in the two versions of Allen’s remark, LDS editor “Alanyst” noted that Foxe’s version “suggests that the story was indeed mentioned in certain places but in such an unreliable way as to make even a Mormon historian deem them unconvincing.” Always the diplomat, with a willingness to grant another editor “good faith,” Alanyst indicates that he believes that “this shift in meaning by John Foxe was unintentional and in good faith; it’s hard to paraphrase something and capture the exact nuance of the original quote. That said, since the original is not much larger than the paraphrase, it’s better to have the full original quote.”<sup>32</sup>

Foxe agreed to change what he had written, but not without claiming that the change was insignificant: “I apologize for what was almost certainly my transcription error. But I think if there’s any change of meaning, it’s trifling.”<sup>33</sup> Thus without the intervention of two LDS editors, the assertion that an LDS historian had expressed doubt about the validity of early references to the first vision would have remained in the article. Most casual readers of the Wikipedia article would not have taken the time to check the sources to discover that Allen’s words had been subtly rearranged in a way that reversed his intended meaning.

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31. Allen, “Significance of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 30.

32. Comment by “Alanyst” posted on “First Vision” Wikipedia talk page on 13 October 2007, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:First\\_Vision&diff=next&oldid=164255019](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:First_Vision&diff=next&oldid=164255019).

33. Comment by “John Foxe” posted on “First Vision” Wikipedia talk page on 13 October 2007, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:First\\_Vision&diff=164252531&oldid=164187300](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:First_Vision&diff=164252531&oldid=164187300).

## “Fact” Creation in LDS Wikipedia Articles

Among all LDS Wikipedia articles, the article “First Vision” has experienced some of the most intense and long-running edit wars. The overall emphasis of the article tends toward discounting and discrediting the vision, and this becomes apparent when one examines how the sources are used. It is very easy for a Wikipedia editor to represent a mere opinion as an established “fact.” Consider this statement from the Wikipedia article “First Vision”: “No members of the Smith family were church members in 1820, the reported date of the first vision.”<sup>34</sup>

Wikipedia’s implication is that Joseph Smith lied about his family becoming associated with the Presbyterians in the 1820 time frame. Note that Joseph Smith’s own words regarding this issue are not presented. Casual readers may simply accept this idea as “encyclopedic fact” and move on. However, Latter-day Saints familiar with Joseph Smith’s history will immediately notice that this contradicts Joseph’s own statement that members of his family became associated with the Presbyterians around the time of the religious excitement in 1820. How does Wikipedia support such a clear and definitive claim? The editors refer to the source used to support the assertion, D. Michael Quinn’s *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, wherein “Quinn calls the Smiths ‘unchurched Christians’ who ‘possessed . . . seer stones, a dagger for drawing the required circles, as well as magic parchments to ward off thieves and communicate with good spirits to help find treasures.’”<sup>35</sup>

The editor synthesizes a conclusion that is not explicitly stated in the supporting source in order to diminish the Smith family’s Christianity and emphasize “magic.” The Wikipedia article neglects to mention that Lucy Mack Smith sought out

34. 18 October 2011, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_Vision](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Vision).

35 D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 322. The source reference is present in the Wikipedia article “First Vision” as of 16 October 2011 (see n. 27 above).

baptism without wanting to be formally associated with a particular congregation sometime before her son Alvin reached his “twenty-second year,” which would place the baptism prior to 11 February 1820. Lucy describes attending a sermon at the Presbyterian church and being disappointed that the sermon “did not fill the aching void within nor satisfy the craving hunger of the soul.” After her baptism, Lucy relied on her Bible for spiritual support.<sup>36</sup>

Another instance of synthesis of new “facts” is based on the apparent *lack* of sources. Wikipedia’s “First Vision” article makes the following assertion: “In the Palmyra area itself, the only large multi-denominational revivals occurred in 1816–1817 and 1824–1825.”<sup>37</sup> Two sources—one by Richard Bushman and the other by Dan Vogel—are used to support the synthesized conclusion that no “revival” occurred in 1820:

The great revival of 1816 and 1817, which nearly doubled the number of Palmyra Presbyterians, was in progress when the Smiths arrived.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, it was the revival of 1824–25 . . . rather than the revival of 1817 or the one he ‘remembered’ for 1820.<sup>39</sup>

Bushman’s and Vogel’s opinions are used to establish the statement that since there were *recorded* revivals in the two time frames specified, there was no “revival” during 1820. This ignores the fact that Joseph never even claimed there was a “revival” in

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36. Lucy Mack Smith, “Lucy Smith History, 1845,” quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:242. Vogel notes that “Alvin became twenty-two on 11 February 1820. However, Lucy misdates Alvin’s birth to 1799, rather than 1798, and his death to 1824, instead of 1823. Later she states that she joined the Presbyterian church after Alvin’s death.”

37. Statement from Wikipedia article “First Vision” (see n. 27 above).

38. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 36, 46.

39. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 60; see pp. 26, 58–60.

the Palmyra area: he stated that there was “an unusual excitement on the subject of religion” (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). There is, in fact, evidence that Methodist camp meetings did occur in the area that did not normally receive newspaper coverage, with one 1820 camp meeting only making it into the news as the result of a death that appeared to be associated with it.<sup>40</sup>

Wikipedia does not specifically discuss the 1820 camp meeting, even though it is the topic of a referenced secondary source from D. Michael Quinn. Wikipedia only mentions that “D. Michael Quinn notes a Methodist camp meeting in Palmyra in June 1818.” However, the source used to support this statement is Quinn’s “Joseph Smith’s Experience of a Methodist ‘Camp-Meeting’ in 1820.” Note that Wikipedia utilizes the Quinn essay only to discuss the 1818 revival and completely ignores any discussion of the 1820 camp meeting. This effort by critics to ignore the possible significance of the 1820 meeting in favor of the 1818 revival is, ironically, the very focus of Quinn’s essay.<sup>41</sup>

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40. *Palmyra Register*, 5 July 1820, 2. The Methodists objected to the newspaper’s implication that the death of James Couser was associated with their meeting at the “camp-ground.” The newspaper issued a correction, stating, “We committed ‘an error in point of fact,’ in saying the Couser ‘obtained his liquor at the camp-ground.’ By this expression we did not mean to insinuate that he obtained it within the enclosure of their place of worship or that he procured it of *them*, but at the grog-shops that were established at, or near if you please, their camp-ground. It was far from our intention to charge the Methodists with retailing ardent spirits while professedly met for worship of their God.” This indirectly establishes that the Methodists held at least one meeting at the “camp-ground” in June of 1820.

41. D. Michael Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience of a Methodist ‘Camp-Meeting’ in 1820,” Dialogue Paperless E-Paper 3, 20 December 2006, 4. Regarding the 1820 camp meeting, Quinn notes that “Palmyra’s weekly newspaper . . . edition of 28 June 1820 referred to out-of town visitor James Couser, who died on June 26th, the day after he drunkenly left ‘the Campground’ following the evening services of ‘a camp-meeting which was held in this vicinity.’ The *Palmyra Register*’s next edition denied that its editor intended ‘to charge the Methodists’ with selling alcohol at ‘their camp-ground’ while they ‘professedly met for the worship of their God.’”



Some interesting contrasts can be observed by comparing elements of the Wikipedia “First Vision” article to John Matzko’s 2007 essay “The Encounter of the Young Joseph Smith with Presbyterianism.” Matzko, a professor of history at Bob Jones University, thoroughly examines the influence that events in Palmyra related to the Presbyterians may have had on the young Joseph Smith. Similar topics are addressed by John Foxe in the Wikipedia “First Vision” article, and it is useful to contrast the two approaches. For example, in contrast to the obscure treatment of the Quinn essay in the Wikipedia article, Dr. Matzko correctly and directly acknowledges it in his *Dialogue* essay: “D. Michael Quinn argues that, on the contrary, a Methodist camp meeting of 1820 can be fairly interpreted as the religious revival to which Joseph Smith refers and that Methodists typically only asked permission to use property for camp meetings rather than purchase the land.”<sup>42</sup>

While Matzko’s acknowledgment of the camp meeting is clear, the Wikipedia article attempts to obscure its possible significance. An inclusion of the Matzko citation in the Wikipedia article would easily clear up the confusing treatment that the camp meeting currently receives.

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For discussion of an 1820 camp meeting near Palmyra, see the following studies (all but the first appeared before Quinn’s essay): Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Probing the Lives of Christ and Joseph Smith,” *FARMS Review* 21/2 (2009): 16–18; Davis Bitton, “The Charge of a Man with a Broken Lance (But Look What He Doesn’t Tell Us),” review of *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*, by Grant H. Palmer, *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 261; Steven C. Harper, “Trustworthy History?,” review of *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*, by Grant H. Palmer, *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 294–96; Larry C. Porter, “Reinventing Mormonism: To Remake or Redo,” review of *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record*, by H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/2 (1995): 128–31; and Richard L. Bushman, “Just the Facts Please,” review of *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record*, by H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994): 126–27.

42. John A. Matzko, “The Encounter of the Young Joseph Smith with Presbyterianism,” *Dialogue* 40/3 (Fall 2007): 78 n. 2.

Such negative “fact creation” is by no means limited to Wikipedia’s “First Vision” article. The Wikipedia article “Mormonism and Christianity,” by the very nature of its subject matter, is a magnet for speculative statements. As of 11 October 2011, the article asserts, “An important part of this pioneer Mormonism is the Adam–God doctrine, which became the most prominent (but not exclusive) theology of 19th-century Mormonism.”<sup>43</sup>

The idea that the Adam–God theory became the “most prominent” theology of nineteenth-century Mormonism would no doubt come as a surprise to any LDS historian. Yet this “fact,” cited to Kurt Widmer’s *Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theological Evolution*, presents itself in the Wikipedia article as *the* LDS historical position on the Adam–God theory, without any qualification whatsoever. Ari D. Bruening and David L. Paulsen counter that “the Adam–God theory may have been taught by Brigham Young, but it was never the dominant position of the church,” adding that “the church was silent on the subject.”<sup>44</sup> This more accurate representation of the prominence of the Adam–God theory is not included in the Wikipedia article.

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43. Statement from Wikipedia article “Mormonism and Christianity,” accessed 11 November 2011, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mormonism\\_and\\_Christianity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mormonism_and_Christianity). The statement is cited to several sources: Kurt Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theological Evolution, 1830–1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 131; Gary James Bergera, “The Orson Pratt–Brigham Young Controversies: Conflict within the Quorums, 1853 to 1868,” *Dialogue* 13/2 (1980): 41, describing the Adam–God doctrine as “Adam was at once the spiritual as well as the physical father of all persons born on this world, including Jesus Christ”; Boyd Kirkland, “Jehovah as the Father: The Development of the Mormon Jehovah Doctrine,” *Sunstone* 44 (Autumn): 39, stating that Adam “later begot Jesus, his firstborn spirit son, in the flesh.”

44. Ari D. Bruening, and David L. Paulsen, “The Development of the Mormon Understanding of God: Early Mormon Modalism and Other Myths,” review of “Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theological Evolution” by Kurt Widmer, *FARMS Review* 13/2 (2001): 109–69.

The “Mormonism and Christianity” article further asserts that nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints believed that “Adam returned to physically father Jesus by Mary” and that modern church members believe that “Heavenly Father and Mother then gave birth to the spirits of humanity through a sexual union.”<sup>45</sup> Such “facts,” however, reside more in the realm of Mormon folklore than they do in actual doctrine. In the hands of a determined Wikipedia editor, however, any published author’s opinion on a subject can become a dominant “encyclopedic fact” per current Wikipedia standards.

The creation of new “facts” illustrates the important difference between publishing in Wikipedia versus publishing in a periodical requiring genuine peer review. A good example of this difference is illustrated in Wikipedia’s “First Vision” article. The following assertion appeared in the 14 July 2009 revision of the article: “While [Joseph Smith] almost certainly never formally joined the Methodist church, he did associate himself with the Methodists *eight years* after he said he had been instructed by God not to join any established denomination” (emphasis added). The footnote reads: “Bushman, 69–70. The Methodists did not acquire property on the Vienna Road until July 1821, so it is likely that Smith’s first dabble with Methodism occurred during the 1824–25 revival in Palmyra.”<sup>46</sup>

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45. Statement from Wikipedia article “Mormonism and Christianity.” The endnote states: “Widmer (2000, p. 137) (20th century Mormon theologians retained Young’s idea that spirit children were born in the same way that material children are born); Alexander (1980, p. 31) (noting the Heavenly Mother doctrine, Roberts and Widsor taught that ‘[s]exual relations will continue into eternity both for joy and for procreation.’).”

46. The phrase originally inserted into the article on 19 August 2006 by editor “John Foxe” was “Smith’s name appears on a Methodist class roll in June of 1828. While the appearance of his name does not necessarily indicate membership in the Methodist Church, attending a Methodist class was curious behavior for one who had been instructed by God not to join any established denomination eight years previous.” The reference cited was Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, pp. 69–70. The wiki editor has synthesized a statement that is not supported by the

On 17 July 2009 this paragraph was corrected to say: “While he almost certainly never formally joined the Methodist church, he did associate himself with the Methodists ‘*at some point between 1821 and 1829*’ after he said he had been instructed by God not to join any established denomination” (emphasis added). The footnote was changed to read as follows:

Bushman, 69–70; John A. Matzko, “The Encounter of Young Joseph Smith with Presbyterianism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. Non-Mormon historian Matzko notes: “At some point between 1821 and 1829, Smith served as ‘a very passable exhorter’ at Methodist camp meetings ‘away down in the woods, on the Vienna Road.’” Matzko also makes the point that “[s]ince the Methodists did not acquire property on the Vienna Road until July 1821, the camp meetings were almost certainly held after that date.”<sup>47</sup>

Matzko’s assertion, having passed through the routine publication process, is somewhat more accurate and less biased than Foxe’s assertion.<sup>48</sup> Foxe’s original sentence was crafted to imply that Joseph may have disobeyed a commandment from God not to join any church eight years *after* the first vision, thus bolstering the idea that the story of the first vision was invented well after the event was claimed to have taken place. In contrast, Matzko more accurately represents the primary source and places Joseph’s exhortation somewhere *within* the eight-year period.<sup>49</sup> Richard L. Anderson, however, states that

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source used. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First\\_Vision&diff=70600843&oldid=70600094](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First_Vision&diff=70600843&oldid=70600094).

47. Statement from Wikipedia article “First Vision,” at [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First\\_Vision&diff=302519006&oldid=301964238](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First_Vision&diff=302519006&oldid=301964238).

48. It should be noted the Matzko’s assertion that “camp meetings were almost certainly held after” July 1821 does not account for the *Palymra Register* reference to a Methodist camp meeting in the area in June 1820.

49. Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham’s Purchase* (Rochester, NY: 1852), 214: “After catching a spark of Methodism in the

“the time is probably during the editor’s [Orsamus Turner] Palmyra apprenticeship, presumably 1820 or before, and is certainly no later than the summer of 1822.”<sup>50</sup> This opinion is not cited in the Wikipedia article, even though the Anderson article is listed in the reference section.

## Reinventing John Taylor

Wikipedia uses popular critical views to portray John Taylor’s understanding of the first vision. Note the following passage from the 18 October 2011 version of the Wikipedia article “First Vision,” which represents a classic critical attempt to discredit the importance of the vision to the early Saints:

The canonical First Vision story was not emphasized in the sermons of Smith’s immediate successors Brigham Young and John Taylor. . . . 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.

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camp meeting, away down in the woods, on the Vienna road, [Joseph Smith] was a very passable exhorter in evening meetings.” Turner does not provide a date for this event; however, the context of his narrative places Joseph’s “exhortation” within the period of time of the recovery of the gold plates.”

50. Richard L. Anderson, “Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision Through Reminiscences,” *BYU Studies* 9/3 (1969): “Turner gives from his personal contact the time, place, and subject of the Prophet’s early conversion. The time is probably during the editor’s Palmyra apprenticeship, presumably 1820 or before, and is certainly no later than the summer of 1822. The semi-conversion is to Methodism, precisely the belief that Joseph Smith said he was partial to. The place is a ‘camp meeting’ *away from Palmyra*” (p. 379, emphasis in original).

The key turning point in this paragraph is the word *however*, which is designed to make a point that later in Taylor's life he deemphasized and perhaps even *forgot* details of the first vision by noting that "in 1879, he referred to Joseph Smith having asked 'the angel' which of the sects was correct." The selection of this particular citation is very informative since there are *two* discourses by John Taylor recorded for 2 March 1879. In each of these, Taylor refers to the first vision:

None of them was right, just as it was when the Prophet Joseph asked the angel which of the sects was right that he might join it. (*Journal of Discourses*, 20:167)

When the Father and the Son and Moroni and others came to Joseph Smith . . ." (*Journal of Discourses*, 20:257)

Both references are taken from the *Journal of Discourses*, and both record sermons by Taylor made the very same day. Both reference the first vision. So why is the sermon mentioning an "angel" included in the Wikipedia article while the other mentioning the Father and the Son is not? This is done so that certain wiki editors can portray Taylor as being "confused" about the details of the vision, and they wish to demonstrate that the event held little importance in his mind. Rather than explore the historical fact that early Church leaders sometimes referred to visits by deity as "angelic" visitations, the wiki editors simply choose to apply their own logic in order to make a factual assertion that Taylor didn't know what he was talking about.

The choice of John Taylor as the subject of this demonstration is ironic. Numerous references to the visit of the Father and the Son in his letters, sermons, and other writings are re-

corded in the *Journal of Discourses* and elsewhere.<sup>51</sup> Taylor not only fully understood the significance of the first vision, he also repeatedly promoted it over the pulpit and in his writings.

If such a blatant inaccuracy exists in Wikipedia, why not correct it? After all, Wikipedia's philosophy is that "anyone can edit." In actuality, the task of correcting such egregious errors is not as straightforward as it might appear to be. Consider this interaction with partisan sectarian wiki editor John Foxe regarding the treatment of John Taylor. While still unaware of the multitude of Taylor's references to the Father and the Son in

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51. 25 February 1879: "God Himself, accompanied by the Savior, appeared to Joseph" (letter to A. K. Thurber at Richfield, Utah); 28 November 1879: "He came himself, accompanied by his Son Jesus, to the Prophet Joseph Smith" (*Journal of Discourses*, 21:116); 7 December 1879: "the Lord revealed himself to him together with his Son Jesus, and, pointing to the latter, said: 'This is my beloved Son, hear him'" (*Journal of Discourses*, 21:161); 4 January 1880: "the Lord appeared unto Joseph Smith, both the Father and the Son, the Father pointing to the Son said 'this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him'" (*Journal of Discourses*, 21:65); 27 June 1881: "And hence when the heavens were opened and the Father and Son appeared and revealed unto Joseph the principles of the Gospel" (*Journal of Discourses*, 22:218); 28 August 1881: "the Father and the Son appeared to the youth Joseph Smith to introduce the great work of the latter days" (*Journal of Discourses*, 22:299); 20 October 1881: "In the commencement of the work, the Father and the Son appeared to Joseph Smith. And when they appeared to him, the Father, pointing to the Son, said, 'This is my beloved Son, hear him'" (*Journal of Discourses*, 26:106–7); 1882: *Mediation and Atonement* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News Co., 1882; photo lithographic reprint, Salt Lake City, 1964), 138; 5 March 1882: "After the Lord had spoken to Joseph Smith, and Jesus had manifested himself to him . . ." (*Journal of Discourses*, 23:32); 29 May 1882: "God the Father, and God the Son, both appeared to him; and the Father, pointing, said, this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him" (*Millennial Star*, 29 May 1882), 337–38; 23 November 1882: "It is true that God appeared to Joseph Smith, and that His Son Jesus did" (*Journal of Discourses*, 23:323); 18 May 1884: "When our Heavenly Father appeared unto Joseph Smith, the Prophet, He pointed to the Savior who was with him, (and who, it is said, is the brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of His person) and said: 'This is my beloved Son, hear Him'" (*Journal of Discourses*, 25:177); 1892: "God revealed Himself, as also the Lord Jesus Christ, unto His servant the Prophet Joseph Smith, when the Father pointed to the Son and said: 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, hear ye Him'" (cited in B. H. Roberts, *Life of John Taylor*, 1892), 394.

Joseph Smith's first vision, Foxe responded to an LDS editor, "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." Yet when Taylor's numerous citations of the vision were explicitly pointed out to him, he persisted in maintaining his position by attempting to qualify their validity:

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 and at about the time when the canonical story was beginning to be promoted by Taylor's nephew by marriage, George Q. Cannon. When Taylor discussed the origins of Mormonism in 1863, he did so without alluding to the canonical First Vision story: "We read that an angel came down and revealed himself to Joseph Smith and manifested unto him in vision the true position of the world in a religious point of view. He was surrounded with light and glory while the heavenly messenger communicated these things unto him, after a series of visitations and communications from the Apostle Peter and others who held the authority of the holy Priesthood, not only on the earth formerly but in the heavens afterwards." *Journal of Discourses* 10:127<sup>52</sup>

Foxe chooses to concentrate on "the angel" and discounts the multiple references to the Father and the Son by claiming that they were "late in his life." Yet, this contradicts his earlier assertion that Taylor "did not emphasize it during his tenure." In fact, the *majority* of the references to the Father and the Son occurred during Taylor's tenure as president of the church between 1880 and 1887. This hostile wiki editor simply does not concede that an examination of the sources contradicts such

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52. Comment by editor "John Foxe" posted to "First Vision" Wikipedia talk page on 12 November 2009, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:First\\_Vision](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:First_Vision).



a popular critical claim. In spite of the fact that Taylor noted the visit of the Father and the Son multiple times both before and after the 1863 reference to the “angel,” it is the “angel” that receives priority treatment by Wikipedia. John Taylor’s legacy of expounding the importance of the first vision thus becomes a victim of Wikipedia’s version of “truth.”

### The “Attack Biography”

One popular way that editors with agendas can express themselves on Wikipedia is to modify the Wikipedia biography of a person with whom they are displeased. The most well-known instance of biography tampering was the modification by an anonymous editor of John Seigenthaler’s Wikipedia biography to claim, among other things, that he was “thought to have been directly involved in the Kennedy assassinations.” Seigenthaler responded, “This is a highly personal story about Internet character assassination. It could be your story. I have no idea whose sick mind conceived the false, malicious ‘biography’ that appeared under my name for 132 days on Wikipedia, the popular, online, free encyclopedia whose authors are unknown and virtually untraceable.”<sup>53</sup> One Wikipedia watcher notes that

Wikipedia biographies can be an “attractive nuisance.” It says, to every troll, vandal, and score-settler: “Here’s an article about a person where you can, with no accountability whatsoever, write any libel, defamation, or smear. It won’t be a marginal comment with the social status of an inconsequential rant, but rather will be made prominent about the person and

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53. John Seigenthaler, “A false Wikipedia ‘biography,’” *USA Today*, 29 November 2005, [www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2005-11-29-wikipedia-edit\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2005-11-29-wikipedia-edit_x.htm).

reputation-laundered with the institutional status of an encyclopedia.”<sup>54</sup>

The Wikipedia biographies of Latter-day Saint scholars who have some involvement with apologetics are an attractive target for those who are disaffected with the church. A typical approach is to modify the biography so that it both emphasizes the person’s involvement with apologetics and highlights any negative or controversial aspects of that person’s life. For example, on 28 August 2008, an ex-Mormon using the screen name “Descartes1979” edited the Wikipedia biography of Daniel C. Peterson. The introductory paragraph of the biography originally 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.” The editor moved this information elsewhere and replaced the introductory paragraph with “Daniel C. Peterson is a Mormon apologist and professor at Brigham Young University.”

In addition to this change, the editor expanded the 205-word article by adding a new “Controversy” section comprising 451 words. The “Controversy” section remained in place for ten months before it was removed by another editor. The “Mormon apologist” designation remained for sixteen months before the introductory paragraph was restored to its original state.

The same Wikipedia editor, “Descartes1979,” gave similar treatment to the Wikipedia biography of William Hamblin: “William James Hamblin (born 1954) is a Mormon apologist and associate professor of history at Brigham Young University (BYU).” Descartes1979 noted in his edit summary that “Hamblin is by far best known in his apologetic role,” as justification for this change.<sup>55</sup> Without a citation to back up that

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54. Finkelstein, “I’m on Wikipedia” (see note 4 herein).

55. Edit performed on Wikipedia article “William J. Hamblin” by editor “Descartes1979” on 13 January 2011, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index>.

assertion, this is simply one person's opinion. As of 16 October 2011, this assertion continues to be the introductory line of the Hamblin biography.

### **Anonymity and Sock Puppetry**

There are many valid reasons to maintain anonymity online. The use of one's real name on message boards and in Wikipedia editing can provide too much information about one's life to those who would use the information for dishonest purposes. It is therefore recommended that Wikipedia editors create a screen name under which to perform their edits. The majority of Wikipedia editors edit using some sort of pseudonym, and they express the same courtesy toward others that one might expect them to display in "real life." There are also other advantages. A "pseudo persona" has no claimed academic credentials—hence there is no reputation to maintain. If mistakes are made, they will not be included in or reflect upon that person's corpus of academic work.

The use of an anonymous pseudonym sometimes allows one to safely reflect the true inner thoughts of the corresponding "real world" editor without the danger of having any of the persona's activities reflect upon his or her "real world" reputation and credentials. One LDS editor expresses his frustration: "At last, the truth comes out. Now your condescending attitude towards all of us amateurs makes more sense. It has long been obvious that you are a better wordsmith than I, that doesn't make your words any more or less true. Joseph Smith, Jr. was barely literate when he first saw God the Father and Jesus Christ, I am glad to stand with them."<sup>56</sup>

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php?title=William\_J.\_Hamblin&diff=407616288&oldid=407438080.

56. Comment by Latter-day Saint Wikipedia editor "74s181" posted to the "First Vision" Wikipedia talk page on 5 November 2007, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:First\\_Vision/Archive\\_8#.22Drivel.22](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:First_Vision/Archive_8#.22Drivel.22).

Unfortunately, anonymity can also have its dark side. Good, intelligent people who would normally act in a sensible and civilized manner succumb to the temptation to create alternate personalities with which to express their true feelings without restraint. The ability to edit Wikipedia anonymously under a screen name provides the tantalizing opportunity to create alternate editing accounts, each with a different personality. Such an alternate account is called a “sock puppet.” They are strictly prohibited by Wikipedia and are considered a way for an editor to “evade” the Wikipedia community. Sock puppets can be used to make it appear that multiple individuals are participating in the editing process when in fact there is only a single individual. Sock puppets are often used to portray a different attitude or point of view than the master editor. Sometimes they will play a game of “good cop/bad cop” by pretending to hold opposing points of view.

### **The Foxe and the Chicken Coop**

A prime example of sock puppetry and the effect that editing LDS articles can have on an editor occurred on the “Joseph Smith” Wikipedia article during late 2008 to late 2009. Editor John Foxe makes no secret of his feelings toward Joseph Smith, Jr.: “My editing objective is not to convince the world that Joseph Smith was ‘a lecherous fraud’—although he was.”<sup>57</sup> And then the following: “You have to understand that from my perspective, Joseph not only lied, he committed serial adultery.”<sup>58</sup>

Casting himself as the lone non-LDS voice on LDS articles, Foxe portrays himself as a “man of good faith,” but he wishes

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57. Comment by editor “John Foxe” posted to “Golden plates” Wikipedia talk page on 10 March 2007, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Golden\\_plates&diff=prev&oldid=114092102](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Golden_plates&diff=prev&oldid=114092102).

58. Comment by editor “John Foxe” posted to “Seer stone” Wikipedia talk page on 13 January 2009, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Seer\\_stone\\_\(Latter\\_Day\\_Saints\)#Revelation\\_2.17\\_and\\_the\\_white\\_stone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Seer_stone_(Latter_Day_Saints)#Revelation_2.17_and_the_white_stone).

that he had an ally to assist him in his effort to edit LDS-related articles.

In the meantime I will continue, in a gentlemanly fashion, to revert the article to its earlier, and in my view, more NPOV condition. I certainly want to avoid incivility or personal attacks. (You may have heard the story of the chicken farmer who refused to press charges against the chicken thief because he didn't want to be associated with chicken thieves.) And there will be no sock puppetry or meat puppetry on my part. It would be nice to have an ally occasionally, but I won't stoop to creating or recruiting them.<sup>59</sup>

This promise not to create an alternate editing account was repeated just four weeks later. "I admit that it would be nice to have a non-Mormon ally at Mormon articles, but I long ago promised long ago not to create sock puppets or attempt to recruit others to support my views. That's a promise I've kept and intend to keep."<sup>60</sup>

Thus the appearance of a new participant on the "Joseph Smith" article in September 2008 named "Hi540" was perplexing. The name "Hi540" is the course designation of the Bob Jones University course *Historical Research and Writing*,<sup>61</sup> and the account was deliberately designed to look like Foxe's real-world

59. Comment by editor "John Foxe" posted to "First Vision" Wikipedia talk page on 3 November 2007, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:First\\_Vision/Archive\\_8#Arbitration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:First_Vision/Archive_8#Arbitration). The opening *I* in this quotation has been corrected to *In* for ease of reading.

60. Comment posted by "John Foxe" to his own Wikipedia User Page on 6 December 2007, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User\\_talk:John\\_Foxe&diff=176231278&oldid=176219280](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User_talk:John_Foxe&diff=176231278&oldid=176219280).

61. Course Catalog, Bob Jones University. "Hi 540 - Historical Research & Writing. Techniques of historical research, analysis and composition culminating in a formal article-length paper based in part on primary documentation. Required of all students majoring in History," at <http://www.bju.edu/academics/courses/?subject=History>.

identity.<sup>62</sup> It was only when the Hi540 account was used to support the Foxe account in an edit war on the “Joseph Smith” article, however, that a problem became apparent. While the Foxe account remained guardedly civil toward LDS editors, the Hi540 account expressed open hostility toward Joseph Smith and editing performed by Latter-day Saints, including going so far as to mistakenly accuse one non-LDS editor of being a “Mormon.”<sup>63</sup> The disdain of Joseph Smith by Hi540 becomes apparent in an edit summary: “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.”<sup>64</sup>

The Foxe account represented the calm voice of reason while the Hi540 account was allowed to voice provocative opinions. On 13 January 2009 Foxe posted the following comment:

The [Joseph Smith] article has remarkable balance right now. Any attempts to deliberately add Mormon

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62. The “Hi540” account was used as a class exercise to edit Wikipedia articles on a variety of non-LDS related subjects. The account behaved as a very competent and generally civil editor, with the glaring exception being its misbehavior on articles related to Mormonism. According to John Foxe, “The intent was a sort of privacy account in reverse with John Foxe being my private account and Hi540 being tagged with all sorts [of] clues as to my real identity, including a dated childhood picture. Even the quotation is a give-away to folks who know me because I was a seasonal NPS ranger at Robert E. Lee’s Arlington House for several summers. (I’d doubt many sockpuppet creators add helpful clues about their real identities to the home pages of their creatures.)” Posted on John Foxe’s Wikipedia user page on 21 August 2011, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User\\_talk:John\\_Foxe/Archive\\_5#Hi540](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_talk:John_Foxe/Archive_5#Hi540).

63. On 15 September 2008 on the “Joseph Smith” Wikipedia talk page, “Hi540” accused non-LDS editor “A Sniper” of being a Mormon: “I think you’re a Mormon because you accused Foxe of pushing the material of ‘a small cabal of Mormon/ex-Mormon writers.’ . . . I notice that you don’t actually deny being a Mormon.” Editor “A Sniper” responded, “I’m not a Mormon or member of any Latter Day Saint church.” Upon learning this, “Hi540” apologized to the editor “for misjudging him.” See [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Joseph\\_Smith&diff=prev&oldid=238900920](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Joseph_Smith&diff=prev&oldid=238900920).

64. Edit summary posted by “Hi540” on 20 September 2008 while editing Wikipedia article “Joseph Smith,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Joseph\\_Smith&diff=prev&oldid=239869039](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Joseph_Smith&diff=prev&oldid=239869039).

POV will both spark an edit war and in the end degrade the literary quality of the current article because of the difficulty of clearing the corpses from the battlefield when it concludes. Improvements in this article are more likely to come from deletions than additions.

Two and one-half hours later, Hi540 added this comment:

I think Smith is handled with kid gloves in this article. There needs to be more emphasis on the fraudulent means that he used to start his religion and also the emphasis on sex at the end of his life.<sup>65</sup>

This was a classic case of “good cop/bad cop” sock puppetry, with the two accounts representing different personalities. Hi540 continued to express disgust for LDS-related subjects and support his alter-ego Foxe until the Hi540 account abruptly ceased editing LDS articles in late October 2009 after being reminded that he “ought not to pretend to act like a chicken thief . . . every time you converse with a believer.”<sup>66</sup> The account remained active on other, noncontroversial articles and behaved in a respectable manner until Foxe’s sock puppetry was confirmed by Wikipedia administrators in August 2011, almost two years later. This resulted in the Hi540 account being permanently banned and the Foxe account being given a

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65. Comments posted by “Hi540” on 13 January 2009 to the “Joseph Smith” Wikipedia talk page, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Joseph\\_Smith&diff=prev&oldid=263815036](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Joseph_Smith&diff=prev&oldid=263815036).

66. “Hi540” ceased editing LDS-related articles after responding to a comment posted by Roger Nicholson under the screen name “Roger Penumbra” on the “Joseph Smith” talk page on 27 October 2009: “You really ought to be embarrassed by your rhetoric, Hi540. There’s an old story about a farmer who caught a thief stealing his chickens. The sheriff was called, but the farmer said he didn’t want to press charges. ‘Why not?’ said the sheriff. ‘Because I don’t want to be associated with a chicken thief,’ said he. You ought not to pretend to act like a chicken thief (even though you are not) every time you converse with a believer.” Two days later, the Hi540 account made its final edit to the “Joseph Smith” Wikipedia article. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk\\_Joseph\\_Smith/Archive\\_13](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk_Joseph_Smith/Archive_13).

two-week suspension. Foxe apologized to LDS Wikipedia editor Alanyst:

I'm greatly embarrassed about my behavior in editing with two accounts at Joseph Smith during the thirteen months between September 2008 and October 2009. It was especially painful to read my promise not to create a sock puppet nine months before using one. (At least the record bears out my memory that I created Hi540 a year before I actually used the account illegitimately.) I apologize to you personally and to the community at large.<sup>67</sup>

### The FAIR Wiki

The popularity and accessibility of Wikipedia demonstrates the power of the wiki format, and other wikis have been built upon the same model. If Wikipedia can aspire to become a repository for all knowledge, why not create such a wiki for the purpose of collecting and improving responses to all known critical claims against the church? Such a wiki exists as part of the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), a volunteer online organization that provides well-researched answers to critical claims against the church.

The FAIR Wiki was created in 2006 with the purpose of serving as a location to store and easily access reference material for use by FAIR members. The wiki, however, soon demonstrated its utility as a way for FAIR members to collaboratively edit responses to critical claims. As questions came in through FAIR's "Ask the Apologist," the best answers provided by FAIR members made their way into wiki articles. The number of wiki articles grew to several thousand over the next five years, and the wiki became a very valuable resource. The number of claims that critics make against the Church is finite, and it is

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67. Comment by "John Foxe" posted to his Wikipedia user page on 22 August 2011, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User\\_talk:John\\_Foxe/Archive\\_5#Hi540](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_talk:John_Foxe/Archive_5#Hi540).



possible using the wiki to index and provide scholarly responses. The wiki began to include claim-by-claim examinations of popular critical books and films.

As the FAIR Wiki grew in size and complexity, it began appearing within the first ten Google search results (the first page). In fact, for a number of specific subject searches related to apologetics, the wiki appeared in the number-one or number-two positions on the first page. Such is the case with a Google search on the subject of Jesus and Satan being “brothers,” a popular search topic during the last few years since it was brought to the forefront during the 2008 presidential campaign.<sup>68</sup>

As of 1 October 2011, a Google search of the text string “are Jesus and Satan brothers” showed the FAIR Wiki in the number-two position, immediately after a website belonging to a counter-cult ministry. However, a search for “Jesus Christ brother of Satan” shows the FAIR Wiki as the number-one result. Wikipedia does not appear at all because there is not a specific Wikipedia article written on the subject of Jesus and Satan being brothers. Note that even a slight difference in the construction of a search phrase can produce a difference in the result ranking. Subjects related to LDS apologetics that are currently discussed in the media comprise the majority of search engine hits on the FAIR Wiki.

### How Should Latter-day Saints Treat Wikipedia?

This is not a “call to arms” for massive numbers of Latter-day Saints to go and attempt to edit Wikipedia articles about the Church. The nature of Wikipedia is such that an LDS-themed article will never be considered “faith promoting.” What is needed is for intelligent and well-read Church members to calmly participate in the editing process, joining a

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68. Laurie Goodstein, “Huckabee Is Not Alone in Ignorance on Mormonism,” *New York Times*, 14 December 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/14/us/politics/14mormon.html>.

number of such LDS editors who already participate heavily in this process. Editing LDS articles requires a significant investment of time and patience, particularly when dealing with editors who do not demonstrate any amount of respect for The Church of Jesus Christ or the faith of Latter-day Saints. A cool head coupled with a fair dose of patience is always best. LDS editors should behave with civility, even in the face of mockery.

Equally important is the need for wiki editors to be educated on the subject being edited. As Dr. Matzko correctly notes, “It is easy enough to spin webs of speculation” when attempting to document the history of Joseph Smith Jr.<sup>69</sup> Acquiring a thorough knowledge of the available sources is the key to success on Wikipedia. Editors’ own opinions should not remain in Wikipedia articles; cited facts will stand a much better chance of remaining. Editors also should not remove citations, even if they appear disagreeable, unless the source used is obviously in violation of Wikipedia policy. An editor who consistently behaves in a civil manner toward others and patiently works to achieve consensus with those editors with whom he or she may disagree will build a solid reputation within the Wikipedia community. Over time, misrepresentations about our faith can be corrected.

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69. Matzko, “Encounter of Young Joseph Smith with Presbyterianism,” 76. Dr. Matzko is a historian and the chairperson of the Division of Social Science College of Arts and Science at Bob Jones University. The context of the quote specifically refers to the possibility that Joseph Smith may have attended the dedication ceremony for the Western Presbyterian Church in Palmyra at age thirteen, with the speculation based on circumstantial evidence that it may have influenced the dedication ceremony of the Kirtland Temple years later in 1836.



