Maristella Gatto

The Power and Politics of Online Collaborative Genres during the Covid-19 Information/Health Crisis

Abstract

In the context of the recent Covid-19 'infodemic,' the World Health Organization joined forces with Wikipedia, the largest multilingual collaborative online encyclopedia, in order to boost the dissemination of accurate reliable knowledge (WHO 2020, online). It cannot go unnoticed that this agreement implicitly acknowledged the major role Wikipedia plays as a source of medical information on the Web; at the same time it was challenging—albeit for a good cause—the nature of Wikipedia as an encyclopedia. In fact, coping with the Covid-19 emergency has inevitably expanded Wikipedia's boundaries beyond the limits of the encyclopedia genre, by 'forcing' it to chart unknown territories in the pursuit of a balance between established information and ever new data.

It is against this background that the impact of this new scenario on the 'generic integrity' of Wikipedia is discussed in the present article through the analysis of pages related to Covid-19 in Wikipedia. The basic assumption is that while the interplay between the centrifugal and centripetal forces of discourse remains at the heart of the Wikipedia enterprise (Gatto 2012; Bakhtin 1982), in the case of the Covid-19 health/information crisis a more pressing recourse might have been made to centripetal forces, in ways not dissimilar to the typical 'gatekeeping' at work in traditional genres, so as to maintain both generic integrity and high standards in the quality of information.

Keywords: *generic integrity, collaborative genres, infodemic, Covid-19, Wikipedia*

In the context of what has been recently labelled with the word "polycrisis," to signify "a time of great disagreement, confusion, or suffering that is caused by many different problems happening at the same time so that they together have a very big effect" (*Cambridge Dictionary*, online[1]), it has been overtly acknowledged that the (mal)practice of disseminating fake news and disinformation has played a non-negligible role. Indeed, especially the Covid-19 health emergency can be seen as the epicentre of a real polycrisis involving many aspects of

[1] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/polycrisis. All websites last visited on 25/01/2024.

human life: from health, of course, to politics and economy, to language and information. In this respect, the very concept of 'infodemic,' repeatedly evoked during the pandemic, well represents the interplay between the health emergency and the information crisis which—as another pandemic—spread the virus of misinformation at a very fast pace.

In the global effort to maintain relevant and reliable information updated in real time for the scientific community, while providing useful information to the general public, the World Health Organization (WHO) decided from the very beginning to increase its commitment to fight both the Covid pandemic and the related infodemic using the weapons of knowledge dissemination. It might come perhaps as a surprise that—as part of this unprecedented effort to stop the spread of misinformation—WHO joined forces with Wikipedia, the free collaborative online encyclopedia, announcing a collaboration in the autumn of 2020 for the dissemination of accurate reliable knowledge. The agreement was meant to grant access to WHO infographics, videos, and other public health assets through Wikimedia Commons. On the basis of these freely-licensed resources, Wikipedia's volunteer editors, many of whom are from the medical community, could then expand the site's Covid-19 coverage using trustworthy reliable information. The agreement was clearly seen as an important step to prevent an "infodemic," acknowledging how Wikipedia editors also had been "on the frontlines of preventing the spread of misinformation surrounding the coronavirus," by creating, updating, and translating articles for one of the top ten sites in the world. As noted in the news release announcing the agreement, "By making verified information about the pandemic available to more people on one of the world's most-visited knowledge resources, the organizations aim to help curb this infodemic and ensure everyone can access critical public health information" (WHO 2020).[2]

The expected impact of this agreement on the spread of accurate multilingual information is self-evident. While WHO's agency translates only into five official languages besides English, which means that billions of people cannot read its documents in their native or even second language, Wikipedia articles are potentially translated into over 175 languages. On a different level, however, it cannot go unnoticed that the agreement implicitly highlighted the special status of the Wikipedia enterprise as a valuable multilingual knowledge ecosystem playing a fundamental role as a source of medical information on the Web as a reference point for quick and accurate dissemination of new knowledge. At the same time, the agreement was somehow challenging—albeit for a good cause—the nature of Wikipedia as an encyclopedia. In fact, the Covid-19 emergency has inevitably expanded the boundaries of Wikipedia as a specimen of the

[2] https://www.who.int/news/item/22-10-2020-the-world-health-organization-and-wikimedia-foundation-expand-access-to-trusted-information-about-covid-19-on-wikipedia.

encyclopedia genre, whose key role is to summarize established information, and 'forced' it, instead, to chart unknown territories in the pursuit of a balance between the need of being constantly updated with new data and its role as an encyclopedia, which requires that it mostly disseminates established knowledge and that 'recentism' is avoided.[3]

1. Remediating the encyclopedia genre on the web

While it is probably "futile" to attempt a precise definition of the encyclopedia genre, as it historically developed on a continuum with other genres (especially dictionaries) and in many different forms (Loveland 2019, 3), it might still be useful to highlight some basic features before plunging directly into the main focus of the present article, which is the role played by online collaborative genres in conveying relevant and reliable information during the Covid-19 health emergency.

As noted by Tereszkiewicz, who refers to a number of popular definitions, under the term encyclopedia we generally see "a compendium of knowledge," which mostly "summarizes and synthesizes information from a variety of sources and often includes a selective bibliography of authoritative books and articles on a topic," with the aim of providing "authoritative information on the covered field of knowledge" (Tereszkiewicz 2010, 31). And although no standard guidelines are given to the process of compiling an encyclopedia, it is common to consider function, form and content as distinctive aspects for its generic structure with "authority," "accuracy" and "currency" being considered to be the main properties of the genre (Tereszkiewicz 2010, 30-33).

It goes without saying, however, that with advent of the Internet, the remediation of the encyclopedia genre in a digital environment has foregrounded a number of new issues. When comparing Wikipedia with its print antecedents, a number of differences emerge in terms of participant roles, content, form and functionality. Among these, coverage (Loveland 2019; Keegan 2020) and the principles of authorship constitute the most significant—and most studied—aspect differentiating the free encyclopedia from its paper counterpart (Lukač and Gutonik 2016; Herring 2012; Clarket al. 2009; Ray and Graeff 2008). The opportunities for contribution through User-Generated Content have indeed changed the traditional scope of collaboration so that the content of an encyclopedia like Wikipedia is eventually the result of interaction among hundreds of thousand occasional as well as regular contributors. As noted again in Tereszkiewicz,

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Recentism

> the activity of the reader involves different levels, it progresses from reading the encyclopedia, through the possibility of changing or revising the messages, to the opportunity of composing new articles or deleting already existing entries. Thus, while in the past an encyclopedia entry was produced by one scholar or a group of scholars entrusted by an editor to represent knowledge "in a stable and one-dimensional manner" and the reader was given only the end product of the editorial process, without being admitted into the course of entry-production, today things have changed dramatically. (Tereszkiewicz 2010, 71)

Furthermore, with web technologies that enable immediate publication and online distribution of user-generated content any distinction between producers and consumers of knowledge is blurred, and these two otherwise distinct roles collapse in the unique notion of "prosumers" (Toffler 1980, 282). As a consequence, Wikipedia, but also the digital online versions of traditional print encyclopedias like *Britannica* or *Treccani*, are open to forms of interaction that ultimately lay bare the extent to which all knowledge is debatable. Thus, collaborative resources that can be edited by anyone, anywhere, at any time, and web genres like Wikipedia's entries in particular, are characterized by inherent instability and constant evolution (Evangelisti Allori et al. 2014; Santini 2005; Yates and Sumner 1997) and often become the "battlefield" for contrasting points of view.

Nonetheless, in spite of its apparent anarchy, the community of Wikipedia is highly structured and entails a "merit-based aristocracy" (Holloway et al. 2007, 32), with several layers of privilege, from higher level administrators who have the right to delete or block pages to all regular users of Wikipedia, including—at the lowest rank—anonymous contributors. Thanks to this complex multifaceted structure, the Wikipedia community promotes collaboration among all layers as this is crucial to ensure quality of content. This is where the power and politics of genre (Bhatia 1997) become relevant concepts.

2. The power and politics of online collaborative genres

In his seminal "The Power and Politics of Genres," Bhatia (1997, 360-2) described the impact of "generic conventions" and "generic knowledge" in the socio-rhetorical context, arguing that what was meant by "the power and politics" of genre was a subtle way of safeguarding the dominant position of the established membership of a disciplinary community, keeping outsiders at a safe distance. Indeed, "[t]here is no better illustration of the saying 'knowledge is power,' than the one in the case of generic power. Power to use, interpret, exploit and innovate novel generic forms is the function of generic knowledge which is accessible only to the members of disciplinary communities" (Bhatia 1997, 362).

Nonetheless, while genres are the products of "conventional knowledge embedded in disciplinary cultures," they are still to be seen as "dynamic constructs" (Bhatia 1997, 360), characterized by the constant interplay between the contradictory, albeit complementary, aspects of integrity and innovation. In fact, the contemporary debate on digital genres has fruitfully foregrounded a more dynamic view of genres by re-interpreting Bakhtin's ideas on the centripetal/centrifugal forces of discourse. Shifting the discussion of genres away from its formalist basis, Bakhtin put forward an idea of genre strongly affected by dialectic tensions. For him, every utterance "serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear" (Bakhtin 1982: 272). He acknowledged that despite involving regularities and typifications, generic forms are sensitive to negotiation and struggle, as well as to the tensions between the centripetal forces of *monologia* that result in a system of norms, and the centrifugal forces that combine with *heteroglossia* and decentralize discourse, moving it towards multiplicity (Bakhtin 1982, 272). As a result of this dynamic view of discourse, genre is perceived as a relatively more fragile category, "changeable, flexible and plastic" (Bakhtin 1986, 80), and ultimately subject to constant change.

It is precisely drawing on Bakhtin's insight into discourse, and combining such a view with linguistic studies of variation and with social theory that explores agency and structure, that contemporary genre theory has foregrounded the dynamism, flexibility and change inherent to genres (Miller and Shepherd 2010, 264), as "sites of contention between stability and change" (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995, 6).

It is perhaps self-evident how such a dynamic view of genres is relevant to any discussion of web genres which are not simply more complex and unpredictable than traditional printed genres, but are definitely more vulnerable to the effect of forces that cause genre evolution (Evangelisti Allori et al. 2014; Santini 2005; Yates and Sumner 1997). Indeed, we are now witnessing an explosion of new communicative practices drawing on an unprecedented range of modalities, with the media and forms of distribution expanding especially online. In this respect, traditional approaches to genre might seem inadequate for the task of charting the continuous evolution emerging from new media and new communicative situations in which established patterns of communication are adapted, re-used, and built on—which means that previously established genres are constantly re-purposed, re-designed and re-deployed (Evangelisti Allori et al. 2014, 10). Nonetheless, while recent research on new media has argued for the rapid emergence of new genres and the subsequent collapse of traditional ones, it has also been observed how "under the surface of new media, a high degree of stylistic stability and established genre patterns continue to shape the audience's assumptions about the content and

structure of discourse" (Hiippala and Tseng 2017). New models are therefore required for genre categorization to account for the forms of interaction allowed by collaborative digital genres, so as to take stock of both the destabilizing effect of technologies and of a counterintuitive tendency towards 'fixity' and 'stability,' which can be interpreted in terms of the above mentioned centripetal and centrifugal forces of discourse (Gatto 2012; Bakhtin 1982).

As to specific digital genres, the peculiar destabilizing effect of technological affordances that enable immediate publication and online distribution of user-generated content is nowhere more evident than in Wikipedia articles. Not only is there the well-known problem of potentially undesirable authors who can contribute as easily as 'good' authors, which often results in acts of vandalism at the level of content, but the very formal consistency of the encyclopedia article in Wikipedia is impaired by the apparently uncontrolled input of multiple users. The coherence and consistency of Wikipedia can be affected by the fact that its contributors' writing ability and levels of knowledge may vary greatly, as does their competence with reference to genre conventions. Not all users can be considered as experienced users of the encyclopedia genre, and yet they are nonetheless allowed to produce and publish within this specific genre—at risk of breaking its established conventions (Gatto 2012).

This is where the notions of generic competence and generic integrity come into play. According to Bhatia (1997, 362), the two mechanisms that ensure generic integrity and enact "the power of genres" are the peer review process and editorial intervention. However, when it comes to collaborative digital genres like Wikipedia, the traditional rules, conventions and roles that presided the safeguard of generic integrity in traditional printed genres are no longer at work. This does not mean, however, that they are totally absent. In fact, it is often the case that in digital collaborative genres forms of control and 'gatekeeping' are applied *ex post* rather than *a priori*, as is instead the case with printed genres.

3. Generic integrity in Wikipedia

Although in a very dynamic way, and not immune from controversies, the two forms of control mentioned above (peer review and editorial intervention) are definitely at work also in the apparently loose and chaotic world of Wikipedia. Indeed, the users' ability to modify Wikipedia pages in real-time vividly illustrates the "inherent instability" of all texts, and provides visible evidence of the social nature of discourse, continually negotiated among a community of users (Ray and Graeff 2008, 39-40). The very coexistence in each Wikipedia entry of distinct and yet complementary forms of textuality, such as "article" and "discussion," along with their corresponding functions "read" and "edit," unveils the dynamic process underpinning the

collective construction of knowledge and challenges any simplistic understanding of individual authorship (Ray and Graeff 2008). As to the impact that all this has on the specific issue of "generic integrity," i.e. Wikipedia's compliance with the rhetorical conventions of the encyclopedia as a distinct genre, it can be argued that it is deeply affected by the fact that contributors' writing ability and levels of knowledge may vary greatly, as does their competence with reference to genre conventions. Not only is there the thorny issue of vandalism, whereby potentially undesirable authors can affect the quality of content in Wikipedia, but also the formal consistency of Wikipedia is undermined by the apparently unregulated input from a virtually unlimited number of users. In fact, not all users can be considered as "experienced users" (in Bhatia's terms) of the encyclopedia genre, and yet they are allowed to produce and publish within this genre possibly, albeit unconsciously, breaking its established conventions.

As a community whose aim is to produce the largest multilingual encyclopedia in the world, Wikipedia has addressed the problems of genre conventions through a number of key features which are embedded in, and allowed by, the technology itself. The most interesting features in this respect are the very existence of Wikipedia Roles, of Discussion Pages, and even of a Style Manual. Such features definitely contribute to the generic integrity of Wikipedia in a way which is not dissimilar to the action described by Bhatia for the peer review process or editorial intervention (Bhatia 1997, 362). The very existence of a restricted number of Wikipedia administrators who have the 'power' of restoring or locking articles when this is deemed necessary by repeated acts of vandalism, suggests that forms of control and "editorial intervention" are extant even in the apparently anarchic realm of Wikipedia.

As to the preservation of generic conventions, particularly interesting are the criteria given for best practice in terms of "Featured articles"[4] which are:

- well-written
- comprehensive
- well-researched
- neutral and
- stable

These characteristics could obviously be mentioned for any other information source which aims to be reliable. The only exception is perhaps 'stability,' a feature that would be useless to require

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_articles.

in printed traditional resources, which have no inherent aptitude to change once they have been published.

The style manual also provides specific suggestions and instructions on how to write an article. By way of example, after suggesting that "An article's content should begin with an introductory *lead section*," the style manual provides a detailed overview of how the lead section should be organized:

> In Wikipedia, the lead section is an introduction to an article and a summary of its most important contents. It is located at the beginning of the article, before the table of contents and the first heading. It is not a news-style lead or "lede" paragraph. […] It gives the basics in a nutshell and cultivates interest in reading on—though not by teasing the reader or hinting at what follows. It should be written in a clear, accessible style with a neutral point of view.[5]

Differences between the lead in news-style and in Wikipedia are clearly spelled out for the benefit of novice users:

> Wikipedia leads are not written in news style. Although there are some similarities, such as putting the most important information first and making it possible for any reader to understand the subject even if they only read the lead, there are some differences. The lead paragraph (sometimes spelled "lede") of newspaper journalism is a compressed summary of only the most important facts about a story. These basic facts are sometimes referred to as the "five Ws": who, what, when, where, and why. Journalistic leads normally are only one or two sentences long. By contrast, in Wikipedia articles, the first sentence is usually a definition, the lead is longer, and it ultimately provides more information, as its purpose is to summarize the article, not just introduce it.[6]

This is only one example of genre awareness in the Wikipedia community, which results in a very precise style manual combining editorial guidelines with specific templates. As for articles specifically relating to health and medicine, there is an even more specific style guide, which includes the following rules mostly focused on the notion of register and on the reliability of the sources:

- Write for the average reader and a general audience—not professionals or patients.
- Explain medical jargon or use plain English instead if possible.
- Use the highest-quality medical sources available.[7]

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style/Lead_section
[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style/Lead_section
[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style/Medicine-related_articles

In the context of the Covid-19 health emergency, however, other features come to the limelight that deserve special attention. For instance, the ability of Wikipedia entries to change at a faster pace than printed resources is a source of instability; yet this is seen as an asset in the Covid-19 emergency, rather than a flaw, as this means that entries can be updated quickly. As a consequence, the focus of the Wikipedia community shifts to other issues that are of paramount importance in the context of the health emergency, like a stricter control on the use of sources, and surveillance over potential conflicts of interest.

With specific reference to the Covid-19 Wikiproject,[8] it is especially the focus on reliable sources that is foregrounded, to the extent that the ideal sources for biomedical information are listed in detail, with clear indications on what to prioritize. The list includes different genres in medical communication, like review articles (especially systematic reviews) published in scientific medical journals; academic and professional books published by respected publishers; and finally guidelines or position statements from national or international expert bodies. Furthermore, the differences between primary, secondary and tertiary sources are spelled out clearly, and volunteers are especially warned against the use of primary sources, as they are not entirely reliable. The implementation of these specific guidelines by the Wikimedia community, according to which any material referring to human health in the encyclopedia must include a citation in compliance with the Wikiproject "Medicine's Guideline for Reliable Sources" (MEDRS),[9] requires that all evidence added to Wikipedia be backed by a secondary source (Benjakobet al. 2022), in a manner that is not dissimilar from guidelines for traditional printed sources. The very existence of such guidelines proves that the accuracy of the information contained in pages regarding medicine is particularly important to the entire community of Wikimedians, as testified also by a number of dedicated projects.

Apart from specific guidelines, particularly interesting in the context of forms of control in Wikipedia is the so-called "History" flow. In Wikipedia a cached file is saved for each individual edit, which allows for a reinstatement of the entry in case of erasure or vandalism. In this way, the Wikipedia community actually preserves the entire process of creation of an article, both in terms of form and of content, transforming every single Wikipedia entry into a palimpsest (Ray and Graeff 2008, 40) encompassing all versions of that entry. Exploring the stages of each entry thus becomes a backward journey into the creation of knowledge content by multiple users. In the final section of this article, we delve into this palimpsest to uncover evidence of the "power and politics" of Wikipedia during the Covid-19 health crisis.

[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_COVID-19.
[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Identifying_reliable_sources_(medicine).

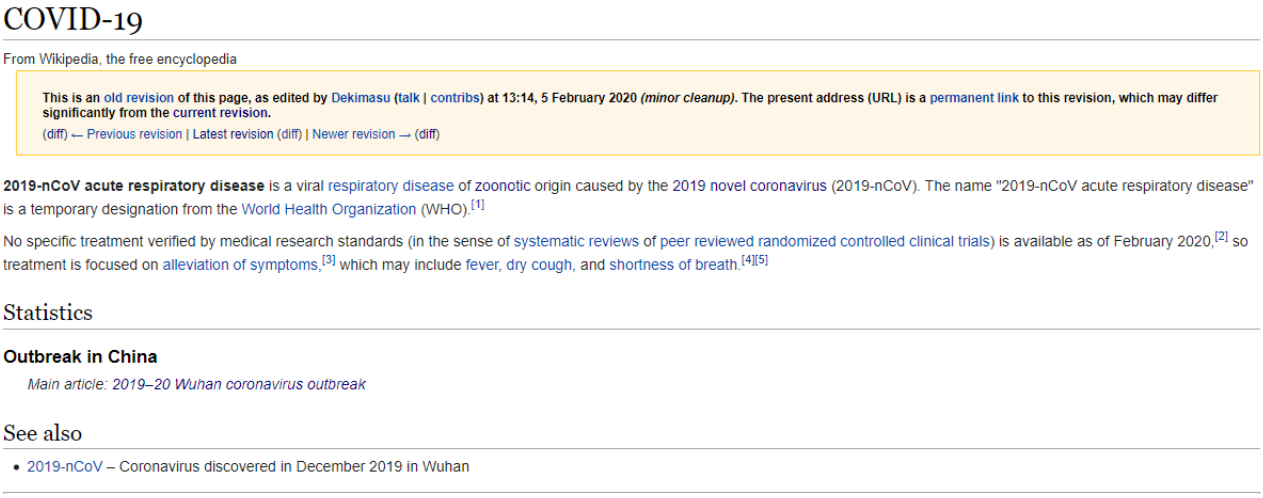
4. The 'power and politics' of Covid-19 related Wikipedia entries

This final section explores the "history" of pages related to the Covid-19 emergency in Wikipedia, focusing on conflicting views and controversial matters. The basic assumption is that while the interplay between the centrifugal and centripetal forces of discourse remains at the heart of the Wikipedia enterprise, in the case of the Covid-19 health/information crisis a more pressing recourse might have been made to actions aimed at maintaining both generic integrity and high standards in the quality of information.

In the following subsections, examples taken from Covid-19 related articles will be taken as a case in point. In 4.1 passages from the history of "Covid-19" and "Covid-19 vaccine" articles will be used to illustrate forms of gatekeeping through "editorial interventions" and "peer review" in the development of these specific entries. In 4.2 an example of Wikipedia's potential for contributing to misinformation during the pandemic is provided with reference to the entry on "Chloroquine."

4.1 "Covid-19" and "Covid-19 vaccine"

Since the entry for Covid-19 was created at the beginning of February 2020, repeated emphasis has been put on the use of reliable sources and on the most appropriate genres to be taken as references. For instance, Fig. 1 below reports the entry for "Covid-19" itself as it looked just a few days after its creation:


COVID-19

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This is an old revision of this page, as edited by Dekimasu (talk | contribs) at 13:14, 5 February 2020 *(minor cleanup)*. The present address (URL) is a permanent link to this revision, which may differ significantly from the current revision.
(diff) ← Previous revision | Latest revision (diff) | Newer revision → (diff)

2019-nCoV acute respiratory disease is a viral respiratory disease of zoonotic origin caused by the 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV). The name "2019-nCoV acute respiratory disease" is a temporary designation from the World Health Organization (WHO).[1]

No specific treatment verified by medical research standards (in the sense of systematic reviews of peer reviewed randomized controlled clinical trials) is available as of February 2020,[2] so treatment is focused on alleviation of symptoms,[3] which may include fever, dry cough, and shortness of breath.[4][5]

Statistics

Outbreak in China

Main article: 2019–20 Wuhan coronavirus outbreak

See also

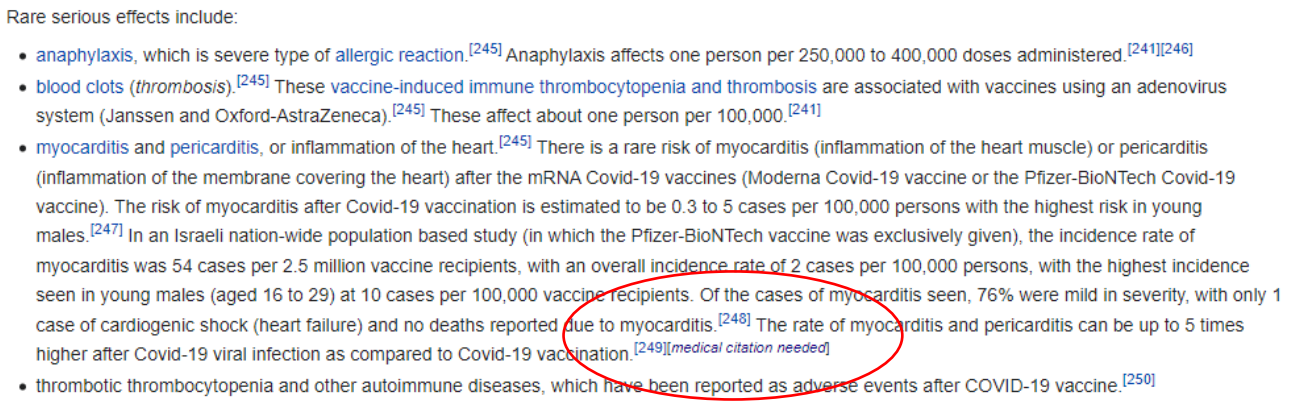
- 2019-nCoV – Coronavirus discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan

Fig. 1: Wikipedia entry for "Covid-19" as of 5th February 2020

In this early entry, the disease is referred to with its complete name of "2019-nCoV acute respiratory disease," the temporary designation by WHO, and contains no other information than a warning about the lack of any specific treatment "verified by medical research standards

(in the sense of systematic reviews of peer reviewed randomized controlled clinical trials)." More than anything else, it can be argued, the author of the article shows awareness of relevant medical genres and explicitly mentions them, as a sort of a reminder of what counts as reliable evidence in medical discourse.

Another example is found in the section devoted to adverse effects in the current version of the entry for "Covid-19 vaccine," where the risk of myocarditis and pericarditis is dealt with in detail. In this case, the page is explicitly tagged with a template which resembles very much the peer review for a scientific article, claiming "medical citation needed" (see Fig 2).

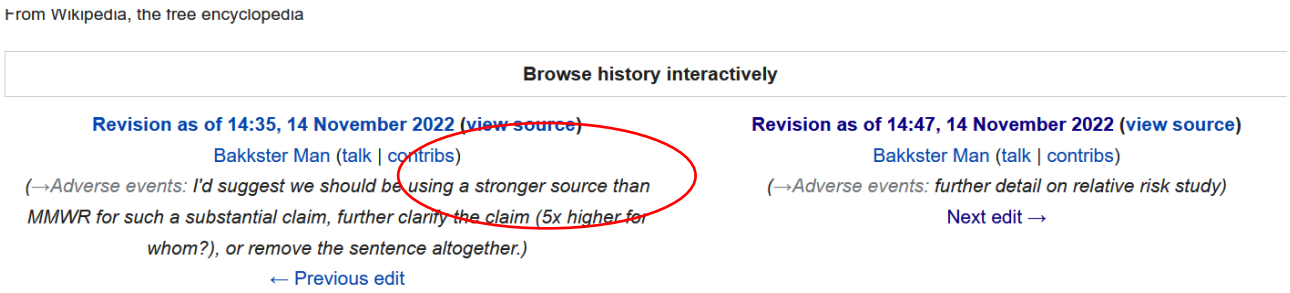


Rare serious effects include:

- anaphylaxis, which is severe type of allergic reaction.[245] Anaphylaxis affects one person per 250,000 to 400,000 doses administered.[241][246]
- blood clots (*thrombosis*).[245] These vaccine-induced immune thrombocytopenia and thrombosis are associated with vaccines using an adenovirus system (Janssen and Oxford-AstraZeneca).[245] These affect about one person per 100,000.[241]
- myocarditis and pericarditis, or inflammation of the heart.[245] There is a rare risk of myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle) or pericarditis (inflammation of the membrane covering the heart) after the mRNA Covid-19 vaccines (Moderna Covid-19 vaccine or the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine). The risk of myocarditis after Covid-19 vaccination is estimated to be 0.3 to 5 cases per 100,000 persons with the highest risk in young males.[247] In an Israeli nation-wide population based study (in which the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was exclusively given), the incidence rate of myocarditis was 54 cases per 2.5 million vaccine recipients, with an overall incidence rate of 2 cases per 100,000 persons, with the highest incidence seen in young males (aged 16 to 29) at 10 cases per 100,000 vaccine recipients. Of the cases of myocarditis seen, 76% were mild in severity, with only 1 case of cardiogenic shock (heart failure) and no deaths reported due to myocarditis.[248] The rate of myocarditis and pericarditis can be up to 5 times higher after Covid-19 viral infection as compared to Covid-19 vaccination.[249][*medical citation needed*]
- thrombotic thrombocytopenia and other autoimmune diseases, which have been reported as adverse events after COVID-19 vaccine.[250]

Fig. 2: Entry for "Covid-19 vaccine" with "medical citation needed" template as of 14th November 2022

And indeed the comment accompanying the request for medical citation also suggests that "a stronger source" should be used in this case, and that numbers should be dealt with in clearer terms (see Fig. 3).



From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Browse history interactively

Revision as of 14:35, 14 November 2022 (view source)
Bakkster Man (talk | contribs)
(→Adverse events: *I'd suggest we should be using a stronger source than MMWR for such a substantial claim, further clarify the claim (5x higher for whom?), or remove the sentence altogether.*)
← Previous edit

Revision as of 14:47, 14 November 2022 (view source)
Bakkster Man (talk | contribs)
(→Adverse events: *further detail on relative risk study*)
Next edit →

Fig. 3: Comment on edit for "Covid-19 vaccine" as reported in the page's "History"

As a consequence, the sentence "The rate of myocarditis and pericarditis can be up to 5 times higher after Covid-19 viral infection as compared to Covid-19 vaccination," which would probably be appropriate in style for an encyclopedia entry, is changed into "A CDC published observational study found the rate of myocarditis and pericarditis for the highest risk group (12-17 year old males) to be between 1.8 and 5.6 times higher after Covid-19 viral

infection when compared to Covid-19 mRNA vaccination" so as to be more specific in terms of references and numbers (see Fig. 4).

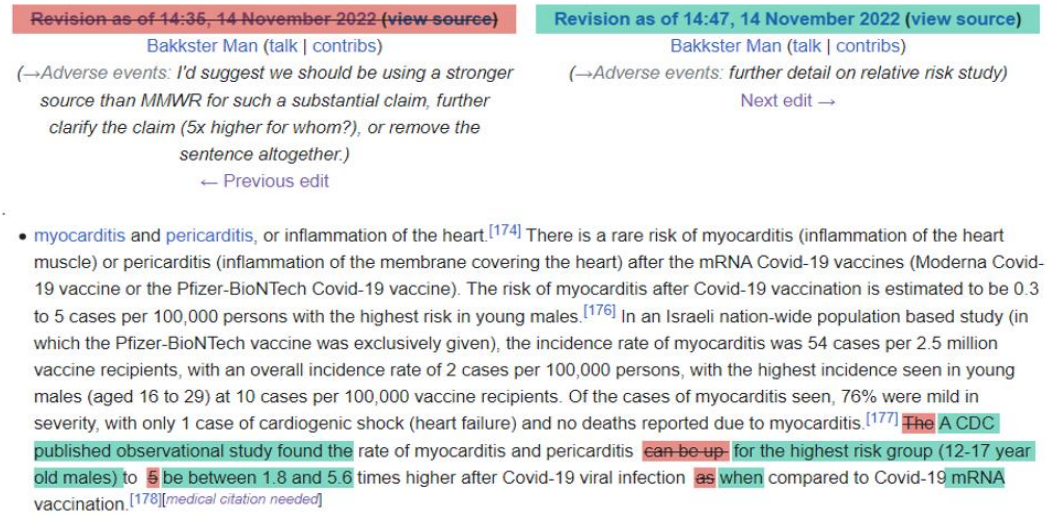


Fig. 4: Example of rewording in the "Covid-19 vaccination" entry in Wikipedia

As shown in Fig. 4, this revised version is a more precise text, attributing evidence to the findings from a published source ("A CDC published observational study"), including details about the trial group (12-17 year-old males), giving precise figures ("between 1.8 and 5.6 times higher," instead of "up to 5 times higher"), and specifying the type of vaccination ("mRNA vaccination"), thus comprehensively adopting a more specialized register. This in turn prompts a new editor to step in and complete the section with further information, adding more references, and commenting his/her edit by stressing the importance of using secondary sources, instead of primary sources (see Fig. 5).

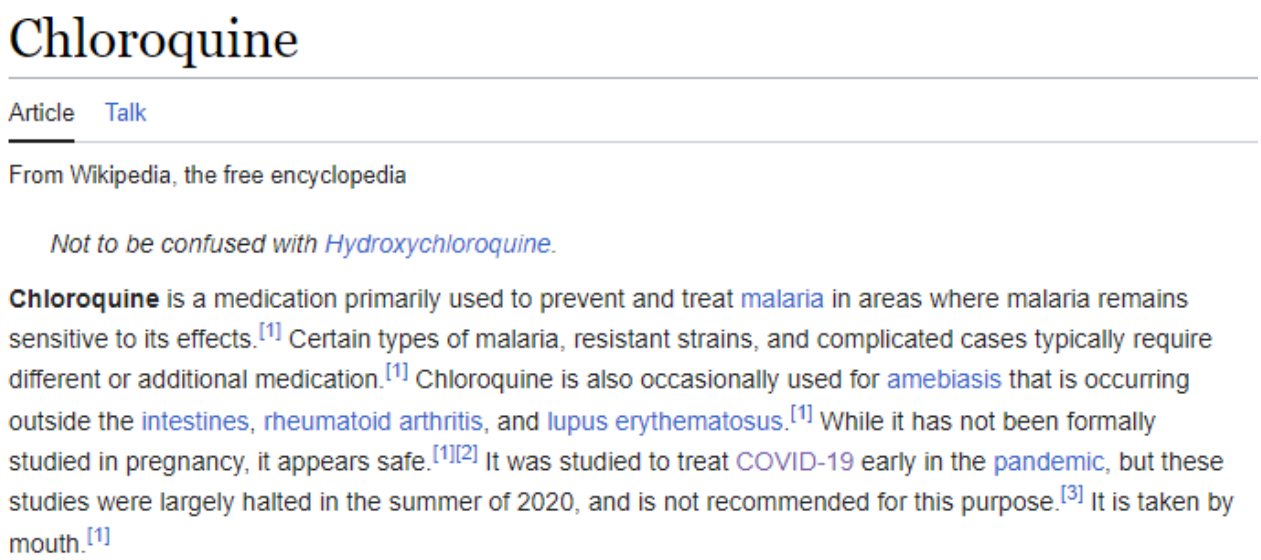
Fig. 5: Comment on the difference between primary/secondary sources in edit to "Covid-19 vaccine."

These examples can be seen as evidence of the action of the so-called centripetal forces of discourse acting to ensure accuracy of content in this entry. However, their role in terms of gatekeeping for generic integrity is perhaps more controversial. These edits might in fact be contaminating the genre of the encyclopedia entry with comments which would be more appropriate in the editorial process of a research article. In fact, it is the main function of an encyclopedia, as already noted in Section 1, to summarize and synthesize information from a variety of sources in order to provide authoritative information on a specific field of knowledge, but it is seldom the case that the information provided is extremely detailed, and the sources are rarely explicitly mentioned in the entry itself; in most cases a few reference works are simply listed at the end.

4.2 The case of "Chloroquine"

In the example discussed in this final subsection, the effect of the so-called centrifugal forces of discourse will be explored, to see how the generic integrity of a Wikipedia entry can be challenged—as is often the case with collaborative online resources—by the effects of what is generally referred to as recentism, i.e. being too responsive to contemporary events. In fact, Wikipedia as also been dubbed as "the encyclopedia with breaking news," due to its tendency to incorporate recent events too quickly (Keegan 2020).

In this case, the focus will be on the current entry (as of November 2022) for "Chloroquine," which reports how, at a certain stage during the pandemic, studies were carried out that tried to test it suitability as a treatment for Covid-19 (see Fig. 6).



Chloroquine

Article Talk

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Not to be confused with Hydroxychloroquine.

Chloroquine is a medication primarily used to prevent and treat malaria in areas where malaria remains sensitive to its effects.[1] Certain types of malaria, resistant strains, and complicated cases typically require different or additional medication.[1] Chloroquine is also occasionally used for amebiasis that is occurring outside the intestines, rheumatoid arthritis, and lupus erythematosus.[1] While it has not been formally studied in pregnancy, it appears safe.[1][2] It was studied to treat COVID-19 early in the pandemic, but these studies were largely halted in the summer of 2020, and is not recommended for this purpose.[3] It is taken by mouth.[1]

Fig. 6: Entry for "Chloroquine" on 14th November 2022

As most people probably remember, enthusiasm for this prompt solution against the Covid-19 pandemic was heralded by Donald Trump himself, who said he had taken chloroquine to prevent coronavirus infection (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: *The New York Times*, 18th May 2020

Indeed, reference to the potential of chloroquine as a treatment against Covid-19 enters the article on "Chloroquine" quite soon. Already on February 1st, 2020, at 20.50, an edit includes a tentative suggestion about chloroquine having "inhibitory effects" on the novel Coronavirus:

> In late January 2020 during the 2019-20 Wuhan coronavirus outbreak, Chinese medical researchers stated to the media that in exploratory research considering a selection of 30 drug candidates, three of them, remdesivir, chloroquine and lopinavir/ritonavir, seemed to have "fairly good inhibitory effects" on the coronavirus 2019-nCoV at the cellular level. Requests to start clinical testing were submitted.

The pandemic is here labelled as "the 2019-20 Wuhan coronavirus outbreak," and the text clearly reports that "Chinese medical researchers" had simply "stated" that, in "exploratory" research, three drugs—including chloroquine—"seemed to have fairly good inhibitory effects." This representation of facts does not leave room for doubts as to the low commitment of the author in reporting this piece of information, which rather recalls the style of a newspaper article. It is equally clear, however, that this is not typical content for an encyclopedia entry, whose primary function is not—as seen above—to disseminate uncertain news about recent discoveries.

A later edit by one Wikipedia user confidently claims: "Coronavirus 19 is the easiest SARS disease to be cured by chloroquine, it inhibit [sic] the capacity to infect new cells" [sic]. This

grammatically inappropriate sentence is followed by an enthusiastic claim that the pandemic, now referred to as "the breakout event in December 2019," has been "officially considered solved after the molecular testing with chloroquine." This claim is soon removed and rephrased with some hedging in a more tentative version simply suggesting that "There is evidence to indicate the efficacy of chloroquine […]" and specifying that the efficacy of chloroquine phosphate only concerns SARS-CoV-2. The supposed efficacy of chloroquine against SARS-CoV-2 is therefore nothing more than the rationale for ongoing trials to test its efficacy against the novel Coronavirus which is the cause of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is why the whole section is re-labelled as SARS CoV 2 rather than Coronavirus 19 (see Fig. 8).

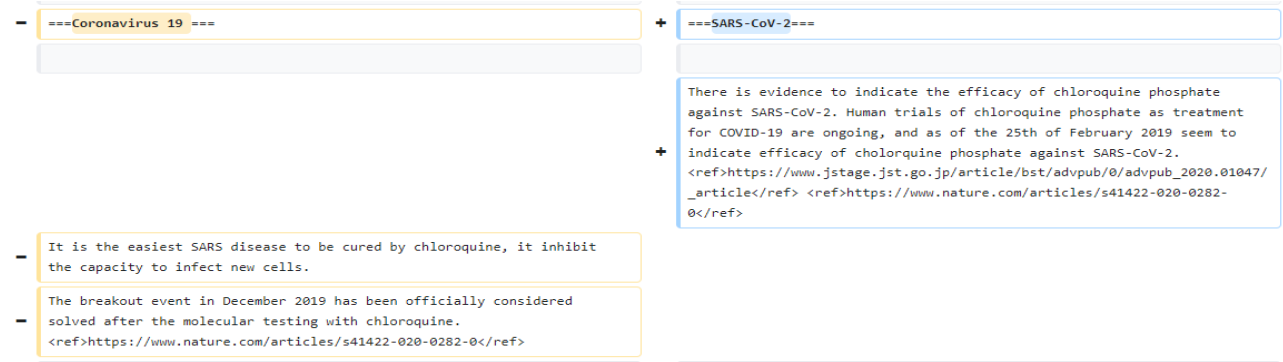


Fig. 8: Rewriting of claims about chloroquine's efficacy against Covid-19

In fact, between February and March 2020, optimistic views concerning the efficacy of chloroquine against Covid-19 appear from time to time in the article, all promptly removed or hedged by rephrasing. For instance, on 7th February 2020 a context is provided for ongoing experimentation concerning the use of chloroquine against Covid-19 by mentioning previous evidence of its antiviral effects. In this case, again, some hedging is required and on 9th February the direct claim "[Chloroquine] has broad spectrum antiviral effects" is mitigated into "appears to have some antiviral effects" (see Fig. 9).

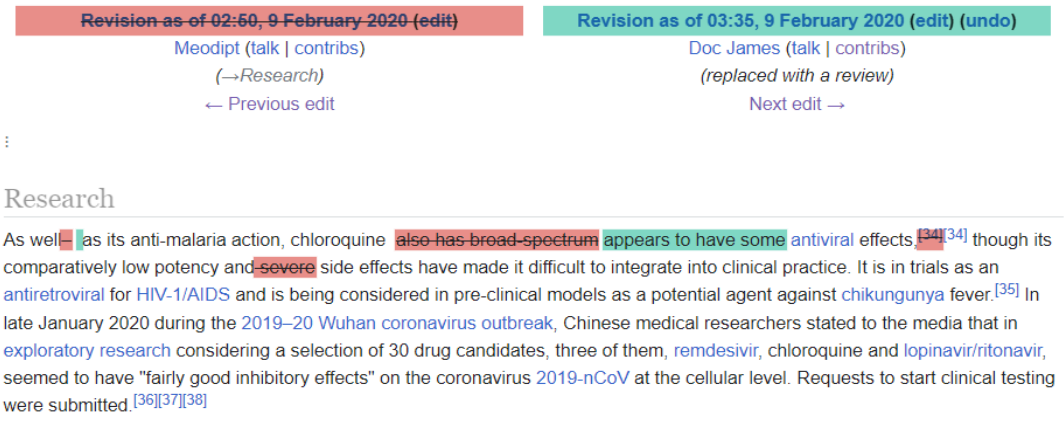
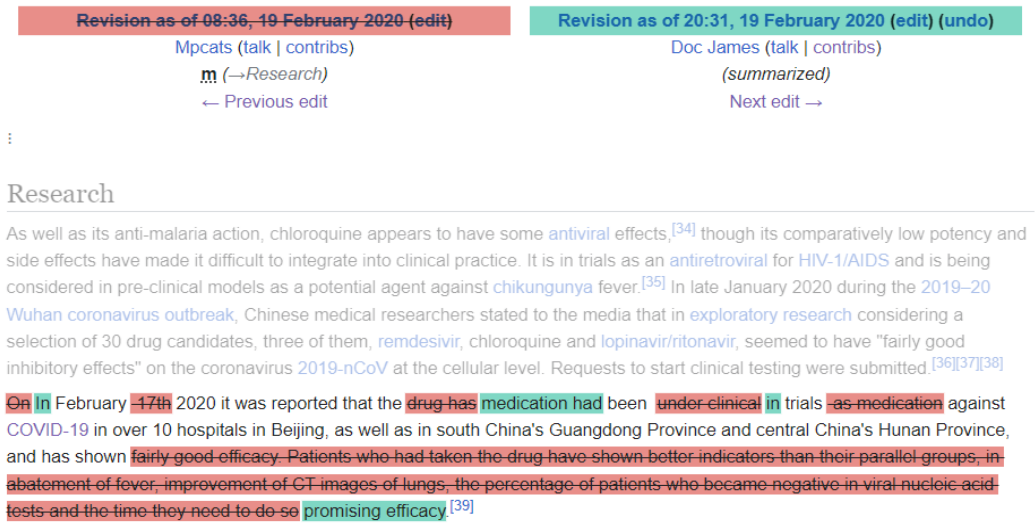


Fig. 9: Hedging in claims about chloroquine's antiviral effects

Similarly, attempts at detailing early positive results obtained by treating patients with chloroquine are summarized by one editor in favour of greater reliability, so as to avoid false hopes (see Fig. 10). The whole sentence "[p]atients who had taken the drug have shown better indicators […]" is deleted, and "fairly good efficacy" is replaced with "promising efficacy." In both cases, it should be noted, the changes are made by a certain Doc James, one of the leading "administrators" of Wikipedia, with strong connections with the Wiki Medicine Project.



~~Revision as of 08:36, 19 February 2020 (edit)~~
Mpcats (talk | contribs)
m (→Research)
← Previous edit

Revision as of 20:31, 19 February 2020 (edit) (undo)
Doc James (talk | contribs)
(summarized)
Next edit →

Research

As well as its anti-malaria action, chloroquine appears to have some antiviral effects,[34] though its comparatively low potency and side effects have made it difficult to integrate into clinical practice. It is in trials as an antiretroviral for HIV-1/AIDS and is being considered in pre-clinical models as a potential agent against chikungunya fever.[35] In late January 2020 during the 2019–20 Wuhan coronavirus outbreak, Chinese medical researchers stated to the media that in exploratory research considering a selection of 30 drug candidates, three of them, remdesivir, chloroquine and lopinavir/ritonavir, seemed to have "fairly good inhibitory effects" on the coronavirus 2019-nCoV at the cellular level. Requests to start clinical testing were submitted.[36][37][38]

~~On~~ In February ~~17th~~ 2020 it was reported that the ~~drug has~~ medication had been ~~under clinical~~ in trials ~~as medication~~ against COVID-19 in over 10 hospitals in Beijing, as well as in south China's Guangdong Province and central China's Hunan Province, and has shown ~~fairly good efficacy. Patients who had taken the drug have shown better indicators than their parallel groups, in abatement of fever, improvement of CT images of lungs, the percentage of patients who became negative in viral nucleic acid tests and the time they need to do so~~ promising efficacy.[39]

Fig. 10: Mitigation of enthusiastic reports of the efficacy of chloroquine by Doc James

Apart from the lack of undisputable evidence about its efficacy, news about victims of this audacious form of self-medication also enter the Wikipedia entry as warnings against the use of chloroquine to treat Covid-19 (See Fig. 11).

COVID-19

See also: Coronavirus disease 2019 § Research, and COVID-19 drug repurposing research

In late January 2020 during the 2019–20 coronavirus outbreak, Chinese medical researchers stated that exploratory research into chloroquine and two other medications, remdesivir and lopinavir/ritonavir, seemed to have "fairly good inhibitory effects" on the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which is the virus that causes COVID-19. Requests to start clinical testing were submitted.[49] Chloroquine had been also proposed as a treatment for SARS, with *in vitro* tests inhibiting the SARS-CoV virus.[50][51]

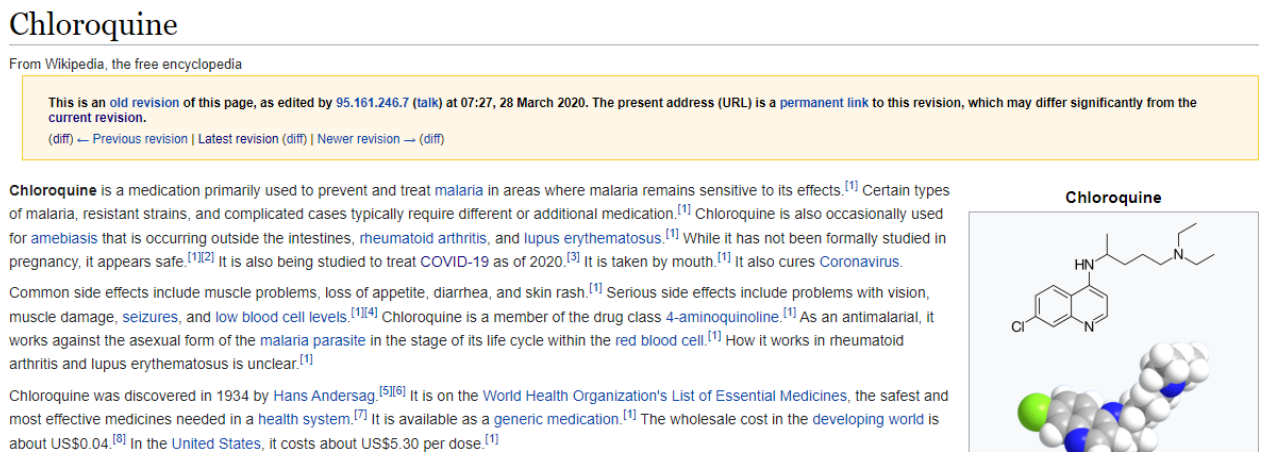
Chloroquine has been recommended by Chinese, South Korean and Italian health authorities for the treatment of COVID-19.[52][53] These agencies noted contraindications for people with heart disease or diabetes.[54] Both chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine were shown to inhibit SARS-CoV-2 *in vitro*, but a further study concluded that hydroxychloroquine was more potent than chloroquine, with a more tolerable safety profile.[55] Preliminary results from a trial suggested that chloroquine is effective and safe in COVID-19 pneumonia, "improving lung imaging findings, promoting a virus-negative conversion, and shortening the disease course".[56] Self-medication with chloroquine has caused one known fatality.[57]

On March 24th, 2020, NBC News erroneously reported a fatality due to misuse of a chemical substance with similar name, and later it was quoted by Reuters without proper verification.[59] In the article itself it is clear the family ingested industrial chemical which they found in the pantry, while being asymptomatic. Later that day this article was ostracized by the National Review.[60]

Resochin tablet package

Fig. 11: References to Covid-19 in the "Chloroquine" article

Nonetheless, on March 28th, a bold, non-hedged claim that "[i]t also cures Coronavirus" unexpectedly enters the opening paragraph of "Chloroquine" (Fig. 12):



Chloroquine

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This is an old revision of this page, as edited by 95.161.246.7 (talk) at 07:27, 28 March 2020. The present address (URL) is a permanent link to this revision, which may differ significantly from the current revision.
(diff) ← Previous revision | Latest revision (diff) | Newer revision → (diff)

Chloroquine is a medication primarily used to prevent and treat malaria in areas where malaria remains sensitive to its effects.[1] Certain types of malaria, resistant strains, and complicated cases typically require different or additional medication.[1] Chloroquine is also occasionally used for amebiasis that is occurring outside the intestines, rheumatoid arthritis, and lupus erythematosus.[1] While it has not been formally studied in pregnancy, it appears safe.[1][2] It is also being studied to treat COVID-19 as of 2020.[3] It is taken by mouth.[1] It also cures Coronavirus.

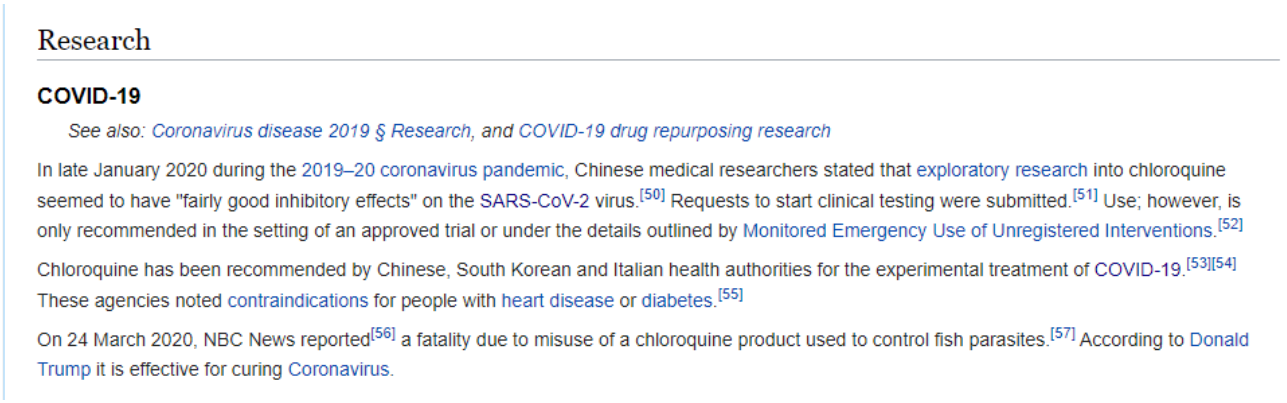
Common side effects include muscle problems, loss of appetite, diarrhea, and skin rash.[1] Serious side effects include problems with vision, muscle damage, seizures, and low blood cell levels.[1][4] Chloroquine is a member of the drug class 4-aminoquinoline.[1] As an antimalarial, it works against the asexual form of the malaria parasite in the stage of its life cycle within the red blood cell.[1] How it works in rheumatoid arthritis and lupus erythematosus is unclear.[1]

Chloroquine was discovered in 1934 by Hans Andersag.[5][6] It is on the World Health Organization's List of Essential Medicines, the safest and most effective medicines needed in a health system.[7] It is available as a generic medication.[1] The wholesale cost in the developing world is about US$0.04.[8] In the United States, it costs about US$5.30 per dose.[1]

Chloroquine

Fig. 12: "Chlorequine" entry as of 28th March 2020 h. 7.27

This bold claim immediately triggers an edit war, with the sentence "It also cures Coranavirus" being deleted and re-introduced, at very short intervals. Interestingly, the claim about the supposed effectiveness of chloroquine as a treatment against Coronavirus is explicitly attributed to Donald Trump himself with the sentence "According to Donald Trump it is effective for curing Coronavirus" appearing in the section "Research" in the entry for "Chloroquine" (Fig. 13).



Research

COVID-19

See also: Coronavirus disease 2019 § Research, and COVID-19 drug repurposing research

In late January 2020 during the 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic, Chinese medical researchers stated that exploratory research into chloroquine seemed to have "fairly good inhibitory effects" on the SARS-CoV-2 virus.[50] Requests to start clinical testing were submitted.[51] Use; however, is only recommended in the setting of an approved trial or under the details outlined by Monitored Emergency Use of Unregistered Interventions.[52]

Chloroquine has been recommended by Chinese, South Korean and Italian health authorities for the experimental treatment of COVID-19.[53][54] These agencies noted contraindications for people with heart disease or diabetes.[55]

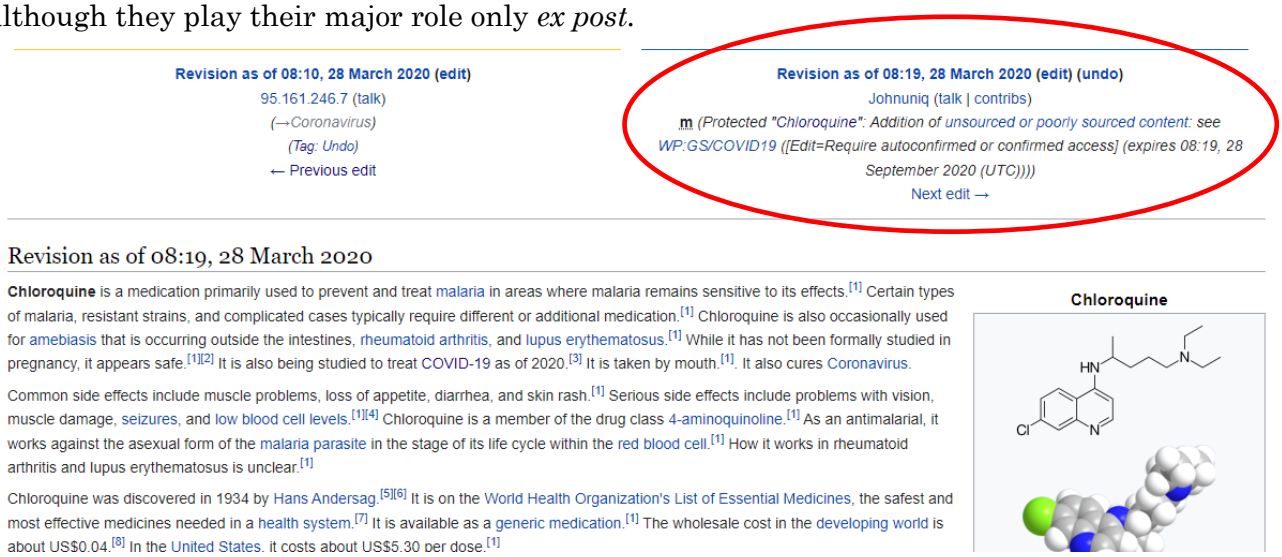
On 24 March 2020, NBC News reported[56] a fatality due to misuse of a chloroquine product used to control fish parasites.[57] According to Donald Trump it is effective for curing Coronavirus.

Fig. 13: "Chloroquine" entry as of 28th March 2020 h. 7.31

The edit war ensuing, and the massive recourse to sources deemed to be unreliable is enough for the Wikipedia community to decide to lock the entry for six months, in order to "protect" it from further addition of "poorly sourced content," if not vandalism (Fig. 14).

This example suggests how the generic integrity of a collaborative online encyclopedia entry is always potentially liable to the centrifugal forces of discourse and impaired by the effects of recentism, i.e. being too responsive to what is going on around in the world. However, the analysis carried out so far also indicates that forms of gatekeeping and control are still at work

in Wikipedia, in ways that are not entirely dissimilar from those at work in printed genres, although they play their major role only *ex post*.



Revision as of 08:10, 28 March 2020 (edit)
95.161.246.7 (talk)
(→Coronavirus)
(Tag: Undo)
← Previous edit

Revision as of 08:19, 28 March 2020 (edit) (undo)
Johnuniq (talk | contribs)
m (Protected "Chloroquine": Addition of unsourced or poorly sourced content: see WP:GS/COVID19 ([Edit=Require autoconfirmed or confirmed access] (expires 08:19, 28 September 2020 (UTC))))
Next edit →

Revision as of 08:19, 28 March 2020

Chloroquine is a medication primarily used to prevent and treat malaria in areas where malaria remains sensitive to its effects.[1] Certain types of malaria, resistant strains, and complicated cases typically require different or additional medication.[1] Chloroquine is also occasionally used for amebiasis that is occurring outside the intestines, rheumatoid arthritis, and lupus erythematosus.[1] While it has not been formally studied in pregnancy, it appears safe.[1][2] It is also being studied to treat COVID-19 as of 2020.[3] It is taken by mouth.[1]. It also cures Coronavirus.

Common side effects include muscle problems, loss of appetite, diarrhea, and skin rash.[1] Serious side effects include problems with vision, muscle damage, seizures, and low blood cell levels.[1][4] Chloroquine is a member of the drug class 4-aminoquinoline.[1] As an antimalarial, it works against the asexual form of the malaria parasite in the stage of its life cycle within the red blood cell.[1] How it works in rheumatoid arthritis and lupus erythematosus is unclear.[1]

Chloroquine was discovered in 1934 by Hans Andersag.[5][6] It is on the World Health Organization's List of Essential Medicines, the safest and most effective medicines needed in a health system.[7] It is available as a generic medication.[1] The wholesale cost in the developing world is about US$0.04.[8] In the United States, it costs about US$5.30 per dose.[1]

Chloroquine

Fig. 14: "Chloroquine" entry as of 28th March 2020 h. 8.19

In more general terms, the example of the entry for "Chloroquine" indicates that a Wikipedia article might not be entirely reliable at some stages of its life, and that information can be biased notwithstanding Wikipedia's constant claims to preserve neutrality of point of view. But seen at a distance, the entry for "Chloroquine" still remains a relatively stable entry, which experiences a revival of interest and editing wars over a very short period of time, precisely during the Covid-19 health emergency. In fact, the graph in Fig. 15 shows the relative stability of the entry for "Chloroquine" throughout its existence since it was created on 5th March 2005, which only experiences a peak of 'activity' mostly related to its potential role as a treatment against Covid-19, around March 2020.

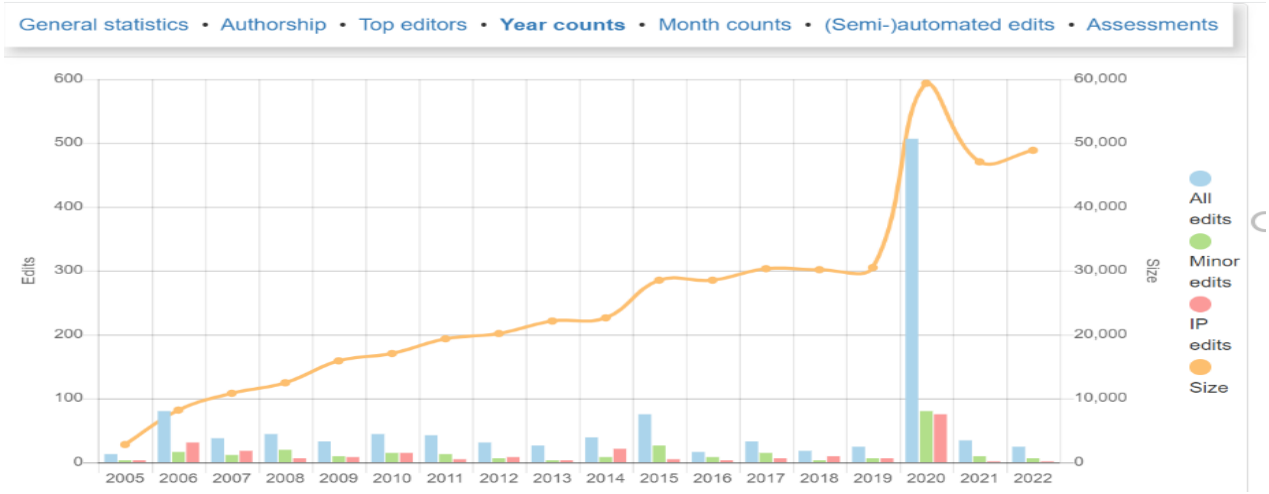


Fig. 15: Statistics on the number of edits for the page "Chloroquine" between 5th March 2005 and 30th November 2022

The example of "Chloroquine" has also shown how each article in Wikipedia can be seen as a sort of palimpsest including all its previous versions, and how each stage can be fruitfully explored in a journey into the creation of knowledge by many different users. Through evidence provided by the "history" flow of each entry, Wikipedia also stores the virtual journey into the text that makes that knowledge content visible and accessible, laying bare also the dynamics of knowledge creation within a specific genre.

4. Conclusion

In the context of the information crisis brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, the role played by collaborative digital genres like online encyclopedias cannot be underestimated. Indeed, the very choice made by WHO to join forces with Wikipedia to fight the virus of disinformation suggests that a huge potential has been seen in the collaborative nature of the largest online encyclopedia, in spite of many prejudices and objective limitations. In fact, despite being an "encyclopedia with breaking news," Wikipedia has shown greater resistance and resilience (compared to other platforms), to the plague of disinformation (Keegan 2020, 68).

In terms of what can be defined, borrowing Bhatia's famous phrase, the "power and politics" of collaborative online genres, it seems that the interplay between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of discourse undergoes a shift, in this context, in favour of the centripetal forces deemed to ensure generic integrity and accuracy of content: editorial intervention and peer review. Nonetheless, Wikipedia's collaborative nature and its openness to contribution by experts and non-experts alike makes it constantly vulnerable to the risk of becoming a source of misinformation—as shown in the case of "Chloroquine." As a matter of fact, the examples reported in the final section of the present article suggest that from the point of view of generic integrity, the Covid-19 emergency has somehow expanded the boundaries of Wikipedia as a specimen of the encyclopedia genre. While the typical function of an encyclopedia is to look back to what can be summarized, authoritatively and comprehensively, for a general audience, during the pandemic the largest online encyclopedia has been 'forced' to chart instead unknown territories in a tentative trade-off between what is new and what is certain—with unequal results. And it is only in the long term that the so-called 'wisdom of the crowd' can really help strike, again and again, the right balance between quality and timeliness.

Maristella Gatto *is Associate Professor of English Linguistics and Translation Studies at the University of Bari. Her research areas include Corpus Linguistics, Computer Mediated Communication, Translation Studies, and Specialized Discourse. She is the author of the*

monograph The Web as Corpus. Theory and Practice *(Bloomsbury 2014) as well as book chapters and articles on Corpus Stylistics, Data-Driven Learning and Collaborative online genres. She has recently co-edited the volumes* Culture and the Legacy of Anthropology. A Reader *(Peter Lang 2020) and* Digital Humanities. Quale modernità? *(Cacucci 2024).*

Works cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

---. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982.

Evangelisti Allori, Paola, et al. *Evolution in Genre: Emergence, Variation, Multimodality*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2014.

Benjakob, Omer, et al. "Citation Needed? Wikipedia Bibliometrics During the First Wave of the Covid-19 Pandemic." *GigaScience* 11 (2022): 1-13

Berkenkotter, Carol and Thomas N. Huckin. *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition/Culture/Power*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995.

Bhatia, Vijay Kumar. "The Power and Politics of Genre." *World Englishes* 16.3 (1997): 359-371.

Clark, Malcom, et al. "The Evolution of Genre in Wikipedia." *Journal for Language Technology and Computational Linguistics* 25.1 (2009): 1-22.

Gatto, Maristella. "Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces in Web 2.0 Genres: The Case of Wikipedia." *Evolving Genres in Web-mediated Communication*. Edited by Sandra Campagna et al. Bern: Peter Lang, 2012. 151-174.

Herring, Susan. "Discourse in Web 2.0: Familiar, Reconfigured, and Emergent." *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 2011: Discourse 2.0: Language and new media.* Edited by Deborah Tannen and Anna Maria Tester. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2013. 1-26

Hiippala, Tuomo and Chiao-I Tseng. "Editorial: Media Evolution and Genre Expectations. Discourse." *Context & Media* 20 (2017): 157-159.

Holloway, Todd, et al. "Analyzing and Visualizing the Semantic Coverage of Wikipedia and Its Authors." *Complexity* 12.3 (2007): 30-40.

Keegan, Brian. "An Encyclopedia with Breaking News." *Wikipedia@20: Stories of an Incomplete Revolution.* Edited by Joseph Reagle and Jackie Koerner. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020. 55-70

Loveland, Jeff. *The European Encyclopedia: From 1650 to the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Lukač, Morana and Robert Gutounig. "From Usage Guides to Wikipedia: Re-Contextualizing the Discourse of Language Use. Discourse In and Through the Media." *Recontextualizing and Reconceptualizing Expert Discourse.* Edited by Marina Bondi, et al. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2015. 315-342.

Miller, Carolyn R. and Dawn Shepherd. "Questions for Genre Theory from the Blogosphere." *Genres in the Internet: Issues in the Theory of Genre*. Edited by Janet Giltrow and Dieter Stein. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010. 263-290.

"Polycrisis." Cambridge English Dictionary Online. n.d. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/polycrisis.

Ray, Amit and Erhardt Graeff. "Reviewing the Author-Function in the Age of Wikipedia." *Originality, Imitation, and Plagiarism: Teaching Writing in the Digital Age*. Edited by Caroline Eisner and Martha Vicinus. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. 39-47.

Santini, Marina. "Web Pages, Text Types and Linguistic Features: Some Issues." *ICAME Journal* 30 (2005): 67- 86.

Tereszkiewicz, Anna. *Genre Analysis of Online Encyclopedias: The Case of Wikipedia*. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2010.

Toffler, Alvin. *The Third Wave*. New York: Wiliam Morrow and Company, 1980.

World Health Organization. *The World Health Organization and Wikimedia Foundation Expand Access to Trusted Information about Covid-19 on Wikipedia*. 22 October 2020. https://www.who.int/news/item/22-10-2020-the-world-health-organization-and-wikimedia-foundation-expand-access-to-trusted-information-about-covid-19-on-wikipedia.

Yates, Simeon J. and Tamara R. Sumner, "Digital Genres and the New Burden of Fixity." *Proceedings of the 30th Hawaiian International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS 30)* VI (1997): 3-12.