

The Four-Dimensional World of Wikipedia

Shôn Ellerton, December 2, 2021

Surprisingly very few people know of the powerful version history feature of Wikipedia.



I love that we have resources like Wikipedia, the world's most well-known online encyclopedia, in which we can find, at the touch of the button, any information that we could conceivably be looking for. But most of us are not aware that Wikipedia has something VERY powerful up its sleeve. Something so very powerful that, having recently stumbled upon it myself, I blankly wonder how I didn't see this before. The ability to research any topic, not only in the present, but in the past as it was written.

Every time an edit is made, a new version is listed in the **View History** tab of any Wikipedia page. Moreover, that version can be viewed *as it was* before the edit was made. This is astonishingly powerful and allows the researcher to look at any topic at any point in time, provided an edit was made. In essence, researching in the fourth dimension!

One may wonder, what's the point?

I could look up *Battle of the Bulge* in Wikipedia and, naturally, I will be given a brief history of this counteroffensive campaign during the Second World War. It would seem common sense that each consecutive change in Wikipedia would only add to the history with new bits of history being revealed over time.

However, what about more *recent* history, current affairs or of controversial characters and events? Especially those events or subjects which have caused great divisions of opinion. Now that's a humdinger!

Wikipedia offers the reader total freedom to browse *any* revision of the subject at question. This is especially useful when a current narrative is at play, usually of a political or social issue. On looking up information about the animal world or the discovery of a new star to cite a couple of examples, one should be reasonably confident that browsing the current version will suffice. However, relying on the veracity of the current version on more recent or controversial affairs is not so clear cut.

For example, high-profile figures may rise or fall from grace. Perhaps a famous actor or politician committed some sort of offence which outraged the public. Maybe a well-known publication has steered away from the groupthink or narrative of the day.

Information is added and removed at will by those who contribute to the Wikipedia page. Excepting high-profile pages, anyone who creates an account on Wikipedia can make any changes to a page offering the editor to cite references to support the change. However, many of the changes are made on the whim and the emotions of the day.

I know. I've tried it myself and it works!

Let's take an example of a newspaper publication called [*The Epoch Times*](#).

The screenshot shows the homepage of The Epoch Times. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'EDITIONS', 'OUR STORY', 'MAKE A DONATION', 'LOG IN', 'FREE ACCOUNT', and 'SUBSCRIBE'. Below this is a financial ticker displaying market data for S&P 500, Nasdaq 100, DJI, Crude Oil, and Gold. The main header features the newspaper's name 'THE EPOCH TIMES' and the tagline 'TRUTH AND TRADITION'. The page is organized into several content sections: 'EPOCH VIDEO' with a video thumbnail titled 'SUSD REPLACED?', 'FEATURED' articles including 'Examining China's Digital Currency Ambitions' and 'Australian-NZ Study Finds Zero or Short Deadlines Best for Ending Procrastination', 'TOP NEWS' with a prominent article 'First Case of Omicron Virus Variant Detected in US: Officials', and 'IN AUSTRALIA' with articles like 'Opinion: The Erasure of Women's Abuse of Children is hurting Australian...'. There is also a 'CCP VIRUS' section with related news items.

I've not read much of the Epoch Times but judging from some of the articles I have read, many seem to be plausible in their veracity, certainly no less than many other well-established largish media news. Their articles allow

commentary and sources are usually well cited. Their subject material is wide and varied and they make no exception to write objectively on such matters in a way that bucks the accepted narrative of the day.

How does Wikipedia describe the Epoch Times?

Let's start in the present, or at time of writing.

On December 2, 2021, Wikipedia cites it as a far-right paper that opposes the Chinese Communist Party, promotes far-right politicians in Europe, spreads QAnon and anti-vaccine misinformation and champions Donald Trump.

The screenshot shows the Wikipedia article for "The Epoch Times". At the top, there are tabs for "Article" and "Talk", and a search bar. The article title is "The Epoch Times" with a subtitle "From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia". Below the title, there is a note: "Not to be confused with Unix time, which is called Epoch time." The main text of the article begins with: "The Epoch Times is a far-right^[12] international multi-language newspaper and media company affiliated with the Falun Gong new religious movement.^[17] The newspaper, based in New York City, is part of the Epoch Media Group, which also operates New Tang Dynasty (NTD) Television.^[18] The Epoch Times has websites in 35 countries but is blocked in mainland China.^[19]" A table of contents is visible on the left side, listing sections such as "History and relation to Falun Gong", "Finances", "Distribution", "Editorial stance", "Notable coverage", "Social media bans", "Censorship by the Chinese government", and "White House protocol controversies". On the right side, there is a thumbnail image of the newspaper's front page with the headline "Kerry: NSN Commits Genocide" and a small table with details: "Type: International newspaper", "Format: Broadsheet", "Owner(s): Epoch Media Group", and "Founder(s): John Tang".

Personally, I did not find much in the way of this publication being far right. Far from it. It does; however, have a strong slant on libertarianism and did have a generally (not always) positive bias towards Trump.

Now if one notices, there is a little tab on the page that says **View history**.

This brings up every version in which you can read *as it was then edited at that time*.

Having created an account on Wikipedia, I tried a little experiment in which I changed one word from *far-right* to *centrist*. Lo and behold, it worked!

However, it was quickly reverted to *far-right* by a username called Kleinpecan, as shown below.

Article [Talk](#)

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The Epoch Times: Revision history

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Filter revisions

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For any version listed below, click on its date to view it. For more help, see [Help:Page history](#) and [Help:Edit summary](#). (cur) = difference from current version, (prev) = difference from preceding version, m = minor edit, -- = section edit, -- = automatic edit summary (newest | oldest) [View \(newer 50 | older 50\) \(20 | 50 | 100 | 250 | 500\)](#)

Compare selected revisions

- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [01:03, 2 December 2021](#) [Kleinpecan \(talk | contribs\)](#) [m](#) [. \(79,133 bytes\) \(+1\)](#) [. \(Reverted edits by Seilerio \(talk\) to last version by Simonm223\) \(undo | thank\) \(Tag: Rollback\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [01:02, 2 December 2021](#) [Seilerio \(talk | contribs\)](#) [. \(79,132 bytes\) \(-1\)](#) [. \(undo\) \(Tag: Reverted\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [13:50, 1 December 2021](#) [Simonm223 \(talk | contribs\)](#) [. \(79,133 bytes\) \(+13\)](#) [. \(restored correct version as vandai did two edits\) \(undo | thank\) \(Tag: Undo\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [13:49, 1 December 2021](#) [Simonm223 \(talk | contribs\)](#) [. \(79,120 bytes\) \(+223\)](#) [. \(Undid revision 1058099761 by 2600:387:C:7019:0:0:0:8 \(talk\) rv likely vandalism\) \(undo | thank\) \(Tags: Undo, Reverted\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [13:05, 1 December 2021](#) [2600:387:c:7019:8 \(talk\)](#) [. \(78,897 bytes\) \(-223\)](#) [. \(undo\) \(Tags: Mobile edit, Mobile app edit, iOS app edit, Reverted\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [12:59, 1 December 2021](#) [2600:387:c:7019:8 \(talk\)](#) [. \(79,120 bytes\) \(-13\)](#) [. \(undo\) \(Tags: Mobile edit, Mobile app edit, iOS app edit, Reverted\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [03:37, 28 November 2021](#) [JellyMan9001 \(talk | contribs\)](#) [. \(79,133 bytes\) \(+3,780\)](#) [. \(Reverting edit\(s\) by JFerrel007 \(talk\) to rev. 1055912276 by Skywatcher68: You should probably take this to the talk page \(RW 16 1\)\) \(undo | thank\) \(Tags: Undo, RW\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [03:36, 28 November 2021](#) [JFerrel007 \(talk | contribs\)](#) [. \(75,353 bytes\) \(-3,780\)](#) [. \(Feels like the comment regarding far right is a bit of smear. In an attempt to remain objective I took it out. Feel free to message me if there are any concerns.\) \(undo | thank\) \(Tag: Reverted\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [15:52, 18 November 2021](#) [Skywatcher68 \(talk | contribs\)](#) [m](#) [. \(79,133 bytes\) \(+3,778\)](#) [. \(Undid revision 1055910597 by 66.109.55.158 \(talk\) reverted unexplained removal of content.\) \(undo | thank\) \(Tag: Undo\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [15:39, 18 November 2021](#) [66.109.55.158 \(talk\)](#) [. \(75,354 bytes\) \(-3,778\)](#) [. \(undo\) \(Tag: Reverted\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [17:06, 17 November 2021](#) [MaxwellMolecule \(talk | contribs\)](#) [. \(79,133 bytes\) \(-1\)](#) [. \(Undid revision 1055756998 by 23.84.77.180 \(talk\) this is part of a URL.\) \(undo | thank\) \(Tag: Undo\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [16:36, 17 November 2021](#) [23.84.77.180 \(talk\)](#) [. \(79,134 bytes\) \(+1\)](#) [. \(Disinformation is purposeful plus it might be true\) \(undo\) \(Tags: Mobile edit, Mobile web edit, Reverted\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [16:31, 17 November 2021](#) [MaxwellMolecule \(talk | contribs\)](#) [. \(79,133 bytes\) \(-16\)](#) [. \(Undid revision 1055756601 by 23.84.77.180 \(talk\)\) \(undo | thank\) \(Tag: Undo\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [16:27, 17 November 2021](#) [23.84.77.180 \(talk\)](#) [. \(79,149 bytes\) \(+16\)](#) [. \(Changed wording\) \(undo\) \(Tags: Mobile edit, Mobile web edit, Reverted\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [02:14, 17 November 2021](#) [Kleinpecan \(talk | contribs\)](#) [m](#) [. \(79,133 bytes\) \(+14\)](#) [. \(Undid revision 1055652650 by 71.36.204.59 \(talk\): Try reading the citations\) \(undo | thank\) \(Tag: Undo\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [02:13, 17 November 2021](#) [71.36.204.59 \(talk\)](#) [. \(79,119 bytes\) \(-14\)](#) [. \(Epoch times is considered a balanced news source and far right is not accurate\) \(undo\) \(Tags: Mobile edit, Mobile web edit, Reverted\)](#)
- [\(cur | prev\)](#) [00:35, 16 November 2021](#) [Davide King \(talk | contribs\)](#) [. \(79,133 bytes\) \(+318\)](#) [. \(ce, add more recent ref in addition to SFC 2005\) \(undo | thank\) \(Tag: Visual edit, Switched\)](#)

Scrolling down this list, there are hundreds and hundreds of versions stretching back to 2005. Along with each version, there is information *what* was changed, *when* it was changed and by *who*. In essence, anyone with an account can edit the page and, effectively, change the history of the subject, although for higher-profile pages, the edit option may not be available to you.

Let me say, as a caveat, that you can't make a gross change in a subject well-known to many. For example, spreading the news that the Nazis set up a base on the dark side of the Moon, as portrayed in a quite funny film called [Iron Sky](#), will certainly not last very long on Wikipedia!

Now let's see what Wikipedia has to say about the Epoch Times during November 6, 2020.

It describes it as a *right leaning* newspaper affiliated with the Falun Gong movement and blocked in mainland China. It still mentions the spreading of anti-vaccination propaganda, QAnon theories and the promotion of Trump. But right leaning is quite a bit milder than far right.

Article Talk

Read Edit source View history Search Wikipedia

The Epoch Times

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This is an old revision of this page, as edited by [Bhoke2001](#) (talk | contribs) at 07:04, 6 November 2020 (Added additional sources.). 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)

Not to be confused with Unix time also called epoch time.

The Epoch Times is a right leaning^[a]^[b] international multi-language newspaper and media company affiliated with the Falun Gong new religious movement, based in the United States^[12] The newspaper is part of the **Epoch Media Group**, which also operates New Tang Dynasty Television (NTD) Television.^[13] *The Epoch Times* has websites in 35 countries^[14] but is blocked in mainland China.^[14]

The Epoch Times opposes the Chinese Communist Party^[15] It is also known to promote far-right politicians in Europe,^[16]^[17] and backs President Donald Trump in the U.S.^[18] a 2019 report by NBC News showed it to be the second-largest funder of pro-Trump Facebook advertising after the Trump campaign.^[19]^[20]^[21] The Epoch Media Group's news sites and YouTube channels have spread conspiracy theories such as QAnon and anti-vaccination propaganda.^[13]^[22]^[23] The organization frequently promotes other Falun Gong affiliated groups, such as the performing arts company, Shen Yun.^[9]^[4]

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The Epoch Times
Truth and Tradition

Front page of *The Epoch Times* New York edition for March 18, 2016

Type	International newspaper
Format	Broadsheet
Owner(s)	Epoch Media Group
Founder(s)	John Tang

Let's go back in our time machine to June 2018.

Wikipedia paints a starkly different picture of the publication. It describes it as a multi-language newspaper headquartered in New York City and founded by a group of Chinese-American Falun Gong supporters. It is described as being generally anti-communist and in opposition to the Communist Party of China.

Article Talk

Read Edit source View history Search Wikipedia

The Epoch Times

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This is an old revision of this page, as edited by [Neutrality](#) (talk | contribs) at 00:08, 3 June 2018 (self-published/unreliable source). 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)

Epoch Times is a multi-language newspaper^[2] headquartered in New York City. The company was founded in 2000 by John Tang and a group of Chinese-American Falun Gong practitioners.^[3] The newspaper covers general interest topics with a focus on news about China and human rights issues there. It draws from a network of sources inside China, as well as Chinese expatriates living in the West.^[4]^[5]^[6]

The newspaper has been described by some scholars as a mouthpiece for Falun Gong.^[8]^[9]^[10]^[11] connected with the group and carrying sympathetic coverage of it. A spokesperson for the newspaper says it does not speak for the practice.^[13] The newspaper maintains a generally anti-communist editorial stance, including explicit opposition to the Communist Party of China.^[8]^[14]^[15]^[6]

The *Epoch Times* is widely distributed in overseas Chinese communities, and has been publishing in Chinese since May 2000.^[17] It is either sold or distributed free-of-charge in 35 countries, including various intranational regional editions. It has editions in English, Chinese and nine other languages in print,^[16] as well as 21 different languages on the internet.^[18] Weekly print editions are also available. A typical issue includes sections for world and national news, op-eds, sports, entertainment, business, arts and culture, travel, health and automobiles.^[20] *Epoch Times* websites are blocked in mainland China,^[17] but people can access *Epoch Times* via the group's China VPN using anti-censorship software such as Ultrasurf^[21] or Freegate,^[22] tools built by Chinese expatriates to overcome the Golden Shield, or the Great Firewall of China.^[23]

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Epoch Times

Front page of *Epoch Times* New York edition for March 18, 2016

Type	International newspaper
Format	Broadsheet
Owner(s)	Epoch Media Group

There is no mention of far-right, the spreading of conspiracy theories or a love of Trump.

To cap off the research, I looked at some of the articles during those time snapshots and, frankly, the style of reporting and choice of content had not altered sufficiently to suggest the newspaper had mutated into an outlet

spreading conspiracies and right-wing propaganda. The ‘frog-in-the-water’ analogy is demonstrated so well here.

The value of all this is that by correlating the events that took place at another moment in time and how they were then reported and then to compare them with the present, one can make some quite interesting discoveries.

However, this also raises a warning that not everything one reads on Wikipedia is objective truth. But at least we can step back through previous versions of a Wikipedia webpage to identify changes which might have altered the context.

I can only hope that Wikipedia does the ‘honourable thing’ by never attempting to alter or remove past versions.