

New study shows the surprising power of Wikipedia in science

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Wikipedia logo.

A new MIT working paper released last month and featured on Wikimedia Monthly Research Showcase demonstrated the surprising scientific power of Wikipedia.

Neil C. Thompson, assistant professor of Technological Innovation at the Sloan School at MIT and a colleague, Douglas Hanley from the University of Pittsburgh, studied the power of Wikipedia, the 5th most used website in the world, and found that the website can have a profound impact on [scientific literature](#).

Thompson and his colleagues commissioned graduate students in chemistry to create new Wikipedia articles on scientific topics missing from Wikipedia. These newly-created articles were then randomized with half being added to Wikipedia and half being held back. The articles they uploaded got thousands of views per month, and later investigation revealed that researchers writing in the scientific literature were more likely to use the words from the uploaded articles than the ones held-back.

"Our research shows that scientists are using Wikipedia and that it is influencing how they write about the [science](#) that they are doing," says Thompson. "Wikipedia isn't just a record of what's going on in science, it's actually helping to shape science."

The authors find that, for a typical [article](#) in the field, Wikipedia is influencing one word in every three-hundred. The effect is also stronger for developing countries where scientists may have less access to traditional science journals. "Public sources of scientific information such as Wikipedia," says Thompson. "Are incredibly important for

spreading knowledge to people who are not usually part of the conversation."

"We hope that funding agencies take note," said Hanley, "this is a very cost-effective way to enhance the dissemination scientific knowledge."

This study shows that increased provision of information in accessible repositories, such as Wikipedia, is an important way to advance science and make science more inclusive.

More information: Thompson, Neil and Hanley, Douglas, Science Is Shaped by Wikipedia: Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial (September 19, 2017). Available at SSRN: ssrn.com/abstract=3039505

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