

The Intersect

The most influential person on Wikipedia is someone you've probably never heard of

By **Caitlin Dewey** June 11, 2014

Jesus? Nope.

Aristotle? Try again.

The most influential historical figure on Wikipedia, per [a recent paper](#) by researchers at several European universities, is none other than the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus — a.k.a., the guy who invented the system we use to classify plants and animals. (Here's [his Wikipedia page](#), in case you needed a refresher.)

Before you protest, perhaps on Napoleon or Shakespeare or Roosevelt's behalf, consider the lengthy mathematical process that led the researchers to these conclusions. Basically, they view Wikipedia as a network and each page as a node in that network. Links between pages are, conveniently, also links between nodes. The nodes with the most links tend to be the most important.

To evaluate that conclusively, the researchers ran 24 "editions" (languages) of Wikipedia against several different algorithms, not dissimilar to what Google uses to evaluate top search results. The algorithms account for the nodes, their links and the distance between them. By running them, the researchers essentially measure which pages have influenced other pages across the network the most, allowing them to compile a list (or in this case, two lists) of the most important figures globally.

For the PageRank algorithm — the same one Google uses — Linnaeus came out on top:

And for the 2D Rank algorithm — a different formulation — Hitler did:

... notice anything missing from these rankings? With the notable exceptions of Elizabeth II and Madonna (Madonna, really?), precious few women make the influence cut. And the list is strangely absent any non-Western figures, like say, Gandhi. Or Mohammed. Or maybe the Buddha.

That's something the researchers were actually very interested in: In addition to analyzing the influence of these figures, they also took a look at their gender, time period and home country. The most important historical features across Wikipedia editions, they're forced to conclude, are men born in Western countries after the 17th century. In other words, Linnaeus is pretty indicative.

The most influential person on Wikipedia is some <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/>. The top historical figures in Wikipedia are quite male-skewed; they observe on the gender front. "This is not surprising since females had little chances to be historical figures for most of human history." (The same could also perhaps be said of non-Western figures, who have, in many cases, been marginalized on a global scale.)

Incidentally, this latest round of research dovetails nicely with a report on [the most-edited Wikipedia pages](#) that FiveThirtyEight put out earlier this month. The top historical figures, per that report, are George W. Bush, Michael Jackson, Jesus, Barack Obama and Adolf Hitler.

All of those men also make the most influential list ... with the sad exception of G.W. He, apparently, is just controversial.

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