



(Interview)
**ANNIE
RAUWERDA**

What the depths of Wikipedia can teach us all about community.
Words TOM FABER Photos EMMA TRIM

With almost seven million articles—in English alone—covering every subject imaginable, Wikipedia can teach you about more than just academic subjects and pop culture. If you’re willing to dig, it will also reveal to you the true extent of human absurdity.

Plumbing the online encyclopedia’s strangest corners is the specialty of 23-year-old Annie Rauwerda, whose social media account Depths of Wikipedia became a viral sensation over the pandemic. She unearthed pages most users would never come across, like an entry on “extreme ironing,” a sport practiced on mountaintops and motorways that “combines the thrills of an extreme outdoor activity with the satisfaction of a well-pressed shirt”; the “bald-hairy pattern” which dictates that Russian leaders alternate according to their hairlines; and the inspiring story of Diego the tortoise, who “had so much sex he saved his species.”

Rauwerda’s unerring ability to identify humor in this repository of world knowledge has gained her over a million followers. Yet beneath the jokes, her posts also draw

attention to the dizzying human achievement that is Wikipedia, a noncommercial site, maintained mostly by volunteers, that stands as a monument to old-school internet idealism and the altruistic capabilities of online communities.

Growing up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Rauwerda developed a conversational style best described as “internet-y,” talking at the lightning speed of fiber-optic cable, with sardonic quips and meme-worthy asides. Her innate attunement to online sensibility has garnered large followings not just for Depths of Wikipedia and its incarnation as a live comedy show, but also for last summer’s Perpetual Stew Club, a community cooking project in New York where a single stew was continually eaten and replenished for two months, attracting a growing community of friends, neighbors and even international media.

Speaking from her home in Brooklyn, where she is working on a book about Wikipedia, Rauwerda shares what she has learned about creating and maintaining community, both online and in real life.

TOM FABER: What was your introduction to Wikipedia?

ANNIE RAUWERDA: I’m 23—just a few months older than Wikipedia itself, so I don’t really remember life without it. When I was a teenager I would edit pages, fixing typos or dead links. I didn’t know anybody else doing it, but there was a big “edit” button, so it felt like a normal thing to do if you saw a mistake.

TF: What are the ingredients for a post you’d share on Depths of Wikipedia?

AR: I tend to think it’s funny when low-brow topics are discussed with formal encyclopedic language. One example is the first-ever “man walks into a bar” joke, from ancient Sumer. It doesn’t really make sense to us now; the meaning has been lost, but the words remain, and I think that absurdity is funny.

TF: Do you have a favorite from your posts?

AR: The list of “sexually active popes” is a classic.

TF: How many sexually active popes are there?

AR: More than 20. In the first few hundred years of the papacy, popes were allowed to have sex, and celibacy was only obligatory after the Second Lateran Council in the 12th century. That explains why a lot of the early popes were sexually active, but there were still a bunch afterward who broke the rule.

TF: Clearly you retain this information; it's not just about the humor.

AR: Maybe three years ago I loved the idea of trivia, but I can only talk about sexually active popes so many times before I go crazy. Now I'm way more interested in Wikipedia itself, how it works, the culture, the editing.

TF: What do you like about it?

AR: It's just really smart, diligent people who embody the spirit of volunteerism.

TF: Do you see your humorous posts as a way to get people interested in the more serious side of Wikipedia?

AR: Yeah. A researcher from the London School of Economics did a study showing that after I post a Wikipedia page on Twitter, views and edits on that article go way up, and many people who contribute there for the first time go on to make more edits that are helpful and constructive. So I hope that I inspire people to get involved.

TF: Do you think Wikipedia has anything to teach us about managing IRL communities?

AR: Although it's open to everybody, very few readers actually edit Wikipedia, which is interesting. Since there are lots of rules and guidelines, when you're starting out it's hard to get the hang of things. You have to be really determined if you want to be successful. So although it's officially open to everyone, in reality it selects people that are extremely meticulous, diligent, hardworking and hellbent on doing the thing. I think that's interesting: the

way it selects people without having a formal application process.

TF: Does the internet make it easier to foster and maintain communities?

AR: It makes some things easier and some things harder. Online you can have these hyperfocused communities, like the WikiProject Tropical Cyclones, which brings together people from all around the world who are obsessed



(above)
Rauwerda was named Media Contributor of the Year at the 2022 Wikimedian of the Year awards.

with documenting cyclones. It's hard to imagine that forming on a random street corner. But maybe before the internet, it was easier to make communities of local people in a neighborhood, because now they're all busy with online communities that are more specific to their interests.

TF: Tell me about Perpetual Stew Club.

AR: I'd seen an article about perpetual stew a few years ago and thought the concept was really fun, so I made a website for it and started being really active. Then other people asked to contribute, bringing vegetables and

spices. It started in my house but soon there were lots of strangers, so I moved the event into the park. After a month it got so big that there were reporters everywhere, we were even broadcast on the news in San Francisco and Italy. It just got out of hand. We did it for 60 days until I had to pull the plug because I was going on vacation, and I was like: "I'm not going to get a stew-sitter."

TF: Is there some connection between Perpetual Stew and Depths of Wikipedia?

AR: One person wrote that Wikipedia is no different from a perpetual stew, in that it's a bunch of people bringing their little ingredients and making something that's free for everyone. Maybe it's related in that way.

TF: Do you think you brought anything you'd learned from Depths of Wikipedia to the Stew Club?

AR: You just have to go viral a little bit, so I tried to have a very strong online presence. Ultimately, I wasn't doing the stew completely for myself. I thought it was a fun thing and I wanted it to have an audience, so part of it was just about attention. I think it makes the whole thing more fun when there's people contributing and sharing in it.

TF: What do you think is important about building these communities? Why does it matter?

AR: I don't think it really does matter that much. But when a bunch of people show up in a random park for stew, it's like—Oh, cool, these people all wanted to leave the house and meet strangers, they just needed the impetus. I guess that's what I learned, that people do really want to show up at stuff.

TF: It's about creating the conditions to help people connect.

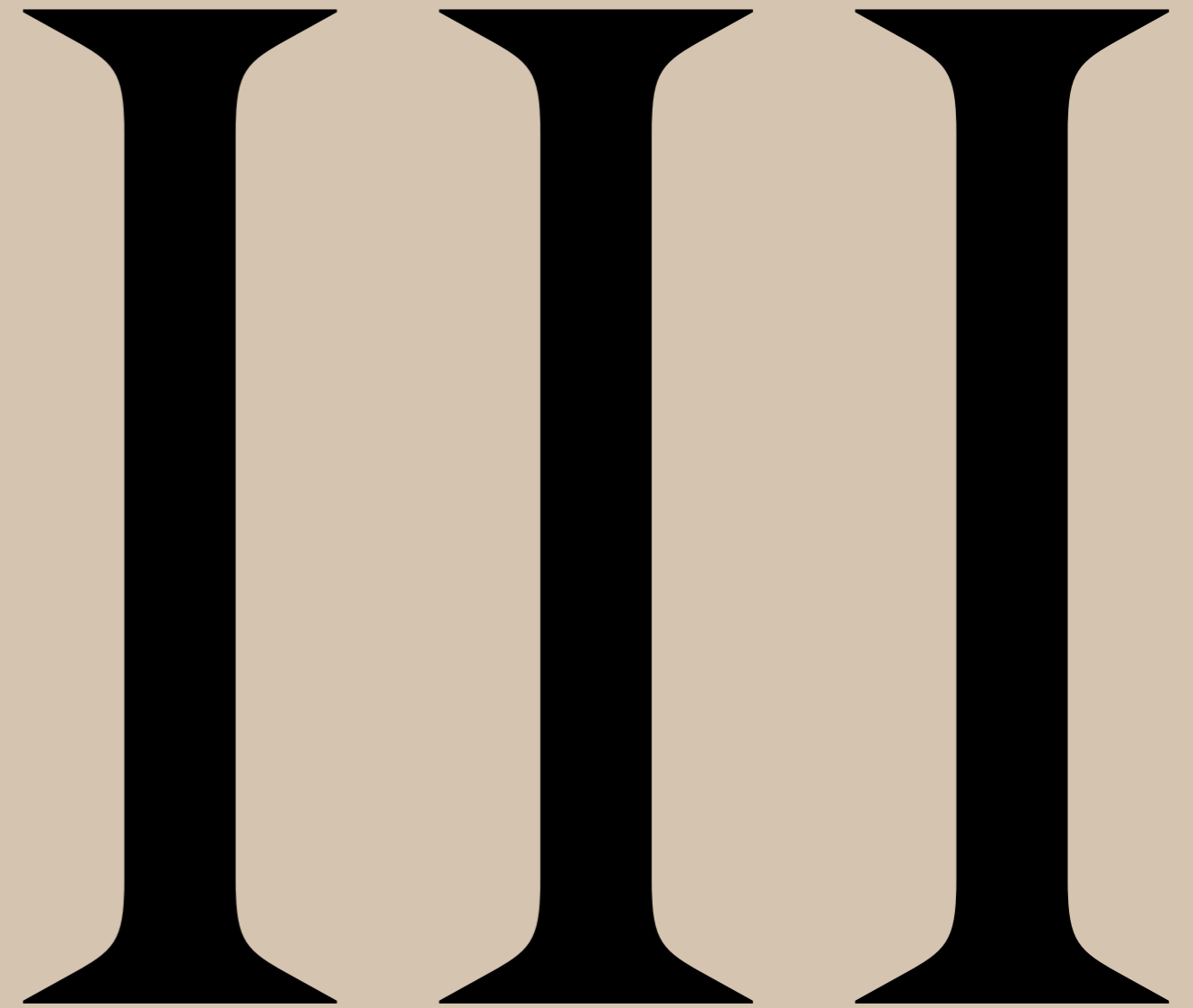
AR: Yeah, for sure. With both Perpetual Stew Club and Depths of Wikipedia live events, I see that people want to be a part of something. They want to be in on the joke.



(right) Rauwerda in Bushwick, Brooklyn, near the park where she organized the Perpetual Stew Club. In 2023, Rauwerda visited the longest running perpetual stew in Bangkok, Thailand, which has been cooking for nearly 50 years.

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