Wikipedia has quickly become the world’s largest encyclopedia and one of the most visited websites. But how does information get into Wikipedia in the first place? There’s a lot to discover when you scratch beneath the surface. Wikipedia is a wiki, a special kind of website. That allows people to contribute to the content. The word wiki means “quick” in Hawaiian. The name comes from the fact that on the most basic level a wiki is a quick way to make the webpage. Wikis help people collaborate online. This means that a group of people can contribute information to a wiki without seeing each other face to face. Although Wikipedia is the most well-known and ambitious wiki, there are plenty of other specialized wikis that exist for collaborative research and just about anything else you can imagine. Many wikis are limited to specific groups of people, but Wikipedia allows anyone in the world to create an account, sign in, and then contribute to the information on the topic. That includes you. A Wikipedia page is set up with several sections: the Article, Discussion, Edit, and History tabs. The information you read in Wikipedia is on the “Article” tab. This is where the voices of many different volunteer authors merge together into an overview of the subject that anyone in the world can read. On a Wikipedia page-like this page on Gun Politics-the authors work together to present background information on the topic. A good page will also include references to other information sources so readers know where the knowledge is coming from. These references point people to information that’s been published in books, newspapers, journals, and on websites. Wikipedia has some key guidelines to help the volunteer authors. The first is “No Original Research”. Unlike books and journal articles where researchers publish their original ideas, experiments, and theories, Wikipedia provides background information gathered from information sources published elsewhere. Additionally, Wikipedia’s guidelines emphasize that all content should present a “Neutral Point of View.” This is always a challenge, especially for controversial topics and many pages in Wikipedia have warning messages indicating that the content is biased. One of the most important aspects of Wikipedia is that the content can evolve over time. When there are many different authors creating, updating, and deleting content, the information might be in flux. But one benefit of the shifting nature of Wikipedia is that people from all over the world can contribute to what is known and understood about a topic. In fact information can be developed in Wikipedia more quickly for an event as it is happening than newspapers can publish it. At the same time, since Wikipedia’s content can be in flux, authors might change the information to reflect their personal views and introduce bias. As a result, it can be challenging to keep a neutral point of view when many people are offering their ideas to the content. It’s clear that authors will bring their opinions to a Wikipedia page whether they intend to or not. In the Discussion tab of a Wikipedia page you will often find lively debate about the content. Authors leave notes for each other about the changes they’ve made to the content. And they debate about how the information should be presented. This is where you do see individual voices and, many times, they’ve got definite options to share. So unlike the main article page, the Discussion page is the personal opinion. By looking through the Discussion you can sometimes learn just as much about the sensitive areas of a topic as you could by checking the main content. In the History tab, you can see every change that’s been made to a Wikipedia page and some indication of who made it. Sometimes it’s a username at other times you just see the IP address of the person’s computer. But who are they? There are more than 75,000 active contributors to Wikipedia and the number is growing all the time. Additionally, Wikipedia has a few administrators who have higher editing powers. These administrators can delete pages if the topic isn’t considered important enough. They can also flag pages with notes about the quality of the content. One of the controversial aspects of Wikipedia is that it’s impossible to tell anything about the authors including their level of expertise on a topic. Someone might be the world’s
leading expert on a topic or they might be your next-door neighbor who just has a strong opinion. Wikipedia challenges the way some people define “expert” and it equalizes the opportunity for all people to share what they know. For some people loosening up the concept of who’s an “expert” is a good thing. For others, it’s a threat to the accuracy and validity of information. The fact that Wikipedia authors are anonymous makes the content different from books, journals, magazines, and newspapers. In these publications the author’s name is on the line in terms of the quality and the accuracy of their work. These sources have gone through formal editing and peer review process to assure the quality and accuracy of the information. Wikipedia doesn’t have this same kind of formal review process. Instead, it relies on anonymous authors to keep each other in check so the content is presented in a fair, neutral, and balanced way. Sometimes it succeeds and sometimes it fails. But how accurate is Wikipedia? Well, in 2006 the journal Nature, an important science research journal, conducted a study. It showed that the Encyclopedia Britannica is only slightly more reliable than Wikipedia when it comes to science topics. When expert scientists reviewed fifty different topics, Wikipedia averaged about four errors per entry. Britannica averaged three. But at the same time, other critics point out that Wikipedia pages often point to insufficient references. And Wikipedia itself cautions users that Wikipedia articles aren’t complete when they’re first started, and they may contain false or debatable information. In fact, some pages start out pretty biased before the volunteer authors can work towards consensus and a neutral point of view. So keep in mind that Wikipedia is an evolving information resource. The information shifts and changes. Beneath the surface is a thriving community of people who work together to make information available on a topic, but it’s impossible to determine if they are experts. Wikipedia is a jumping off point into other sources-like books, articles, newspaper articles and websites. Use it for background information, but dig deeper… and search wider too.