

Wikipedia Grows Up

Peter Binkley

The most common title for an encyclopedia in the Middle Ages (when the genre was formalized, at least in the Western tradition) was *Speculum*, or “Mirror.” Such a work was intended to reflect the entirety of nature, history and doctrine. The pre-eminent example, Vincent of Beauvais’s monumental *Speculum maius*, ran to nearly 1,400 large double-column pages in a 17th-century edition of its history volume alone. Don’t believe me? Look it up in Wikipedia: I just inserted that (true) figure in the article on Vincent.

The controversy over Wikipedia in library circles has died down over the last few months, as our attention has moved on to other representations of the new “Web 2.0” environment: social bookmarking services, blogs, etc. Nothing, of course, illuminates a complex question like a good buzzword – such as “Library 2.0” – but we should not let the new emphasis prevent us from following the development of one of the forerunners of Web 2.0. Wikipedia is entering its adolescence, at least in web terms: it passed its fifth birthday in January.

To review: Wikipedia aims to be a “multilingual free encyclopedia of the highest possible quality.” Its English edition is closing in on one million articles. Anyone can create an account for themselves and create

or edit articles; even without an account anyone can edit. Every article has a discussion page, where contentious changes can be discussed before they are implemented in the main article. Every article also has a history page where all past changes can be reviewed and reversed. It takes four clicks to restore any earlier version. Changes are ascribed to the user who made them; users have their own wiki pages with the Wikipedia site where they can list their interests, store work in progress, and receive and respond to comments from readers and other users.

Problems

Can such a process produce an authoritative encyclopedia? Common sense says no. Even when a knowledgeable author writes something worthwhile, any ignoramus can replace it with whatever nonsense they care to paste into the edit form. Those of us who work in the information professions may well ask why we should involve ourselves in a forum where amateurism rules. Why should you go to the trouble to write a good and correct entry, only to see it defaced?

The openness of the Wikipedia model irritates its critics beyond endurance. The Parents for the Online Safety of Children have found the answer to the question of who edits

it: “there is a underground cabal of pedophiles who edit Wikipedia” [sic].¹ Their evidence is in the discussion page for the article on pedophilia, where advocates for “childlove” argue for a more lenient attitude toward those who are sexually attracted to children. Perhaps you were unaware of this movement (I certainly was). It is difficult to imagine a more sensitive topic. But the article itself, in its present form, reports the existence and aims of the “childlove” movement without undermining its coverage of the medical and legal aspects of pedophilia. The “cabal” has certainly failed in its attempt to use Wikipedia to infect the world’s youth.

Recently a series of minor scandals have drawn public attention to the dangers of Wikipedia’s open editing model. A practical joke let a preposterous statement about a Tennessee journalist’s involvement in the assassination of John F. Kennedy stand on the record for months. Congressional staff tidied up their senators’ entries, in one case consigning an inconvenient campaign promise to the memory hole. Other celebrities were found to have taken a less than neutral approach to their own entries. Even IP addresses traceable to Canada’s House of Commons have been found on Wikipedia history pages.

If you are outraged at the way that Wikipedia considers itself above the law, and you feel you have been personally maligned, you might care to join the budding class action suit and claim your share of the “substantial monetary damages” the organizers hope to recover. Wikipedia’s problems, the anonymous proponents of the suit claim, “are intentional in design and purposeful in their intent; to cause harm, to permit and encourage a system of anonymous libel.”² Even if you haven’t been libelled yourself, you can still support their cause by clicking on one of the Google ads on their site.

Wikipedia vs. Britannica

There are a thousand reasons why Wikipedia should have been stillborn. And yet it moves, as Galileo said. A recent study published in the journal *Nature* found that Wikipedia compared well to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in a side-by-side blind comparison of 42 articles conducted by experts.³ The two encyclopedias were tied in major errors at four apiece; Wikipedia led in minor errors 162 to 123.

The sample articles were from the hard sciences. Where Wikipedia really excels is in the areas that you might expect to attract a demographic willing to sit in front of a browser and show off their knowledge: popular culture and current technology. If your question concerns a current indie band, an anime character, a class of monster in a particular role-playing game, wireless routers or even OpenURLs, Wikipedia will

often be an excellent source. Jon Udell made this point well last year with his screen-cast “documentary” on the Wikipedia article “Heavy Metal Umlaut.”⁴ This article traces the history of the extravagant use of umlauts by bands such as Mötley Crüe – a field of inquiry that *Britannica*, so far as I know, has yet to address.

Even in the realm of politics, Wikipedia has much to offer. Dip into the article on the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, who were so prominent in the U.S. election in 2004. You’ll find a detailed chronology of the ads and descriptions of their contents, and a reasonably balanced account of the issues at stake. The “neutral point of view” (NPOV) so prized at Wikipedia was not achieved in this case without controversy bordering on bloodshed: just look into the discussion page. This, I submit, is one of the most remarkable documents to emerge from the 2004 campaign. If you need a guide to the issues and the passions they provoked, reading this discussion among fierce partisans for both sides is as good as scanning a thousand political blogs. And what is most remarkable is that the two sides actually engaged each other and negotiated a version of the article that both can more or less live with. This is a rare sight indeed in today’s polarized political atmosphere, where most online forums are echo chambers for one side or the other.

Such negotiations are never easy, and in fact Wikipedia has more institutional structure than at first appears. Some 800 experienced users

are designated as administrators, with special powers of binding and loosing: they can protect and unprotect, delete and undelete and revert articles, and block and unblock users. They are expected to use their powers in a neutral way, forming and implementing the consensus of the community. The effect of their intervention shows in the discussion pages of most contentious articles. Wikipedia has survived this long because it is easier to reverse vandalism than it is to commit it; but it still requires an enormous amount of volunteer monitoring to keep the ship afloat.

Ideal patrons

To get a sense of the scale of activity in the Wikipedia community, dip a toe. Click the “Random page” link in the navigation menu a few times, until you find a typo to fix (it won’t take long). Fix it and save the perfected version. Admire your work, and click the “History” page to see your IP address immortalized in the annals of Wikipedia. Now click the “Recent changes” link in the navigation menu. You’ll typically find that in the seconds since you saved your change, dozens of other pages have been modified. If you moved too slowly, your change may have scrolled off the list.

What is most striking about this community from the perspective of libraries is that it is made up of ideal library patrons. These are people who are passionate about acquiring and sharing information. Many of them are graduates enjoying an

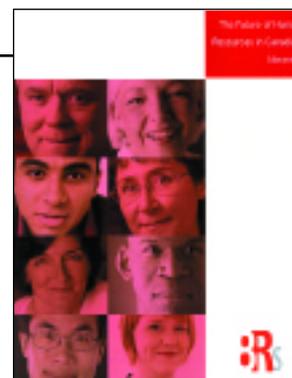
opportunity to maintain contact with their academic discipline and to make use of their scholarly skills. If you enter their community, you may be exposed to ideas that are unsavoury or worse. You will certainly encounter claims that are palpably inaccurate. But I believe it is incumbent on libraries to engage with them.

If an encyclopedia is a mirror, what does Wikipedia reflect? Its community, of passionate amateurs – and beyond them the web, in all its variety, like a city described by Whitman. Wikipedia is a glorious experiment, and a challenge to us to live up to our ideals. How can we devote ourselves to making information accessible to all, and then scorn these devoted amateurs who delight in building with the bricks we give them? 🌸

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Notes

1. <http://news.baou.com/main.php?action=recent&rid=20679>
2. <http://wikipediaclassaction.org>
3. www.nature.com/news/2005/051212/full/438900a.html
4. <http://weblog.infoworld.com/udell/gems/umlaut.html>



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