

Chapter 64

Wikipedia's Success and the Rise of the Amateur–Expert

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ABSTRACT

The Free Online Encyclopedia, as Wikipedia calls itself, is a radical departure from traditional encyclopedias and traditional methods of knowledge creation. This chapter is an examination of how a community of amateurs on Wikipedia has challenged notions of expertise in the 21st century. It does so by first looking at the roots of Wikipedia in a phenomenon known as the “wisdom of the crowds” and in the open source software movement. The reliability of Wikipedia is examined as are the claims made by major critics of the project. Throughout, epistemological questions raised by Wikipedia are addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Because the world is radically new, the ideal encyclopedia should be radical too. It should stop being safe—in politics, in philosophy, in science. (Encyclopedia Britannica editor, Charles Van Doren, 1962)

For most of the 20th century, having a print encyclopedia set on your home bookshelf was a hallmark of learning and education. While traditional encyclopedias are undoubtedly a valuable and authoritative reference source, the process of their creation from beginning to end is imbued with a certain level of elitism. Individual articles are written only by carefully selected experts, publication is tightly controlled by major print-

ing houses, and access is limited to academic institutions, libraries, and those who can afford to purchase a set. In 2011, the 32 volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* cost \$1,395, putting it far out of reach for the vast majority of individuals (BritannicaStore.com, 2010).

Well before the advent of the Internet, one of the most successful strategies for selling encyclopedias was through door-to-door salesmen. While unimaginable in the digital age, encyclopedia publishers found that it often required that intimate level of human interaction to convince customers to make such a substantial book purchase. In *The Great EB: The story of the Encyclopedia Britannica*, Herman Kogan recounts the heyday of the door-to-door encyclopedia salesman:

On any day or night of any week there is an Encyclopedia Britannica salesman sitting or standing in a living room, a kitchen, a study, a den, an office or in some less conventional place, with material from his sales kit spread before him as he "tells the story" to a potential customer. (Kogan, 1958: 299)

Salesmen were trained in the psychology of selling, they had to serve an apprenticeship under an experienced salesman, and they even went so far as to scour newspapers for the names of recent graduates to contact for a potential sale (Kogan, 1958). One evening in 1969, the Wales family of Huntsville, Alabama, was convinced to purchase a set of *World Book Encyclopedias* from one of these door-to-door salesmen (Schiff, 2006). Three years prior to that evening, the Wales family had welcomed a son, Jimmy Wales. Jimmy was educated in the private Montessori-influenced school where his mother taught. During this time Jimmy "spent lots of hours pouring over the *Britannicas* and *World Book Encyclopedias*" (Lamb, 2005). Drawing in part on these early childhood experiences, in 2001 Jimmy Wales helped to found Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia quickly became more radical than anything Charles Van Doren could have dreamed of in 1962.

As of 2011, Wikipedia is the sixth-most-visited US website, falling not far behind giants such as Google and Facebook (Top Sites in the United States, 2011). The scale of Wikipedia is astounding. Its English language version currently has more than 3.6 million articles; worldwide, it has 17 million articles in 270 different languages (Statistics, 2011). As an entity that both creates and disseminates knowledge, Wikipedia has no peer. Its articles frequently appear among the first few links returned by a Google search, so its reach and impact factor are enormous. As an encyclopedia, Wikipedia is certainly radical in that the site is freely accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. What the average Wikipedia user often

does not realize is that the site has been operated as a not-for-profit from the very beginning. The site does not sell any advertising and is not beholden to any outside interests. According to Wales, the goal of Wikipedia is nothing short of creating "a world in which every single person is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge" (Lih, 2009: xv). The radical freedom of Wikipedia extends well beyond free access. The use of its content is governed by both a Creative Commons License and the GNU Free Documentation License, ensuring that all users of Wikipedia can copy, modify, and redistribute anything in Wikipedia that is not otherwise protected. Wikipedia is also radically egalitarian in its approach to the creation of knowledge. All 17 million Wikipedia articles have been created by uncompensated, anonymous users. In stark contrast to the traditional encyclopedia model, Wikipedia does not require that one be a credentialed expert to write on a subject. With a few exceptions, anyone can create a new article or edit an existing one. Of this radical facet of Wikipedia, Wales has said, "To me, the key thing is getting it right. I don't care if they're a high-school kid or a Harvard professor" (Schiff, 2006: 5). In practice, this does not mean Wikipedia is an "anything goes" sort of place. On the contrary, the Discussion Pages that accompany each Wikipedia article often reveal the nitty-gritty details of the process of knowledge creation, detailing, long, impassioned battles over various elements of the article. Over the long term, this radical openness helps to mitigate authorial bias that often plagues single-authored works.

BACKGROUND

The encyclopedic impulse—to collect and codify human knowledge—is nearly as old as writing itself. Wikipedia is the most recent in a long line of attempts to document what we collectively "know." The word *encyclopedia* is derived from

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