

## Wikipedia: Is it the Library of Babel?

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In 1941 Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges wrote “The Library of Babel” about a mythical library that contains every book that was ever written, or that might ever be written, and every possible permutation and erroneous version of every one of these books. Within the endless reaches of the Library, “there is no personal problem, no world problem, whose eloquent solution does not exist—somewhere,” but at the same time, “for every rational line or forthright statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency.” The majority of the books in this library are pure gibberish.

The library represents the universe. Its books are not arranged in any understandable order. The letters on the outside of each book “neither indicate nor prefigure what the pages inside will say.” There is no usable index. The “faithful catalog of the Library” exists within it somewhere, but where, and how can it be distinguished from the “thousands and thousands of false catalogs”? Because of this catastrophic confusion, all the books are totally useless, leaving the librarians in a state of suicidal despair.

Forty years after Borges wrote this parable, one Wade Cunningham and his wife were on their honeymoon trip to Hawaii. Cunningham had to switch airport terminals and asked an agent how to travel to the other terminal. The agent told him to take the wiki wiki. This word so fascinated Cunningham that he asked the agent to repeat it several times. He then learned that “wiki” is the Hawaiian word for “quick,” with “wiki wiki” meaning “super quick.” The airport’s wiki wiki bus was their quick transportation between terminals. Ten years later, Cunningham created a web program on the nascent internet that allowed visitors to edit the very page they were viewing. And he had the perfect word for his new idea (Lih).

In 1995, after an eight-year struggle, Cunningham launched his WikiWiki web creation, a site for programming and software engineers. It had nothing to do with encyclopedias. Rather, visitors could contribute to the site what they knew about computer programming and edit not only their own contributions, but those of others as well. They did not need an account or password, which was unusual. There was no gatekeeper or central editor. Cunningham believed that his concept would work because “people are generally good” (quoted in Lih). Of course it was easy to inspect and undo any edit because every version of every page was saved, providing a complete trail of changes.

While Cunningham was developing his web site in Portland, Oregon, another person addicted to the internet was in Chicago, working at a futures and options trading company. This was Jimmy Wales, who would become the founder (or, according to some, the co-founder) of

Wikipedia. He had accumulated enough capital through financial speculations to become an Internet entrepreneur, so he and two partners created a company called Bomis to develop what Wales described as a “guy oriented search engine” (Lih). He wanted to be the *Playboy* of the Internet, with erotic photographs.

Bomis did not work out, so Wales moved to a new idea: an open source encyclopedia written by expert volunteers. He called it “Nupedia” and hired a philosopher/academician, Larry Sanger, to head it up. As editor-in-chief, Sanger had the only paid position and was given broad authority. It is Sanger whom some consider a co-founder of Wikipedia, along with Wales (Lih).

Sanger began compiling the Nupedia in February of 2000. He emailed his former acquaintances from academia, asking them to write entries voluntarily for the project. He wanted a core of Ph.D.’s, professors and highly experienced professionals to be the contributors and editors. Sanger wrote, “We wish editors to be true experts in their fields and with few exceptions possess a Ph.D.” (Lih)

Sanger established a seven-step process to enforce the standards, managed by elites who demanded high qualifications of the writers and followed a rigorous, fixed editorial procedure. In the first year only about a dozen articles were completed while another one hundred were only in draft stage. At this rate, it would have taken Nupedia over 350,000 years to accumulate the nearly 4.2 million articles the English Wikipedia contains today. Nupedia was stalled at the end of 2000.

By accident Sanger and Wales stumbled on Wade Cunningham’s WikiWikiWeb, a web site that allowed anyone to directly edit any page at any time. They were interested in the possibilities this approach held for their own project, but this opened the door for a culture clash. Sanger’s elite editors thought that a Wiki was too informal and unstructured to create an encyclopedia and did not want to share authorship with the unwashed masses. Therefore, Sanger set up a separate site called Wikipedia as a scratchpad, intended only to provide articles for transfer to Nupedia. Within a month, Wikipedia had over 600 articles; within a year, twenty thousand articles had been posted by over a thousand contributors. Nupedia ended in the dustbin of history (Lih).

If you have read *The Professor and the Madman*, Simon Winchester’s book about the making of the venerable Oxford English Dictionary, you know that there is precedent for using volunteers to produce a scholarly publication. In 1857 the Philological Society in Great Britain sent out an appeal to the English-reading public to read books and make extracts for a dictionary. Volunteer readers, including W. C. Minor, the so-called madman, sent in thousands of slips of paper--each with words and definitions.

Yale professor Yochai Benkler developed a theory of why so many people donated their time, effort and skills to the collective good for no monetary gain. He contended it was the

“socio-psychological” reward of interacting with others and the “hedonistic” personal gratification of the task (Lih). Similarly, thousands have contributed to Wikipedia, even though their efforts are anonymous and unpaid, simply for the pleasure of sharing what they know with others.<sup>i</sup>

Not all of Wikipedia’s contributors write entries. Borges’ fictional library of Babel had a group of “purifiers,” who arbitrarily destroyed books they deemed nonsense. Likewise a group of Wiki purifiers exists. They are called “deletionists” as distinguished from “inclusionists,” and they remove content for a variety of reasons--from "being not notable," to having been allegedly “manipulated by political and business interests.” The deletionists initially argued for a short-lived wikimorgue, called the Deletionpedia, containing articles deleted from the English Wikipedia. The site collected over 63,000 articles during its eight months of existence in 2008 (Wikipedia).

The unofficial motto, “Wiki is not paper,” not only refers to there being no physical or economical limit on the number or the length of articles, but also indicates why Wikipedia’s entries can be instantly updated. When I heard a rumor that Nikon was preparing a replacement for my digital camera, I went to Wikipedia. Unbelievably, it had an entry detailing the specifications of the upgraded camera, even though Nikon had not released any information or even acknowledged its existence. These specifications were later proved correct when Nikon made its announcement. To begin documenting the 2011 Virginia earthquake as history, Wikipedians needed just eight minutes--the elapsed time between the seismic disaster near Mineral, Virginia, and the first bulletin on Wikipedia (Montgomery).

Expanding on the motto “Wiki is not paper,” Wales has said, “Any kind of metaphor around paper or space is dead” (quoted in Lih). The old paper encyclopedia may be dead, too. In 2012 the Encyclopedia Britannica discontinued its print edition after 244 years of publication (Bosman). Acknowledging the realities of the digital age, this most prestigious encyclopedia in the English language now focuses primarily on its online encyclopedia and educational curriculum for schools. The last print version of the 32-volume 2010 edition weighed 129 pounds and cost almost \$1,400. Moreover, it contained little on many topics related to popular culture. For instance, Wikipedia lists every television show that was ever broadcast, each with extensive descriptions, all of which Britannica ignored.

Nor is Britannica’s lack of scope compared to Wikipedia is not just a matter of listing episodes of *M\*A\*S\*H*. As a resident of Clarke County in Virginia, I wondered what other states have a Clarke County. Wikipedia reported that there are Clarke Counties (spelled with a final “e”) in Alabama, Georgia, Iowa, and Mississippi. Then there are 12 other Clark Counties spelled with no final “e.” Australia has a Clarke County in New South Wales. The navy had a tank landing ship called USS Clarke County until the 1960’s. And you learn all that before going to the Clarke County disambiguation page.<sup>ii</sup> Try discovering this trivia in the Encyclopedia Britannica.

But, some may ask, is Wikipedia as reliable and authoritative as the old Britannica? Academia sometimes treats Wikipedia as if it were the Library of Babel. My granddaughter says that she could not use Wikipedia citations in high school or college papers. Speaking about itself, Wikipedia says it "...is increasingly used by people in the academic community, from freshman students to professors, as an easily accessible tertiary source for information about anything and everything. However, citation of Wikipedia in research papers may be considered unacceptable, because Wikipedia is not considered a credible or authoritative source."

If you enter the words "Wikipedia reliability" in Google, the search engine finds over 29,000 articles on the subject. A typical one is titled "Epistemology and Wikipedia." It says, among other nasty things, that "the mechanism underlying the Wikipedia, in and of itself, has no intrinsic reliability. [...] If an entry is written by clueless rubes or hacked out by partisans, then it probably has things wrong' (Magnus).

Over the years Wikipedia has established numerous guidelines and policies that have addressed earlier concerns about the web site. For instance, the Verifiability Policy states: "Other people have to be able to check that you didn't just make things up. This means that all quotations and any material challenged or likely to be challenged must be attributed to a reliable, published source using an inline citation." There follows a multi-page section outlining an appropriate inline citation.

Whatever academia may think, ordinary users increasingly rely on Wikipedia. At the seventh annual Wikimania conference in 2011 at Haifa, Israel, the website's contributors and supporters heard a French journalist say, "Making fun of Wikipedia is so 2007." The consensus was that the once routine questioning about its reliability is passé, demonstrated by the fact that some 470 million people worldwide use the site monthly. It is the 5<sup>th</sup> most popular web site in the world, with the English edition one of the 285 different Wikipedias.

But there was a new complaint at the Israel conference, accusing Wikipedia of possessing the same Western mindset that lies behind printed encyclopedias (Huffington Post). These critics believe that Wikipedia's insistence on footnotes and sourced articles needs to be modified if it wants to gather converts in the global community. The Haifa gathering viewed a film, paid for by the Wikimedia Foundation,<sup>iii</sup> that depicted what can be lost by enforcing the rules of citation and verification. The film argued that if Wikipedia claims to report the sum of human knowledge, it must include more than printed knowledge.

For instance, a Wikipedia article in Malayalam, one of the regional languages of India, described a traditional children's game, including photos and a detailed account of the rules, but cited no written sources--no written source exists. The article would have been deleted in the English Wikipedia for lack of sources.

These critics want a more generous and expansive citation policy so that articles can be written on cultures that have little or no written language. However, one of Wikipedia's guidelines says it will not engage in original research, so the outcome of this debate is pending. The ban on original research is one of the three absolute core policies among the 28 official policies editors follow, alongside maintaining a neutral point of view and verifiability.

Wikipedia seeks to embrace nothing less than the whole world, bringing to mind another literary analogue. Near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Lewis Carroll wrote about an ultimate map that was a precursor to Borges' Library of Babel. It was drawn on a one-to-one scale—one mile on the map represented one mile on the ground. Carroll wrote, "It has never been spread out yet. The farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight" (Carroll). If you wanted to apply Lewis Carroll's idea to Wikipedia, how many bits of information would it require to capture the entire universe? An MIT quantum engineer, Seth Lloyd, computed that, considering "every degree of freedom of every particle in the universe," it would be 10 to the 90<sup>th</sup> bits, or a novemvigintillion, a number that is twice the volume of the universe in cubic millimeters (Lloyd).

Maybe Wales wanted Wikipedia to mirror the universe. He has said that if Wikipedia could be freed of practical concerns, he would be happy to see a biography of every human on the planet on Wikipedia (Lih).

Does humanity really need a reference work as comprehensive as the world itself? We are drowning in a tsunami of facts, a phenomenon that has such labels as "information overload," "information glut," "information anxiety," and "information fatigue." T.S. Eliot wrote about the gap between information and knowledge in 1934:

Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;  
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.  
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,  
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,  
But nearness to death no nearer to GOD.

Psychologists and sociologists speak of the "information-load paradigm." People can only absorb a limited amount of information, and excessive information causes confusion and frustration. The various strategies designed to cope with information overload boil down to two: filter and search.

I once took my son to the Library of Congress to obtain information on a Confederate belt buckle he had found in a neighborhood field. Even with the card catalogue, we were

overwhelmed by the surfeit of books on Civil War relics. It took nearly all day to find a relevant citation. We needed better filter and search tools.

Filter and search tools allow both Wikipedia and Google to escape the bottomless abyss of Babel. Of course, filter and search are not new concepts to the digital age. Computers have just improved on print's alphabetical indexes, library shelving schemes, and card catalogues, along with anthologies, digests, and books of quotations. Instead of contributing to information overload, the Internet helps us cope with it.

So is Wikipedia the Library of Babel? I respond with a "no." It's fun to make intellectual analogies, but the facts as described here lead me to believe that Wikipedia is a valuable resource that left the Encyclopedia Britannica in its dust. Borges died in 1986, before Wikipedia entered the world. If he were alive today, he might agree that the technical advances of the computer age empower Wikipedia to overcome the limitations of print, liberating the world from the scourge of Babel's nightmare.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> As Wikipedia went international, language debates arose between the British and American versions. A compromise was reached to use British spellings and terms for topics that were primarily British, American spelling and terms for topics primarily American. But problems still came up. America wanted to identify a popular snack food as "the potato chip" while Britain insisted on "the potato crisp." The solution was this entry: "A potato chip or crisp is a thin slice of potato..." But when it came to whether the chips were "flavored" or "flavoured," an edit war ensued. The solution? "Flavored" was changed to "seasoned."

<sup>ii</sup> The Wikipedia term "disambiguation" may sound "Babelish," but it simply means the process of resolving the conflicts that arise when a single term is ambiguous--when it refers to more than one topic covered by Wikipedia articles. For example, besides beer being an alcoholic beverage, it is a coastal town in Devon, England; it is a lunar crater named for Wilhelm Beer; it is a 1999 novel by Chris Walter, and Wikipedia has biographies of 26 people with Beer in their name.

<sup>iii</sup> In mid-2003 Wales set up the Wikimedia Foundation, a non-profit organization. All intellectual property rights and domain names were moved to the new foundation, with the purpose of establishing general policies for the encyclopedia. His work for the foundation has always been unpaid, and while the other top ten web sites have thousands of employees, Wikipedia has 165 employees. Wikipedia asks for donations similar to the way public radio and

television raise funds. In addition they obtain grants and in-kind gifts. Their 2012-2013 budget calls for revenue of \$46.1 million, a 32% increase over the previous year (Wikipedia).

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\*Biographical Notes

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After graduating from Northwestern University with a degree in radio, TV and film, John Lewis joined his family radio business. The company initially operated radio stations in three states and then expanded into TV cable operations, constructing and operating systems in twelve Virginia municipalities. He was a founding member of the Virginia Cable Television Association, served as a director of the Association for 20 years, and was president for three terms.

Since retiring in 2008, he has continued an avid interest in photography, participating in several shows, winning several awards and publishing two books of his images. He serves on numerous community organization boards as a member or officer. He and his wife, Marjorie, have two children and three grandchildren.

A charter member of the Winchester Torch Club, he has presented Torch papers on a variety of topics including extrasensory perception, the anthropic cosmological principle, year-round schooling, Mount Kilimanjaro, chaos theory, the definition of God and Richard Byrd's North Pole flight.

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