Sum of all knowledge: Wikipedia and the encyclopedic urge

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Publication date
2012

Citation for published version (APA):
Salor, F. E. (2012). *Sum of all knowledge: Wikipedia and the encyclopedic urge*.

Introduction

On January 15th 2011 *Wikipedia*, the online encyclopedia that anyone can edit, celebrated its 10th anniversary. The following year, in March 2012, the publishers of the world's oldest encyclopedia in continuous publication, the *Encyclopeadia Britannica*, announced that no new printings of the venerable encyclopedia will be made, marking the end of a print run that lasted more than two hundred and forty years. Since the turn of the century, the proliferation of the World Wide Web heralded an increasing number of similar disruptions. From the established models of producing and distributing recorded culture to interpersonal communications and the definition of the self, all aspects of society and culture is in a state of transition.

While many bourgeoning disciplines have emerged in academic community to better the understanding of these macro and micro transformations, the cutting edge of academic inquiry often overlooks history and it is all to common for non-academic commentators to get lost in hyperbole and speculation. *Wikipedia*, partly due to its success and reach and partly due to its somehow arcane aspects, has been a very popular subject for both academic and non-academic inquiries since its inception. However, it is troubling to observe many, otherwise insightful, studies on *Wikipedia* to compare the online encyclopedia to the venerable *Britannica* and go on to argue for perceived differences between these two very popular works. While *Britannica*, and the modern encyclopedia set it exemplified, was instrumental in defining the very notion of what an encyclopedia should be for multiple generations, its long history is but a phase in the overall development of the encyclopedic ideal. The urge to create encyclopedias is as old as the recorded history and there is no question that we are living through a pivotal era of disruption concerning the manifestation of this urge. With the present study, I hope to advance the understanding of the nature of this disruption through a multifaceted approach to the history of encyclopedias and *Wikipedia*. Consequently, the principle motivation for this study is to bridge the gap between the historical study of the encyclopedic form and the cutting edge research focused on *Wikipedia*.

To achieve this goal, I start by presenting the history of the encyclopedia in chapter one, *Defining the Encyclopedia*. Starting with Plato's *Academy*, this chapter follows the evolution of encyclopedias through Antiquity to Middle Ages and into modern times. While recounting the highlights of this history, I also analyze the influence of the changing media landscape. Initially starting with papyrus scrolls, examples of encyclopedic works can be found in every form of written communication, and the interaction between the inherent properties of these media and the shifting forms of encyclopedias is a continuing theme of this study. While stemming from the same basic ideal, this chapter highlights shifting perspectives and priorities throughout the ages that shape different encyclopedias and in conclusion identify three key concepts that constitute the core of this thesis. These are knowledge, authorship, and implicitly, authority and organizational principles that govern content and form.

The thread I have followed in this chapter follows the trajectory of the western encyclopedic tradition. Since the founders of the *Wikipedia* project and its community identify themselves to be a part of the encyclopedic tradition as it has emerged and developed in Western Europe, I have chosen to follow their self-identified points of departure in my analysis as well. However, in the sense that compiling, organizing and passing down of knowledge, encyclopedic urge is arguably part of our very nature as humans and throughout history many different forms of encyclopedias have emerged from different cultures, both oral and literate. While there is certainly a great potential for further studies taking these histories into account, the present thesis will be limited in its historical approach only towards the encyclopedic lineage that grew from Plato and Aristotle. Additionally, current historical evidence suggests that the development of distinct encyclopedic traditions across the globe were mostly isolated cases. However, it should be noted that the global impact of *Wikipedia*, which is available in more than 250 languages, creates ample opportunities to further investigate the interaction between the principles, and heritage, of the online encyclopedia and any other local traditions.

After presenting the evolution of the encyclopedic form from Antiquity and through centuries, the first chapter will conclude at the beginning of the 20th century, identifying the era as the point where the modern encyclopedia reaches maturity. The theme of the second

chapter, *Imagining and Building a new Encyclopedia*, is to chronicle various efforts to transcend the limitations of print. I will take a two-pronged approach in my analysis during this section; on the one hand presenting the works of visionaries from a diversity of fields that imagined a better encyclopedia while on the other hand chronicling the birth of personal computers, the Internet and emergence of online collaborative communities. Throughout 20th century bibliographers like Otlet, literary pioneers like Borges and science fiction authors like Wells, Asimov and Adams all thought about ways to free encyclopedias from the limitations imposed by bound books and paper. Their intellectual struggle constitute an important, albeit an indirect, component in the foundations of *Wikipedia* and along with the emergence of the very tools that these authors converged upon in their imaginings, constitute the legacy of the 20th century in the encyclopedic tradition. While discussing these contributions, I will also note the importance of the vibrant free and open source software communities that emerged through the World Wide Web and whose community values and practices constituted a very important guideline for *Wikipedia*.

Following this sweeping, yet increasingly granular, overview of the evolution of encyclopedic form, chapter three, *Introducing Wikipedia,* focuses solely on examining the online encyclopedia. I start by describing the fundamental components that *Wikipedia* is built upon and chart the growth of the project. I then present an overview of the fundamental policies and guidelines that govern the workings of the encyclopedia, followed by a discussion concerning the community of editors and contributors that arguably define *Wikipedia* more than any other single component. The growing body of cutting-edge research targeting various aspects of *Wikipedia* and its community of editors provide ample data and insight into the complicated dynamic of the *Wikipedia* community. Overall, this chapter presents *Wikipedia* and situates it as a product of the trends that have started their development during the 20th century.

Chapter four, *Positioning Wikipedia*, builds on the findings of the preceding chapters and presents the main analysis, and conclusions, of this thesis. Organized around the three concepts of knowledge, authorship and organization, I take a three-step approach to each of these concepts in order to highlight novelties and continuities represented by *Wikipedia*. For each of the three concepts, I start by presenting a brief overview of the

evolution of the concept through a multidisciplinary perspective. While taking into account the evolving understanding of the concept in question, I provide a theoretical framework with which to analyze my findings in earlier chapters. The next part of the analysis highlights the historical survey I have presented through the lens of the concept in question. I demonstrate how knowledge, authorship and organization have evolved through the history of encyclopedias and identify enduring trends over centuries. In the third, and last, part of each component, I apply the same conceptual lens towards *Wikipedia* and compare and contrast these findings with the previous, historical, part of the analysis.

In a sense, the template of this thesis came to resemble the cyclical nature of its subject matter. My initial goal of better understanding *Wikipedia* led me to investigate the breadth of the encyclopedic tradition through which I have identified the central concepts of this thesis. After completing my historical overview, I return to these concepts to reread the history and *Wikipedia* together to identify continuities and to better recognize novelty. Taken as a whole, this study is a combination of the historical and the analytical and one leads to, and breeds, the other. Therefore, the study presented in the following chapters will not be a demonstration of a strict set of predefined analytical tools. Instead, I aimed to present an eclectic selection of theories and approaches that proved most useful in understanding the particular period or issue at hand.

During my research, as neither a historian nor a philosopher by training, I found myself sympathizing with the Sisyphean struggle of countless compilers whose dilemmas and compromises I chronicled throughout this study. Just as the story of encyclopedia making is a tale of choices in the face of various limitations, this analysis is just as defined by what it is not as what it aspires to be. I was constantly aware of the myriad ways this long history can be approached, however I settled on the fairly linear outline that constitutes this thesis for a number of reasons. Mainly, I wanted this research to highlight the endurance of the basic encyclopedic ideal that persisted through our entire recorded history. Also, a linear and arguably straightforward approach might prove to be the most fertile ground for many tangential approaches to the topic later, a great number of which I myself could imagine going on to conduct.

This study is about novelty and continuity. It demonstrates how *Wikipedia* redefines encyclopedic knowledge, on whose authority and authorship it is recorded and according to which organizational principles. But, and perhaps most importantly, it also situates *Wikipedia* among the countless works throughout the entirety of human history that have resulted from our common urge to collect, compile and organize knowledge. As Umberto Eco remarks, encyclopedias are one of our species' attempts to grasp infinity and with this study I hope to unite *Wikipedia* with its ancestors and demonstrate why it is special.