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Sum of all knowledge: Wikipedia and the encyclopedic urge

Salor, F.E.

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Summary

In March 2012, one year after the 10th anniversary of *Wikipedia*, the free, online encyclopedia that anyone can edit, the editors of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* announced that no more print editions of the venerable encyclopedia will be made, marking the end of a print run that span more than two hundred and forty years. Building on this period of disruption of the encyclopedic form, this study offers an understanding of *Wikipedia* distilled through the heritage of Western Encyclopedic tradition.

Throughout its ten years of existence, *Wikipedia* has been a popular subject of analysis and commentary. It has been hailed as both a revolution and the end of civilization as we know it. With the initial motivation of countering hyperbole and prejudice, this study is about both novelty and continuity. I demonstrate how Wikipedia redefines encyclopedic knowledge, on whose authority and authorship it is recorded and according to which organizational principles. But, and perhaps most importantly, this study 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. With this study I hope to unite Wikipedia with its ancestors and demonstrate what makes it special.

Starting with Plato's *Academy* and Aristotle's *Categories*, I trace the evolution of the encyclopedic ideal through the scriptoria of Middle Ages and the print shops of the enlightenment, culminating in the modern encyclopedia set of the late 19th century. Based on this historical analysis, I identify three core concepts that have shaped the encyclopedic form through their interaction with evolving media of communication. These are, knowledge, authorship and organization.

Continuing this historical survey with an investigation of the 20th century, I start by identifying the maturation of the modern encyclopedia and discuss various attempts to re-imagine the encyclopedic form by both visionary authors and engineering pioneers. Works of prominent science fiction authors, as well as computing pioneers are reviewed, highlighting the common theme of surpassing the limitations imposed by the printed page. These efforts are culminated in the personal computer, capable of connecting to the rest of

the world through the Internet and the burgeoning communities of online collaboration they fostered. While the course of the 20th century, and the events I depict in this chapter did not result a dramatic shift in the widespread definition of the encyclopedia, this study identifies them as crucial in the technical feasibility and ideological outlook of *Wikipedia*.

In the following chapters, I explore the history, working principles and community of *Wikipedia*, identifying it as a native form of its medium. An enterprise that can only exist as a result of the technical and social foundations laid during the 20th century. The final chapter reviews these findings through the lens of the individual concepts, leading to the overall conclusion of this study.

After reviewing more than two millennia of history and witnessing the process through which its technical and theoretical foundations were set up over a century, I conclude by identifying the novelties and the continuities of *Wikipedia* as parts of a whole. In its breakthrough approach to knowledge, authorship and organization, *Wikipedia* might be perceived as anathema to all the values traditional encyclopedias seem to embody. However, as a result of this study, in all its revolutionary aspects, Wikipedia emerges as yet another step in achieving the impossible goal of the original encyclopedic ideal. The most novel aspects of Wikipedia constitute, in essence, the strongest embodiment of its heritage.