The Great Wikipedia Debate: Should Anyone be Allowed to Contribute?

Introduction

A universal, complete, and accessible container for all human knowledge – a way to house the entirety of humanity's learned efforts, as well as historical triumphs, achievements, and catastrophes – a place to contribute a piece of raw information that, when indexed within the expanding pool of overlapping datum, a greater truth may be revealed... since the dawn of intelligent thought, this is the mechanism that mankind has strived to develop.

Clearly, a barrier that past cultures struggled to overcome during their efforts to create such a magnificent receptacle of knowledge and human experience, was the limitations of, and access to, technology. The birth of language, followed by the written word, gave a reasonable method for the inscription of information. Yet findability maintained its stance as a sizable difficulty. Even as publications became thoroughly indexed, their contents hardly overlapped in any findable manner, making for a quick flow of non-linear information a near impossibility. For construction of mankind's knowledge container to become a feasibility, the printed word was in drastic need of technological innovation.

Technology, as should be no surprise, grows in forms dictated by the needs of its innovators. Thus, technology often flourishes along side the desire to create. There is, however, an
accidental emergence of technology... or rather, an adaption of a previously established technology. This exists when a mechanism constructed for one purpose fits nicely as a solution to that of another. The genesis of hypertext is a significant example of such a technological evolution. Hypertext, a form of digital (not printed) text that allows for the inclusion of a hyperlink, a part of the document that links it to another digital document, is a technology that has spawned an overabundance of accidental, or adapted, uses. Currently however, it is the intent of humankind to use hypertext as the vessel by which the all-encompassing, indexed, and accessible knowledge container can be constructed. And by this, of course, I am referring to Wikipedia, "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit (Wikipedia, Main Page)."

Conceivably, a non-linear, hyperlinked, encyclopedic mechanism that anyone can, and is encouraged to contribute to, as is found in the internal workings of Wikipedia, is the answer to this of mankind's most persistent desires. But, as the prophetic adage reads, "With great power comes great responsibility (Wikiquote, Stan Lee)." Those who have the power to create, instinctually have entrusted unto them the power also to destroy. And so, from the ashes of an idyllic solution to an unrelenting problem, a burdening conflict is born: Is humankind mature enough to handle the responsibility that is inherently infused within the vast process of accumulating, organizing, and bestowing all knowledge unto itself? Can we trust ourselves to contribute valuable, unbiased, and accurate information to the human knowledge database? Given the proven range of morality that exists amidst members of our species, is it reasonable to give anyone with a command of the language authoritative rights to all of humanity's information? In short, should anyone and everyone be allowed to contribute to Wikipedia?
Wikipedia?

Briefly, Wikipedia is a stunning exemplification of the inherent potential found within the domain of collaborative authoring, "where written works are created by multiple people together (collaboratively) rather than individually (Wikipedia, Collaborative Writing)." Wikipedia, for all intensive purposes, is simply an online encyclopedia. This, in and of itself, is profoundly unremarkable. It is, however, the technique by which Wikipedia acquires its contained knowledge that is deserving of substantial discussion. From its own article:

"Wikipedia uses a type of software called a 'wiki', allowing visitors to add, remove, or otherwise edit and change its content. It therefore is possible for large numbers of people to create articles and update them quickly as new information becomes available; it also means vandalism and disagreement about content are common (Wikipedia, Wikipedia)."

Drawing from an inclusive community of contributors who are encouraged to take part in this free encyclopedia project by contributing articles, editing existing articles, and preserving quality by reporting and editing malicious entries, Wikipedia houses a comprehensive array of content and information that reflects the openness of its own policy.

It is important to note that Wikipedia is not a revenue-generating enterprise. Its goal set is not built upon a foundation of advertising or sponsorship. Wikipedia, without pretense, is what it sets out to be: an open and free encyclopedia. It strives to hold true to its policy of a neutral point of view while its articles attempt to maintain a stance of absolute non-bias. Wikipedia is not the place for an editorial piece. No, it is a container of factual knowledge, not opinion.

This is what Wikipedia ventures to achieve: an open, unbiased, and accessible container of knowledge. Given, however, that the community of contributors is unregulated and unrestrained, how does Wikipedia maintain quality, accuracy, and impartiality? A team of volunteers, similar to
the volunteers that contribute articles and information, monitor new entries as they come in. If an entry is deemed inaccurate or possesses questionable intentions, they deal with it accordingly. Oftentimes, that includes reverting to a prior iteration of the article in question.

Wikipedia is used in a similar manner as to the way one might use any reference tool. It is a holder of information, like an encyclopedia, and its credentials should be evaluated as such. Of course, its reputation and reliability is in question because of its open authoring and editing policies (which we will discuss at length elsewhere in this document). Despite this question of accuracy, Wikipedia has acquired impressive grounds over the relatively short course of its lifetime. What is most notable though, is how Wikipedia stacks up against some of its online rivals who, for the most part, have been around the block more than a few times:

"More than a million people a day visit the Wikipedia site. The Alexa traffic rankings put it at number 18, well above the New York Times (50), the Library of Congress (1,175), and the venerable Encyclopedia Britannica (2,952) (Rosenzweig)."

In certain situations, Wikipedia has become the obvious source for encyclopedic information in the same way that our society has come to "Google" for an item instead of search for it.

The rationale for Wikipedia's success is difficult to pin down. Perhaps more importantly, it is the popularity of the reference tool that should call for further inquiry. Presumably, Wikipedia's openness and general position of anti-elitism is enough to encourage the public to donate information and trust the data that they extract in return. And thus, empowering the global information community to rebel "against traditional encyclopedias that are compiled by an exclusive group of experts, this web site has put the power of knowledge into the hands of the general public (Lipczynska)."
The Inherent Problems of the Wiki Model

Wikipedia is, of course, not without its fair share of skeptics and nay-sayers. With the popularity of any such project where innovation abounds and there is a call for a drastic change of a traditional approach, there will be an abundance of resistance. It is the case that in said "traditional reference forms," authorities of a certain topic write about their topic. And clearly, there is no harm in that. These authorities, who have been trained professionally, are more than qualified to write about the subject at hand. But now, with the introduction of Wikipedia, the stature of authority is no longer a requisite for writing. And, is this okay? Should the everyday member of society, without extensive knowledge of a subject, be allowed to write about that subject? These are the questions that mar the reputability of Wikipedia.

Vandalism

So then, is it okay to allow anyone to contribute to Wikipedia? Simply put, the argument states that, "If anyone can edit my text, then anyone can ruin my text (Skiba)." And thus, the question becomes, will they?

Sadly, the short answer is, yes:

"Latimes.com posted the paper's Friday, June 17 editorial "War and Consequences" as a wiki, a form that allowed readers to edit or alter any part of the piece. The Times' trailblazing "wikitorial" drew lively contributions from readers across the political spectrum. But the trial came to a crashing halt in the wee hours of Sunday morning, after a handful of site visitors added pornographic images and other inappropriate material to the piece, prompting latimes.com to remove the wiki (Dorroh)."

In this scenario, Latimes.com fell victim to a most unfortunate, but unavoidable artifact of wiki culture: vandalism.

It is not that every contributing member of wikis or Wikipedia is out to make a deliberate
mess. Far from it! In fact, it is a small minority that actually acts deliberately to vandalize an article.

The unfortunate reality is that without a mechanism to watch for deliberate vandalism, the wiki structure falls to pieces. Thankfully, Wikipedia has such mechanisms in place. Teams of vigilant volunteers watch for malicious vandalism and correct the belligerent defacement of articles.

However, the sheer quantity of articles make the vigilant volunteer approach somewhat arduous. Mr. John Seigenthaler, former editor of The Tennessean in Nashville, TN, had the following to learn when he read about himself in an article on Wikipedia:

"Mr. Seigenthaler recently read about himself on Wikipedia and was shocked to learn that he 'was thought to have been directly involved in the Kennedy assassinations of both John and his brother Bobby.' 'Nothing was ever proven,' the biography added (Seelye)."

Of course, this was news to Mr. Seigenthaler, who was surprised to learn that he had anything to do with the Kennedy assassinations.

A flagrant and deliberate attack like this one is not uncommon in such arenas like Wikipedia. What is uncommon, however, is the several months that passed before this error was recognized and corrected. "The real problem," according to Jimmy Wales, collaborator on the original Wikipedia project, "was the volume of new material coming in; it is so overwhelming that screeners cannot keep up with it (Seelye)."

The impetus for such vandalism and defamation on Wikipedia is twofold. On perhaps the more glamorous side of the rationale for defacement can be found what is known as the personal vendetta. With a simple edit, a Wikipedia contributor can mar a topic (oftentimes a person, as was the case in the Seigenthaler incident) that will be seen by countless numbers of viewers before it is discovered and corrected. This is a relatively effortless way to defame an individual. The damage done varies, but is nonetheless, disastrous.
The second, and perhaps the more juvenile of the reasons for Wikipedia vandalism, is illustrated perfectly in the Latimes.com "wikitorial" incident. Barb Palser, who wrote on this and other similar happenings, explains that "The topic of the editorial didn't matter; the lure was the chance to deface a famous newspaper with millions of viewers (Palser)."

Vandalism is the first strike against Wikipedia's openness of inclusion policy. It has been proven, here and elsewhere, that a vocal minority of people with the privilege of access will, by nature, do harm... especially considering the fostering level of ease that Wikipedia allows for and doubly so when one has the ability to maintain their anonymity. And now, as we look back to our original inquiry, "should anyone be allowed to contribute to Wikipedia?" we have a portrait of the Wikipedia vandal who, without question, is a cavity in Wikipedia's otherwise gleaming smile, giving the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit, an annoying toothache.

Accuracy

But the question still stands, "should anyone be allowed to contribute to Wikipedia?"

Perhaps vandals should be excluded, but what about those who, intentionally or not, circulate inaccuracies disguised as credible information?

The reader/writer/editor mechanism established by collaborative authoring environments, such as Wikipedia, is one of substantial debate. Because the information within any given article is subject to change, and oftentimes does so frequently, a reader may find themselves questioning the credibility of this version of edits. Robert McHenry analogizes this situation accurately, albeit a bit tastelessly, in his writings about Wikipedia:

"The user who visits Wikipedia to learn about some subject, to confirm some matter of fact, is rather in the position of a visitor to a public restroom. It may be obviously
dirty, so that he knows to exercise great care, or it may seem fairly clean, so that he may be lulled into a false sense of security. What he certainly does not know is who has used the facilities before him (McHenry).

If the accuracy is in question because of the unknown source of the article or edit, then is this an argument for only credible authorities to be allowed to contribute? Interestingly, the answer is a somewhat sheepish, no.

Despite the question of the credentials of an author, and in turn, that author's ability to maintain accuracy amidst their writing, Wikipedia articles, for the most part, maintain high levels of accuracy. The scientific journal, Nature, took it upon themselves to measure the accuracy of Wikipedia versus that of "the world's oldest encyclopedia, the 'Encyclopedia Britannica.'"

"Nature's news team took 50 articles from each resource - on topics as diverse as the Archimedes Principle, the kinetic isotope effect and Pythagorus' Theorem - and asked experts to vet them, without revealing their source (Grose)."

Their findings where encouraging:

"Nature's study last December determined that 'the difference in accuracy (between the two encyclopedias) was not particularly great' and that major errors in Wikipedia, like the Seigenthaler debacle, were rare (Grose)."

It seems then, that the self-policing structure of Wikipedia is working in accordance with its original intents. (It is necessary, however, to point out that the findings of this study do not state that Wikipedia is without inaccuracies. It is simply that Wikipedia's accuracy is on par with other, more traditionally reputable sources, such as the Encyclopedia Britannica.)

**Popularity**

A prominent danger inherently found in letting the masses populate an encyclopedia with articles, is that certain subjects will invariably be given more attention based on their status in popular culture. This is further compounded by the purported notion that geek culture (sci-fi,
fantasy, tv, films, games, etc...) proliferates within Wikipedia and that "This is the encyclopedia that Slashdot built (Rosenzweig)."

Undeniably, geek culture is such that its fans are... well, fanatical about their particular niche of fiction. While there is no argument that Wikipedia should eliminate such fan-fueled entries, it has been said that certain other topics (ones that originate in this sphere of reality) deserve more attention. Xed, founder of Wikiproject: Countering Systemic Bias, remarks:

"It seems that the predilection of its users for sci-fi and fantasy was being indulged at the expense of more serious topics: 'I made the point at the time that there was more information on Middle Earth than Central Africa (Shariatmadari).""

This is not to say that a detailed account of Middle Earth is without merit. No, and far from it! It is simply that other, less popular subjects deserve just as much attention.

The difficulty is that not many contributors are motivated to write extensively about a presumably dry subject, such as Central Africa, that they may not feel particularly moved by. In a reference device like the Encyclopedia Britannica, topics are covered on a more uniform scale simply because their authors are getting paid to write about those specific, and sometimes dry, subjects. Wikipedia is supported wholly by volunteer contributors who are motivated to write articles regarding what they feel passionately about (which in this case, happens to be Middle Earth), as opposed to paid authors whose motivation comes in the form of a paycheck.

Should fan-based articles be prevented from proliferating in the Wikipedia space? Should their authors be curbed? Well, I would like to venture that the answer should be (if it is not already), no. The authors of these articles are not breaking any Wikipedia statute, nor are their articles in the way of "more worthy" articles (in the sense that some articles are difficult to avoid, like a stack of books blocking the one you are looking for). Wikipedia is the people's encyclopedia
and it is a direct reflection of the peoples interests. As David Shariatmadari describes it:

"Wikipedia is a creature of the demographic that views and contributes to it: it mirrors their interests exactly. So if we have very little information on Yi [the mother tongue of 6 million people in China], that's because there's no demand for it (Shariatmadari)."

This is not to say, however, that an unpopular topic goes through eternity, with an inadequate article. Zyxoas, a South African Wikipedian provides a spark of hope:

"Sesotho is a language spoken by some four million people in two countries. When I found the article a couple of years ago it was a two paragraph stub. I thought 'Hey! That sucks!' and I dumped a whole bunch of linguistic info in there (Shariatmadari)."

Of course, it is the nature of Wikipedia culture for its contributors to write about what they know, what moves them, or what they feel strongly about. Fan-fueled articles will continue to thrive on Wikipedia, but that is no reason for other topics to suffer. The genius of this mechanism is that it is open to the global community, without any trace of restraint (unless the author has proven themselves to harbor malicious intents). Every topic has its Zyxoas and when the fingers of Wikipedia are outstretched far enough, the Zyxoas of all of existence's obscurities will be awaiting their call to occupy their particular space in the void.

**Benefits of an Open Structure**

Despite the notorious difficulties that Wikipedia struggles with constantly (vandalism, inaccuracies, popularity of fan-fueled entries, etc...) brought forth by its allowance of a total inclusion of contributors, the free encyclopedia enjoys immense benefits from not only allowing, but encouraging anyone to contribute to its cumulative knowledge. It is this openness that defines Wikipedia and enables it to be the residence of an expansive breadth of information. At the time of
this writing (November 21, 2006. 2 p.m. EST), the current cropping of articles within the pages of Wikipedia clocks in at a whopping 1,495,288 (Wikipedia, Statistics). That is, at the very least, pretty darn impressive. And what is more, is that the figure is constantly growing. It is difficult to know, however, what this figure would be without Wikipedia's initial acceptance of all articles. Nevertheless, Wikipedia has developed an atmosphere conducive to contribution, and for this they should be commended.

Up-To-Dateness

Wikipedia's open structure allows for its articles to stay current. This reaches to the extent of an up-to-the-hour level of contribution. Concerning a grim topic, but poignant in this context, "Wikipedians like to point out that after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 they added relevant entries within hours (Rosenzweig)." This level of instantaneous revision is an impressive feature of the free encyclopedia. Wikipedia's open contribution policy made it possible for edits to occur as they were unfolding during the tsunami disaster. A closed system of contribution would, presumably, add huge amounts of time to the process of documenting developing events. Wikipedia encourages this up-to-the-minute style of reporting by allowing and encouraging anyone to contribute. The journalistic power of this process is immeasurable.

Educational Benefits

Much has been written questioning the educational benefits of Wikipedia. Is this mechanism a valuable tool for educational means? Can and should Wikipedia be used to better the intellects of those who consume it? The answer is somewhat cryptic, but I would wager that it falls
well within the boundaries of, yes.

The educational process is, as we have all no doubt experienced, a two-way street. There are those who take on the role of educators, and those who play the part of students. Interestingly, Wikipedia is in odd educational territory because of its bidirectional position. A contributor (reader and writer), is encouraged to take on both roles of the educational thoroughfare. In fact, "reader/responder and author/writer often merge, voices collapse and multiply, often belonging to no single source - or even to a person (Miller)."

Wikipedia has consistently been characterized as a read/write mechanism. The line that divides reader and writer is becoming more and more blurred as time passes, and thus, that line that separates teachers from students is becoming equally as blurry.

It is arguable that a blurring of teacher/student roles can be a frightening proposition (especially from that of an instructional position). But from more of a comprehensively educational standpoint, the merits of a dual-roped contributor are remarkably beneficial to the quality of the information database. What a reader (not a contributor) often forgets is that this information belongs as much to him as it does to anyone. Initially, this is a complicated concept to accept, and its ramifications can be daunting. Mike, from the tech blog, Techdirt, expounds upon the benefits of the dual-role, read/write, teacher/student concept:

"There's just something that seems to freak people out about Wikipedia, when they can't fathom the idea that 'the masses' could produce something of value by simply being able to correct one another, allowing them to build something much more beneficial and much more useful than an expensive encyclopedia edited by just a few people (Lipczynska)."

Yet, it is not simply the act of building something useful, it is the act of contributing to a global pool of knowledge.
APWoolrich, a British Wikipedia contributor, is as "enthusiastic about contributing to the education of others as to his own." Wikipedia, he states, "accords with my personal philosophy of sharing knowledge, and it links me with the rest of humanity (Rosenzweig)." His attitudes are not exclusive to his own perspective, as this is a common outlook among contributors and Wikipedians alike. Human knowledge, historical or otherwise, does not belong to the individual who possesses it. This knowledge belongs to the global community. The Wikipedia mechanism is built around this concept: the sharing and accessibility of all knowledge. As contributor, APWoolrich is a teacher and, simultaneously, a student of global knowledge. Closing the doors of contribution, and locking potential contributors out of this read/write, teach/learn device, hides aspects of this intelligent species' knowledge from the totality of the grand knowledge container.

Community of Knowledge

In contemporary society, community is no longer restrained by the bounds of physical proximity. Social software is the apparatus by which community can be established in the virtual sense. Wikipedia is an impressive example of social software's ability to connect and build communities not hindered by location. This community, the Wikipedia community, is of course built around the concept of shared knowledge through the conduit of open contribution. "Social software connects people together intellectually and makes it possible to share and evolve ideas (Skiba)." As contributors continue to sculpt the knowledge currently available, and as they constantly add to the expanding knowledge-base, the social software network grows and evolves through open collaboration.

Contributing to the Wikipedia social software network is of immense benefit to all of its
members. Because of the nature of social software, Wikipedia contributors are connected to one another by their contributions and by the information that they donate. Interestingly, it is the shared knowledge that works to bind humanity inside and out of this virtual space. Wikipedia is responsible for providing the vehicle for this connection to take place on a global, yet virtual scale, in that this mechanism disregards physical location through use of social software techniques.

**The Answer?**

And now, here we are. And the question still remains: Should anyone and everyone be allowed to contribute to Wikipedia?

We have discussed the inherent dangers of allowing anyone to contribute to this free and open encyclopedia. We have remarked upon vandals who simply want to see their destruction on a grand scale, and we have watched as the machine quietly deals with these delinquents. We have understood the difficulties of maintaining a reliable level of accuracy. Yet, we have also seen the effects of a self-policing community that works tirelessly to eradicate such inaccuracies and to wipe clean the flagrant vandalism. We have recognized the tendency of some Wikipedia contributors to write fan-fueled articles about fictional worlds, but we have also seen that these articles are considered non-issues, as they are as easy to avoid as they are to find.

We have commented on the remarkable effects of the ability of Wikipedia's contributors to update articles concerning history-making topics, as they unfold. Additionally, the Wikipedia model has taught us the benefits of self-education and, in turn, shown us the potential power included in the process of blurring the lines between teacher and student. And finally, we have
observed Wikipedia as a social software network and watched the global connections that it can make.

But, the question still remains. And chances are, the question will remain unanswered for the duration of Wikipedia's longevity. Here, however, in this document, I would like to propose the following answer to the question that has plagued the thoughts of many: Should anyone be allowed to contribute to Wikipedia? Yes! Everyone and anyone should be allowed to contribute. And furthermore, everyone should be encouraged to contribute and congratulated when they do so!

It is that this is quite possibly the beginning of something rare and revolutionary. Wikipedia has the potential to become the global information container that mankind has sought to create for generations now. Wikipedia could perhaps become the future home for all of humanity's knowledge, and it is such that it is a more-than-capable platform for such a lofty and reverent goal. However, this aspiration is only a possibility if everyone, every member of this earthen sphere, is encouraged to contribute and does so with the purest of intentions.

The concept, admittedly optimistic and perhaps idyllic to a tragic degree, is that we are all functioning members of this earthly province. By definition, our "functioning member" status implies that we all have something to say, something to contribute... disregarding its level of presumed importance. The subject matter in question is, in turn, irrelevant. The key to this totally inclusive database of knowledge and experience, is that our grand information container will not be complete unless every capable soul has donated their efforts – their unique expertise – by way of a contribution of knowledge.

However, there is more: this could be the onset of the global community comprised entirely of social software technology. Built upon the foundation of all-encompassing knowledge and
strengthened by the idea that humanity can be united by the membership of everyone of us to this species, and by our contributions to the collective knowledge, this ideal serves to unite disparate cultures through the potential of collaborative authoring. The global information consortium, so to speak, is just that: one united entity, as opposed to legions of disjointed societies.

The vastness of the global knowledge database has the tendency to be limited by the ability of those who are granted access to it. Wikipedia seeks to provide that key component of unrestrained access, and to utilize the efforts of those who long to contribute but simply do not have the technical means to do so. Rosenzweig writes of Benkler's proposal to make ready use of this underutilized portion of the population:

"Still, such projects have shown the ability, as Benkler wrote, to 'capitalize on an enormous pool of underutilized intelligent human creativity and willingness to engage in intellectual effort (Rosenzweig).""

There exists a massive portion of the population that would contribute if only they had the wherewithal to gain access.

**Conclusion**

The success of Wikipedia is not accidental. And, far from it. No, the resounding successful response to the reality of the all-encompassing encyclopedia is a "demonstration that people are eager for free and accessible information resources (Rosenzweig)." But aside from the people's need for accessible information, Wikipedia's success walks hand in hand with its innovative policy of open inclusion. In fact, this model can only truly work – can only be fully successful – if anyone and everyone is allowed to contribute, and furthermore, if everyone is encouraged to do so. This
immense, expanding, and limitless global container, holding all of humanity's knowledge must, in order to be just that, contain the entirety of humanity's knowledge. With any exception to this rule, the contents of this container will never achieve full totality.

**Post-Conclusion**

As this study concludes, and as we have discovered the potential need for every one of us to become a contributing member of the global knowledge container known as Wikipedia, I feel that it is more than apt, at this time, to close with the wiki prayer:

"Please, grant me the serenity to accept the pages I cannot edit,
The courage to edit the pages I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference (Skiba)."

And, as a personal addendum to the insightfulness of the aforementioned mantra, I would like the opportunity to add the following:

Please, grant me the ability to find pages teeming with human knowledge,
Amidst the ones regarding Star Wars, Star Trek, or (Battle)Star Galactica,
And the wisdom to know the difference.


**Bibliography**


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