The Critical Dictionary and the Wiki World

MICHAEL ADAMS

A new utopian lexicography – online?

SOME lexicographical desires that might be served by automation were articulated several decades ago by Carter Revard (1973), in 'How to Make a N.U.D.E. (*New Utopian Dictionary of English*)'. Revard advocated the development of a 'computer-processible' database that could be searched forward and backward and indeed 'inside out', as flexibly as software would at the time allow. Revard's title suggested an intellectual aesthetic that persists (though clothed in new metaphors), but also that the automated dictionary would be 'sexy', another idea that has persisted into the twenty-first century, though Revard's N.U.D.E lost its allure in familiarity. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, online or on CD-ROM, has taught us to take Revard's N.U.D.E. for granted, so we have turned our imaginations towards a new utopian lexicography – online.

Introduction

In 1989, W. Steven Dodd, in 'Lexicomputing and the Dictionary of the Future' proposed that we face a transition from *dictionary as product* to *dictionary as service*, which 'implies that instead of multiple identical copies of a dictionary, sold to users, there would be a single version of a database, from which clients of the service obtained the information they required, much as professionals of various sorts already get abstracts and similar data "on-line"' (1989:87).

Though forward-looking, Dodd underestimated users' ambitions. Today, dictionary users are Web users: they imagine that a static paper text is necessarily less richly informative than a hyperlinked megatext. They expect to move among texts as interest and curiosity direct, not to be constrained by linear, editorially directed matter of the old-fashioned kind. The nodes of an infinite hyperlinked search may map a universe of small, classically organized texts, but those who travel the Web for information and ideas expect to click around on impulse. Further, they often expect to participate in the public construction of knowledge, contributing and editing Web content whenever they feel competent to do so. They are hyper-Romantics who have conflated their imaginations and the scapes of human knowledge into a hypertextual hyperuniverse.

Future dictionaries of English should acknowledge these new user inclinations to the extent compatible with the highest lexicographical standards. They should promote rather than resist the restructuring of knowledge and knowing that accompanies new information technologies. Google and the Galaxy of Wikis represent what Jean-Noël Jeanneney, president of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, has recently called 'the myth of universal knowledge'. Dictionary users yearn for what Cass Sunstein calls 'Infotopia', and the politics of Infotopia – ultimate participatory democracy of knowledge – challenge the

MICHAEL ADAMS has an AB, an AM, and a PhD from the University of Michigan, and is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Indiana University, Bloomingon. His research interests are: the history and structure of the English language, the history, theory, and practice of English lexicography, and late mediaeval and early modern Scottish literature. He is the author of: 'Slayer Slang: A Buffy the Vampire Slayer Lexicon' (Oxford 2003); with Anne Curzan, 'How English Works: A Linguistic Introduction', (AB Longman 2006); and 'Slang: The People's Poetry', (Oxford, 2007).

DOI: 10.1017/S0266078407002039
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078407002039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tradition of lexicography, and indeed the traditions of scholarly reference at large.

In other words, we are on the brink of a hypertextual lexicography that will revise radically every aspect of Yakov Malkiel's 1962 typology of dictionaries.[1] Malkiel argued that all dictionaries can be classified by means of three distinctive features: range, perspective, and presentation. *Range* comprises the density of lexical treatment (how much of the lexicon in question is entered in the dictionary), the number of languages involved, and the degree of focus on purely lexical data. *Perspective* considers whether a dictionary is historical or concerned with language of the present day, the principled arrangement of entries (alphabetic, thematic, or otherwise), and tone ('detached, preceptive, or facetious' [1962:19]).

Presentation encapsulates features like the extent of definition (from gloss to detailed explanation), documentation, illustration, and 'special features', such as phonetic transcription, labeling for region, register, use, etc.

In Malkiel's view, certain constraints, or at least regularities, govern the combination of features realized in any dictionary. So, 'there prevails a definite relation between size and tone: dictionaries written in an entertaining vein tend to be slender. Again, historical slant and profusion of pictorial illustrations do not go together' (1962:23), all of which is true enough when classifying *print* dictionaries. But hypertextual lexicography allows editors more flexibility with – and users more control over – range, perspective, and presentation of material.

More or less unlimited space allows the lexicographer to construct a page of exclusively lexical information linked to relevant but encyclopedic pages, and users control the density of the experience by moving among pages; tone need not be uniform, but might be detached, preceptive AND facetious, depending on the page and the extent to which pages criticize one another, as well as on users' opportunities to participate in querying and criticism. And editors can provide several versions of any definition (one arranged historically, another sense analytically, another according to prototype semantics, etc.) among which users can navigate at will, as well as mounds of documentation, portfolios of illustration (static and moving), and sound files (anticipated by Dodd), again all of which users select in whatever sequences suit their predetermined needs or developing interests. In other words, many new types of dictionary are suddenly possible where they were at least unlikely before.

The Critical Dictionary – and the Wikipedia

One possible new type is the Critical Dictionary, which would accumulate, organize, and interconnect all sorts of lexical facts, complications of those facts, and commentary about the complicated lexical material we have caught in the Web. It would be not be a wiki nor would it attempt universality. It would be an authoritative lexical reference, one founded on expertise, but nonetheless sceptical of its own authority. Or, to put it another way, where conventional dictionaries necessarily abstract lexical knowledge, the Critical Dictionary would open lexical matters page by page – it would be an open and critical approach to what has seemed aloof and assured, and would not only answer questions about words but promote intellectual engagement with words and everything to do with them.

The term 'critical' applies threefold: when appropriate, the Critical Dictionary is critical of the value of the material it includes; it is critical of the methods used to understand that material; and it is critical of the conclusions to which lexical semantic and historical analysis come. The Critical Dictionary would not replace knowledge with speculation and wishful belief; rather it would represent, better than traditional print dictionaries, the nature and extent of lexical knowledge and lexicographical authority.

Of course, many are already fascinated with words and more than willing to speculate on meaning, etymology, and usage. There's nothing wrong with the fascination or with reasonably informed popular contributions to the record and history of English, such as those one finds in Wikipedia, Wiktionary, and other wikis. As Marshall Poe recently gushed in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 'Wikipedia has the potential to be the greatest effort in collaborative knowledge gathering the world has ever known, and it may be the greatest effort in voluntary collaboration of any kind' (2006: 86). As Sunstein argues in *Infotopia* (2006), there are good reasons to distrust expertise and to rely on collaboration, which, after all, really amounts to a presumably productive division of labor. Thus, Sunstein (2006: 151) observes,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078407002039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> It is an understatement to say that Wikipedia generally works. In terms of sheer volume, it dwarfs the Encyclopedia Britannica. The number of articles is extraordinary. True, the quality does not always match the quantity; you can easily find articles that are thin or amateurish or that contain significant omissions and errors. But for the most part, the quality tends to be high as well. Specialists are regularly surprised to see a good deal of accuracy, as well as astounding currency, in Wikipedia entries.

Nevertheless, an example of etymological misinformation in Wikipedia will help to illustrate the value of lexicographical expertise, the problems of purely collaborative modes of compiling reference works, and the advantages of the Critical Dictionary.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* etymology for *hurdy gurdy* notes that the term for the instrument does not appear until the early sixteenth century, that *hirdy-girdy* meaning 'ruckus' occurs in the fifteenth century, and that the instrument name is echoic and onomatopoetic, perhaps derived from the earlier term for 'ruckus'. One problem with the etymology is obvious: *hirdy-girdy* 'ruckus' could as well derive from the name of an instrument as an instrument's name could derive from a term for 'ruckus'. Chronology is the issue: *hurdy gurdy* 'instrument' and *hirdy girdy* 'ruckus' enter the lexical record too close to each other for us to be sure that one actually preceded the other.

Were there hurdy gurdies in England before the term *hurdy gurdy* 'instrument' enters the lexical record? Indeed there were: according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, they were called *simphonies* from roughly 1300 to 1500, the point at which *hurdy gurdy* 'instrument' entered the scene. Also, according to the *MED*, *simphonie* had by 1400 come to mean 'pleasing combination of sounds', suggesting that not everyone heard 'ruckus' when a *hurdy gurdy* 'instrument' played. Pictures of hurdy gurdies appear twice in the *Luttrell Psalter* (BM Additional 42130, c.1340) and the *Horae B. Mariae Virginis* (BM Harley 6563, c.1330), both of which we know were illustrated in England (Palmer & Palmer 1980:75ff). Could the instrument name have preceded the term for 'ruckus'? Indeed it could, but then from what would the word have derived? The Wikipedia entry for *hurdy gurdy* (checked most recently on 21 December 2006)[2] dismisses what it identifies as a 'folk etymology':

> *hurdy* = a person's backside + *gurdy* = a wheel with a crank, used to reel in fishing nets in a boat. … There are a number of problems with this putative etymology. Among them are (1) hurdy is not known as an English term, and (2) the term for the crank is hurdy-gurdy not gurdy, and was first recorded in 1883, clearly based on the term for the instrument.

Actually, there are a number of problems with this putative debunking, not least that *hurdies* ('buttocks') is a reasonably well attested English word, assigned to the North in the *English Dialect Dictionary* with evidence from Ramsay's *Tea-table Miscellany* (1724) and entered in the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* with sixteenth century evidence. The Wikipedia entry is incorrect then, but, given the dates, none of this is relevant to fifteenth-century **hurdy gurdy*. However, the entry for *hurdes* in the *Middle English Dictionary*, which cites the alliterative romance *Winner and Wastour*, is relevant – the manuscript of *Winner and Wastour* dates from c.1450 (roughly contemporary with the apparent actuation of *hirdy girdy* 'ruckus'), but the poem was composed c.1350 (roughly contemporary with manuscript depictions of the instrument).

Likewise, *girdle* 'belt, strap' is available in English from at least 1150, with the reduced *girde* attested in *King Alexander* (manuscript date c.1400, composition date ?a1300) and the Paston Letters a1500. A *hurdy gurdy*, an instrument supported on a belt around the buttocks, might have taken its name from buttocks and belt, after all.

In traditional dictionaries of English, etymological comments are terse and even cryptic. Beyond unhelpful annotations like *perh.* and *prob.*, etymologies are unassailable nuggets of expert conclusion. In the Critical Dictionary, however, etymologies could link to lexical evidence, historical evidence, evaluations of folk etymology, etymological controversy, and bibliography – all of these could be presented in various forms to serve various user needs. Such forms might include word-history notes like those in the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, chronologies that align the hurdy gurdy and *hurdy gurdy* evidence, even a link to folio 43 of the *Horae B. Mariae Virginis*, in which doubting Thomases can see for themselves the picture of a dog playing the hurdy gurdy.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078407002039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Were I writing an etymology for *hurdy gurdy* in a static dictionary, I would exercise restraint: the chronological development I just proposed is not certified by a c.1450 rhyming compound for the instrument; the plural *hurdies* 'buttocks' requires re-analysis as singular *hurdy* 'buttock', another form for which we have no evidence.

The point is this: NO single line of bracketed information adequately accounts for *hurdy gurdy*'s etymology, nor does even the *OED*'s more extensive note. The Critical Dictionary would allow the user to navigate among the evidence and commentary, both linked and written exclusively for a particular imprint, so to speak, of the Critical Dictionary. The user would never arrive at a pat resolution to the etymological controversy surrounding *hurdy gurdy* (unless we discover new evidence that resolves it), but would be led to think in lexically and historically sophisticated ways, as he or she would not in a static dictionary.

The Critical Dictionary is an opportunity, given hypertext's flexibility, to structure lexical knowledge in honest detail and to invite users into the activity of knowing about words, without leaving them to their own devices, exactly, or to the errors of well-intentioned but imperfectly informed and inexperienced amateur etymologists.

Why don't I just correct and amplify the etymology for *hurdy gurdy* in Wikipedia, as I am expected to do, thus collaborating in the universal reference text that Wikipedia proposes to be?

There's no reason to suppose, given differences of opinion, that my expertise would be respected. In a recent article about Wikipedia in *The New Yorker*, Stacy Schiff recounts instances of edit wars: 'A number of the disputes on the English-language Wikipedia relate to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to religious issues. Almost as acrimonious are the battles waged over the entries on Macedonia, Danzig, the Armenian genocide, and Henry Ford. Ethnic feuds die hard: Was Copernicus Polish, German, or Prussian? (2006:41). Even more alarming, William Connolley, a climate modeler at the British Antarctic Survey, found himself in an edit war with a global warming skeptic, who kept revising Connelley's contributions to relevant articles. The dispute went to arbitration, and Connolley was punished, his editorial activity in Wikipedia restricted.

Now he is one of Wikipedia's editorial administrators, but he 'believes that Wikipedia "gives no privilege to those who know what they're talking about," a view that is echoed by many academics and former contributors, including Larry Sanger [one of Wikipedia's founders], who argues that too many Wikipedians are fundamentally suspicious of experts and unjustly confident of their own opinions'" (Schiff 2006: 41–42). Of course, there's nothing wrong with skepticism about experts and expertise – but there's nothing wrong, either, with privileging the conclusions of those most continuously, deeply, and earnestly engaged in lexical material and analysis. format

Even more 'of course', the etymology of *hurdy gurdy* is quite different from global warming or the Armenian genocide – it is unlikely to attract dispute because it is unlikely to attract any attention at all. Sunstein suggests that market forces regulate Wikipedia's success; contributing and editing reflect market judgments – think of them as metaphorical prices – for the material in question.[3] Significantly, Wikipedia writers and editors, dictionary or encyclopedia users looking up a word once and for all, and lexicographers stewing in their expertise would all bid differently on the etymology of *hurdy gurdy*. As Wikipedia itself announces, 'Really egregious errors are fixed quickly by the thousands of people who read Wikipedia every day. In general, the worse the error, the faster it will be noticed and fixed.'

Someone has to decide how egregious the *hurdy gurdy* error is. The routine contributor would value it at less, I suspect, than the user looking up the etymology at the time of use. Lexicographers are experts who anticipate user interest and ensure the accuracy of material on which no one would bid until it was too late to ensure accuracy. At the moment, in the Wikiverse at least, definitions of *truthiness* might be 'worse' errors than the etymology of *hurdy gurdy*; *truthiness* could become the object of an edit war, and the etymology of *hurdy gurdy* would be ignored.

Leaving Wikipedia to its own democratic devices won't lead to lexically sophisticated editing: as Sunstein notes, 'For the English edition, over half of the edits are done by 0.7 percent of all users – a mere 524 people. The most active 2 percent of users, that is, fewer than fifteen hundred people, have done almost three quarters of all edits' (2006:152). Sunstein's book is largely devoted to problems of group deliberation. According to Condorcet's Jury

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Theorem, 'the probability of a correct answer by a majority of [a] group increases toward 100 percent as the size of the group increases' (Sunstein 2006: 25) – as long as we assume that at each member of the group in question is more likely to be right than wrong about the matter under deliberation. Conversely, though, 'Suppose that each individual in a group is more likely to be wrong than right. If so, the likelihood that the group's majority will decide correctly falls to zero as the size of the group increases' (Sunstein 2006:28).

We must ask the question, then, when it comes to aggregational lexicography, is it safe to assume that those contributing and editing lexical information for a wiki dictionary or encyclopedia, are more likely to be right than wrong about, for instance, the etymology of *hurdy gurdy*? If they aren't, an isolated expert voice among the multitude cannot turn the probability of success towards 100 percent.

The wiki ideal is to have the largest possible number of participants work over information, on the assumption that, the bigger the group, the less likely it is to be wrong. Clearly, that's a questionable assumption. It is questionable even for a group of 1,500, that is, the group of most frequent contributors, editors, and users of Wikipedia. That group's etymology benefits from neither profound lexical knowledge nor optimal aggregation, so it is likely that it will devise and maintain a 'worse' version of the etymology of *hurdy gurdy*.

'Last year,' Schiff writes, '*Nature* published a survey comparing forty-two entries on scientific topics on Wikipedia with their counterparts in Encyclopædia Britannica. According to the survey, Wikipedia had four errors for every three of Britannica's, a result that, oddly, was hailed as a triumph for the upstart' (2006:42). All of this only reveals something true of all markets – they are 'reliable enough', which is not the same thing as saying they accurately value all minutiae in the market, when to do so would depend on a willingness to add value in spite of diminishing returns. In any given year, say, the value of any etymology looked up exactly once is not exactly zero; but that is the value the market will assign to it – zero, or 'close enough'. There's nothing at all odd about Wikipedia's enthusiasm for its efficiency: experts may be able to beat Wikipedia 25% of the time, but 75% reliability is reliable enough for the Wikipedia user – until Wikipedia users want to know the etymology of *hurdy gurdy*. Then they might prefer the inefficiently supplied expertise of a lexicographer, after all.

The best dictionaries of English depend for good reasons on expertise. The average Wikipedia user/contributor/editor doesn't know about illuminations in the Luttrell Psalter, which on the face of it has nothing to do with hurdy gurdies or, more particularly, with the word *hurdy gurdy*. The Wikipedia hurdy gurdy expert is unlikely to know about the *English Dialect Dictionary* or that the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* and the *Middle English Dictionary* can be checked online. And it's very difficult to accommodate the counter-intuitive or the equally intuitive within an etymology, unless you have learned the art of it from experience and practice.

Thus, the Critical Dictionary is not a 'custom' dictionary – at least, not in every aspect of its use. As Jeanneney has remarked of the Google Library project, 'there can be no universal library, only specific ways of looking at what is universal'; 'clumps [of flowers] have no sense and only bouquets have value. An indeterminate, disorganized, unclassified, uninventoried profusion is of little interest' (2006:5). Similarly, English lexis, or the lexis of all languages, must be organized in some fashion by someone who has principles of organization and standards of presentation as professional habits. Only lexicographical expertise will overcome the tendency of 'universal' knowledge to be reliable enough but not as reliable as we can, and therefore should, make it.

So, the Critical Dictionary, no matter how well it satisfies the wide range of user interests, inclinations, and Web capabilities is a network of expert texts. If the problem at hand is explaining semi-auxiliary *come* in African American Vernacular English, habitual *steady*, or habitual *be*, the user can move from node to node within an editorially contrived hierarchy of texts, on to pages that explain the syntactic issues, the histories of these particular features, and the history of African American Vernacular English generally.

Controversy over the influence of West African languages can be brought into the web of texts focused by these items, and discussion pages can be maintained for controversial subjects in order to bring folk history, folk etymology, popular belief, and even prejudice into the hypertextual frame of reference without deferring to any of them.

There is no essential schedule for completing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078407002039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

any Critical Dictionary, as work can be added as slowly as those compiling such a dictionary project can support it, feature by feature, page by page. Once compiled, coded, and presented, the material doesn't go anywhere – it simply accumulates, and deficient material can always be revised. Experts work for hire, although review would undoubtedly be accomplished in-house by the sponsoring organization, whether university unit or commercial publisher. Obviously, Web support would be an unavoidable cost, especially if users are invited to participate in the lexicographical enterprise. In practical terms, though, the Critical Dictionary is not out of reach, as every added link, note, and page of commentary is added value.

The value of the Critical Dictionary is partly that it distinguishes the authority of the expert from the authority of THE dictionary: one can learn to doubt the latter while trading heavily and more than a little reliably on the former. One could argue that the authority of THE dictionary is enhanced when it engages users in the search for lexical knowledge, and when it is as honest about its limits as its powers. The knowledge is better knowledge, uncompromised in the digital age by the exigencies of print publication and distribution.

Jeanneney also remarks on the World Wide Web's 'formidable ambivalence' (2006:24). The Critical Dictionary, although it exploits the structure and resources of the Web, is not ambivalent, is not the entropy of 'dictionary' into an endlessly reticulating work of reference. Because the Critical Dictionary is a dictionary (that is, a text constructed, however loosely, principally by lexicographers), its success depends on those who write it and those who use it finding a centre of purpose and method that holds the structure together.

Because I am not a deconstructionist, I do not find Willam Frawley's (1985) deconstruction of The Dictionary ultimately persuasive. Nevertheless, Frawley is certainly right that The Dictionary's status as writing (Derridean *écriture*), not to mention its intertextuality, continually calls its 'truth' into question. For instance, 'no dictionary can be unbiased because every dictionary is writing. In fact, all attempts to rid the dictionary of bias and ideology are themselves ideological acts' (Frawley, 4–5).

The Critical Dictionary aligns itself with the skepticism at the very core of deconstruction and, without solving truth problems, approaches knowledge as multivalent and the object of various perspectives. So one type of dictionary, Malkiel argues, takes the detached perspective Frawley recognizes as ideological, but the Critical Dictionary, without dismissing detachment as one mode of approaching lexical material and analysis, questions it by admitting other perspectives within its hypertextual architecture – perspectives that may be directly, openly critical of one another.

Hypothetically, any firm, university, learned society, or person can construct a Critical Dictionary. Any one Critical Dictionary would differ in range, perspective, and presentation from the next. If the medium is the message, the wiki message is monopolistic and will undoubtedly exhibit a central tendency. As much as users may want to participate fully in the marketplace of lexical knowledge, to locate all difference in that market within one marketplace forgets the advantages of thinking globally while acting locally. Critical Dictionaries, like commercial dictionaries, would compete productively. They used to do so more effectively, in my opinion, than they do now. Distinguishing features have become common, and the margin of difference in content and approach from one to another commercial dictionary of English has narrowed.

Renewing competition among dictionaries by means of the new lexicographical medium – competition that would include Wiktionary, the Urban Dictionary, Wikipedia, and other wikis, as well as any number of Critical Dictionaries – would renew and amplify the value of English dictionaries for the broadest spectrum of users, though it will justify lexicography of English on terms a little different from those that either lexicographers or dictionary users probably expect. ■

Notes

1 Sidney I. Landau usefully revises Malkiel's typology in 'What is a Dictionary?', the first chapter of *Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography* (2001: 6–42), though the typological focus blurs somewhat as the chapter progresses. Landau relies on the distinctive features central to the current argument, however, so the Critical Dictionary challenges generally held assumptions about dictionary texts relevant to print publication.

2 One might object that my focus should be *hurdy gurdy* in Wiktionary rather than in Wikipedia. However, Wiktionary (wisely) eschews etymology, and I cannot therefore exercise my argument against it. Wiki principles are, however, as well realized in Wikipedia, and my concern about expertise most

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078407002039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dramatically justified by weak etymological argument, so the Wikipedia entry has become my target here. Later, I acknowledge that the universe of lexical reference would certainly include both Wikipedia and Wiktionary, on their merits.

3 Sunstein is inclined to view this as 'mere' metaphor and does not hang much of his theory on it (2006: 217ff). I am inclined to see it as an apt metaphor given the purposes of the present argument and deploy it unabashedly. In fairness to Sunstein, though, I must admit our differences here.

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Some comments on the Wikiworld

[1] 2004: Wiki software

Dan Gillmor, 'Online encyclopedia run by volunteers is a credible resource', *South China Morning Post*, 3 February (technology section), Hong Kong:

One of the world's most comprehensive online reference sites is soon to publish its 200,000th article. More accurately, one of its constributors will publish the article. Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), an encyclopedia created and operated by volunteers, is one of the most fascinating developments of the Digital Age. In just over three years of existence, it has become a valuable resource and an example of how the grass roots in today's interconnected world can do extraordinary things…

The site defies assumptions. After all, one might imagine, if anyone can edit anything, surely cyber-vandals will wreck it. Surely flame wars over article content will stymie good intentions. And, of course, the articles will all be amateurish nonsense. Right? Well, no. Wikipedia does have its flaws – including recent hardware problems – but its very nature protects it and it has emerged as a credible resource. Wikipedia is based on software called 'Wiki' (www.c2.com/cgi/wiki). A wiki allows any user to edit any page. It keeps track of every change, and anyone can follow the changes in detail.

A wiki engenders a community when it works correctly. And a community that has the right tools can take care of itself… 'The only way you can write something that survives is if someone who is your diametrical opposite can agree with it,' says Jimmy Wales, a founder of Wikipedia. … [A] wiki draws strength from volunteers who catch and fix every act of online vandalism. The Wikipedia is the biggest public Wiki, but it is far from the only one. There are others covering travel, food and a variety of other topics. You can find a Wiki category page at (c2.com/cgi/wiki?WikiCategories).

Wikis are going private, too. They are increasingly being used behind corporate firewalls as planning and collaboration tools.

[2] 2005: The wiki as a tool

Anna Flanagan, 'Reading, Blogging, and 'Rithmetic?', *The Council Chronicle*: *The National Council of Teachers of English*, March, the USA:

John Lovas says that while some people see Web logs as the digital equivalent to hula hoops, he believes they are more akin to e-mail: rather than fading away after an initial period of intense interest, Web logs will become so routine that people will accept them as part of everyday life. Both Lovas and Will Richardson are now getting interested in a new tool called a 'wiki.' While anyone can *comment* on content contained in a Web log, a wiki allows readers to *change* content, even if they did not create it.

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Students at Richardson's school are using a wiki to write a media literacy text-book, which can be modified or overwritten by future students.

[3] 2005 Boggled minds

Faye Carney, 'Wikid,' *The Author*, London, Winter issue:

The most mind-boggling web-based dictionary of all is of course the ambitious and idealistic Wiktionary. Like its sister project Wikipedia, the free web-based encyclopaedia, it is the creation of hundreds of web volunteers who submit entries and continuously review one another's work. (A wiki, from the Hawaiian word for 'quick', is an editable web page which allows anyone to update the content of an entry). This vast collaborative effort – Wikipedia alone now has over 776,000 entries entries – overturns all our preconceptions about 'authoritative' texts. The Wiki projects are the reference equivalent of those modern buildings that wear their innards on the outside: they lay bare the editorial process in all its multilayered complexity. Passions run high among contributors: there is even a 'mediation centre' for resolving online disputes. It's a glorious anarchic and constantly evolving enterprise.

In May this year Hitwise also reported that Wikipedia was the second-most visited reference site. Why, you might ask, do half a million internet users want to contribute to or even use the Wikipedia, when perfectly reputable reference products are available online? My guess is that part of its attraaction is its lively community portal; I would also guess that the majority of its visitors are relatively young.

[4] 2005 Collaborative action

[No by-line] 'The future of journalism: Yesterday's papers', *The Economist*, 23 April 05:

Blogs, moreover, are but one item on a growing list of new media tools that the internet makes available. Wikis are collaborative web pages that allow readers to edit and contribute. This, to digital immigrants, may sound like a recipe for anarchi chaos, until they visit, for instance, wikipedia.org, an online encyclopedia that is growing dramatically richer by the day through exactly this spontaneous (and surprisingly orderly) collaboration among strangers.

[5] 2006 Vandals in cyberspace

Alex Ortolani, 'Common Knowledge,' *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong, 4 May:

However, the open platform has its drawbacks. Last December Wikipedia came under fire when an entry on former newspaper editor John Seigenthaler falsely linked him to the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy. It was eventually traced to a prankster, who apologised for his actions. But the incident damaged Wikipedia's credibility as a reference source. Subsequent news reports also found that some political groups were using entries to discredit opponents in smear campaigns. Cyber-vandals who post false information, pornography or abuse are an inevitable problem in a system that seeks maximum openness. To combat the menace, Wikipedia introduced a group of about 900 administrators to help monitor the entries. The members, who are voted in by the community, have the power to bloc certain sites that are continually sabotaged, such as those for US President George W. Bush and Taiwan leader Chen Shui-bian. They also step in to arbitrate between squabbling contributors about the presentation of controversial topics.

[6] 2006 Countering the vandals

Lorna Martin, 'Wikipedia fights off cyber vandals,' *The Observer*, London, 18 June 06:

What links George W Bush, Christine Aguilera, Adolf Hitler, sex – and, from last Friday, Tony Blair? The answer is that the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, has deemed that they are part of a growing number of subjects in need of protection from cyber vandals. The giant internet database, which boasts an 'anyone can edit' policy, decided that the 11-page entry on the Prime Minister needed to be shielded after a wave of online assaults from contributors wishing to embellish his biography – many in highly imaginary, not to mention damaging ways. Wikipedia aims to offer free knowledge to everybody on the planet. But its strength – that anyone, anywhere, can fiddle with the prose – is, according to some sceptics, becoming a weakness. Along with massive expansion – it is now the web's third most popular news and information source and contains almost 4 million entries – there have been increased opportunities for vandalism and growing disputes over what should be said, forcing those behind the project to protect more and more subjects… Earlier this year Wikipedia was the subject of media interest after a retired US journalist discovered insinuations in his Wikipedia biography that he had been involved in the assassinations of John and Robert

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078407002039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kennedy. Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia's founder, dismissed the suggestion that tighter controls undermined its democratic principles. 'Protection as a policy has existed for years,' he said yesterday. 'Semi-protection was devised as a softer, more open approach. Rather than full protection, which means nobody can edit, we now increasingly use semi-protection.' To add to or edit information on semi-protected sites, users must be registered for at least four days… Once the assaults have died down, she said the semi-protected page would be reset to 'anyone can edit'.

[7] 2006 Competitive editing

Ben MacIntyre, *The Times,* London, 21 July: 'How wiki-wiki can get sticky: The phenomenal but unreliable encyclopedia is best used with a healthy dose of scepticism':

When Kenneth Lay, the disgraced Enron chief, died suddenly this month, Reuters conducted an important experiment: the news service carefully monitored the way the death was described on Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia. Wikipedia articles can be written and edited by anyone, on every subject, at any time. Launched just five years ago, Wikipedia is free, vast and evolving at an astonishing pace, with some 4.6 million entries at the last count… The news [of Lay's death] broke at 10am. Over the next half-hour, Lay's entry on Wikipedia was edited five times. At 10.06 the death was 'an apparent suicide'; two minutes later it was 'heart attack or suicide'; at 10.11, the first moralist chimed in with a declaration that 'the guilt of ruining so many lives finaly (sic) led him to suicide'; a few minutes later a 'doctor' pronounced that that the 'stress' of Lay's trial had probably killed him. Thus, in the space of a few minutes, Wikipedia had produced four causes of death: suicide, heart failure, nervous strain and the retribution of a just God. For Wikipedia's detractors, the incident was further proof of the dangers inherent in a DIY encyclopaedia. Wiki-wiki is Hawaiian for 'quick', but critics point out that Wikipedia is so fast that it also tends to be sloppy, partial and inaccurate, sometimes wildly so. About 13,000 people actively contribute to Wikipedia with articles and edits; some of these are experts; but some, inevitably, are nutters…. Wikipedia should always be taken with a pinch of salt. But the more we contribute and revise, the less salt we will need. We are all Wikipedists now.

[8] 2006 Caution in China

Reuters in Beijing, *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong, 17 November: Online encyclopedia Wikipedia was accessible on the mainland yesterday after being blocked for more than a year, a move hailed by Reporters Without Borders. The main page of the Chinese-language version of Wikipedia (zh,wikipedia.org) could be displayed and searches for apolitical terms yielded results, but queries for subjects taboo to the Chinese leadership, such as 'June 4', remained blocked. Beijing routinely blocks access to websites it deems subversive and filters internet pages for for sensitive words. It was unclear why Wikipedia, blocked since October last year, was again accessible. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu said she had not heard of reports regarding Wikipedia, but added that Beijing supported the development of the internet and [China] had 123 million users, making it the world's second-largest internet market.

[9] 2007 Citation risks

'Errors in history exams spur debate on Wikipedia usage,' *The New York Times* (as reprinted in the *South China Morning Post*, 22 February):

When half a dozen students in Neil Waters' Japanese history class at Middlebury College in Vermont asserted in exams that the Jesuits supported the Shimabara Rebellion in 17th-century Japan, he knew something was wrong… He figured out the problem soon enough. The obscure, though incorrect, information was from Wikipedia, the collaborative online encyclopedia, and the students had picked it up cramming for his exam. Professor Waters and other professors … had begun noticing about a year ago that students were citing Wikipedia as a source in their papers. When confronted, many would say that their high school teachers had allowed the practice. But the errors in the Japanese history text were the last straw… The Middlebury history department notified its students this month that Wikipedia could not be cited in papers or exams… [As a consequence of such problems,] Wikipedia itself has restricted the editing of some subjects, mostly because of repeated vandalism or disputes over what should be said. [Comment in the same article, from Jimmy Wales, Wiki co-founder: 'Basically they are recommending exactly what we suggested – students shouldn't be citing encyclopedias. I

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078407002039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would hope they wouldn't be citing *Encyclopaedia Bricannica* either.']

[10] 2007 Wikid vandals

From Jenny Kleeman, *The Observer*, 25 March

One of the internet's greatest success stories is under constant attack from cyber vandals. Now Wikipedia is fighting the information saboteurs – but can it stem the damage?

If you looked up stingrays on Wikipedia last week, you would have learnt that, as well as living in tropical coastal waters and reproducing in litters of five to 10 offspring, the cartilaginous marine fish also 'hate Australian people'.

It wouldn't take long to realise that the last bit isn't true, or certainly that no one asked stingrays whether it was.

In fact it was a piece of 'internet vandalism' by a growing band of cyberspace guerrillas that is targeting sites such as Wikipedia. Since the death of Steve Irwin – the Australian television naturalist who was struck in the chest by a stingray's barb last year – the entry has become one of the online encyclopaedia's most regularly vandalised articles.

The internet has always been a magnet for bored people looking for amusement, but while some write a blog and others search for pornography, a growing number get their kicks by sabotaging high-profile websites. Any site that relies on well-meaning contributions from the public is vulnerable – MySpace, Slashdot and You Tube have all been victims – but Wikipedia is particularly susceptible because it is the encyclopaedia anyone can edit, including those whose sole aim is to undermine it.

Wikipedia is one of the great internet successes of the decade. Launched in 2001, it quickly became the world's most popular non-profit website and is now among the top 10 visited on the net, containing more than six million articles in 250 languages. With only seven paid administrative employees, the encyclopaedia depends on the altruistic collaboration of its four million registered users, as well as countless others who edit the site anonymously.

[an editorial compilation]

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