
In an early issue of the newsletter of the *New Dictionary of National Biography*, the editor, Brian Harrison, reflected on the categorization of ‘life patterns’ and listed twenty-two distinct types. These include careers that are ‘snuffed out’, ‘interrupted’, ‘unplanned’, or ‘facilitative’; those who have ‘head-starts’ – such as the rich who enjoy hereditary privilege; ‘late changers’, into which honoured or disgraced politicians usually fall: ‘child prodigies’, and ‘late developers’, such as Lord Melbourne (if being ‘developed’ means becoming Prime Minister at 55, after being an MP off and on for the previous twenty-eight years). Careers can be ‘variegated’ or ‘heroic failures’; those without careers are ‘privatized’ – presumably aristocrats who are too complacent to take advantage of their ‘head-starts’.\(^1\) I did not notice an ‘opportunist’ career, although perhaps George Smith, whose interest in publishing an English version of the *Biographie Universelle* seeded the growth of the original *DNB*, would fall into that category.

Pigeon-holing people is a knack that one acquires as a commissioning editor, whose job includes identifying experts. This is a skill that editors of dictionaries and encyclopaedias have had in common since the early nineteenth-century, when farming out tasks to specialists was considered especially necessary. Knowledge was seen to be growing exponentially, and its cultivators were becoming professionalized, leading to the late-nineteenth-century rise of the ‘expert’ who, as Nicholas Murray Butler allegedly said, knows more and more about less and less.

\(^1\) *New Dictionary of National Biography Newsletter*, 6 (June 2001), 1–2.
It was Macvey Napier’s job as editor of the multi-volume *Supplement* to the fifth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (eventually published in six volumes between 1815 and 1824) to commission eminent authorities, a.k.a. ‘big names’, to amend previous errors and update articles with the very latest knowledge in the arts and sciences. As a lawyer and man of letters, Napier’s own name was big enough, he felt, for him to pen numerous entries on law, philosophy, history, and many biographical entries. The latter category was something to which Thomas Young — the natural philosopher who worked on theories of light and colour, and who helped decipher the Rosetta Stone — also offered to the *Supplement*, becoming the ‘solo voice’ on scientific biography. The *Supplement* seems to have been published at a transitional moment in the history of biographical dictionaries, scientific reference works, and encyclopaedias, in attempting to use its contributors’ expertise as a guarantee of authority, while sustaining the impression that their material was accessible and comprehensible to a broad readership.

In the days just before the specialization of the reference genre, leading to dedicated biographical dictionaries that would — in one branch — lead to the *New DNB*, some subtle, underlying tensions of the ‘encyclopaedic project’ were beginning to emerge. Identifying the best authority became an issue, and contributors tried to direct the scope and boundaries of the work — to forge ‘patterns’ in the systems of knowledge being represented, and to encourage attention to particular types of knowledge according to their own preferences. Editorial, authorial, expert, and general skills began to rub up against each other, begging questions about the aims, intentions, and utility of works that try to simplify, maybe unify, increasingly intricate fields of knowledge. For an editor in the 19th century, it was an ambitious, if not an opportunistic, career choice — peddling information in discrete units, bound together alphabetically, secularly, knowing that the production of knowledge moves faster than even what the printing press could keep up with, necessitating a potentially commercially viable set of *Supplements*.

It all seemed much simpler in the 18th century, when the projects upon which later supplements would be built were originally contrived and pursued under the banner of Enlightenment collection and classification. This was an era in which, as Richard Yeo explains, distinctions between encyclopaedias, scientific dictionaries and biographical dictionaries were not yet drawn. Hence the reference both to ‘encyclopaedias’ — falling under the purview of ‘encyclopaedic visions’, or (as sometimes stated within the book) the
‘encyclopaedic project’ – and ‘scientific dictionaries’. ‘Enlightenment culture’, the third part of Yeo’s title, is what translated these visions into texts; texts which were meant to embody the Enlightenment ideal of open, public communication.

One of the accomplishments of Yeo’s book is its success in illustrating how the works that we today call encyclopaedias derived from smaller dictionaries of arts and sciences, in which Enlightenment spokesmen spelled out early achievements to realize the Baconian programme for the advancement of natural knowledge. Yeo draws particular attention to Antoine Furetière’s *Dictionnaire Universel* (3 vols, 1690), John Harris’s *Lexicon Technicum* (2 vols, 1704, 1710), and Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* (2 vols, 1728). Another bonus is the new information Yeo provides about reference works and editors less-well-known than Diderot, D’Alembert, and the *Encyclopédie*.

In the 18th century, as Samuel Johnson declared, knowledge was of two kinds. ‘We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it.’² This was a view expressed by one of the most famous ‘compilers’ in what might be considered the first ‘age of compilation’, when every gentleman and a few gentlewomen kept a commonplace book – that resource of anecdote and ‘promptuarly’ – allowing many wits to appear endlessly witty since their need for a good memory was supplanted, so long as one remembered where to look for one’s stocks of adages and quips. Commonplace books were an exercise in classifying knowledge, settling upon appropriate headings under which passages from books, quotations, trivia, and sundry information could be grouped. But as the collection increased, the classification system fragmented, making the management of the whole difficult and access to (and the usefulness of) its contents, cumbersome. This is why they are relevant to the history of encyclopaedias, a point well made by Yeo, who assesses the debt that Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* owed to the commonplace book. Yeo notes that ‘the major encyclopaedias of the Enlightenment sought a compromise between systematic and alphabetical arrangement’.³ This approach served two ends. Not only was it secular, and governed by a categorical structure that did not purport to reflect divine groupings, but the encyclopaedia, like a well-conceived commonplace book, enabled

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readers ‘to recollect what they formerly knew’ (in the words of a contemporary reviewer).\(^4\) It seems that, unlike the humble Lady Charlotte Bury (companion to Princess Charlotte), who in 1811 strolled along the rows of books in the British Museum, and ‘devoured with greedy eyes the outside of the volumes and wished – oh! how vainly – that their contents were stored in my brain’, many gentlemen liked to think that their brains were filled with all that knowledge, and that reference works were merely indices to each one’s genius.\(^5\)

Here emerges a paradoxical point about the usefulness of eighteenth-century dictionaries and encyclopaedias: they were tools for the trained. As with commonplace books, one needed not only to remember where to look for lost information, but also what to look for. As Gwen Raverat, Charles Darwin’s granddaughter, complained, ‘You can have no idea, if you have not tried, how difficult it is to find out anything whatever from an encyclopaedia, unless you know all about it already’.\(^6\)

Richard Yeo identifies a number of intriguing paradoxes that emerge when ‘encyclopaedic visions’ are translated into publishing projects: that encyclopaedias were designed to abridge and condense what was revered as expansive and universal knowledge; that they celebrated and illustrated ‘useful’ knowledge in an age concerned with industrial espionage and the protection of trade secrets. They promoted vernacular and open access to information in a period notable for passing copyright laws; their aim was to provide systematic, lasting value, despite the fact that the forms of knowledge they reviewed were continually changing. An encyclopaedia represented types of knowledge, but itself became a *typos*, a ‘model’ of knowledge, capturing a movement away from medieval compendia such as the *Speculum Maius* (ca. 1250) – something regarded as a ‘mirror’ of nature and divine order – and a turn towards a secular circle of knowledge, a ‘course of education’ in the liberal arts and sciences that gathered up all the latest knowledge in an attempt to restore what was lost and to record humanity’s industry and progress.

A ‘modern’ course of education involved more than book reading, and Renaissance encyclopaedism – as Yeo points out in his

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\(^4\) Yeo, *op. cit.* note 3, 116.  
\(^6\) Quoted in Yeo, *op. cit.* note 3, 27.
discussion of the ‘encyclopaedic tradition’ – recognized that the representation of knowledge could also take the form of museums, cabinets of curiosity, gardens, and libraries. But Yeo’s book focuses upon texts published in the long eighteenth century, mainly in Britain, with notable exceptions of works that ‘set the tone’ for what he calls the ‘encyclopaedic project’.

Into whatever organizational form knowledge was pigeon-holed, the increasing stock of it was growing in leaps and bounds throughout the 18th century, necessitating more garden and cabinet space, and more volumes of dictionaries. Everywhere one looked, and encouraged others to look, more was being discovered. Travelling naturalists were finding new insects, fossils, and fauna. Circumnavigators were discovering new territories and tribes – further fuel and harbingers of hope that light was dawning and the long reign of delusion, deceit and maybe even death was coming to an end. The prospect was of boundless knowledge, lending weight to Enlightenment catchwords that dominated social and economic thought, such as ‘growth’, ‘progress’, and ‘perfectability’.

Such conceptions instilled a dizziness in some, paralleling the fright that the likes of Blaise Pascal felt when contemplating the possibility of an infinite universe. Some order had to be imposed on the mass of new materials and ideas. Dictionaries of arts and sciences were one means of imposing control. As Yeo writes, ‘these works can be seen as responses to what contemporaries perceived as a knowledge explosion, witnessed in the rapid multiplication of books and the pace of discovery in geographical exploration and in the physical sciences’. It was the job of the dictionaries to provide an abridgement – bite-size accounts – of this growing stock of knowledge. Even this task, however, laid the course for another paradox in the history of encyclopaedias. While ‘the encyclopaedic vision of the period was one of containment’, as Yeo puts it, the sheer growth in the production of knowledge necessitated a rapid growth in the containment field.

Thus, throughout the 18th and into the 19th century, dictionaries and encyclopaedias grew into multi-volume works in attempt to control the ‘crisis of the multitude of books’ that created an apparent demand for summaries.

‘Apparent demand’ seems a legitimate way to assess the phenomenon of publishing books in answer to the problem of books being published. By the 17th century, notes Yeo, ‘many scholars

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7 Yeo, op. cit. note 3, xiii.
8 Yeo, op. cit. note 3, 77.
believed that the growth of books had reached a crisis point’, and
some were left bewildered by the suggestion that more books
could help control the flood of printed ideas. ‘How is it possible
to understand the whole universe?’ wondered François de Grenaille
in 1643:

All the books that are made treat only some of the imaginable topics; what could
we read that would treat absolutely everything? In addition, these big volumes that
our century has published to instruct us frighten most minds, not only because it
is impossible to carry them, but because their length makes us dread reading
them.9

This could be read as a prescient concern; something that could have
made him (had he visions of the coming age of encyclopaedias)
panic in the way that librarians began to panic about a hundred
years later – by which time the Bibliothèque du Roi was stocked
with nearly 180,000 volumes. But while this may have represented a
formidable opportunity to the eighteenth-century mind (or eye), it
hardly represented accessible knowledge. This was the issue that
drove French *philosophes* to produce an *Encyclopédie* – making
knowledge available for a curious, if allegedly forgetful, public.

But as the *Encyclopédie* was an idea ostensibly borrowed from
Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia*, it is wise to follow Yeo’s lead in closely
examining what lay behind Chambers’ motivations and intentions,
so uncovering less-familiar projects that could be seen as part of a
more familiar Enlightenment ideology. Situating his work relative
to the Republic of Letters, Yeo notes that Chambers, ‘while clearly
not advocating radical political change, was critical of the privi-
leged control of knowledge by academies sponsored by absolute
monarchs, and dismissive of the parade of learning in private
libraries’. For those in Britain who perhaps did not know what
180,000 volumes of bond knowledge looked like, or who were not
members of exclusive societies and privy to their discussions, the
*Cyclopaedia* offered a supplementary public service. In doing so,
however, its promoters were aware of the political status and state-
ments that its public offerings might convey.

A project dealing with such expansive circles of knowledge runs
the risk of spiralling back into itself, becoming yet another type
of the types of knowledge that the apparatus seeks to define.
*Did* anyone in the 18th century wonder when an encyclopaedia of
encyclopaedias would be published? There is a tendency towards

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9 Yeo, *op. cit.* note 3, 87.
reflexivity in encyclopaedic visions – for example, when one finds an entry entitled ‘Encyclopaedia’ inside an encyclopaedia. Diderot thought this was the best way to explain their purpose and uses (and who better to know?, but who would know to look?), and in his own entry under that title, Diderot likened encyclopaedias to sanctuaries of knowledge, where the records of progressive knowledge would be most useful ‘immediately in the wake of some catastrophe so great as to suspend the progress of knowledge, interrupt the labours of craftsmen, and plunge a portion of our hemisphere into darkness once again’, he said. No need to reinvent the wheel since, somewhat ironically, the product of a revolution in thought and knowledge would provide ‘protect[ion] from time and from revolutions’.10 From another point of view, encyclopaedias could be seen more like shrines than sanctuaries; or perhaps as trophies of heroism, icons of national greatness left for posterity, perpetuating the record of accomplishment of their contributors.

There is a degree to which the ‘nationality’ of an encyclopaedia betrays its claims to represent ‘universal’ forms of knowledge. Despite declarations that 18th-century scientific dictionaries and encyclopaedias were authored ‘By a Society of Gentlemen’ (as were different editions of Harris’s Dictionary) or by a ‘Société de Gens de Lettres’ (as was the Encyclopédie) – implying collaboration amongst citizens of the ‘Republic of Letters’ – in reality, as Yeo points out, they were sometimes authored and published by only one or two people. And, like most publishing endeavours, they were produced with a sense of rivalry; an eye cast towards the competition, diminishing the very universality towards which they ostensibly aspired. The rivalry and variability of representing new knowledge is evidenced in particular instances that prove the rule – where, for example, editors adopted new methods of organizing entries based on others’ styles. As Yeo writes, when, in 1782, the successor to the Encyclopédie, the Encyclopédie Méthodique, had its entries arranged alphabetically, ‘some supporters of Chambers said that this vindicated his method of presenting scientific knowledge as entries on terms, rather than as extended articles’.11 The key words here which, I think, need further analysis are ‘supporters’ and ‘his method’: what are the implications for such personalized control over the reproduction of knowledge?

10 Quoted in Yeo, op. cit. note 3, 86.
11 Yeo, op. cit. note 3, 192.
Yeo recognizes that such issues do reverberate to the level of national pride. Early in the book, he observes that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* ‘came to be regarded as an emblem of the British Empire: in the early 19th century it was spoken of as the “national Encyclopaedia” and seen as a carrier of British values to the colonies’. Such projects fall within a tradition of nation-building, through displays of knowledge not unlike those inspired by museums, where the appropriation of the classical past (capturing marbled pillars of antiquity) and commercial futures (controlling colonies and trade routes) come together, side by side, celebrating historical or ‘useful’ topics, such as navigation, botany, and brewing.

And like travellers plundering ancient lands for curious relics, encyclopaedia editors and ‘reviewers’ were sometimes prone to pilfer others’ prose, declaring that their printing was justified as ‘an abridgement’. It is not surprising that compilers of scientific dictionaries took the opportunity to defend abridgement in their own pages. Chambers explained that an ‘Epitome’ was ‘an abridgement; or the reduction of the principal matters of a large book, into a little compass’, implying that this was a good thing. Under ‘Abridgement’, he noted that the practice was sometimes criticized as leading to the loss of the originals, as had happened with some Latin texts; but he praised the utility of abridgements of the *Philosophical Transactions* and Boyle’s philosophical works.

Similarly, in their first edition, the editors of the *Britannica* made an even more definite defence of those who summarise and compile, suggesting that this was a particularly necessary skill, given the number of writers who ‘have acquired the dexterity of spreading a few critical thoughts over several hundred pages’. A review of this first Scottish encyclopaedia in *The Scots Magazine* for December 1768 simply reprinted, in full, the substantial article on ‘Abridgement’, prefacing it with this dry editorial comment: ‘We insert one article entire, as a specimen.’ The satirical insinuation here is unmistakable: by not abridging the entry on ‘Abridgement’ the reviewer implied that all this talk of its noble value was hyperbole and that, like this review, most entries in the first *Britannica* were simply lifted from other works with minimal mental effort.

Thus, the issues of delimiting, encircling, and controlling the representation of knowledge which define the ‘encyclopaedic project’ become inextricably linked to the politics of knowledge, returning

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12 Yeo, *op. cit.* note 3, 1.
us to the problem, or paradox, of the concept of the ‘universal’, so often touted by such projects. This point is familiar to those who study the history of the production (as distinguished from reproduction) of scientific knowledge. This includes Yeo, whose previous book treated such issues very well – tellingly, in regard to the man who coined the specialist term ‘scientist’ but was known to be amongst the dying breed of those who pursued an encyclopaedic-like programme, ‘in which the word “science” almost returned to its former meaning – systematic knowledge of any subject ...’

Science, like the encyclopaedic project that worked to summarise its conclusions, has always been made to look universal by its forms of literary representation. The history of scientific textbooks suggests ways that training through pedagogical ‘systems’ helped create the appearance of science as organized, rule-bound, cooperative, relevant, and accessible to all – in this sense, universally useful. Encyclopaedias, being an extension of the pedagogical culture of Enlightenment Europe, likewise played on the multiple meanings of the word (and concept) of ‘universal’. ‘While referring to the ambitious scope of subjects’, writes Yeo, ‘it also suggested a universal interest and hence a large potential audience’.

The ‘potential audience’ is certainly the category that most interested commercially-minded publishers and editors. There was apparently an endless supply of people desiring to be reminded of what they have forgotten, and some others desiring to expand rigorously their own intellectual horizons. If, by the mid-18th century, librarians were worried about how many more books they could possibly shelve in the booming book trade, by the 19th, satirists laughed at the pretensions of encyclopaedists who thought they could find all that knowledge useful. ‘Mr Panscope’, Thomas Love Peacock’s indefatigable polymath in *Headlong Hall* (1816), who embodied ‘the chemical, botanical, geological, astronomical, mathematical, metaphysical, meteorological, anatomical, physiological, ... [a] critical philosopher, who had run through the whole circle

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of the sciences, and understood them all equally well’, portrayed the ambitious intellectualism of his acquaintance, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who twenty years earlier had audaciously set out a decade’s plan to study ‘universal science’, including mathematics, physical sciences, biography, and history.\(^{16}\)

The massive presupposition in all this was that people want to know – that people are eager to access information, and need simple models of presentation so as not to be overwhelmed by the blooming, buzzing confusion surrounding everyone. But, as with recent studies on consumerism and consumption in the eighteenth century, we are left knowing more about how ‘useful knowledge’ was prepared and packaged, than about how it was accessed or used. Who except for the contributors cared about the contents of an encyclopaedia?

Yeo notes that, in 1784, Immanuel Kant spoke of the ‘need for critical discussion of public issues as a precondition of an enlightened age’. Citizens of the Republic of Letters spoke of such works as creating ‘a Library to a great many People’. Subscription lists were read by publishers and booksellers, allegedly ‘to find out the wishes of the book-buying and reading public’, who then proceeded without risk (if there were at least 200) in their publishing endeavour. Another historian cited by Yeo suggests that the Encyclopédie was a response ‘to a demand of the intellectual community’, and so on.\(^{17}\) Historians of the book, notably Adrian Johns, have noted the difficulties that historians face in attempting to analyse reading habits.\(^{18}\) But that questions of ‘demand’ dominate over analyses of ‘desirability’ amongst readers, seems to suggest a final paradox: that commerce, rather than freedom of access, determined the course of encyclopaedic projects.

It could be argued that little has changed over the last two and a half centuries. With all the jazz surrounding the coming of the millennium, it was guaranteed that national monuments, embracing the wealth of national knowledge, would once again be built – more, it might seem, with an eye to foreign competition than for utility. Hence the new buildings of the Bibliothèque Nationale and the British Library. The ideals of open access and public utility are


\(^{17}\) Yeo, op. cit. note 3, 41, 44, 46, 71 where Richard Schwab is cited.

to a degree embodied in the architecture of both. For each, this was, perhaps, intended to reinvigorate a national commitment to recover, codify, and preserve knowledge. Yeo reminds us of Karl Popper’s ruinous vision of a day when ‘all our machines and tools are destroyed, and all our subjective learning, including the knowledge of machines and tools, and how to use them. But libraries and our capacity to learn from them survive. Clearly, after much suffering, our world may get going again.’

Eighteenth-century historians also contemplated the implications of the destruction of knowledge. ‘The valuable library of Alexandria was pillaged or destroyed’, wrote Edward Gibbon, ‘and, near twenty years afterwards, the appearance of empty shelves excited the regret and indignation of every spectator whose mind was not totally darkened by religious prejudice.’ Diderot mused that only if the ancients had written an encyclopaedia, ‘and if that manuscript alone had escaped from the famous Library of Alexandria, it would have been capable of consoling us for the loss of the others.’ The 18th-century encyclopaedic projects ostensibly grew out of a concern about humanitarian progress – carrying into the future that classical torch – rather than national aggrandisement.

But Richard Yeo’s book also suggests ulterior motives. If it were truly a question of open access, then why not spend less money (as little as £300 million, according to one estimate) to scan every book published before 1900, and put it on-line, using the medium that most closely resembles the open form of knowledge of them all – boundless, categorized down to keyword, and democratizing? Perhaps the idea was too far ahead of its time when the plans to build these new libraries in Paris and London were approved. At least other encyclopaedic projects, such as the Biographie Universelle, the current edition of the EB or the new DNB, are on-line or being designed for internet access.

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19 Yeo, op. cit. note 3, 2.
20 Yeo, Encyclopedic Vision, op. cit. note 3, 85–86.

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