



INFORMATION SCIENCE

The ascent of Wikipedia

Scholars reflect on 20 years of crowdsourced knowledge

By Andrew Robinson

In 2005—not long after the founding of Wikipedia by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger in early 2001—academic experts commissioned to compare 42 articles published in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and Wikipedia relating to science found an average of three errors in the *Britannica* entries and four in Wikipedia, suggesting a comparable level of accuracy (1). Yet in 2007, Michael Gorman, former president of the American Library Association, argued scornfully that “A professor who encourages the use of Wikipedia is the intellectual equivalent of a dietician who recommends a steady diet of Big Macs with everything” (2). Gorman’s article reflected the widespread skepticism at the time about the reliability of an encyclopedia that anyone can edit.

Today, Wikipedia is the world’s leading encyclopedia. Every month, 1.5 billion unique devices worldwide access it 15 billion times, with more than 6000 page views per second. Meanwhile, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—last printed in 2010—is now “all but dead” online, according to scholar Heather Ford in her essay in *Wikipedia @ 20*.

The reviewer is the author of *The Last Man Who Knew Everything* (Oneworld Publications, 2007) and *Genius: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2011). Email: andrew@andrew-robinson.org

The book’s 22 essays are wide-ranging, often intellectually engaging, and, in parts, stylishly written. Its 34 contributors include, fittingly, academics and nonacademics based in many countries, although predominantly in the United States. Its U.S.-based editors, Joseph Reagle and Jackie Koerner, are (respectively) a professor of communication studies and a qualitative research analyst for online communities who also acts as the community health consultant for the Wikimedia community.

Wales neither contributes an essay nor makes much of an appearance in the book, although he does provide a pithy blurb saluting the “hard-won wisdom of its contributors, the novel reflections of scholars, and the necessary provocations of those working to shape [Wikipedia’s] next twenty years.” These provocations are examined in detail and range from what to do about microaggressive community editing of novice Wikipedia contributors to how Wikimedia, the nonprofit organization that hosts Wikipedia, might address the lack of reliable internet access experienced by four billion people worldwide.

Perhaps the most important internal controversy discussed is the bias of Wikipedia’s contributors and entries. The English Wikiped-

Surpassing the expectations of its early critics, Wikipedia is now the world’s leading encyclopedia.

ia has more than 31,000 active contributors, yet only 11 language editions have more than a thousand active contributors, and more than half of the editions have fewer than 10. Moreover, a recent Wikimedia Foundation survey revealed that about 91% of Wikipedia editors are male and 77% are white. As of late 2019, only 18% of biographies on Wikipedia were about women. Far fewer were about nonwhites. A number of nonmale and nonwhite contributors to the book describe their own, often unavailing, efforts to improve these statistics.

There is also the tricky issue of determining the appropriate relationship that should exist between Wikipedia’s language editions. Each is written independently of the other 284 editions, although “a contributor may consult an existing article in another language edition when writing a new article, or they might even use the content translation tool to help with translating one article to another language, but there is nothing to ensure that articles in different language editions are aligned or kept consistent with each other,” notes Denny Vrandečić, founder of both Wikidata and the Croatian Wikipedia. “This is often regarded as a contribution to knowledge diversity since it allows every language edition to grow independently of all other language editions,” he adds, begging the question: “Would creating a system that aligns the contents more closely with each other sacrifice that diversity?”

Ironically, one weakness of the book—common in edited collections—is the infrequency of cross-referencing between articles. Another is the sweeping summary conclusion by Katherine Maher, executive director of the



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Joseph Reagle and Jackie Koerner, editors
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Wikimedia Foundation, that “Wikimedia reminds us that the greatest thing we will ever build is the thing which we build with others.” This surely underestimates the advances in human knowledge that have come from solitary thinkers (many of them specialists)—a universally popular part of Wikipedia’s entries—rather than from collaborative groups. That said, anyone interested in the history, current constitution, and possible

future development of a singular contemporary global phenomenon will be stimulated by this anniversary collection. ■

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