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Living with Wikipedia: It’s Here to Stay

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Living with Wikipedia: It’s Here to Stay

Part I of two parts. The second installment, “Improving Wikipedia,” will run on Thursday, October 9.

By Charles W. Hayford

My name is Charles and I’m a Wikipedia addict.

I can’t help myself, but then, neither can 75,000 other “active contributors.” We don’t just look things up: we create articles, correct and introduce mistakes, send each other notes, and fuss over issues great and obscure. Anonymity lends a carnival air of freedom and community since, as the famous New Yorker cartoon had it, "on the Internet nobody knows you’re a dog" (and yes, the link is to a Wikipedia article).

Wikipedia is an internet galactic cloud of information. Nicholson Baker, who once crankily lamented the end of the library card catalogue, in a review of John Broughton’s Wikipedia: The Missing Manual (NY Review March 20, 2008), calls it “just an incredible thing.” It’s “fact-encirclingly huge, and it’s idiosyncratic, careful, messy, funny, shocking, and full of simmering controversies—and it’s free, and it’s fast.” Wikipedia, he says, is the "convergence between the self-taught and the expensively educated.”

What’s in it for China folk? In the near future we will have at least three major print encyclopedias of China, so now is a good time to ask how Wikipedia stacks up, especially for those of us who are teachers.

The lures are obvious. Where else can you so quickly find a list of six translations of Liaozhai Zhiyi, Zhu Yuanzhang’s birthday, chopstick etiquette in four Asian countries, or not quite enough about postage stamps and postal history of China? Even weak articles often have supplementary internet links which make them worthwhile. You can find the translation of a current or tricky term by locating it in the English Wikipedia, then clicking on the link (at the left side of the page) to the article in the Chinese Wikipedia.

So what’s not to like?

When I asked around among my friends, I got an email from a recovering Wikipedian who has gone cold turkey and wants to remain anonymous, perhaps for the sake of his family’s safety:

“First, as long as you edit relatively peripheral articles, you are not likely to get involved in any dispute and people are happy to see you sharing your knowledge. However, if you venture into the more contentious articles in our field – especially the ones involving the "three T's" – you realize that almost any contributions may be reverted by different interest groups that police these pages. At that point, you either give up or engage in a discussion on the discussion page, and that is when you realize that Wikipedia is as much a discussion club as an encyclopedia and tenacity often prevails over truth. If you want to be proven right, it’s not enough to give credible sources to support your argument, you need allies, and in order to get allies you need to talk a lot. The consequence is that you end up talking to people rather than editing articles.... many talk pages on Wikipedia are larger than the actual articles! You also realize that most people get their information on the internet and not in libraries. The fact that a scholar is widely published on the internet (but disdained by academics) often makes him a stronger source than a thoroughly researched book that may be two decades old.”

These observations are from the point of view of editing, but let’s spell out the consequences for how we read:

□ While many articles are detailed, proportionate, and sound, others are woolly, evasive, partisan, and about as reliable as a paper crutch. There’s no way to predict which is going to be which. Readers who most need reliable information are the least able to distinguish.
Wikipedia is a collaboration of anonymous amateurs: "Out of mediocrity, excellence." But if anybody with access to the internet can edit an article, how do you know if that dog (with or without lipstick) got Zhu Yuanzhang's birthday right?

True, mistakes are less of a problem than you might think. When one experiment deliberately introduced mistakes, almost all were quickly corrected. But they chose areas which are well populated. Are there enough China people out there who can correct mistakes?

And what if it's not a mistake but unbalanced judgment or omission? For instance, assertions from Chang Jung and Jon Halliday's *Mao: The Unknown Story* (Random House, 2005) were systematically inserted into a wide range of articles for which more appropriate sources were available, such as Second Sino-Japanese War, among many others. Neither the article on Liaozhai Zhiyi nor the linked article on Pu Songling mention the standard study by Judith Zeitlin, *Stories of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford University Press, 1993) or Jonathan Spence's discussion in *Death of Woman Wang* (Viking 1978).

In theory, the process is self-generating and perhaps self-correcting, but it's not self-limiting. To see the process in action, look at the article on Xiang Yu, Liu Bang's rival and the hero of the Beijing opera "Farewell My Concubine" made famous by the film. Click on the "History" tab to follow how one bare paragraph in 2004 became a more than full chronicle of some 8,000 words (though it has an officious tag "This article does not cite any references or sources"). Who decides what is too detailed for a casual visitor wanting background to the film? (A useful task for you to take on: find wooly articles and write or re-write the lead paragraphs to make them into useful summary introductions to the topic.)

Too often collaboration turns into a version of the party game where each person adds a paragraph to the story without seeing what went before. This is serial contribution, not teamwork.

The article Chinese Literature, for instance runs a little over 5,000 words (that is, shorter than the article on Xiang Yu). There are useful facts and individual comments but the article strikes me as confusing and shapeless, not a good place to send students. Sections of the article describe periods and genres, with links to perhaps several hundred articles, many of which are nicely done, but the crucial introductory paragraph, which should summarize and set the themes, reads in its entirety:

"Chinese literature extends back thousands of years, from the earliest recorded dynastic court archives to the mature fictional novel that arose during the Ming Dynasty to entertain the masses of literate Chinese. The introduction of widespread woodblock printing during the Tang Dynasty (618–907) and the invention of movable type printing by Bi Sheng (990–1051) during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) rapidly spread written knowledge throughout China like never before. In more modern times, the author Lu Xun (1881–1936) would be considered the founder of modern baihua literature in China."

Wikipedia prose is stilted and timorously qualified. The "Guide to Writing Better Articles" includes "avoid weasel words," but you can't look at more than an article or two before you start to cringe.

The basic Wikipedia principle NPOV, or "Neutral Point of View" often actually turns out to be "No Point of View" or "The Last Point of View Standing." If everybody has authority, then nobody has authority to shape or set a theme. Articles simply accrete.

Users of the English Wikipedia outside China will not be directly affected, but there is a continuing question of censorship or blocking access within the PRC. Rebecca MacKinnon discusses with founder Jimmy Wales whether "China will change Wikipedia or Wikipedia will change China." Will editors be tempted to self-censor?

Wikipedians recognize these objections. The frank though rambling article "Researching With Wikipedia" is an excellent summary of the pitfalls and drawbacks, with links to other good articles. The jist: "You should not use only Wikipedia for primary research (unless you are writing a paper about Wikipedia)."
These problems lie with the very nature of the creature, which cannot be changed without killing it. Wikipedia's nature reflects the interactive, anonymous, flat, and decentralized "Web 2.0," which includes Google, FaceBook, YouTube. This probably will lead to the end of reading books, of libraries, and of civilization as we know it.

The flat internet breeds a clickable link mentality which expects everything to be available instantly and acts as if anything that's not clickable (in English, please) doesn’t exist. True, as my colleague Alan Baumler points out, vastly more articles are available online. But because much of human experience is not clickable in English, the usable world is reduced to the present. As an MA student remarked to a librarian friend of mine when he recommended an article which was not online, "I don't do paper."

The interactive and decentralized internet is flat, that is, it reduces hierarchy. Populist bloggers welcome the end run around elites in the national media to allow direct access to the facts. The early film director D.W. Griffiths suggested that when movie cameras became widespread, historians would no longer be needed since anyone could look at the photographs to prove what had or had not happened.

These all misunderstand the nature of knowledge by confusing "data" with "facts" and "analysis," and contribute to an anti-intellectualism disguised as anti-elitism. Wikipedia's sense of community – a good thing – sometimes defers to the anonymous persistent voice rather than to the well informed and accountable expert.

Even the claims to internet democracy may be exaggerated – 1 percent of Wikipedia contributors account for nearly half the participation. The WikiProject Countering Systemic Bias is a cool minded analysis and call for help in balancing the predominately male, white, English speaking geeks who live in affluent Northern Hemisphere countries and do most of the editing.

In the end, I will stick with my Wikipedia habit. The fun and information are hard to beat, and I’m not harming anybody but myself. Wikipedia intensifies the problems we discussed, but they would not go away if Wikipedia did.

The most important argument is that people use it: the article on Chinese Literature has been visited nearly 10,000 times in September 2008, the article on Chiang Kai-shek, 32,000 times and "Mao Zedong" more than 175,000 times, ranking it in the top 800 articles. As the elephant said when he pooped on the walk, "that’s here to stay."

The good news is that Wikipedia allows us to compensate for the problems by our participation. Part II will discuss practical tricks, shortcuts, neglected features, and how to make best use of your talents in editing.

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I will post further references and links at Frog in a Well, where you are also welcome to post comments.

I would like to thank Alan Baumler, Kate Merkel-Hess, Konrad Lawson, Ray Lum, and a friend who wishes to be anonymous for their suggestions.

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