The Encyclopedia in Cyberspace

Wikipedia Makes Every Man an Editor

Since the Internet's early days, there has been much speculation over the future of the encyclopedia. For the most part, it seemed the boundless potential of the information revolution would largely improve the existing format—making encyclopedias more comprehensive, interactive, and accessible. But some of the more interesting advances in recent years have entailed enlarging not only the realm of information *resources* but the sphere of information *producers.*

The Wikipedia is the largest and best-known of today's online encyclopedias. Its mission is to "put the sum of all human knowledge in the form of an encyclopedia in the hands of every single person on the planet for free," according to one of its founders. But whereas old-fashioned encyclopedias required the Herculean, aristocratic labor of scholarly minds to assemble their content and bring their volumes to completion, the Wikipedia is thoroughly democratic: Anyone with access to the Internet, both expert and layman alike—even an elementary school student—can contribute to and edit Wikipedia's content.

The idea for the Wikipedia emerged from an earlier effort to create a free Internet encyclopedia called Nupedia. At the time of its demise, Nupedia's content comprised a paltry 23 articles and some 60 more unfinished entries. Nupedia's co-founders Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger attributed this poor showing to the cumbersome process of review by credentialed experts with specialized knowledge, the preferred method of encyclopedia-makers past. So they rolled the dice on a new peer-review model based on Web software called "wiki," which allows multiple users not only to contribute to but also to edit a common pool of information. It enables people to collaborate on the creation of massive amounts of information-rich content in ways never before possible.

In only three years' time, the Wikipedia has grown by leaps and bounds, and today it is positively

seething with activity: A legion of so-called "Wikipedians"—some tens of thousands of them—regularly contribute articles, edit and rework existing ones, and collaborate in various other ways to develop Wikipedia's online content. Wikipedia actually encourages articles on new subjects from anyone, no matter how rough the writing may be. One "of the great advantages of the Wiki system," says Wikipedia's statement on editorial policy, "is that incomplete or poorly written first drafts of articles can evolve into polished, presentable masterpieces through the process of collaborative editing." To date, Wikipedia has amassed over one million articles in over one hundred different languages.

Along the way, Wikipedia has encountered a few operational setbacks—including an occasional rash of cyber-vandalism, server outages and software problems, disputes about whether to accept advertising, and a wiki-crackdown by communist authorities in China. But Wikipedia has continued to grow nonetheless: According to the Alexa tracking service, Wikipedia is now one of the top 300 most popular websites on the Internet, ranking much higher than most other online reference tools. So optimistic is co-founder Wales about Wikipedia's future that he recently predicted that the *Encyclopædia Britannica* "will be crushed out of existence within five years."

Not so, say some scholars, educators, and other information professionals who question the reliability of Wikipedia's content. In one recent article for *TechCentralStation*, Robert McHenry, a former *Britannica* editor-in-chief, observed by way of example that Wikipedia's entry on Alexander Hamilton, which had begun as a modestly good effort at biography, had been revised in the process of collaborative editing into a mediocre article replete with spelling and grammatical mistakes, clouded reasoning, and factual inconsistencies. In McHenry's assessment, the person who consults Wikipedia is like 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."

Wikipedia's critics also charge that its articles are too biased, especially on politically-charged issues. Although Wikipedia's editorial guidelines officially aim for cool neutrality and objectivity, "the reliability of the Wikipedia information on a particular topic is inversely proportional to the level of controversy and passion elicited by that topic," as one blogger put it. During this year's presidential campaigns, the articles on Senator Kerry and President Bush were so heavily edited—and in some instances, so thoroughly vandalized—that Wikipedia's volunteer administrators were forced to freeze the articles until after the election.

Others fear a demographic bias in Wikipedia's coverage. Most Wiki-

pedians apparently tend to be comput-er-savvy, male professionals from the U.S. and U.K., and Wikipedia's content is heavily skewed toward technical, political, and scientific subjects. This means, as Ethan Zuckerman of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society has put it, that Wikipedia has "more information on Middle Earth than on Central Africa."

But for all of its failings, Wiki-pedians can claim that their online project has been failing forward. In 2002, an IBM research group discov-ered that acts of vandalism on Wikipedia are corrected on average within five minutes. Factual and gram-matical errors, too, are quickly fixed:

Shortly after McHenry's critical arti-cle appeared online, Wikipedia's entry on Hamilton was corrected. One con-cerned Wikipedian has established Project CROSSBOW—"The Com-mittee Regarding Overcoming Serious Systemic Bias On Wikipedia"—designed to develop strategies to increase contributions and improve-ments on topics that don't usually get much attention. On the whole, Wikipedia has shown a tremendous ability to self-police its content. But doing so requires the constant vigi-lance of the educated to defend what we know against those who know nothing. And in a way, this is not a new problem at all.