

Introduction: Connections

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Twenty years ago, Wikipedia set out on its path to provide humanity with free access to the sum of all knowledge. Even if this is a mission that can't be finished, Wikipedia has made remarkable progress toward the impossible. How so? Wikipedia is an encyclopedia built on a wiki. And never has an application (gathering the sum of human knowledge) been so suited to its medium (easily interconnected web pages).

Encyclopedias have long been reliant on interconnections. In 1755, the *Encyclopédie's* Denis Diderot wrote that the use of cross-references (or *renvois*) was “the most important part of our encyclopedia scheme.”¹ This feature allowed the *Encyclopédie's* editors to depict the connective tissue of Enlightenment knowledge and to dodge state and church authorities by way of facetious and satirical references. For example, they linked to articles on the Christian rite of communion, wherein “the body and blood of Christ” is consumed, from the article on “Cannibals.”

At the onset of each new informational medium—from paper, to microfilm, to silicon—connectivity was the impetus. Among the documentalists of the early twentieth century, there was Wilhelm Ostwald's *Brücke*, a bridge, and Suzanne Briet's *indice*, an indicator. Such documentalists advanced indexing and classification schemes to improve interconnections between information. Then, on the cusp of the digital age, Vannevar Bush famously wrote of the power of an electromechanical memex laced with “associative trails.”² This inspired the hyperlinks of the 1960s and the URLs of the 1990s.

Creating HTML web pages interspersed with links, however, is not so easy; the first wiki was launched in 1995 to fix this. To create and link to a new page, you simply wrote the page's title in CamelCase, so-called

because capitalizing “camel” and “case,” when conjoined, has two humps. Your lumpy title is now a link that, when clicked, takes you to a fresh page awaiting new content.

Wikipedia, then, appeared in 2001, almost by way of accident.³ Efforts at collaboratively creating an online encyclopedia had faltered for years. When a wiki was added to one such project, as an experimental scratchpad, it took off beyond anyone’s expectation: Wikipedia was born.

Just as the history of two centuries, from print to digital, reveals the importance of connection—call it a reference, bridge, indicator, trail, or link—Wikipedia’s two decades are also a story of connection. The following essays speak of and exemplify those connections across disciplines and borders, across languages and data, and across the professional and personal.

What Has Changed

This is a collection of essays about Wikipedia as the English-language edition and larger movement approach their twentieth year. Many of the contributors are astonished by this milestone because we’ve been so close to Wikipedia and remember when it was young. So we pause to look back on those two decades, to see what has changed, and to connect the past with the present, looking toward the future.

In Wikipedia’s early days, those of us concerned with history argued Wikipedia was the fulfillment of a long-pursued vision of a universal encyclopedia: the rousing end of a long story. But, of course, the story didn’t end; a good story never ends.

Other contributors have sought to explain how Wikipedia worked in practice given that it was not easily explained by theory. New theories, including commons-based peer production, prompted hope that Wikipedia’s success would be followed by similar examples. Yet there have been disappointments on the road to an imagined utopia and back.

Those of us following the public discourse about Wikipedia remember it as the new kid on the block, upsetting traditional knowledge authorities. We can recall a former president of the American Library Association calling Wikipedia the dietary equivalent of a Big Mac.⁴ Now, Wikipedia is reported on in the press as the grown-up of the web and as a bastion of (mostly) reasoned interaction.

Many of the educators among us first encountered Wikipedia when we were students. Even if our teachers were suspicious of the new site, we were thrilled to collaborate with others on something people would actually read. Now, as Alexandria Lockett notes in her essay, our students have never lived in a world without Wikipedia. Helping students contribute to Wikipedia is one of the most rewarding assignments we offer. And rather than dismissing Wikipedia as junk food, some librarians see rigorous engagement with Wikipedia as a staple of their profession.

Finally, those of us who recognized the limitations of Wikipedia in its first decade hoped that the obstacles of complicated syntax, entrenched biases, and complex policies were tractable. A lot of effort has been spent on these concerns, and progress has been made. Though it took time to develop and deploy, the VisualEditor is now the predominant default on most Wikipedia editions. And there are now vigorous projects working to increase representation and participation. Even so, these problems are far from solved.

Insight from Hindsight, in Three Parts

The intention behind this collection was to pause and ask: what have we learned?

Often, technology is seen as a stepping stone to the future. Near its start, Wikipedia was labeled as an extraordinary revolution and a degenerate hive mind. Yet people are so caught up in tech's present novelty and future implications they rarely look back to consider what actually happened. Wikipedia's twentieth anniversary is a moment to do so. It's not often we have such a hyped and controversial tech phenomenon still doing what it was doing from its start—most become advertising platforms, like Facebook and Google.

Consequently, in late 2018, this book project was launched with a request for essay proposals related to "Wikipedia @ 20." Prospective contributors were asked what insights they had gained from these two decades of history. The saying that "hindsight is twenty-twenty" is sometimes used dismissively; we wanted to use it constructively. Contributors were asked to tell us about lessons learned, insights gained, and myths busted during their engagement with Wikipedia.

The resulting chapters are grouped into three sections: hindsight, connection, and vision. This is an arbitrary division as each essay has elements of each—but some organization never hurt.

The first set of chapters are retrospective; they are mini-histories on how Wikipedia has been produced and discussed relative to internal and external tensions—such as the encyclopedia’s conflict of interest policy. And the insight from these hindsight is that events flow in ways contrary and unexpected. Wikipedia has far exceeded its creators’ expectations and outlived the many predictions of its death. Similarly, as the authors of “From Anarchy to Wikiality, Glaring Bias to Good Cop” write, Wikipedia’s press coverage “has evolved from bewilderment at the project, to concern and hostility at its model, to acceptance of its merits and disappointment at its shortcomings, and finally to calls to hold it socially accountable and reform it like any other institution.” The peer-based production that the encyclopedia heralded had much utopian potential, but time has revealed unforeseen limitations. And among the many things Wikipedia is not, it is not a newspaper, but its content and readership is driven by the news.

The second set of chapters demonstrate the richness of connections. Not only is the link essential in the story of encyclopedias and the web, it is a motif in many of the essays. Wikipedia spans national, cultural, and linguistic divides as well as those between people, data, and machines. Wikipedia has even become “the most important laboratory for social scientific and computing research in history,” as one pair of contributors show. And the connections between Wikipedia and the many platforms that use its data are not as close as they should be, severing the context and verifiability of knowledge.

In “Three Links,” the authors write that “working with the encyclopedia and its community has been a valuable forging ground, shaping each of us into links in a wide-reaching mesh of personal and professional connections.” Wikipedia connects volunteers, teachers, librarians, scholars, and activists. Many of our contributors bridge these communities by serving in multiple roles—not always easy. There’s also evidence of Wikipedia’s place in our personal lives, of long-lasting collaborations and friendships.

The final set of chapters speak to Wikipedia’s founding vision, best expressed in the famous provocation to “imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge.”⁵ This Enlightenment-inspired promise has yet to be fulfilled.

Obviously, not everyone who'd like to read Wikipedia can do so, and we include the story of some of those making it available to people without internet and those within censorious regimes. However, "free access" is more than *read only*; it also includes contribution. As coeditor Jackie Koerner writes, Wikipedia's relationship with knowledge equity is complex: the summation of human knowledge is biased by those documenting it. We include essays from those working to remedy this shortfall, from the Art+Feminism and Black Lunch Table projects, from an educator at a historically Black Women's college, and from those at Wiki Education. A path forward, "Toward a Wikipedia For and From Us All," is illuminated by the contributors from *Whose Knowledge?*

We conclude with a capstone from Katherine Maher, executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation. As we finished work on this volume, the Wikimedia movement had finished a process for envisioning the Wikipedia of 2030. Wikipedia will continue its development from a wiki website toward an accessible platform for knowledge. And the community will redouble its efforts to include people and bodies of knowledge previously overlooked. Maher eloquently articulates what is required to continue the journey toward a world that no longer need only be imagined.

Notes

1. Denis Diderot, "The Encyclopedia," in *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization, Vol. 7: The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, John W. Boyer, Keith M. Baker, Julius Kirshner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 82.
2. Michael Zimmer, "Renvois of the Past, Present and Future: Hyperlinks and the Structuring of Knowledge from the Encyclopédie to Web 2.0," *New Media & Society* 11, no. 95 (2009), <http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/11/1-2/95>.
3. Joseph Reagle, "Wikipedia: The Happy Accident," *Interactions* 16, no. 3 (2009): 42–45, <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/1516016.1516026>.
4. Michael Gorman, "Jabberwiki: The Educational Response, Part II," *Encyclopædia Britannica Blog*, June 26, 2007, <http://blogs.britannica.com/2007/06/jabberwiki-the-educational-response-part-ii/>.
5. Jimmy Wales, "Wikipedia Founder Jimmy Wales Responds," *Slashdot*, July 28, 2004, <https://slashdot.org/story/04/07/28/1351230/wikipedia-founder-jimmy-wales-responds>.

