19 Possible Enlightenments: Wikipedia's Encyclopedic Promise and Epistemological Failure

Matthew A. Vetter

Wikipedia challenges traditional notions of expertise, authorship, access, and transparency. It also conserves features of the genre that characterize its emergence from Western Enlightenment logic. Given Wikipedia's maturity, how can we understand this contradiction?

Twenty years ago, I was an undergraduate at the University of Kentucky. Wikipedia was there, too, of course, but very much in the background. It wasn't until ten years later, around 2011, that I began to actually attend to and reflect on the project as a collaborative and technologically mediated system and philosophy for knowledge creation, curation, and distribution. Throughout this essay, I use the term *epistemology* to describe this system as well as its related philosophy. I came to Wikipedia through English composition as scholars in that field discovered the encyclopedia's adaptability for teaching writing and research.[1] Some of these scholars were also asking their college students to actively participate in the (English version) of Wikipedia. This was an exciting prospect and one that I jumped on in my own teaching.

Yet my initial attraction to Wikipedia was always its ambitions regarding knowledge sharing and the rhetoric surrounding those ambitions. In an often-quoted interview in 2004, Wales asked us to "imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge."[2] Like many others, I found myself drawn to the enormity of this idea and drawn to the prospect of how I might motivate students by both challenging previous academic receptions of Wikipedia and giving them access to Wales's idealism.

Looking back, it has always been this optimism that was so attractive, but that attraction mutated as I continued to teach, edit, and study Wikipedia

over the last decade. I wrote my doctoral dissertation, which I defended in 2015, on Wikipedia, and that document also demonstrated the evolution of my thinking about the encyclopedia. What began as a strictly educational application of the ways in which Wikipedia could be used to teach writing (especially in terms of how participating in the encyclopedia could help students accomplish traditional learning outcomes), by the end, became something else.

I began focusing more and more on the complicated reality of Wikipedia's biases toward Western, rational, and print-centric knowledge-making practices: especially its well-documented gender gap and marginalization of indigenous knowledges. Wikipedia's optimistic rhetoric never ceased to amaze me, but it became more complex as I began to consider how it both challenged and conserved the boundaries of the encyclopedic genre. Wikipedia challenges traditional notions of expertise, authorship, access, and transparency, among other constructs. At the same time, it conserves features of the genre that characterize its emergence from Western Enlightenment logic—especially practices and policies related to verifiability and reliability that are rooted in print-centric notions of knowledge curation. Going forward, now that the encyclopedia is essentially a young adult, how should we understand Wikipedia as a project that promises possible enlightenment? How should we understand Wikipedia as an encyclopedia that fails to fully represent global and multicultural diversity? Can we understand both of these possibilities simultaneously?

In this chapter, I reveal the ways in which, despite postmodern critiques,[3] Wikipedia continues to promise enlightenment, and we (the Wikipedia community as well as academics engaged in Wikipedia-based education) continue to be pulled toward that promise. I have structured my contribution as an aporia, or riddle, in order to consider Wikipedia's encyclopedic promise as both a rhetorical strategy and state of puzzlement or impasse: an impossible question. Wikipedia's page on "aporia" was the first mainspace article I edited in March 2011.[4] As such, it serves as a touchstone regarding my original entry into the Wikipedia community as well as a philosophical analogy for my own evolving understanding of the encyclopedia's promise and failure. Ultimately, I argue that the reconciliation of these competing claims becomes possible by calling attention to Wikipedia's transparent and dynamic properties. Such properties can help us understand the

encyclopedia as an epistemology that is constantly in process, one that is always evolving and striving toward a universal circle of knowledge.

Wikipedia's Encyclopedic Promise

In "What Is an Encyclopedia? A Brief Overview from Pliny to Wikipedia," Dan O'Sullivan charts a succinct history of the genre, noting its major ambition for universal knowledge as well as how the genre has emerged as both a conservative and radical textual enterprise. Moving quickly through history, O'Sullivan traces a Western encyclopedic tradition by examining Pliny's *Natural History* (first century), Vincent de Beauvais's *Speculum Maius* (thirteenth century), Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (seventeenth century), Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* (eighteenth century), Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (eighteenth century), the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (nineteenth century), and finally Wikipedia (twenty-first century). O'Sullivan places particular emphasis on the Enlightenment period as crucial to the genre's major development and growth.[5] Further, while all of these experiments share common goals of gathering and organizing human knowledge, instantiations of the genre in the Enlightenment period mirror more closely some of Wikipedia's (and indeed modern encyclopedias in general) most basic motivations. In brief, the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment insisted on the possibility of the collection and curation of all human knowledge and its benefit to society. My purpose here is not to trace the history of the genre, however. Instead, I hope to introduce the first element of this essay's aporia, Wikipedia's promise, as historically situated—emerging directly from an Enlightenment positioning of the genre. Compare, for instance, Jimmy Wales (2004) description of the project of Wikipedia—"Imagine a world in which every single person is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing"[6]—with Denis Diderot's in 1775:

> Indeed, the purpose of an encyclopedia is to collect knowledge disseminated around the globe; to set forth its general system to the men with whom we live, and transmit it to those who will come after us, so that the work of preceding centuries will not become useless to the centuries to come; and so that our offspring, becoming better instructed, will at the same time become more virtuous and happy, and that we should not die without having rendered a service to the human race.[7]

Both definitions appear in the Wikipedia information page on Wikipedia's purpose, which also includes statements such as "Wikipedia has a lofty goal: a comprehensive collection of all of the knowledge in the world" and the more subtle "Wikipedia's purpose is to benefit readers by acting as an encyclopedia, a comprehensive written compendium that contains information on all branches of knowledge."[8] In both definitions of their respective encyclopedia projects, Wales and Diderot draw on an ambitious, Enlightenment-era understanding of knowledge as a tangible commodity, something that can be collected and distributed. In this rationalistic positioning, knowledge is something to be tracked down, recorded, and shared with the world. We might forgive Diderot's idealism, given his historical milieu. For Wales and the wider Wikipedia community, however, such a view of epistemology is in direct conflict with postmodern notions of knowledge emerging in the twentieth century. Such a conflict also constitutes the most problematic aspects of Wikipedia's failure to live up to its own ambitions for universal knowledge, which I reveal in the following discussion of the encyclopedia's neglect of indigenous knowledge.

Wikipedia's Epistemological Failure

Like Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, Wikipedia is an enormously ambitious project in that it insists that the encyclopedic endeavor itself (the gathering of all human knowledge) is at all possible. Further, Wikipedia's adherence to print culture, especially in terms of how it verifies factual claims,[9] both signals and reinforces the rational and modern insistence on the primacy of the written word as dominant medium for the communication of knowledge. As asserted by Peter Gallert and Maja van der Velden,

> Wikipedia as an encyclopedia is rooted in a culture of writing—not simply in the usage of a writing system to express and conserve thoughts, but in the almost exclusive usage of written sources for the body of its content. In its endeavor to systemize and codify the knowledge of mankind it voluntarily restricts itself to facts that are supported by reliable, published, third-party sources, as defined by its editor community.[10]

Ultimately, this allegiance to print discourse—which has become central to the encyclopedic genre itself since the invention of the printing press—also limits the genre from accomplishing its ambitions for creating and maintaining a universal "circle of knowledge." Instead of encouraging

a diversity of knowledge-making practices beyond those rooted in print, Wikipedia excludes editors who practice or only have access to marginalized knowledge-making practices (e.g., oral histories). Because of this, Wikipedia presents an epistemological condition that is essentially paradoxical—an aporia. As Noopur Raval argues, making a platform open access does not automatically translate to equality of participation, ease of access, or cultural acceptance of the medium.

> The question remains: where does one start? Does one wait for these thousands of un-become (those who cannot participate and cannot be recognized) digital citizens standing in the shadows to gradually emerge and adopt new technologies or does one rework the project's imagination to make space for various stakeholders who may not speak/write and document in the same way?[11]

Wikipedia's adherence to the practice and tradition of print places it firmly in the encyclopedic tradition, yet it is also this placement that prevents it from accomplishing its encyclopedic goal of becoming a global human knowledge source. This adherence manifests in three specific policies that maintain traditional Western textual practices: the policies of verifiability, no original research, and notability. All three policies, it's important to state, play a significant role in the creation of reliable content, and yet, all three also serve to limit Wikipedia's universality. The principle of verifiability requires that articles are sourced with reliable content that can be easily verified, that is published and widely available either in digital or print form.[12] "No original research," as applied to article mainspace, prohibits the use of "material—such as facts, allegations, and ideas—for which no reliable, published sources exist."[13] Finally, the principle of notability requires that topics (to be represented in Wikipedia) have significant coverage from reliable (usually printed) sources independent of the subject.[14] These three policies significantly define the encyclopedia's knowledge-making practices, especially in terms of what is represented and who is writing those representations.

The dominance of print culture plays a significant role in the marginalization of indigenous knowledge cultures, especially when their knowledge is stored and transmitted orally. Peter Gallert and Maja van der Velden further explain what happens to these cultures in Wikipedia:

> For many aspects of the culture, tradition, and knowledge of indigenous people, there exist no or insufficient written records. This puts indigenous knowledge in Wikipedia, particularly on its largest language edition, the English Wikipedia,

into a disadvantageous situation. Oral information transmission is not regarded as a way of publishing by the online encyclopedia, knowledge keepers are often believed to be too close to their narrative's subjects to follow a neutral point of view, and passing on songs and stories is not seen as a reliable way of preserving knowledge.[15]

Wikipedia's failure to represent and engage indigenous and/or oral knowledge practices is only one example of the systemic biases at work in the encyclopedia. Researchers, academics, and Wikimedians alike have also addressed problems related to the encyclopedia's gender gap as inherently systemic.[16] The indigenous knowledge problem, however, does help to illustrate the ways in which the Wikipedia's encyclopedic promise falls short.

These are not new issues. Nor are they unacknowledged by the Wikimedia community. The Oral Citations Project, for instance, an initiative and research project led by Indian Wikimedian Achal Prabhala to validate alternative verifiability practices and engage oral epistemologies, was completed in 2011. The project was funded by Wikimedia itself, and garnered attention from several media outlets. It did not, however, drastically or significantly change Wikipedia's print-centric verifiability policy. In a response to a question on a talk page about the project's outcome, for example, Asaf Bartov, a Wikimedia grant officer, wrote the following: "[The project] has not gained adoption or significant attention from the editing community; it remains a possible direction, and may be picked up in the future, if and when the editing community shows interest in tackling this formidable challenge."[17]

This poor representation of indigenous knowledge prompts the question: Why and how does enlightenment rhetoric persist in and about Wikipedia? I direct this question to the Wikipedia community. But I also ask a similar question of myself. Given what I have learned in the last decade about the impossibility of universal knowledge, why do I continue to be enthralled and excited by Wikipedia's enlightenment potential? This is the aporia, the riddle, that I attempt to answer in the final section.

Possible and Impossible Answers: Wikipedia as Game, or Blind Man's Bluff

Toward the end of his brief essay "What Is an Encyclopedia? An Historical Overview from Pliny to Wikipedia," Dan O'Sullivan further describes this impossibility of universal coverage in the following passage:

> The illusion of a totalizing drive for universal knowledge—a project that is manifestly impossible to achieve, even with the most advanced technology and the enthusiastic cooperation of thousands—is also quite inappropriate in the emergent postmodern, skeptical, and multicultural world of today. Indeed, knowledge cannot be exhaustively collected and stored in this manner but is always tied to the local time and situation in which it was developed and deployed, constantly in a state of flux.[18]

While he does not cite specific theorists, his critique is consistent with philosophical advances of the twentieth century. More specifically, poststructuralist theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault have interrogated traditional notions of knowledge by acknowledging their logocentrism (the faulty assumption that knowledge exists independent of language) and their historicity (the notion that knowledge is always created and characterized by historical context.)[19] Bruno Latour continues such deconstruction by charting the social construction of scientific knowledge; while Friedrich Nietzsche challenges the possibility of empirical objectivity itself.[20] Here I would make a distinction between, on the one hand, Derrida and Latour, who critique the transparency of language and empiricism respectively, and on the other, Foucault and Nietzsche, who critique the ethics and intent of those engaged in knowledge-making processes.

In Nietzsche's cynical philosophy especially, humankind has neither the capacity or desire for truth, and takes up instead,

> deception, flattering, lying, and cheating … the constant fluttering around the single flame of vanity … deeply immersed in illusions and dream images; their eye only glides over the surface of things … their feeling nowhere leads into truth, but contents itself with the reception of stimuli, playing, as it were, a game of blind man's bluff.[21]

For Nietzsche, the game of blind man's bluff is an apt analogy for the ways in which the desire for power, self-interest, ignorance, and language motivate and inform human philosophy. In such an analogy, truth becomes a game in which the main player is blindfolded—incapable of seeing the alternative motivations that drive their search for knowledge. In contrast to Nietzsche's cynicism, I would like to place Wikipedia's more optimistic rhetoric regarding its self-stated purpose: "Wikipedia has a lofty goal: a comprehensive collection of all of the knowledge in the world."[22] Not only does this ambition assume the possibility of a commodifiable and stable mass of knowledge (that only needs to be collected and made available);

it also assumes that Wikipedians will go about collecting that knowledge through a procedure that is both altruistic and methodologically balanced.

In other words, the ambitious and lofty rhetoric of Wikipedia's encyclopedic project often neglects to consider its editors' self-interests or ulterior motives. And yet, of course volunteer editors are motivated by their own interests to improve and create encyclopedic content. Further, there will always be paid and political editing in Wikipedia. Self-interest can even help to explain Wikipedia's content gaps—as the homogeneity of editorial demographics creates a homogeneity of well-covered subject areas and subject coverage gaps—as policy makers in Wikipedia reify knowledge practices that reflect their own cultures and cultural values.

It's important to pause here to make a note about my own motives in writing this essay. I wrote in the introduction that Wikipedia's optimistic rhetoric never ceased to amaze me but only became more complex as I began to realize how it both challenges and conserves the boundaries of the encyclopedic genre. This remains true, even as I wade into Nietzsche's cynical vision. Wikipedia remains the most comprehensive and equitable knowledge project we have known. And while I challenge its failure to represent universal knowledge, I also hold in my mind contesting arguments regarding what the community has accomplished. To put it another way, it is always my admiration for the project of Wikipedia that compels me to reflect and critique it as an epistemological project.

Perhaps if we soften Nietzsche's philosophy slightly—remove its cynicism and misanthropic critique—we might better understand how self-interest works both in opposition to and in support of Wikipedia's ambitious goals. Yes, self-interested editing leads to imbalances of content and biases among representations of genders, topics, and even geographies.[23] But self-interest also means that editors focus on the development of articles and topics they would like to see improved; it encourages participation and enables the altruistic volunteering of time and effort that have made this and other peer production projects so successful.

Further, while Nietzsche's description of knowledge as game is a useful analogy for understanding the curation of knowledge in Wikipedia, I would also revise the rules of such a game. In particular, I would argue that Wikipedia has, in many ways, removed the blindfold from "blind man's bluff." Indeed, it is Wikipedia's radical transparency and dynamism that ultimately allows a resolution of the conflict between its encyclopedic promise and

epistemological failure. Unlike encyclopedias before it, Wikipedia is not a stable object. Rather, it remains perpetually unfinished. It is a performance or experience in epistemology, and its processes are available (to those who choose to play the game) on countless pages devoted to discussion, history, policy, and governance of the encyclopedia.

Wikipedia as Epistemology in Process

Because of its innovative application of the wiki platform for large-scale peer production, Wikipedia represent an epistemology in process: one that is always evolving alongside social, cultural, and technological influences. Further, it is this unfinished and in-process state that helps to reconcile the tension between the encyclopedia's ambition and its failure to fully carry out that ambition. Reconciliation of Wikipedia's failures to represent multiple forms and methods of knowledge curation requires that we see opportunity in its unfinished form. Moreover, it requires that we be more attentive to those spaces in the encyclopedia that allow and enact the recursive and collaborative process of knowledge production and curation: history pages which show us multiple iterations of an article in development and talk pages where editors negotiate an article in development. It is this flux and negotiation, ultimately, that demonstrates the encyclopedia's capability to exist within rationalist *and* postmodern realities, to value the enlightenment ambitions of the encyclopedic genre (via Diderot) *and* the complicated postmodern reality of knowledge as socially constructed.

Notes

1. Robert E. Cummings, *Lazy Virtues: Teaching Writing in the Age of Wikipedia* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2009); Carra L. Hood, "Editing out Obscenity: Wikipedia and Writing Pedagogy," *Computers and Composition Online* (Spring 2009), https://www2.bgsu.edu/departments/english/cconline/wiki_hood/index.html; James P. Purdy, "When the Tenets of Composition Go Public: A Study of Writing in Wikipedia," *College Composition and Communication* 61, no. 2 (December 2009): 351–373.

2. Jimmy Wales, "Wikipedia Founder Jimmy Wales Responds," *Slashdot*, July 28, 2004, https://slashdot.org/story/04/07/28/1351230/wikipedia-founder-jimmy-wales-responds.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Michel Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth (The Government of Self and*

Others II): Lectures at the College De France, 1983–1984 (London, UK: Palgrave Mac-Millan, 2011); Bruno Latour, Steve Woolgar, and Jonas Salk, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (Chicago: Aristeus Books, 2012).

4. Wikipedia, s.v. "Aporia: Difference between Revisions," last modified March 8, 2011, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Aporia&type=revision&diff=417869078&oldid=398840873.

5. Dan O'Sullivan, "What Is an Encyclopedia? A Brief Overview from Pliny to Wikipedia," in *Critical Point of View: A Wikipedia Reader*, ed. Geert Lovink and Nathaniel Tkacz (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011), 34–49.

6. Wales, "Wikipedia Founder Jimmy Wales Responds."

7. Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew, and Other Works* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956).

8. Wikipedia, s.v. *"Wikipedia: Purpose,"* last modified July 3, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Purpose.

9. Wikipedia, s.v. "Wikipedia: Verifiability," last modified August 21, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability.

10. Peter Gallert and Maja Van der Velden, "Reliable Sources for Indigenous Knowledge: Dissecting Wikipedia's Catch-22," in *Embracing Indigenous Knowledge in a New Technology Design Paradigm*, ed. Nicola J. Bidwell and Heike Winschiers-Theophilus (Indigenous Knowledge Technology Conference, 2013).

11. Raval Noopur, "The Encyclopedia Must Fail!—Notes on Queering Wikipedia," *ADA: A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology*, no. 5 (July 2014).

12. Wikipedia, s.v. "Wikipedia: Verifiability," last modified August 21, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability.

13. Wikipedia, s.v. "Wikipedia: No Original Research" last modified August 21, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No_original_research.

14. Wikipedia, s.v. "Wikipedia: Notability" Wikipedia, last modified August 22, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability.

15. Gallert and Van der Velden, "Reliable Sources for Indigenous Knowledge," 2.

16. Benjamin Collier and Julia Bear, "Conflict, Criticism, Or Confidence: An Empirical Examination of The Gender Gap in Wikipedia Contributions," in *CSCW '12: Proceedings of the ACM 2012 conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (New York: ACM, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1145/2145204.2145265; Ruediger Glott, Philipp Schmidt, and Rishab Ghosh, *Wikipedia Survey Overview* (Maastricht: UNU-MERIT, March 2010), http://www.ris.org/uploadi/editor/1305050082Wikipedia_Overview_15March2010

-FINAL.pdf; Leigh Gruwell, "Wikipedia's Politics of Exclusion: Gender, Epistemology, and Feminist Rhetorical (In)action." *Computers and Composition*, 37, (September 2015): 117–131; Adrianne Wadewitz, "Wikipedia's Gender Gap and the Complicated Reality of Systemic Gender Bias," *Hastac*, July 26, 2013, https://www.hastac.org/blogs/wadewitz/2013/07/26/wikipedias-gender-gap-and-complicated-reality-systemic-gender-bias.

17. Meta-Wiki, s.v. "Research Talk: Oral Citations," last modified June 28, 2016, https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research_talk:Oral_Citations.

18. O'Sullivan, "What Is an Encyclopedia?" 48.

19. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*; Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*.

20. Latour, Woolgar, and Salk, *Laboratory Life*; Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*.

21. Ibid.

22. Wikipedia, s.v. "Wikipedia: Purpose."

23. Mark Graham, "Wiki Space: Palimpsests and the Politics of Exclusion," in *Critical Point of View: A Wikipedia Reader*, ed. Geert Lovink and Nathaniel Tkacz (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011): 269–282.