The Wikipedia Revolution

Jeffrey Barlow
Pacific University

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The Wikipedia Revolution

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By Jeffrey Barlow

This article consists of a review of an excellent book, Andrew Lih’s *The Wikipedia Revolution*, and, in the spirit of *Wikipedia*, a "stub"— that is the beginning of a subsequent piece on how different classes of users can better use *Wikipedia*, which has become truly indispensable.

**Review:**

The impact of *Wikipedia* is closely related to the impact of the Internet itself. It is very much part of the Web 2.0 stage of the Internet. *Wikipedia* is an application which permits a community of highly organized— or loosely organized users, depending on your perspective—to create content. The advantages and disadvantages of the massive on-line encyclopedia, with its unattributed and community-edited articles, are largely those of the Internet itself. It is the first recourse when searching for information for more people, myself included, than any other site. But, at the same time, its articles are unattributed [1], and there are abundant examples of its misuse by those deliberately planting inaccurate or misleading, not to say defamatory and deliberately false information [2].

Andrew Lih’s work is an excellent introduction to this cultural phenomenon. Lih had good access to key figures in its founding and in its continuing development. The book includes a not-very-informative forward by Jimmy Wales, *Wikipedia*’s animating spirit, who has usually preferred to stay very much behind the scenes at the site, having largely turned it over to the community of users [3].

It is not, of course, possible to write any one definitive book on such a broad phenomenon as *Wikipedia*. *The Wikipedia Revolution* is certainly not a guide to how to best utilize it for research nor how best to write for it. There are plenty of other works for those purposes, and we welcome, again in the spirit of *Wikipedia*, readers to mention works they have found useful for other purposes in the comments section of this review.

In addition, there is more than one *Wikipedia* in the sense that many national groups have joined
in creating it, and have not only their own unique languages (There are entries in 255 different languages as of Lih’s writing in 2007-2008.) but their own branch Wikipedia organizations with their own rules and their own cultural concerns [4]. Wikipedia is also constantly growing and mutating, so any one book will necessarily neglect a great deal. This is then, a study of the dominant American English language version of Wikipedia.

As well as treating the history of Wikipedia, Lih necessarily deals with its technological underpinnings, a very interesting story in and of itself. A community of users has voluntarily modified and adapted the Wiki software originally created by Ward Cunningham [5] to steadily meet enormous technical challenges, such as how to facilitate writing, editing, and reading Wikipedia in its 255 different languages.

These were not, however, the most daunting problems which Wikipedia faced. Those problems were the social ones. Wikipedia is, after all, the world’s largest encyclopedia of knowledge, with not only the most users, but also a huge community of writers, editors, and other behind-the-scenes critical personnel who selflessly patrol for bad grammar, punctuation, incorrect information, evil intent, and poor taste. As the work’s subtitle suggests, Wikipedia is created and maintained by “a Bunch of Nobodies.” These are all organized into what may be the world’s largest technologically enabled voluntary community. As a result, Wikipedia, though the author does not belabor the fact, is a fascinating social experiment, which shows the very best, and occasionally the very worst of our species—at least the worst that can be accomplished by writing on the Internet.

Despite the inchoate nature of Wikipedia, The Internet Revolution is tightly focused, well written, and informative. It is an excellent place to begin understanding the history, the key controversies, and the major issues related to the development of Wikipedia. Lih also deals with the antecedents of Wikipedia, principally Nupedia, which was intended to be fully peer-reviewed [6].

Lih is well qualified to write the work, having worked both as an academic at Columbia (where he was a founder of the Media Studies program, and at the University of Hong Kong, in journalism and new media). At the time of writing, Lih was a frequent commentator at CNN, NPR, and MSNBC. He is very much a believer in the Internet as a tool for democracy, and even invites the readers of this book to edit its last chapter in a wiki format [7]. It would be difficult for an author to show more trust in the “commons” than this. He is also an administrator (a powerful class of Wikipedia users) who has edited more than ten thousand entries.

Lih and The Wikipedia Revolution then, do not lack for authority. Unfortunately, Wikipedia itself does. That is, as the ordinary viewer cannot know who has written or who has subsequently edited an entry, let alone what their qualifications may be, the articles cannot safely be accepted as definitive, and are often disputed. One of the key concepts of Wikipedia is that its content is not original research but a compilation of knowledge drawn from other sources. In short, it is an encyclopedia, deliberately modeled on classical models. As a result, many educational institutions, and doubtless many more educators, do not permit students to cite Wikipedia articles
in the notes or bibliographies of formal papers.

Wikipedia’s lack of authority is unfortunate, but inherent in its nature. It has become a useful source—easily the world’s most useful single source—for research and learning of all types on virtually every conceivable topic precisely because it draws on user community interests and necessarily foregoes peer review. Lih does a great deal to establish the limits of Wikipedia authority. He discusses important points in its development when critical decisions, such as not to establish formal peer review, were made.

Lih also, however, points out that there is substantial care taken to ensure a high level of trust. For example, it is not true that anybody can post anything on any topic. The community of users has established a number of important restrictions and rules. For example, would-be authors are advised:

Remember the article you create will be deleted quickly if it is not acceptable. Wikipedia has a new pages patrol division where people check your new articles shortly after you create them.

- Articles that do not meet notability and do not cite reliable published sources are likely to be deleted.
- Do not create pages about yourself, your company, your band or your friends, nor pages that advertise, nor personal essays or other articles you would not find in an encyclopedia.
- Be careful about the following: copying things, controversial material, extremely short articles, and local-interest articles [8].

There are many other restrictions and a sharp-eyed community of groups (and very sophisticated software ‘bots) such as the “new pages patrol” ready to delete, correct, or edit work.

Those who want a better understanding of Wikipedia might well begin with Lih’s work simply because it is linear and authoritative. The next step would be to register with Wikipedia (a very simple instantaneous process…no waiting for your email to cough up a password or other common delays) then prowl through it in order to understand the resources available to you. Many of these are broadly valuable; The Wikipedia Manual of Style, for example is an excellent resource for writers, and for students and teachers of writing [9]. The Wikipedia Revolution should be useful not only to users of Wikipedia, but to those wishing better to understand the impact of the Internet, our audience at the Berglund Center.

End of Review

Stub: How to Effectively Use Wikipedia

In Wikipedia, a “stub” is the bare beginning of what the author hopes will eventually be a much more developed article. That is the case for the following. I hope to draw some reader comment and in any event intend to fully develop this stub as an editorial for the next issue of Interface.
There are many reasons why *Wikipedia* is not equivalent to a peer-reviewed article written by professionals in the topic area and this means that it can never be granted the highest level of authority, as least as judged by scholars. To treat it as no more than a conventional paper encyclopedia, however, is naive. Educators (or Educationists as Sanger prefers to call them in the article cited above) who simply forbid students from using *Wikipedia* are making at least three mistakes.

First, for most students *Wikipedia* is instantly available and usually provides the sort of pithy introduction to an unknown topic that would get a researcher started. (As Lih points out, in many languages *Wikipedia* is the only encyclopedia available in any form.) I myself go to *Wikipedia* for information even on topics where I am expert. I would do so if to see if there was any new information available, if for no other reason. (I would like to hear from scholars who do not themselves do the same. Please comment below.) And as for topics where I am relatively ignorant, usually, but not always, *Wikipedia* will suggest additional reference points upon which I can begin to scaffold my own understanding.

The second reason why strict prohibitions on the use of *Wikipedia* are unwise is that students will use it regardless of what they are told. When I once forbade my students from using it, one gave the stylized “whatever” shrug, and said that she would use it anyway but would cite the sources that it cited as evidence for her point, or would use it to backtrack to an Internet site which would meet my standards. Either of these, of course, is an accepted scholarly practice in paper materials, though the former requires a specialized sort of reference note.

Thirdly, and most importantly, blanket prohibitions on *Wikipedia* neglect an excellent opportunity to enhance students’ research skills. Behind the scenes in the metadata of a *Wikipedia* article, accessible to any registered user (as stated above, registration is a very easy and fast process) is the history of the article, notations of any editing changes, any disagreements as to fact, or other relevant issues. A student can, based on this information and on the conventional information available to any viewer such as presence or lack of notes and sources, make thoughtful decisions as to the authority of the piece, surely the key scholarly practice in any media, and perhaps the more important evaluative ability for the use of the Internet itself.

An assignment increasingly used by some teachers is for the students to evaluate a *Wikipedia* article that touches upon a research topic that they have already worked up. They might well begin their work with *Wikipedia*, do substantial library research, then go back to the same *Wikipedia* article. If they now perceive errors or inadequate coverage, they should register and correct them, citing their own sources. This is a process that *Wikipedia* calls “SOFIXIT,” that is, if you don’t agree, “Be Bold”—another *Wikipedia* injunction—and correct it.

For scholars acting in the public arena and wishing to cite electronic sources, an additional practice is necessary. If you cite electronic sources, you must state in your notes why they can be considered authoritative. At the Berglund Center we signal our own level of trust by affixing an evaluative seal to each piece we publish [10]. Sadly, very few other sites do this, so we must
ourselves certify each electronic source we use if we are to be taken seriously.

I myself recently had the experience of getting involved in a local (to Portland Oregon) controversy involving issues and fields in which I am expert. The topic was a very emotional one and so the on-line discussion was often confrontational, even bellicose.

As the venue was a blog-like structure, I tried to find useful Internet sources which I could cite in support of my positions, rather than standing on my own authority. I thought that these, being publically available, would be more useful to the audience. As I did so, I naturally sought out authoritative ones. In my notes, however, I merely cited them, not carefully explaining why they were useful and authoritative.

As the controversy itself had by this time become unavoidably political and subjective, this failure on my part opened me up to the quick dismissal of my sources as simply having been culled from the Internet. Once one of my opponents made that argument, other replied in the same vein. I then doggedly spent many hours citing published sources, contexting the Internet sources, and in general flogging a dead horse. My opponents had by then harrumphed away to the high ground, their original opinions intact.

While my problem was very particular to the controversy at hand and few issues are unlikely to provoke such partisan rancor, the problem is basic to the use of Wikipedia evidence. Anyone wishing to cite it as an authoritative source must explain, case-by-case, note-by-note, why any given article is credible. I now try to do this in my own writing for this journal.

Evidence of the reliability of a Wikipedia article (or any other online source) should include certain characteristics:

- It is sourced in published works by known experts or published via peer-review, as almost all books from reputable publishing houses and all university presses are.
- It has notes and bibliography showing a familiarity with the uses of such evidence.
- If it cites other on-line sources, you must go to them and see if they seem to be reputable as well.
- If a Wikipedia piece is marked “disputed” or has an “accuracy warning” stay away from it. The notation “citation needed” is probably also fatal to its current authority, although it is intended to signal only a weakness in citation at one point which does not necessarily invalidate the entire piece.

When citing such pieces, state in your notes why you find them authoritative. This is not the same as being merely useful. Students easily confuse the two. As one of my students said in his bibliography: “This source is authoritative because it is the only thing I can find on this topic.”

Writers should not, however, confuse authority and utility. For example: The articles I cited below all have the same qualities which make them authoritative for my uses here. They are about
Wikipedia and written at Wikipedia itself; this makes them what historians call an “original” or “primary source [11].”

So whether a student or an academic, or perhaps a businessperson wishing to persuade others, if you don’t feel qualified to evaluate Wikipedia or other Internet materials you would like to cite, and are not willing to spend a bit of time establishing their authority with other published or Internet sources, and you are unwilling to clearly state the basis for your judgments in your notes, then you should stay way from them and stick to the library, which, of course, has its own pitfalls.

Endnotes

[1] This is only true for the public viewer. Wikipedia editors themselves can tell who individuals are as they must all be registered and log in to post or correct. This may not correspond to a particular legal identity, of course, as pseudonyms are often used, but it does let editors judge the quality of frequent contributors’ works, and when necessary, contact them.


[3] Lih points out in some detail that there were important antecedents to Wikipedia and several other individuals also deserve to be known as “founders.” Foremost among these was Larry Sanger, often described as the co-founder of Wikipedia. Wales, however, has guided it from its formal inception to the present. Sanger recently published a very thoughtful if decidedly contrarian article, “Individual Knowledge and the Internet,” in Educause, found at: http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE+ Review/EDUCAUSEReviewMagazineVolume45/IndividualKnowledgeintheIntern/202336 In it he touches upon some of the frequent criticisms of Wikipedia. It is not material closely related to Lih’s work under review here, but it is certainly going to inspire considerable discussion among “Wikipedians.”

[4] Among the many fascinating examples which Lih discusses is the two-year long argument at Wikipedia as to whether to use the term Danzig or Gdansk to refer to the sometimes German, sometimes Polish, city by that name. Lih 122.

[5] We were fortunate to have Ward Cunningham as our keynote speaker at the Berglund Summer Institute in the summer of 2008. Ward not only discussed but also modeled the community spirit which has made Wikis and particularly Wikipedia what it is today.


[11] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primary_source for the distinction between these. The site is copiously noted in excellent sources many of which I am, as a practicing historian, familiar.

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2 THOUGHTS ON “THE WIKIPEDIA REVOLUTION”

Raquel Capraro
on January 30, 2014 at 6:17 PM said:

I do agree with all of the concepts you have presented on your post. They’re very convincing and will definitely work. Nonetheless, the posts are too brief for beginners. May you please lengthen them a little from subsequent time? Thank you for the post.

nigeria entertainment news
on February 4, 2014 at 10:28 AM said:

I believe other internet site proprietors should take in this site as an type incredibly clean and beneficial kind and design, as well as the content. You’re an expert in this topic!