



EDITORIAL

A tale of information ethics and encyclopædias; or, is *Wikipedia* just another internet scam?

Information
ethics and
encyclopaedias

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to look at the question of accuracy of content regarding *Wikipedia* and other internet encyclopædias.

Design/methodology/approach – By looking at other sources, the paper considers whether the information contained within *Wikipedia* can be relied on to be accurate.

Findings – *Wikipedia* poses as an encyclopædia when by no stretch of the definition can it be termed such; therefore, it should be subject to regulation.

Originality/value – The paper highlights the issue that, without regulation, content cannot be relied on to be accurate.

Keywords Encyclopaedias, Internet, Accuracy, Regulation

Paper type General review

Most of us have been raised with encyclopædias close at hand – on the home bookshelf, in a nearby library, on CD-ROM, online. Indeed, as a youngster I spent many a winter's day curled up with one or more volumes of the family's *Britannica*, learning about an amazing array of subjects, both mundane and esoteric. And it was all accepted as "truth".

As I became older, I learned how to evaluate books, including encyclopædias, and saw that *Britannica*, along with others of that ilk, drew on the expertise of some of the best-known experts in their respective disciplines. This, for me, helped to confirm the accuracy of content, which I think is the hallmark of any respected encyclopædia or dictionary

This seems to be implied in *Britannica*'s own discussion of "encyclopædia" (and I have now graduated to the *Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*): "...only the encyclopædia attempts to provide coverage over the whole range of knowledge, and only the encyclopædia attempts to offer a comprehensive summary of what is known of each topic considered."

And my long-time *bête noire*, *Wikipedia*, makes this quite clear: "... traditional encyclopedias are written by a number of employed text writers, usually people with an academic degree ..." But *Wikipedia* goes on to state that "the interactive nature of the Internet allowed for the creation of collaborative projects such as *Nupedia*, *Everything2*, *Open Site*, and *Wikipedia*, some of which allowed anyone to add or improve content". The emphasis here is mine, for it shows up the basic distinction between an



encyclopædia, where the content is created by experts and monitored by professional editors who themselves are often subject experts, and a compendium of opinion provided by unknown individuals. The latter by definition cannot be an encyclopædia, whether we are living in a print or digital universe.

I do not say that such compendia should be banned, but they should be recognised for what they are: opinions untested by experts. Is it any wonder, then, that the reaction against *Wikipedia* and its online cousins has set in – quite logically, beginning with the academic community, as this is the source of most material in traditional encyclopædias, so one might assume that academics are the best judges of accuracy and reliability of an encyclopædia. Most will know of the much-reported case of Middlebury College, one of the better New England institutions of higher education, and the banning of *Wikipedia* by the History Department there (Belew, 2007). But this is the tip of the iceberg, with many similar unreported cases (including the Faculty of Law of Victoria University of Wellington in 2006), as well as countless individual academics (myself among them) and teachers who have begun to warn their students of the inappropriateness of treating *Wikipedia* as a “real” encyclopædia, or of disallowing its use altogether.

Is this just another example of academic preciousness, or is there something in this reaction against *Wikipedia*? *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (admittedly a competitor of *Wikipedia* – and that, too, has attracted press interest) seems to put its finger on the issues in its article on *Wikipedia*. In *EBO* the argument against *Wikipedia* as an accurate, reliable resource – and therefore what is commonly accepted as an encyclopædia – can be summarised in three statements:

- (1) The central policy of inviting readers to serve as authors or editors creates a potential for problems as well as their partial solution. Not all users are scrupulous about providing accurate information.
- (2) *Wikipedia*’s method is to rely on its users to monitor and clean up its articles.
- (3) Unlike other encyclopaedias, *Wikipedia* has no editors or authors who accept responsibility for the accuracy and quality of their articles, yet identifiable individuals are far easier to hold accountable for mistakes, bias, and bad writing than is a community of anonymous volunteers.

Are these three points significant in assessing *Wikipedia*? In our view they are, because they take us into the area of information ethics, and we believe that *Wikipedia* can be shown to be an unethical resource unworthy of our respect.

We all recognise that the information world (what Floridi and others have termed the “infosphere”) is constantly expanding, and that we are all increasingly reliant on high quality, accurate information in the pursuit of our professional and daily lives. Considering the ethical aspects of this infosphere, Luciano Floridi has posited the interesting concept of “information entropy”, which, as “. . .the opposite of information capacity, indicates the decrease or decay of information leading to absence of form, pattern, differentiation or content in the infosphere” – a kind of information black hole (Floridi, 1998). Floridi goes on: “as the infosphere becomes increasingly meaningful and rich in content, the amount of information increases and entropy decreases”. But if the infosphere is not increasingly “meaningful and rich in content” – that is, if any part

of it is shown to be dishonestly posing as accurate information (or inaccurately posing as encyclopædic when it is in fact untested opinion) – then surely information entropy increases, and detracts from the overall quality of the infosphere.

Indeed, Floridi would seem to confirm this with his four basic moral laws of information ethics:

- (1) Entropy ought not to be caused in the infosphere (null law).
- (2) Entropy ought to be prevented in the infosphere.
- (3) Entropy ought to be removed from the infosphere.
- (4) Information welfare ought to be promoted by extending (information quantity), improving (information quality) and enriching (information variety) the infosphere (Floridi, 1998).

Now, Floridi's four basic moral laws, to anyone who has a passing acquaintance with moral philosophy and information ethics will sense a whiff of censorship and an attack on freedom of expression here – by disallowing entropy we are in some sense acting as gatekeepers of information, in much the same way that contributors to and editors of traditional encyclopædias act as gatekeepers of the content of their products.

Is this such a bad thing? Would any thinking person actually believe that unqualified support for freedom of speech and freedom of expression is justifiable? Fortunately, a partial answer is provided by my former colleague, John Weckert, who thinks not, "because one person's right to freedom of speech or expression can infringe on another's rights, and can clash with other goods" (Weckert, 2000, p. 106). If, then, the idea of complete freedom of expression for all is nonsensical, "... the issue now becomes one of where to draw the lines for this freedom. A common criterion is harm to others ..." (Weckert, 2000, p. 106).

"Harm to others", in terms of information ethics, must include potentially harmful information or information that contributes to information entropy.

The many recorded instances in inaccurate information purveyed by *Wikipedia*, of contributors deliberately posting misleading and potentially defamatory information, surely are a case for media regulation being extended to the Internet, and to *Wikipedia* in particular, which passes itself off as a respectable encyclopædia, when it in fact frequently publishes inaccurate and potentially damaging information:

Some regulation of the content of media is justified in order to protect the innocent and vulnerable. If some regulation in general is justifiable, and if the special arguments regarding the Internet are not sound, then the tentative conclusion must be that Internet content regulation is justifiable (Weckert, 2000, p. 109).

Let's put this in plain English. Internet content regulation is in some sense justifiable; regulating this content is a natural extension of existing media regulation; regulation helps protect the innocent and prevent information entropy; *Wikipedia*, by virtue of its unregulated content has the potential to harm the innocent and certainly to contribute to information entropy; *Wikipedia* poses as an encyclopædia when by no stretch of the definition can it be termed such; therefore, it should be subject to regulation. Some would say that *Wikipedia* should be taken off the internet altogether, but I could not possibly comment ...

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