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Can Wikipedia Ever Make the Grade?

As questions about the accuracy of the anyone-can-edit encyclopedia persist, academics are split on whether to ignore it, or start contributing

By BROCK READ

Alexander M.C. Halavais, an assistant professor of communications at Quinnipiac University, has spent hours and hours wading through Wikipedia, which has become the Internet's hottest information source. Like thousands of his colleagues, he has turned to the open-source encyclopedia for timely information and trivia; unlike most of his peers, he has, from time to time, contributed his own expertise to the site.

But to Wikipedia's legions of ardent amateur editors, Mr. Halavais may be best remembered as a troll.

Two years ago, when he was teaching at the State University of New York at Buffalo, the professor hatched a plan designed to undermine the site's veracity — which, at that time, had gone largely unchallenged by scholars. Adopting the pseudonym "Dr. al-Halawi" and billing himself as a "visiting lecturer in law, Jesus College, Oxford University," Mr. Halavais snuck onto Wikipedia and slipped 13 errors into its various articles. He knew that no one would check his persona's credentials: Anyone can add material to the encyclopedia's entries without having to show any proof of expertise.

Some of the errata he inserted — like a claim that Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist, had made Syracuse, N.Y., his home for four years — seemed entirely credible. Some — like an Oscar for film editing that Mr. Halavais awarded to *The Rescuers Down Under*, an animated Disney film — were more obviously false, and easier to fact-check. And others were downright odd: In an obscure article on a short-lived political party in New Brunswick, Canada, the professor wrote of a politician felled by "a very public scandal relating to an official Party event at which cocaine and prostitutes were made available."

Mr. Halavais expected some of his fabrications to languish online for some time. Like many academics, he was skeptical about a mob-edited publication that called itself an authoritative encyclopedia. But less than three hours after he posted them, all of his false facts had been deleted, thanks to the vigilance of Wikipedia editors who regularly check a page on the Web site that displays recently updated entries. On Dr. al-Halawi's "user talk" page, one Wikipedian pleaded with him to "refrain from writing nonsense articles and falsifying information."

Mr. Halavais realized that the jig was up.

Writing about the experiment on his blog (<http://alex.halavais.net>), Mr. Halavais argued that a more determined "troll" — in Web-forum parlance, a poster who contributes only inflammatory or disruptive content — could have done a better job of slipping mistakes into the encyclopedia. But he said he was "impressed" by Wikipedia participants' ability to root out his fabrications. Since then several other high-profile studies have confirmed that

the site does a fairly good job at getting its facts straight — particularly in articles on science, an area where Wikipedia excels.

Among academics, however, Wikipedia continues to receive mixed — and often failing — grades. Wikipedia's supporters often portray the site as a brave new world in which scholars can rub elbows with the general public. But doubters of the approach — and in academe, there are many — say Wikipedia devalues the notion of expertise itself.

Those skeptics include Michael Gorman, the immediate past president of the American Library Association. "The problem with an online encyclopedia created by anybody is that you have no idea whether you are reading an established person in the field or someone with an ax to grind," said Mr. Gorman, dean of library services at California State University at Fresno, in an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Perhaps because of the site's refusal to give professors or other experts priority — and because of an editing process that can resemble a free-for-all — a clear preponderance of Wikipedia's contents has been written by people outside academe. In fact, the dearth of scholarly contributions to the site has prompted one prominent former Wikipedian — Larry Sanger, one of the site's co-founders — to start an alternative online encyclopedia, vetted by experts.

But as the encyclopedia's popularity continues to grow, some professors are calling on scholars to contribute articles to Wikipedia, or at least to hone less-than-inspiring entries in the site's vast and growing collection. Those scholars' take is simple: If you can't beat the Wikipedians, join 'em.

Proponents of that strategy showed up in force at Wikimania, the annual meeting for Wikipedia contributors, a three-day event held in August at Harvard University. Leaders of Wikipedia said there that they had turned their attention to increasing the accuracy of information on the Web site, announcing several policies intended to prevent editorial vandalism and to improve or erase Wikipedia's least-trusted entries. "We can no longer feel satisfied and happy when we see these numbers going up," said Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia's other co-founder, referring to the site's ever-expanding base of articles. "We should continue to turn our attention away from growth and towards quality."

Still, not all of Wikipedia's most-active contributors want academics in their club. They argue that an army of hobbyists, teenagers, and even the occasional troll can create a more comprehensive, more useful, and possibly even more accurate resource than can be found in the ivied halls.

"The university needs Wikipedia more than Wikipedia needs the university," said Elijah Meeks at Wikimania. He has studied the site as he pursues a master's degree at the University of California at Merced. The encyclopedia, he contended, will keep on humming — and will improve — whether scholars sign on or not.

'Scurrilous' Content

The openness that makes Wikipedia so alluring to its contributors is precisely what discomfits scholars. Because anyone can post, the site is in a constant state of flux — which creates plenty of opportunity for abuse. The common scholarly perception that the site is error-prone is true, if momentary lapses in accuracy are counted. Mr. Halavais's fabrications may have stayed online for only a couple of hours, but any visitors who happened upon the article on Syracuse during that time would have absorbed some bad information.

Then there are the mistakes that linger — most famously, perhaps, in the case of John Seigenthaler Sr.

Last November, Mr. Seigenthaler, a longtime journalist, noticed that a Wikipedia entry claimed that he was

"thought to have been directly involved in the Kennedy assassinations of both John and his brother, Bobby." The comment — which Mr. Seigenthaler called "malicious" and "scurrilous" in a widely published newspaper article — had sat, uncorrected, for more than four months.

In that time the misinformation had reached other popular Web sites, like Reference.com and Answers.com, which regularly cull material from Wikipedia. Arguing that his reputation had been tarnished, Mr. Seigenthaler called Wikipedia "a flawed and irresponsible research tool."

The site's administrators responded by requiring users to register before they post articles. (The new rule would not have stopped the vandal who changed Mr. Seigenthaler's article, since he edited the text rather than created it.) But the incident was nevertheless damaging to Wikipedia's reputation.

Relatively obscure articles like the one on Mr. Seigenthaler — and among Wikipedia's almost 1.5 million entries, there's plenty of esoterica — are especially vulnerable to vandalism, says Mr. Halavais: "The high-traffic areas are going to be the cleanest."

But errors on Wikipedia are not confined to its margins. C. Earl Edmondson, a professor of history at Davidson College, recalls visiting Wikipedia's article on the Mayerling Incident, a 19th-century scandal in which Rudolf, crown prince of Austria, died along with his mistress under mysterious circumstances. European historians consider the incident important. But Wikipedia's treatment of it, says Mr. Edmondson, is troubling.

"Much of the article seems to be valid, even if not comprehensive," he says, but its concluding comments — including a passage that cites the incident as "the end of the ancient house of Habsburg" — are "atrociously erroneous." (In fact, the Habsburgs were deposed in 1918. And Wikipedia's article on the royal house makes no mention of the Mayerling Incident.)

Signs of Success

Perhaps the biggest and most well-known attempt to grade the quality of Wikipedia was done last year by the journal *Nature*, which published a study comparing the accuracy of scientific articles in Wikipedia and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Staff members at the journal chose articles from each reference work and sent them to a panel of experts in the respective fields, who reviewed the texts for factual accuracy, misleading statements, and key omissions. The reviewers found, somewhat surprisingly, that Wikipedia was playing in *Britannica*'s ballpark: An average *Britannica* article had about three errors, while a typical Wikipedia post on the same subject had about four.

Britannica editors were quick to assail the study: The test, they argued in a lengthy rebuttal on the encyclopedia's Web site, "was so poorly carried out and its findings so error-laden that it was completely without merit." Still, the report caused some scholars to rethink their skepticism about Wikipedia, says Mr. Halavais.

In an article for the June issue of *The Journal of American History*, Roy Rosenzweig, a history professor at George Mason University and director of its Center for History and New Media, gave a passing — if conflicted — grade to Wikipedia's coverage of history. Like the *Nature* editors, he found that Wikipedia was almost as factually accurate as a commercial encyclopedia (in this case, Microsoft's online Encarta).

"Are Wikipedians good historians?" he asked. "As in the old tale of the blind men and the elephant, your assessment of Wikipedia as history depends a great deal on what part you touch."

Wikipedia, Mr. Rosenzweig found, had produced thorough, fairly well-written essays on such topics as Red

Faber, a Hall of Fame pitcher for the Chicago White Sox, and "Postage Stamps and Postal History of the United States." But a number of issues that most historians would deem far more important received "incomplete, almost capricious, coverage." An article on American history from 1918 to 1945 made no mention of "dozens of standard topics — the Red Scare, the Ku Klux Klan, the Harlem Renaissance, woman suffrage, the rise of radio," he said. And an article on women's rights in the United States, he wrote, "leaves out the 19th Amendment but devotes a paragraph to splits in the National Organization for Women over the defense of Valerie Solanas [who shot Andy Warhol]."

Mr. Rosenzweig notes, amusedly, that several Wikipedians appear to have since read his critiques and edited a number of articles in response to his concerns.

It's no surprise that Mr. Rosenzweig is more ambivalent about Wikipedia than are the editors of *Nature*. Mr. Wales, Wikipedia's co-founder, says science is the Web publication's strongest suit. The encyclopedia's contributors — a group that, at Wikimania, included plenty of people wearing shirts emblazoned with the logos of open-source-software projects — tend to be tech-savvy and scientific-minded, he says.

"A computer scientist is quite comfortable banging out Wikipedia articles, but a poetry expert is less likely to do it," he says. "That's a barrier that's really unfortunate."

The gap between Wikipedia's coverage of science and its coverage of the humanities may not be a matter of simple demographics, though. Mr. Meeks, the Merced student, who is an occasional Wikipedia poster himself, points out that the science articles benefit from a reliance on concrete facts.

"In the academy, it's the science professors who give Wikipedia the most credence because it's easier for them to confirm or deny articles," he says. "It's much easier to tell if someone is writing a good article on selenium than on Soviet folk art."

What's more, says Mr. Rosenzweig, scientists are experienced in the type of collaborative scholarship that Wikipedia thrives on. But many of the areas that Mr. Wales says are Wikipedia's weakest — art and law, for example — demand contextual analysis and interpretive finesse, areas that are typically the domain of individual scholars.

It is in those areas, Mr. Rosenzweig says, that "professors should go in and participate in the process."

Mr. Wales says he would welcome more professors to the site, as long as they are willing to work with other contributors without talking down to them. "Putting out the message that we're eager to have more academic participation is quite important," he says.

Encouraging that participation may be easier said than done. Professors have, for the most part, stayed away. The site now has more than 40,000 active, registered contributors, members of an online community who bond over shared interests even as they spar over changes in articles. About 1,100 of those contributors have identified themselves as graduate students, says Mr. Meeks. Far fewer have identified themselves as professors.

Among the reasons that so few professors have joined is the site's mission — which, depending on whom you ask, is either nobly anti-elitist or distressingly anti-intellectual.

Mr. Sanger left Wikipedia in 2002 because he felt the site exuded a distaste for expertise that drove talented scholars away. Wikipedia's worst feature, the co-founder says, is the notion, held by some contributors, "that nonexperts should be able to treat with disdain anything an expert says."

Shortly after Mr. Halavais's career as a troll ended, the professor — this time posting anonymously — contributed another article to Wikipedia, a piece on theories of communication, his area of expertise.

"It got shut down pretty quick, and I think there's just a small piece of it left online," he says. "Some other professors I talked to said the same thing happened to them: They were experts in their fields, they wrote something well in their area of expertise, and it got cut up."

The site values concision — some lengthy articles are even marked as entries that should be tightened — so detailed scholarly papers are not looked upon fondly. Peer review may be hard on a professor's ego, but Wikipedia, it seems, is even less forgiving.

And even minor editing changes can lead to frustrating debates. Mr. Rosenzweig once edited a Wikipedia article on the financier Haym Solomon, removing a false but widely held claim that the 18th-century broker had lent money to the infant U.S. government during the Revolutionary War. Almost immediately after he removed the passage, another contributor reinserted it, citing its appearance in a number of books, which Mr. Rosenzweig says have been debunked. Only a seasoned historian would be likely to know that the claim was false, he says.

Academic historians are more likely to spend their time working on projects that can earn them scholarly respect and career advancement than writing or editing Wikipedia entries. Because of its transitory nature and its ban on original research, Wikipedia "doesn't have a lot of credibility within the academy," says Mr. Halavais.

"Generally, it's a time commitment that doesn't pay off reputationally," he says. "You certainly couldn't throw it on a CV." Writing for *Britannica* might not put professors on the tenure track, either, but it confers a certain amount of credibility, says Mr. Halavais.

Besides, say some critics of Wikipedia, it's not clear why an expert in a given field would want to see his work diluted by laymen. In an online essay called "Digital Maoism," Jaron Lanier, a computer scientist, has argued that Wikipedia is at the forefront of a disturbing Web trend — a tendency to value anonymous communal thought over individual intellect.

"A desirable text is more than a collection of accurate references," wrote Mr. Lanier, who spent time as chief scientist for the engineering office at Internet2, the high-speed-networking group. "It is also an expression of personality."

Mr. Wales says most Wikipedia articles are actually written by two or three people, not an anonymous collective. But otherwise, he says, Mr. Lanier's criticism isn't so much wrong as it is immaterial. "One aspect of Jaron Lanier's criticism had to do with the passionate, unique, individual voice he prefers, rather than this sort of bland, royal-we voice of Wikipedia," Mr. Wales says. "To that, I'd say 'yes, we plead guilty quite happily.' We're an encyclopedia."

But some critics say that Wikipedia's acceptance of anonymity — many of its posters never register on the site — causes more serious problems than personality-free prose. The site's open-door policy has emboldened trolls and vandals, whose efforts many academics would rather not suffer, says Mr. Sanger. "To many professors, it seems to be a waste of time to negotiate with people who in any other context would be taking a class from them."

Mr. Wales acknowledges that the site has, at times, seemed unappealing to scholars.

"There have definitely been cases where there were academics who came to the site, made good contributions,

and the rough-and-tumble of the process really turned them off," he says.

Attitude Adjustment

But fans of Wikipedia, like Mr. Meeks, argue that scholars must adapt to the aggressive, transparent approach to scholarship favored on the Web.

"Professors who get worked up about Wikipedia, and say it can never be anything but a poor source of knowledge, don't realize that these sort of hardscrabble open-source projects have been incredibly competitive — for example, in the software industry," he says.

Of course, there is no consensus on whether Wikipedia's debates — what Mr. Meeks calls "living disagreements" — amount to real scholarship.

According to some of its supporters, Wikipedia's editing process constantly pushes its articles toward a Platonic ideal by adding details, clarifying arguments, and tightening prose.

But to critics like Mr. Sanger, the site is all too often just spinning its wheels. "Certain articles on Wikipedia" — many of its entries on philosophy, for example — "have been there for, like, six years, and they've been worked on endlessly," he says. "But in many cases, they seem to have come to a point that is less than optimal from any experts' point of view."

With a newly announced project called Citizendium, Mr. Sanger aims to create an alternate version of Wikipedia that lets an editorial panel of experts put articles through a form of peer review before certifying them as worthy of public view. Citizendium will stick with Wikipedia's policy against original research but will give its expert editors the final say over how articles appear. "There are large numbers of people who are upset with the state of things on Wikipedia, and they're just sort of looking for something to do," he says.

For users like Mr. Halavais, the kind of hierarchy Mr. Sanger proposes would eliminate Wikipedia's efficiency — and, quite possibly, its *raison d'être*.

Still, Mr. Halavais is keenly interested in the idea of forming a body that could certify particularly well-written Wikipedia posts. The professor recently started to assemble an editorial board of recognized experts in Internet studies who "would go through the process of finding appropriate peer reviewers and certifying particular versions of Wikipedia articles as being peer reviewed."

So far, he says, the response has been mixed. "A bunch of people have already told me, 'You'll ruin this pure thing that is Wikipedia.'"

Mr. Wales is not one of those people. "I'm all for certification projects like that," he says, but he phrases his support as a plea for help: "I'd prefer it, though, if instead of certifying what's good, they'd point out all the bad stuff that we need to fix."

HOW TO BE A WIKIPEDIAN

Wikipedia wants to make it easy for visitors to edit its contents, but it has recently taken steps to make creating new entries somewhat more difficult. Here is how Wikipedia articles are edited and created:

How to edit a Wikipedia article:

1. Go to any article on the site.
2. Click on the "edit this page" tab, located near the top of the page.
3. Make alterations and save them. The changes will show up immediately, but Wikipedia's army of contributors who check the site regularly for changes may test the veracity of any newly added information. Every article on Wikipedia includes a "history" button, near the top of the page, that allows users to track every change made in the text.

How to create a Wikipedia article:

1. Register as a Wikipedia member, providing a user name and password.
2. New users are shown introductory Web pages that explain the site's posting guidelines.
3. Type in the title of your article and wait for the site to search for similar articles that may already exist.
4. Enter the text of your article. Links to other Wikipedia articles can be created simply by selecting sections of text and letting the site find URL's for the articles they represent.
5. Write a brief "edit summary" that tells other Wikipedia posters why you created the entry.
6. Preview the article, save it, and get ready for the masses to edit it. The new article should appear on the site quickly, but it could be removed almost as quickly under Wikipedia's "speedy deletion" policy, under which "Wikipedia administrators may delete Wikipedia pages or media 'on sight' without further debate, as in the cases of patent nonsense or pure vandalism."

GRADING WIKIPEDIA

Entry examined: *BRAVE NEW WORLD*

Scholar: Peter E. Firchow, a professor of English at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, has written extensively about Aldous Huxley and his novels.

Grade: B-

- The entry provides "a plethora of links" and more information than the typical literary encyclopedia, says Mr. Firchow, but it is flawed by "the annoying inaccuracies, the glaring omissions, and the inconsistencies."
- "It's clearly lacking an editorial hand to smooth out the inconsistencies."

Some flaws: The article says Huxley wrote *Brave New World* in Britain and was influenced by Yevgeny Zamyatin's dystopic novel *We*. Actually, Huxley wrote *Brave New World* primarily in France and said later that he had not known of *We* at the time. He named his characters after famous people, but the Wikipedia authors are wrong about some of Huxley's sources--for example, the character Bernard Marx is a reference not to George Bernard Shaw but to the French biologist Claude Bernard. The Wikipedia entry does not include any discussion of D.H. Lawrence, whose works strongly influenced *Brave New World*. The article's bibliography is

inadequate, failing to provide information about standard works on Huxley.

Entry examined: *AFRICAN-AMERICAN CIVIL-RIGHTS MOVEMENT*

Scholar: Doug McAdam, a professor of sociology at Stanford University, specializes in the study of social movements and revolutions.

Grade: C

- While there are no glaring inaccuracies, Mr. McAdam says, the entry does not provide any analytical context as to what led to the civil-rights movement or what happened afterward.
- "It isn't bad in a lowest-common-denominator encyclopedia sense."

Some flaws: The entry covers the civil-rights movement from 1955 to 1968, briefly highlighting notable events, such as a paragraph on Rosa Parks and the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott. In typical Wikipedia fashion, the entry provides plenty of links to longer entries on related topics. But Mr. McAdam notes the insufficiency of links to events before and after this particular 13 years of the movement, not to mention the lack of any broader analysis of what brought about the fight for civil rights, and the movement's political and cultural impacts. "Since this is what I care about and study," he says, "I would not direct a student to this site."

Entry examined: *FLOW CYTOMETRY*

Scholar: J. Paul Robinson, a professor of biomedical engineering and of immunopharmacology at Purdue University's main campus and president of the International Society for Analytical Cytology. (Flow cytometry is the analysis of microscopic particles suspended in a fluid.)

Grade: A

- "The main section on flow cytometry was well-done and accurate, ... but as you drop into the subsections, the accuracy drops off. I went in and actually made some corrections to these — I said, 'I can't leave these and let the record stand like this.'"

Some flaws: At one point in the entry, the word "homologous" was misused in talking about blood transfusions. Mr. Robinson said he also decided to add some information that he felt was important, like the name of the scientist who invented the first cell sorter. Because of minor errors, he would give the subsections, such as a part about fluorescence-activated cell sorting, a C. "When you get into technical fields where accuracy is important, it should be accurate," he says. "The problem with the public domain is that anyone can put anything they like into the public domain. ... I was a little surprised that I could go in and edit."

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Section: Information Technology

Volume 53, Issue 10, Page A31

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