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Misinformed, but democratically so!

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Academics and reference librarians keep complaining about the degradation of knowledge by the new phenomenon known as 'collective intelligence'. Note that not many other information professionals are complaining – they are either studying the new phenomenon with interest, participating in it with zeal or applauding it loudly as the newest 'cool' thing on the 'informational revolution' block. My hypothesis – and I must warn the reader outright that this is an opinion piece – is that both the academics and the reference librarians have historical 'issues' that prevent them from embracing 'collective intelligence', whereas other information professionals, with the relatively miniscule but extremely fast-moving history that is theirs, are not so hindered. The 'issues' involve perceptions of knowledge and expertise, their rightful ownership, the limits on who has the right to its production and in what environment.

Knowledge – and often information – was for centuries the privilege of the top classes – the heavenly abodes, the ecclesiastics, the nobility and then, by the 17th century, the bourgeoisie. It was a privilege that came with money and status, and often bestowed more money and higher status. First universities were created by the Church to serve the establishment and promote 'Christian truth'. Things were a little different in places where other gods ruled, but even there knowledge was a privilege and defined by the hierarchy.

Looking back, it is amazing that we actually managed to move forward or invent anything. Looking back again, it is amazing that we are still out and about, and have not been totally annihilated as a result of a few historical 'knowledge' scandals.

The reason why knowledge did not stagnate is called 'democracy'. The word originally did not have positive connotations – at the time of the elites, to be ruled by the *demos* was not exactly hip, nor erudite. It was a bit of a relief that all the *demos* were Greek males, but even then it was considered a degenerate state of affairs by Aristotle in his *Politics*.

However, *demos* were always more numerous than the learned *oligarchs* who were by definition *oligos*. So democracy won the long-standing battle for the right of Tom, Dick and Harry to the treasure trove called 'knowledge'. The elite, beaten into the trenches of their manor houses and ancient universities, even started believing that it was a show of how 'enlightened' and 'progressive' they were by divulging some of their privileged knowledge to the masses in such unthinkable precincts as 'workers' college. The poor wretches were still, after all, receiving whatever anaemic knowledge they did from the *oligarchs*.

In a way I can sympathize with the *oligarchs*. Knowledge is an asset, more precious than gold. Gold can be lost; knowledge only multiplies – unless one looses one's mind, in which case it does not matter anyway. But hoarding valuables never made one popular among the *populus*, so one party had to slowly relinquish the stronghold they held over their value-laden minds to the less advantaged others.

The first undoing of knowledge elitism was of course the printing press. That is history all of us are aware of. The second undoing was better transport, taking knowledge to far away places and opening vistas. Then came the greatest leveller of all – the Internet.

Before the Internet, academic writing was limited to academia and scientific societies. The latter was usually sponsored by a Royal Highness and constituted from a large number of landed gentlemen with lots of leisurely time on their hands. What started as discussions of interesting 'lectures' presented at the sessions of such societies ended in being 'peer review'.

Although the term did not gather its rigorous meaning until recently (mid 20th century), it existed as the non-formal, but no less often heated, critique of one academic publication by other 'peers'. And if anyone was sensitive to critique, it was the elites!
The system has flaws even though the academics and governments have worked hard at tightening all the screws and bolts in the process. Peer-review:

- differs from journal to journal and from one organization to another (not sufficiently consistent);
- is ridiculously long as a process in an age where information travels at the speed of light. One of the pre-requisites of peer review is that it ensures the material is timely, yet it often becomes dated between the time it is authored and the time it is published; and
- can (and should) be questioned regarding its objectivity and altruism, especially in fiercely competitive fields where there are many axes to grind and lots of incentive to get a young troublemaker to toe the line. In the majority of peer reviews, the author does not know who is reviewing him or her, but the reviewers know whom they are reviewing.

There is an increasing trend for researchers, especially in communication and information technology (CIT) and other high-end technologies and sciences, to publish their articles directly online, inviting comments and discussion, but bypassing the journals and the 'peer-review' process. This is understandable in areas such as CIT, where changes are happening at a breakneck speed, and where the lengthy peer-review process can lead to an article being obsolete. A phenomenon related to the above, is the publishing of articles not accepted – dare I say rejected – by peer-reviewed journals – on the authors' Web sites, blogs and forums. It is all still within the academe, but the controlling noose is getting looser. The information revolution has come to bite the academe back.

Peer review was, and still is, the last bastion of the academic elites against the 'Wisdom of the Crowd', as aptly termed by Surowiecki (2004). Surowiecki argues that information is aggregated in groups not individuals and, therefore, that decisions made by a large number of people are statistically better than those made by any one member of that group of people. Mind you, conditions apply: there needs to be a diversity of opinion, the opinions must be reached independently from other people, the deciding persons can specialize and have access to local knowledge and there should be mechanisms for turning individual judgements into a collective decision. The pan-ultimate example of such collective wisdom is the Wikipedia. Not just that: it markets itself as extremely democratic, although there can be doubts as to the veracity of that allegation.

It is rather hard to find any scholarly work on Wikipedia that is objective. Articles in academic journals predominantly lambaste and criticize the project, while among the non-academic publications praise abounds. Sandwiched unhappily between the academic disdain and the journalistic euphoria are the reference librarians whose ambiguous line is 'use it, but, better even, don't use it' – none of which, of course, is affecting Wikipedia in the least … at least not at the moment. Like a tsunami, its articles are growing in number (albeit not in

quality). Let us therefore look at what is irking the academics and making the non-academics go into raptures about this free for all, to read, use and produce, encyclopaedia.

What academics hold against Wikipedia is that it is inherently anti-elitist and that its community has disrespect for expertise (read, experts). The former Wikipedian, Larry Singer, who has since left the project for precisely these reasons – or because the funding for his position ran out, depending on who you ask – stated on a discussion forum:

> 'As a community … [Wikipedia] is anti-elitist (which, in this context, means that expertise is not accorded any special respect, and snubs and disrespect of expertise is tolerated) … the most active and influential members of the project – beginning with Jimmy Wales … were decidedly anti-elitist in the above-described sense'(Singer 2004)

Singer's words are echoed by another unhappy academic and computer scientist Jaron Lanier, who argues that Wikipedia is at the forefront of a disturbing Web trend and is 'part of the larger pattern of the appeal of a new online collectivism that is nothing less than a resurgence of the idea that the collective is all-wise…. This is different from representative democracy, or meritocracy.' (Lanier 2006)

Jimmy Wales agrees while disagreeing. Although not an academic in the full meaning of the word, he does hold a Masters degree and was once a doctoral student and a university lecturer. He acknowledges that the *modus operandi* of Wikipedia might be unappealing to experts and that Wikipedia has 'a very strong bias against credentials as the answer' (Wales 2005). He criticizes Lanier, however, for wanting to hear 'the passionate, unique, individual voice … rather than this sort of bland, **royal-we** voice of Wikipedia' (Read 2006). If seeing one's project as 'royal' is not elitist, what is?

Wales also has a few of his own 'issues': he welcomes more professors to the site (for contributions and editing) 'as long as they are willing to work with other contributors without talking down at them'. I am sure Freud would find this sentence very interesting. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal he states that 'we do not believe that any resource tool can be reliable without scholarly input ... [it is] a long-standing mistake to think of Wikipedia as being anti-elitist'(Wall Street Journal 2006).

Interestingly, not all Wikipedians subscribe to this 'collective wisdom' paradigm. Elizabeth Bauer, an administrator on the German Wikipedia, denies that many authors make a good article or improve a bad one. 'The best articles are typically written by a single or a few authors with expertise in the topic', she said, being seconded by Kizu Naoko, a board-approved editor with the Japanese version who said that 'most of the short articles remain short and of rather poor content'(Riehle 2006).

Reference librarians' position on Wikipedia as a reference tool varies from a decisive 'No', to a 'Yes, but...' Here the critique is much more objective, but based on the traditional view of what a reference source should be like. This presents a perception problem, as Wikipedia is not *just* a reference source – authoritative, peer-reviewed and written by experts.

The world outside the hushed corridors of libraries, however, is embracing a new form of looking at what constitutes 'knowledge'. Firstly, many schools fail to provide good information literacy skills to students. Young people feel that they are better able to find information on-line than their seniors – never mind that they cannot analyse whether it is reliable – and many do not actually want to be taught how to discern valid sources from useless ones (Wilder 2005).

Whereas the Internet has provided the educational establishment with great opportunities for delivery, it has also done it a great disadvantage by enabling students to get access to information without the guiding need for a teacher/mentor, thus giving the students a false sense of power in decision-making.

Also, because of the Internet, information is now replicating itself at an exponential speed – through news sites, blogs, forums and search engines. This means that misinformation also has the potential to replicate. With Wikipedia being the top copyright free reference resource on-line, this can have some serious implications, because although editing at Wikipedia itself is fast and quite efficient, materials copied from the site to third parties will not necessarily be ever updated to reflect the changes in the original source, with the by now notorious case of Seigenthaler's false biography being a case in point (Seigenthaler 2005).

Secondly, the point reference librarians are missing, is that Wikipedia differs from its predecessors and current encyclopedias *socially*. The philosophy behind it is post-modernist, whereas the rest of the traditional encyclopedias are firmly rooted in the scholarship of Chamber, Diderot and D'Alembert. It is free, in terms of copyright of the content, access and production. It is community-based, and that is such an important issue in this age that even *Britannica's* editor-in-chief, Dale Hoiberg, stated publicly that his encyclopedia 'draws from a community, just as Wikipedia does … of more than 4000 scholars and experts' (WSJ 2006). Of course Hoiberg's is a community-of-practice, but *Britannica* does not have a reference to this by now common term. Wikipedia, on the other hand, does (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_Practice)! The community on Wikipedia is not as huge as some believe, because, despite the fact that until June last year anyone could publish and edit, there is a core group of persons who have administrative rights. Things are getting even tighter now, with limits on access to publishing and editing being put in place after the Seigenthaler affair (Hafner 2006).

Wikipedia is perceived by Wales as an experiment in social innovation. According to him, it should, therefore, be radical (Wales 2005). It is fully based on donations. It is voluntary and communal, reminiscent of the *kibbutz;* here is no individual ownership of the text, and therefore it is assumed that the sense of shared ownership will make the community feel entrusted by the world to take care of knowledge and help it grow. Somehow, I find that unconvincing – no sense of ownership to me means no sense of pride in one's product.

Despite being communal, there are often not-so-subtle signals given mostly by its founder, J. Wales, that all is not as democratic as it is marketed to be. At the 2005 conference in New York, for example, he stated openly that the Wikipedia governance was made of a mix of consensus, democracy, aristocracy and monarchy; and that often the later two had the word over the former (Wales 2005). He is also reported to have said about decision-making in Wikipedia that 'it's not always obvious when something becomes policy. One way is when I say it is' (Hafner 2006).

Wikipedia's aim is almost utopian: to spread knowledge freely to all parts of the world. It is now being published on-line in more than 200 languages, although very few of these LOTE versions are anywhere as extensive as the original English. Apparently, it was good enough for an EU affiliated organization to fund its translation into Bambara, one of Mali's languages (Wales 2005). The aim is admirable if one believes that a bit of [incorrect] information is better than no information at all.

Because of the way it is structured, it combines collaboration with 'just in time' knowledge. It is in constant flux, 'embracing the process of reading and writing, preferring the constantly evolving, but never finishing to the static and rapidly obsolescing "product"' (Miller 2005). My only problem with this Utopian project is that I do not know of any Utopias that have

survived.

In my humble opinion, the 'information democracy' dam has been breached, and nothing can stop the flood. Wikipedia will continue being what it is until it either runs out of steam or funds. Academic discontent about it will not have a major effect, simply because academics are a minority among the masses of end-users who would rather have their democratically created misinformation for free as long as really valuable information is expensive and access to it limited to a chosen few.

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