

The New York Review of Books

VOLUME 55, NUMBER 4 • [MARCH 20, 2008](#)

The Charms of Wikipedia

By [Nicholson Baker](#)

Wikipedia: The Missing Manual

by John Broughton

Pogue Press/O'Reilly 477 pp., \$29.99 (paper)

Wikipedia is just an incredible thing. It's fact-encirclingly huge, and it's idiosyncratic, careful, messy, funny, shocking, and full of simmering controversies—and it's free, and it's fast. In a few seconds you can look up, for instance, "Diogenes of Sinope," or "turnip," or "Crazy Eddie," or "Bagoas," or "quadratic formula," or "Bristol Beaufighter," or "squeegee," or "Sanford B. Dole," and you'll have knowledge you didn't have before. It's like some vast aerial city with people walking briskly to and fro on catwalks, carrying picnic baskets full of nutritious snacks.

More people use Wikipedia than Amazon or eBay—in fact it's up there in the top-ten Alexa rankings with those moneyed funhouses MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube. Why? Because it has 2.2 million articles, and because it's very often the first hit in a Google search, and because it just feels good to find something there—even, or especially, when the article you find is maybe a little clumsily written. Any inelegance, or typo, or relic of vandalism reminds you that this gigantic encyclopedia isn't a commercial product. There are no banners for E*Trade or Classmates.com, no side sprinklings of AdSense.

It was constructed, in less than eight years, by strangers who disagreed about all kinds of things but who were drawn to a shared, not-for-profit purpose. They were drawn because for a work of reference Wikipedia seemed unusually humble. It asked for help, and when it did, it used a particularly affecting word: "stub." At the bottom of a short article about something, it would say, "This article about X is a stub. You can help Wikipedia by expanding it." And you'd think: That poor sad stub: I will help. Not right now, because I'm writing a book, but someday, yes, I will try to help.

And when people did help they were given a flattering name. They weren't called "Wikipedia's little helpers," they were called "editors." It was like a giant community leaf-raking project in which everyone was called a groundskeeper. Some brought very fancy professional metal rakes, or even back-mounted leaf-blowing systems, and some were just kids thrashing away with the sides of their feet or stuffing handfuls in the pockets of their sweatshirts, but all the leaves they brought to the pile were appreciated. And the pile grew and everyone jumped up and down in it having a wonderful time. And it grew some more, and it became the biggest leaf pile anyone had ever seen anywhere, a world wonder. And then self-promoted leaf-pile guards appeared, doubters and deprecators who would look askance at your proffered handful and shake their heads, saying that your leaves were too crumpled or too slimy or too common, throwing them to the side. And that was too bad. The people who guarded the leaf pile this way were called "deletionists."

But that came later. First it was just fun. One anonymous contributor wrote, of that early time:

I adored the Wikipedia when it was first launched and I contributed to a number of articles, some extensively, and always anonymously. The Wikipedia then was a riot of contributors,

each adding bits and pieces to the articles they were familiar with, with nary an admin or editor in sight.

It worked and grew because it tapped into the heretofore unmarshaled energies of the uncredentialed. The thesis procrastinators, the history buffs, the passionate fans of the alternate universes of Garth Nix, *Robotech*, Half-Life, P.G. Wodehouse, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Charles Dickens, or *Ultraman*—all those people who hoped that their years of collecting comics or reading novels or staring at TV screens hadn't been a waste of time—would pour the fruits of their brains into Wikipedia, because Wikipedia added up to something. This wasn't like writing reviews on Amazon, where you were just one of a million people urging a tiny opinion and a Listmania list onto the world—this was an effort to build something that made sense apart from one's own opinion, something that helped the whole human cause roll forward.

Wikipedia was the point of convergence for the self-taught and the expensively educated. The cranks had to consort with the mainstreamers and hash it all out—and nobody knew who really knew what he or she was talking about, because everyone's identity was hidden behind a jokey username. All everyone knew was that the end product had to make legible sense and sound encyclopedic. It had to be a little flat—a little generic—fair-minded—compressed—unpromotional—neutral. The need for the outcome of all edits to fit together as readable, unemotional sentences muted—to some extent—natural antagonisms.

So there was this exhilarating sense of mission—of proving the greatness of the Internet through an unheard-of collaboration. Very smart people dropped other pursuits and spent days and weeks and sometimes years of their lives doing "stub dumps," writing ancillary software, categorizing and linking topics, making and remaking and smoothing out articles—without getting any recognition except for the occasional congratulatory barnstar on their user page and the satisfaction of secret fame. Wikipedia flourished partly because it was a shrine to altruism—a place for shy, learned people to deposit their trawls.

But it also became great because it had a head start: from the beginning the project absorbed articles from the celebrated 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which is in the public domain. And not only the 1911 *Britannica*. Also absorbed were Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography*, Nuttall's 1906 *Encyclopedia*, Chamber's *Cyclopedia*, Aiken's *General Biography*, Rose's *Biographical Dictionary*, Easton's *Bible Dictionary*, and many others. In August 2001, a group of articles from W.W. Rouse Ball's *Short Account of the History of Mathematics*—posted on the Net by a professor from Trinity College, Dublin—was noticed by an early Wikipedian, who wrote to his co-volunteers: "Are they fair game to grab as source material for our wikipedia? I know we are scarfing stuff from the 1911 encyclopedia, this is from 1908, so it should be under the same lack of restrictions...." It was. Rouse Ball wrote that Pierre Varignon

was an intimate friend of Newton, Leibnitz and the Bernoullis, and, after l'Hospital, was the earliest and most powerful advocate in France of the use of differential calculus.

In January 2006, Wikipedia imported this 1908 article, with an insertion and a few modernizing rewordings, and it now reads:

Varignon was a friend of Newton, Leibnitz, and the Bernoulli family. Varignon's principal contributions were to graphic statics and mechanics. Except for l'Hôpital, Varignon was the earliest and strongest French advocate of differential calculus.

But the article is now three times longer, barnacled with interesting additions, and includes a link to another article discussing Varignon's mechanical theory of gravitation.

The steady influx of top-hat-and-spatted sources elevated Wikipedia's tone. This wasn't just a school encyclopedia, a backyard *Encarta*—this was drinks at the faculty club. You looked up Diogenes and bang, you got something wondrously finished-sounding from the 1911 *Britannica*. That became Diogenes' point of departure. And then all kinds of changes happened to the Greek philosopher, over many months and hundreds of revisions—odd theories, prose about the habits of dogs, rewordings, corrections of corrections. Now in Wikipedia there is this summary of Diogenes' provocations:

Diogenes is said to have eaten (and, once, masturbated) in the marketplace, urinated on some people who insulted him, defecated in the theatre, and pointed at people with his middle finger.

And yet amid the modern aggregate, some curvy prose from the 1911 *Britannica* still survives verbatim:

Both in ancient and in modern times, his personality has appealed strongly to sculptors and to painters.

The fragments from original sources persist like those stony bits of classical buildings incorporated in a medieval wall.

But the sources and the altruism don't fully explain why Wikipedia became such a boom town. The real reason it grew so fast was noticed by co-founder Jimmy "Jimbo" Wales in its first year of life. "The main thing about Wikipedia is that it is fun and addictive," Wales wrote. Addictive, yes. All big Internet successes—e-mail, AOL chat, Facebook, Gawker, Second Life, YouTube, Daily Kos, World of Warcraft—have a more or less addictive component—they hook you because they are solitary ways to be social: you keep checking in, peeking in, as you would to some noisy party going on downstairs in a house while you're trying to sleep.

Brion Vibber, who was for a while Wikipedia's only full-time employee, explained the attraction of the encyclopedia at a talk he gave to Google employees in 2006. For researchers it's a place to look stuff up, Vibber said, but for editors "it's almost more like an online game, in that it's a community where you hang out a bit, and do something that's a little bit of fun: you whack some trolls, you build some material, etcetera." Whacking trolls is, for some Wikipedia editors, a big part of why they keep coming back.

Say you're working away on the Wikipedia article on aging. You've got some nice scientific language in there and it's really starting to shape up:

After a period of near perfect renewal (in Humans, between 20 and 50 years of age), organismal senescence is characterized by the declining ability to respond to stress, increasing homeostatic imbalance and increased risk of disease. This irreversible series of changes inevitably ends in Death.

Not bad!

And then somebody—a user with an address of 206.82.17.190, a "vandal"—replaces the entire article with a single sentence: "Aging is what you get when you get freakin old old old." That happened on December 20, 2007. A minute later, you "revert" that anonymous editor's edit, with a few clicks; you go back in history to the article as it stood before. You've just kept the aging article safe, for the moment. But you have to stay vigilant, because somebody might swoop in again at any time, and you'll have to undo their harm with your power reverter ray. Now you're addicted. You've become a force for good just

by standing guard and looking out for juvenile delinquents.

Some articles are so out of the way that they get very little vandalism. (Although I once fixed a tiny page about a plant fungus, *Colletotrichum trichellum*, that infects English ivy; somebody before me had claimed that 40 percent of the humans who got it died.) Some articles are vandalized a lot. On January 11, 2008, the entire fascinating entry on the aardvark was replaced with "one ugly animal"; in February the aardvark was briefly described as a "medium-sized inflatable banana." On December 7, 2007, somebody altered the long article on bedbugs so that it read like a horror movie:

Bedbugs are generally active only at dawn, with a peak attack period about an hour before dawn, though given the opportunity, they may attempt to feed at your brain at other times.

A few weeks later, somebody replaced everything with:

BED BUGS MOTHER FUCKER THEY GON GET YO MOTHAFUCKING ASS
BRAAAAAAAT FOOL BRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAP.

A piece of antivandalism software, VoABot II, reverted that edit, with a little sigh, less than a minute after it was made.

Vandalism spiked in August 2006 after comedian Stephen Colbert—in the wake of Stacy Schiff's excellent but slightly frosty *New Yorker* article about Wikipedia—invited viewers of his show to post made-up facts about the increase in the population of African elephants, as proof of the existence of something that was not reality but "wikiality"—a cheap shot, but mildly funny. People repeatedly went after the elephant page, and it was locked for a while. But not for very long. The party moved on.

The Pop-Tarts page is often aflutter. Pop-Tarts, it says as of today (February 8, 2008), were discontinued in Australia in 2005. Maybe that's true. Before that it said that Pop-Tarts were discontinued in Korea. Before that Australia. Several days ago it said: "Pop-Tarts is german for Little Iced Pastry O' Germany." Other things I learned from earlier versions: More than two trillion Pop-Tarts are sold each year. George Washington invented them. They were developed in the early 1960s in China. Popular flavors are "frosted strawberry, frosted brown sugar cinnamon, and semen." Pop-Tarts are a "flat Cookie." No: "Pop-Tarts are a flat Pastry, KEVIN MCCORMICK is a FRIGGIN LOSER notto mention a queer inch." No: "A Pop-Tart is a flat condom." Once last fall the whole page was replaced with "NIPPLES AND BROCCOLI!!!!!"

This sounds chaotic, but even the Pop-Tarts page is under control most of the time. The "unhelpful" or "inappropriate"—sometimes stoned, racist, violent, metalheaded—changes are quickly fixed by human stompers and algorithmicized helper bots. It's a game. Wikipedians see vandalism as a problem, and it certainly can be, but a Diogenes-minded observer would submit that Wikipedia would never have been the prodigious success it has been without its demons.

This is a reference book that can suddenly go nasty on you. Who knows whether, when you look up Harvard's one-time warrior-president, James Bryant Conant, you're going to get a bland, evenhanded article about him, or whether the whole page will read (as it did for seventeen minutes on April 26, 2006): "HES A BIG STUPID HEAD." James Conant was, after all, in some important ways, a big stupid head. He was studiously anti-Semitic, a strong believer in wonder-weapons—a man who was quite as happy figuring out new ways to kill people as he was administering a great university. Without the kooks and the insulters and the spray-can taggers, Wikipedia would just be the most useful encyclopedia ever made. Instead it's a fast-paced game of paintball.

Not only does Wikipedia need its vandals—up to a point—the vandals need an orderly Wikipedia, too. Without order, their culture-jamming lacks a context. If Wikipedia were rendered entirely chaotic and obscene, there would be no joy in, for example, replacing some of the article on Archimedes with this:

Archimedes is dead.

He died.

Other people will also die.

All hail chickens.

The Power Rangers say "Hi"

The End.

Even the interesting article on culture jamming has been hit a few times: "Culture jamming," it said in May 2007, "is the act of jamming tons of cultures into 1 extremely hot room."

When, last year, some computer scientists at the University of Minnesota studied millions of Wikipedia edits, they found that most of the good ones—those whose words persisted intact through many later viewings—were made by a tiny percentage of contributors. Enormous numbers of users have added the occasional enriching morsel to Wikipedia—and without this bystander's knowledge the encyclopedia would have gone nowhere—but relatively few users know how to frame their contribution in a form that lasts.^{[*]1}

So how do you become one of Wikipedia's upper crust—one of the several thousand whose words will live on for a little while, before later verbal fumarolings erode what you wrote? It's not easy. You have to have a cool head, so that you don't get drawn into soul-destroying disputes, and you need some practical writing ability, and a quick eye, and a knack for synthesis. And you need lots of free time—time to master the odd conventions and the unfamiliar vocabulary (words like "smerge," "POV warrior," "forum shopping," "hatnote," "meat puppet," "fancruft," and "transclusion"), and time to read through guidelines and policy pages and essays and the endless records of old skirmishes—and time to have been gently but firmly, or perhaps rather sharply, reminded by other editors how you should behave. There's a long apprenticeship of trial and error.

At least, that's how it used to be. Now there's a quicker path to proficiency: John Broughton's *Wikipedia: The Missing Manual*, part of the Missing Manual series, overseen by *The New York Times's* cheery electronics expert, David Pogue. "This Missing Manual helps you avoid beginners' blunders and gets you sounding like a pro from your first edit," the book says on the back. In his introduction, Broughton, who has himself made more than 15,000 Wikipedia edits, putting him in the elite top 1,200 of all editors—promises "the information you absolutely need to avoid running afoul of the rules." And it's true: this manual is enlightening, well organized, and full of good sense. Its arrival may mark a new, middle-aged phase in Wikipedia's history; some who read it will probably have wistful longings for the crazy do-it-yourself days when the whole project was just getting going. In October 2001, the first Wikipedian rule appeared. It was:

Ignore all rules: If rules make you nervous and depressed, and not desirous of participating in the wiki, then ignore them entirely and go about your business.

The "ignore all rules" rule was written by co-founder Larry Sanger and signed by co-founder Jimbo Wales, along with WojPob, AyeSpy, OprgaG, Invictus, Koyaanis Qatsi, Pinkunicorn, sjc, mike dill, Taw,

GWO, and Enchanter. There were two dissenters listed, tbc and AxelBoldt.

Nowadays there are rules and policy banners at every turn—there are strongly urged warnings and required tasks and normal procedures and notability guidelines and complex criteria for various decisions—a symptom of something called *instruction creep*: defined in Wikipedia as something that happens "when instructions increase in number and size over time until they are unmanageable." John Broughton's book, at a mere 477 pages, cuts through the creep. He's got a whole chapter on how to make better articles ("Don't Suppress or Separate Controversy") and one on "Handling Incivility and Personal Attacks."

Broughton advises that you shouldn't write a Wikipedia article about some idea or invention that you've personally come up with; that you should stay away from articles about things or people you really love or really hate; and that you shouldn't use the encyclopedia as a PR vehicle—for a new rock band, say, or an aspiring actress. Sometimes Broughton sounds like a freshman English comp teacher, a little too sure that there is one right and wrong way to do things: Strunk without White. But honestly, Wikipedia can be confusing, and you need that kind of confidence coming from a user's guide.

The first thing I did on Wikipedia (under the username Wageless) was to make some not-very-good edits to the page on bovine somatotropin. I clicked the "edit this page" tab, and immediately had an odd, almost lightheaded feeling, as if I had passed through the looking glass and was being allowed to fiddle with some huge engine or delicate piece of biomedical equipment. It seemed much too easy to do damage; you ask, Why don't the words resist me more? Soon, though, you get used to it. You recall the central Wikipedian directive: "Be Bold." You start to like life on the inside.

After bovine hormones, I tinkered a little with the plot summary of the article on *Sleepless in Seattle*, while watching the movie. A little later I made some adjustments to the intro in the article on hydraulic fluid—later still someone pleasingly improved my fixes. After dessert one night my wife and I looked up recipes for cobbler, and then I worked for a while on the cobbler article, though it still wasn't right. I did a few things to the article on periodization. About this time I began standing with my computer open on the kitchen counter, staring at my growing watchlist, checking, peeking. I was, after about a week, well on my way to a first-stage Wikipedia dependency.

But the work that really drew me in was trying to save articles from deletion. This became my chosen mission. Here's how it happened. I read a short article on a post-Beat poet and small-press editor named Richard Denner, who had been a student in Berkeley in the Sixties and then, after some lost years, had published many chapbooks on a hand press in the Pacific Northwest. The article was proposed for deletion by a user named PirateMink, who claimed that Denner wasn't a notable figure, whatever that means. (There are quires, reams, bales of controversy over what constitutes notability in Wikipedia: nobody will ever sort it out.) Another user, Stormbay, agreed with PirateMink: no third-party sources, ergo not notable.

Denner was in serious trouble. I tried to make the article less deletable by incorporating a quote from an interview in the Berkeley *Daily Planet*—Denner told the reporter that in the Sixties he'd tried to be a street poet, "using magic markers to write on napkins at Cafe Med for espressos, on girls' arms and feet." (If an article bristles with some quotes from external sources these may, like the bushy hairs on a caterpillar, make it harder to kill.) And I voted "keep" on the deletion-discussion page, pointing out that many poets publish only chapbooks: "What harm does it do to anyone or anything to keep this entry?"

An administrator named Nakon—one of about a thousand peer-nominated volunteer administrators—took a minute to survey the two "delete" votes and my "keep" vote and then killed the article. Denner

was gone. Startled, I began sampling the "AfDs" (the Articles for Deletion debate pages) and the even more urgent "speedy deletes" and "PRODs" (proposed deletes) for other items that seemed unjustifiably at risk; when they were, I tried to save them. Taekwang Industry—a South Korean textile company—was one. A user named Kusunose had "prodded" it—that is, put a red-edged banner at the top of the article proposing it for deletion within five days. I removed the banner, signaling that I disagreed, and I hastily spruced up the text, noting that the company made "Acelan" brand spandex, raincoats, umbrellas, sodium cyanide, and black abaya fabric. The article didn't disappear: wow, did that feel good.

So I kept on going. I found press citations and argued for keeping the Jitterbug telephone, a large-keyed cell phone with a soft earpiece for elder callers; and Vladimir Narbut, a minor Russian Acmeist poet whose second book, *Halleluia*, was confiscated by the police; and Sara Mednick, a San Diego neuroscientist and author of *Take a Nap! Change Your Life*; and Pyro Boy, a minor celebrity who turns himself into a human firecracker on stage. I took up the cause of the Arifs, a Cyprio-Turkish crime family based in London (on LexisNexis I found that the *Irish Daily Mirror* called them "Britain's No. 1 Crime Family"); and Card Football, a pokerlike football simulation game; and Paul Karason, a suspender-wearing guy whose face turned blue from drinking colloidal silver; and Jim Cara, a guitar restorer and modem-using music collaborationist who badly injured his head in a ski-flying competition; and writer Owen King, son of Stephen King; and Whitley Neill Gin, flavored with South African botanicals; and Whirled News Tonight, a Chicago improv troupe; and Michelle Leonard, a European songwriter, co-writer of a recent glam hit called "Love Songs (They Kill Me)."

All of these people and things had been deemed nonnotable by other editors, sometimes with unthinking harshness—the article on Michelle Leonard was said to contain "total lies." (Wrongly—as another editor, Bondegezou, more familiar with European pop charts, pointed out.) When I managed to help save something I was quietly thrilled—I walked tall, like Henry Fonda in *Twelve Angry Men*.

At the same time as I engaged in these tiny, fascinating (to me) "keep" tussles, hundreds of others were going on, all over Wikipedia. I signed up for the Article Rescue Squadron, having seen it mentioned in Broughton's manual: the ARS is a small group that opposes "extremist deletion." And I found out about a project called WPPDP (for "WikiProject Proposed Deletion Patrolling") in which people look over the PROD lists for articles that shouldn't be made to vanish. Since about 1,500 articles are deleted a day, this kind of work can easily become life-consuming, but some editors (for instance a patient librarian whose username is DGG) seem to be able to do it steadily week in and week out and stay sane. I, on the other hand, was swept right out to the Isles of Shoals. I stopped hearing what my family was saying to me—for about two weeks I all but disappeared into my screen, trying to salvage brief, sometimes overly promotional but nevertheless worthy biographies by recasting them in neutral language, and by hastily scouring newspaper databases and Google Books for references that would bulk up their notability quotient. I had become an "inclusionist."

That's not to say that I thought that every article should be fought for. Someone created an article called Plamen Ognianov Kamenov. In its entirety, the article read: "Hi my name is Plamen Ognianov Kamenov. I am Bulgarian. I am smart." The article is gone—understandably. Someone else, evidently a child, made up a lovely short tale about a fictional woman named Empress Alamonda, who hated her husband's chambermaids. "She would get so jealous she would faint," said the article. "Alamonda died at 6:00 pm in her room. On august 4 1896." Alamonda is gone, too.

Still, a lot of good work—verifiable, informative, brain-leapingly strange—is being cast out of this paperless, infinitely expandable accordion folder by people who have a narrow, almost grade-schoolish notion of what sort of curiosity an on-line encyclopedia will be able to satisfy in the years to come.

Anybody can "pull the trigger" on an article (as Broughton phrases it)—you just insert a double-bracketed software template. It's harder to improve something that's already written, or to write something altogether new, especially now that so many of the *World Book*–sanctioned encyclopedic fruits are long plucked. There are some people on Wikipedia now who are just bullies, who take pleasure in wrecking and mocking peoples' work—even to the point of laughing at nonstandard "Engrish." They poke articles full of warnings and citation-needed notes and deletion prods till the topics go away.

In the fall of 2006, groups of editors went around getting rid of articles on webcomic artists—some of the most original and articulate people on the Net. They would tag an article as nonnotable and then crowd in to vote it down. One openly called it the "web-comic articles purge of 2006." A victim, Trev-Mun, author of a comic called *Ragnarok Wisdom*, wrote: "I got the impression that they enjoyed this kind of thing as a kid enjoys kicking down others' sand castles." Another artist, Howard Tayler, said: "'Notability purges' are being executed throughout Wikipedia by empire-building, wannabe tin-pot dictators masquerading as humble editors." Rob Balder, author of a webcomic called *PartiallyClips*, likened the organized deleters to book burners, and he said: "Your words are polite, yeah, but your actions are obscene. Every word in every valid article you've destroyed should be converted to profanity and screamed in your face."

As the deletions and ill-will spread in 2007—deletions not just of webcomics but of companies, urban places, Web sites, lists, people, categories, and ideas—all deemed to be trivial, "NN" (nonnotable), "stubby," undersourced, or otherwise unencyclopedic—Andrew Lih, one of the most thoughtful observers of Wikipedia's history, told a Canadian reporter: "The preference now is for excising, deleting, restricting information rather than letting it sit there and grow." In September 2007, Jimbo Wales, Wikipedia's panjandrum—himself an inclusionist who believes that if people want an article about every Pokemon character, then hey, let it happen—posted a one-sentence stub about Mzoli's, a restaurant on the outskirts of Cape Town, South Africa. It was quickly put up for deletion. Others saved it, and after a thunderstorm of vandalism (e.g., the page was replaced with "I hate Wikipedia, its a far-left propaganda instrument, some far-left gangs control it"), Mzoli's is now a model piece, spiky with press citations. There's even, as of January, an article about "Deletionism and inclusionism in Wikipedia"—it too survived an early attempt to purge it.

My advice to anyone who is curious about becoming a contributor—and who is better than I am at keeping his or her contributational compulsions under control—is to get Broughton's Missing Manual and start adding, creating, rescuing. I think I'm done for the time being. But I have a secret hope. Someone recently proposed a Wikimorgue—a bin of broken dreams where all rejects could still be read, as long as they weren't libelous or otherwise illegal. Like other middens, it would have much to tell us over time. We could call it the Deletopedia.

Notes

[*] See Reid Priedhorsky et al., "Creating, Destroying, and Restoring Value in Wikipedia," www-users.cs.umn.edu/~reid/papers/group282-priedhorsky.pdf; and Aaron Swartz, "Who Writes Wikipedia?" *Raw Thought* (weblog), September 4, 2006, www.aaronsw.com/weblog/whowrites-wikipedia.