

ESSAYS ON FREE KNOWLEDGE

*The Origins of Wikipedia and
the New Politics of Knowledge*

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the New Politics of Knowledge*



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CANAL WINCHESTER, OHIO

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Preface

FREE knowledge from an encyclopedia—that would be a glorious thing. It is a shame that it is impossible. Knowledge is something that exists in minds, not texts. Reading a text will give you some ground for belief; it will not, by itself, actually give you knowledge.

Still, we can speak loosely and say that encyclopedias contain what purports to be knowledge, and that is enough for me to love encyclopedias. I have always been greatly impressed by systematic catalogs of knowledge—and using the Internet to make new catalogs of knowledge has been the unplanned theme of the last twenty years of my career. Before that, I rarely left school or academia, where my specialization was the theory of knowledge.

The chapters of this book emerged out of my career. They began life as stand-alone articles for publication, speeches, and blog posts. I have edited and updated them all (except for Chapter 11) so that they represent authoritative editions and are readable in the context of this book, rather than a web page. I

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put link content into footnotes. I made stylistic improvements throughout. I have also added many footnotes containing more recent reactions to things I wrote 10 or 20 years ago. I hope these will add interest to the book.

I had well over twice the material that made it into this book to choose from. I limited myself to those essays I liked the best, which have proved to be popular, or which I thought were possibly of some lasting importance, for some reason. I deliberately avoided repetition where I could, as well as writings about projects of mine other than Wikipedia.

In my Internet career, I have thought a fair bit about two questions: What is the best way to catalog free knowledge? And what kind of project policies should we adopt? These two questions are of deep interest to people in many disciplines and professions: to computer scientists, for their technical implications; to Internet researchers, for the history, sociology, psychology, and politics of the Internet; to philosophers, for the deep theoretical aspects of a whole new form of life. All of these aspects are of interest to the field of communications.

These are hard, interdisciplinary questions. They are evergreen and can be expected to remain so. They have deep consequences. They ramify in many ways that have been vigorously debated in the last few decades.

I have collected some answers to these ramifying questions under three heads.

The first head is Wikipedia. What makes an open, online collaboration succeed? Do we need to have charters for collaborative projects? Should media, textbooks, and above all reference works aim to be neutral—or should they instead aim at what their editors claim is the objective truth? How should we organize people who are difficult to reconcile, who have different interests and agendas? How do we resolve disputes among anonymous people in open communities?

The second part concerns what I call the “new politics of knowledge.” In an age of instant answers from collectively-built databases, should we care about accumulating individual knowledge, or are mere information and collective knowledge

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good enough? What sort of special role, if any, do experts deserve in declaring “what we all know”? Is individual knowledge, built from books and individual study, somehow outmoded? Is there not something anti-intellectual about saying so?

In the final part I include three recent essays bemoaning the fact that free knowledge is in dire straits, now that, like social media, Wikipedia has abandoned neutrality and is used as a tool for social manipulation. With the “Encyclosphere,” I propose a free, decentralized encyclopedia network, open to contributions from all. I apply similar themes to the Internet generally in a “Declaration of Digital Independence.” I conclude, in a brand new essay, that free information and knowledge on the Internet is under attack, and I ask how we can save it.

I hope this book will be of interest and use to Internet entrepreneurs, scholars, policymakers, and the broad public.

LARRY SANGER

Central Ohio
August 2020

Part I

HISTORY AND THEORY
OF WIKIPEDIA

One

The Early History of Nupedia and Wikipedia: A Memoir

An origin story and analysis, written in spring 2005 for Slashdot while memories were still relatively fresh. How did Wikipedia get started? How did such an unlikely-seeming idea actually work? This is one of the longer and most detailed accounts of the origin of Wikipedia, revised anew, with remarks from 2020 mostly relegated to footnotes and in this volume's concluding essay.

AN impassioned debate has been raging, particularly since the summer of 2004, about the merits of Wikipedia and the future of free online encyclopedias. This discussion has not benefitted by much detailed, accurate consideration of the origins of Wikipedia and of its parent project, Nupedia. But it seems to me that those origins are very important—crucial, even—to forming a proper judgment of the current state and best future direction of free encyclopedias.

Wikipedia as it stands is a fantastic project; it has produced enormous amounts of content, thousands of excellent articles,

and now, after just four years, is getting high-profile, international recognition as a new way of obtaining at least a rough and ready idea about very many topics. Its surprising success may be attributed, briefly, to its free, open, and collaborative nature.

This has been my attitude toward Wikipedia practically since its founding. But a few months ago I wrote an article critical of certain aspects of the Wikipedia project, “Why Wikipedia Must Jettison Its Anti-Elitism,”¹ which occasioned much debate. I have also been quoted in many recent news articles about the project, making various other critical remarks. I am afraid I am getting an undeserved reputation as someone who is opposed to everything Wikipedia stands for. This is completely incorrect. In fact, I am one of Wikipedia’s strongest supporters. I am partly responsible for bringing it into the world (as I will explain), and I still love it and want only the best for it. But if a better job can be done, a better job *should* be done. Wikipedia has shown fantastic potential, and it is open content—and so if the project has problems that will keep it from being the maximally authoritative, broad, and deep reference that I believe could exist, I firmly believe that the world has the right to, and should, improve upon it.

Wikipedia’s predecessor, which I was also employed to organize, was Nupedia. Nupedia was to be a highly reliable, peer-reviewed resource that fully appreciated and employed the efforts of subject area experts as well as the general public. When the more free-wheeling Wikipedia took off, Nupedia was left to wither. It might appear to have died of its own weight and complexity. But, as I will explain, it could have been redesigned and adapted—it could have, as it were, “learned from its mistakes” and from Wikipedia’s successes. Thousands of people who had signed up and who wanted to contribute to the Nupedia system were left disappointed. I believe this was unfortunate and unnecessary; I always wanted

¹ Chapter 5 in this volume.

Nupedia and Wikipedia working together to be not only the world's largest but also the world's most reliable encyclopedia. I hope that this memoir will help to justify this stance. Hopefully, too, I will manage to persuade some people that collaboration between an expert project and a public project is the correct approach to the overall project of creating open content encyclopedias.

I am not writing to request that Nupedia be resuscitated now, as nice as that would be. But I would like to tell the story of Nupedia and the first couple years of Wikipedia, as I remember it. A truly careful, unbiased, comprehensive, and scholarly history of the projects, as opposed to a memoir, would require study of the Nupedia and Wikipedia archives—if early archives of them still exist.² Interviews with many of those heavily involved in the projects would also help a great deal, so long as interviews were done of people on different sides of the disputes that helped to shape the project.

In July of 2001, while still working on both Wikipedia and Nupedia, I wrote, “if some other open source project proves to be more competitive, then it should and will take the lead in creating a body of free encyclopedic knowledge.”³ Since Wikipedia is open content and hence may be reproduced and improved upon by anyone, I have always been cognizant that it might not end up being the only or best version.⁴ My personal devotion has always been to the ideal project as I have envisioned it, not necessarily to particular incarnations of Nupedia or Wikipedia; and I think this attitude is fully

² Incomplete copies have come to light since this essay first appeared, on which one officially approved history has been written (Andrew Lih's *The Wikipedia Revolution*).

³ In “Britannica or Nupedia?” in Chapter 2 in this volume.

⁴ In other words, it is still possible, in 2020, that a fork of Wikipedia, like Everipedia.org, might one day emerge as more robust than Wikipedia itself.

consistent with the (very positive) spirit of open source collaboration generally.

This being said, let me also emphasize strongly that, throughout this discussion, I am not suggesting that Wikipedia needs to be replaced with something better.⁵ I do, however, think that it needs to be supplemented by a broader, more ambitious, and more inclusive vision of the overall project.

Some Recent Press Reports

The following memoir seems all the more important to publish now because the early history of Nupedia and Wikipedia has been mischaracterized in the press. If there were only a few inaccuracies, which made no difference, I would be happy to leave well enough alone. But some of the mischaracterizations I have seen do make a difference, because they give the public the impression that Nupedia failed because it was run by snobbish experts whose standards were too high. As the following should make clear, that is not quite correct. One might also gather from some reports that the idea for Wikipedia sprang fully grown from Jimmy Wales' head. Jimmy, of course, deserves credit for investing in and guiding Wikipedia. But a more refined idea of how Wikipedia originated and evolved is crucial to have, if one wants to appreciate fully why it works now, and why it has the policies that it does have.

For example, reporter Brad Stone writes:

[Jimmy] Wales first tried to rewrite the rules of the reference-book business five years ago with a free online encyclopedia called Nupedia. Anyone could submit articles, but they were vetted in a

⁵ By 2019, however, I had come to the view that Wikipedia is simply “broken.” See Sharyl Attkisson, “‘Wikipedia is...broken,’ controlled by special interests and bad actors, says co-founder,” *SharylAttkisson.com* (blog), May 25, 2019, <https://bit.ly/39nZfdl>.

seven-step review process. After investing thousands of his own dollars and publishing only 24 articles, Wales reconsidered. He