

How can you argue with Wikipedia?

Just after its tenth birthday, questions about the authority and reliability of the online community encyclopedia Wikipedia remain. While this online databank of collected, searchable, and editable information continues to call itself “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit,” Wikipedia is not as easy to edit, change, or manipulate as one may think. In fact, an extensive network of checks and balances is involved in the posting and editing of Wikipedia’s content. Changes in content are overseen by a host of editors, archivists, and board members who participate through a type of governmental rule within the community. Wikipedia’s multiple tiers of editors and managers contributed to Wikipedia emergence as a reputable source of information. However, the extent of the editing required for each fully-realized page illustrates the how difficult it can be to achieve accuracy.

Since becoming a leading source of information on the web, Wikipedia continues to display the steps in the editing process that shape every entry, through a linkable, chronicled history for every entry. It is through this active history that a truer picture of understanding of Wikipedia takes shape. What remains critical to Wikipedia’s purpose is a “free” way to access information, to change the record, and to create truth out of the mistakes of the past.

Even from inside the Wikipedia community the ways in which information is relinquished and decided upon causes much debate. The misconceptions that surround

Wikipedia's democracy is revealed through the many layers at play behind the page. Piotr Konieczny suggests that Wikipedia is far from "free." "Wikipedia's model of governance is difficult to categorize. Characterizations range from anarchy...through democracy...to dictatorship" refereeing to it as a "hybrid of democracy, meritocracy, aristocracy, and monarchy."¹ In a system with varied and overlapping tiers of data, how does one rely on the accessed information? How, with so many layers of text working together, can we argue with Wikipedia?

In his 1982 book, *Orality and Literacy* Walter Ong argues that it is not possible to argue with the text. Ong suggests that the written "text", unlike that of the oral "speech", is not in a position to be argued with and that the physical presence of text, written or printed in a book, cannot be changed, or refuted. Additionally, Ong suggests that due to the separation between the written text and the author who produces that text, a disconnected product of the author and not a text that could appear approachable, as one would approach a speaker in front of them. That surplus text, the text printed on a page, does not carry a link to the original "utterance" and therefore cannot under a discourse that may transform the outcome of the text while in the moment of reading. Ong likens this repudiated, dislodged text to power because the text does not allow the reader to edit. Here, the margins of the text do not count. In order for Ong to find a way for text to act in the same way as speech, texts need an editorial presence. "Like the oracle or the prophet, the book relays an utterance from a source, the one who really 'said' or wrote the book. The author might be challenged if only he or she could be reached, but the author cannot be reached in any book. There is no way directly to refute a text. After

¹ Piotr Konieczny, 2009, 164

absolutely total and devastating refutation, it says exactly the same thing as before. This is one reason why ‘the book says’ is popularly tantamount to ‘it is true’.”² In the above statement Ong refers to the process of print culture, the printing press and the works that were textual copies produced by print technologies. Later in his chapter, “Writing Restructures Consciousness,” Ong does give editorial power to written text describing it as a text that can be manipulated. Yet, the written text has an advantage that the spoken text does not. “With writing, words once ‘uttered’, uttered, put down on the surface, can be eliminated, erased, changed. There is no equivalent for this in an oral performance, no way to erase a spoken word: corrections do not remove an infelicity or an error, they merely supplement it with denial and patchwork.”³

Our use of Wikipedia stands as a counterpoint to Ong’s argument. Changes to Wikipedia’s content reflects Ong’s definition of written culture instead of print culture; however, while we can argue with the text through editions/changes/etc there is never a true removal of the information. Text acts as both a source of manipulation and a source of reliability. This juxtaposition, between authority and evolution, reveals how encyclopedic sources like Wikipedia continue to be viewed as dubious.

The argument presented by Ong concerning the power and nature of text in print and written culture is why I believe Wikipedia continues to be challenged for its accuracy and reliability. Contained by a general belief that print equals text, it is no wonder that we are confused by a text that continually changes The Wikipedia entry for the Italian painter Leonardo DaVinci’s work known as the Mona Lisa shows such evolution. This page, which first appeared on August 12, 2002, is a source of a wealth of information,

² Walter Ong, 2010, 78

³ Ibid. 103

first on the artwork, but also on our shifting perception of the details about the painting. Over the years the painting's data has been modified almost daily, sometimes more than once a day. The original 2002 entry is rather short compared to the expansive description we see today. The original entry starts its meager report with over generalizations about the painting being the "most famous painting in the world," followed by a short description of the painting's measurements and current location, the Louvre in Paris, France. The identity of the model is not discussed in the version and is only described as being a "wealthy Florentine."⁴ The next line of the first entry is somewhat perplexing, but I feel gets to the crux of the earlier Wikipedia pages. "Although it is definitely difficult to view the painting critically and ignore all the mythology behind it, it does display a technical mastery that more or less unquestionably seats it amongst Leonardo's masterworks (although some count The Last Supper as a greater work)."⁵ In this brief statement the editor/writer of this first entry reveals a reluctance to describe the painting's identity in length, even when scholarship on this work abounds. The failure to include researched information and helpful documentation exemplifies two important aspects I feel must have been at the forefront of the discussion on Wikipedia when it was in its youth. The first questions the presentation of factual information online and in a community environment, the second comments on the speed in which to place information online that would allow for a quick start into further discourse. Both questions could have possibly led to an obvious unreliable source for scholars.

⁴ Wikipedia contributors, 2002.

⁵ Ibid.

The version of the Mona Lisa's Wiki we see today is filled with refined, researched information. The current version is separated in categories and sub categories like, "Background," "Subject and Title," "Aesthetics," "Theft and vandalism," etc.⁶ While the categories reflect specific aspects of the scholarship around Leonardo and his Mona Lisa, what we also see in the historical changes are the facts being argued against over and over again. Sometimes these changes are quite small, and the more we see the history being built, the smaller the changes present themselves. Yet, the paintings Wiki page, in alignment with the changes of scholarships, continues to evolve. The Wiki page's evolution is a visual/textural example, in real time, of the growth of our own scholarship concerning the Mona Lisa. The importance of Wikipedia, past it being a searchable tool for information, is that it is an example of the continued advancement of knowledge.

We can see, with every edit in the Wiki's history an evolution toward truth and that transformation of the text is not static as Ong suggests. In this case the textural changes that take place in the Mona Lisa's Wikipedia entry becomes an example of a written culture, where one can erase, change, or manipulate the words. In this document, as in all documents, what we do not find is facts, as Ong suggests. For Ong, the printed text resides behind its flatness; nothing can penetrate the page in order for a more interactive engagement. Yet, with Wikipedia we can argue with the text. We can find a better approach to the information. We can utter a word and in the next second, like our speech it is gone. Even in the Wikipedia page our utterance is not stable, it can disappear on a whim depending on the person who is surveying the editions. Like the written text our own Wikipedia pages might be in jeopardy of being repressed, written over, and

⁶ Wikipedia contributors, 2011

canceled out. But, even in the act the cancel, the wipe, the edit is a step in the direction of facts. Fact is progression, if anything could ever illustrate this reality it would be our Wikipedia pages. To whom, then, does the text belong?

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