

With a Little Help from Your Friends? Wikipedia, Web 2.0 and the New e-Conomy of Information

WIKIPEDIA: AN INTRODUCTION

If director David Fincher were to follow up his 2010 Facebook-origin film *The Social Network* with one about the founding and implications of Wikipedia, the online, open-source “Free Encyclopedia,” what would it look like? Could screenwriter Aaron Sorkin produce another script as vibrant and edgy as the one he wrote for *The Social Network*, in which Mark Zuckerberg and his gaggle of undergraduate Harvard brainiacs are compelled to haphazardly but brilliantly create the world’s greatest online social utility? How much creative license (amply applied in the case of *The Social Network*, according to Mark Zuckerberg himself (Hearn 2010)) would the filmmaker employ to punch up the Wikipedia story?

Certainly, they *could* make such a film. But the story of Wikipedia, much like Wikipedia itself, is one defined by the “piranha effect” (not a bad start for our hypothetical movie’s title, by the way); if one were to tell its story, it would have to at least attempt to tell the stories of at least a handful of the by-now millions of contributors whose efforts have amounted to what many view as “the world’s greatest encyclopedia” (Lih 2009). Considering this enormous scope, it might prove to be more difficult to achieve in a feature film format than a story involving a relatively finite number of primary protagonists and antagonists, as in *The Social Network*.

Whether this hypothetical film ever were to be made, both the idea and the existence of a (mainly) open-source repository of all human knowledge such as Wikipedia is exceptionally profound. Like other large-scale reference projects (e.g., Diderot's *Encyclopédie* or the *Oxford English Dictionary*), it might not, in a narrative sense, be as provocative to our contemporary sensibilities as the founding of Facebook and its implications. But, as I will explore in this paper, perhaps it is only a matter of taking the right perspective to prove how revolutionary Wikipedia really *is* as a manifestation of "world-beating technology" (Ostler 2006). I will also provide a review of the critical perspective - both internal and external - on what Wikipedia *is not*.

WIKIPEDIA'S ORIGINS

Among the ensemble cast of characters for our hypothetical film, Fincher and Sorkin would need to include the following principal characters: First, the creators: Larry Sanger, the brainy, often overzealous philosopher mastermind and editor-in-chief of Wikipedia's predecessor, Nupedia; Jimmy "Jimbo" Wales, the Randian-leaning, "humble constitutional monarch" (Lih 2009: 175) and common denominator of leadership throughout the project's development, continuing up to today; and Ward Cunningham, the inspired and magnanimous creator of wiki software. But that's just the easy part.

What's more, the supporting characters would have to be a very strategic mix of the brilliant, the philanthropic, the misanthropic (i.e., "trolls"), the otherwise-bored, the pedantic - individuals who were and are the real, day-to-day, incremental or wholesale creators of Wikipedia in close to 300 languages (Ibid: 159) around the world. Perhaps all or some of these attributes would be rolled into a set of various composite characters, for dramatic effect and

clarity. Regardless, representatives or representations of all of these types would necessarily have to be included to provide proper scope.

Whereas *The Social Network* has a certain strong appeal to the undergraduate set (or our nostalgia for the same), our Wikipedia film would necessarily have more of a doctoral feel: Co-founder Larry Sanger holds a Ph.D. in philosophy and maintains a robust interest in discussing big questions about how we know what we know. As Lih observes, “He seemed straight out of central casting for the role of academic egghead” (Ibid: 32). Considering its aims as a non-profit (though it wasn’t always so), the Wikipedia project as a whole is certainly more populist and high-minded in nature than that of the often more solipsistic, for-profit Facebook. And while indeed the latter fills an important niche in its role as a social utility - a dynamic, highly integratable rolodex, as it were - Wikipedia’s own mission as “the free encyclopedia” has more clearly defined and far-reaching implications for both the human record and humanity as a whole.

It is not surprising, then, that what is now known as Wikipedia was initiated by a certain team of like-minded and also complementary figures in terms of what they each brought to the table. As Joseph Michael Reagle details in *Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia*,

Each man’s [founders Larry Sanger’s and Jimmy Wales’] career path made for a fruitful collaborative potential. Wales obtained bachelor’s and master’s degrees in finance and took courses in...Ph.D. programs...but never wrote a dissertation; he instead turned to the marketplace as a futures options trader...Sanger was a doctoral candidate in philosophy finishing his dissertation on ‘Epistemic Circularity’ (Reagle 2010: 35).

Clearly, their academic pedigrees and professional interests were a powerful catalyst for developing new ways in which concepts relating to the economics of information could be

leveraged into full-fledged careers, not to mention into projects with massive potential for an epistemic revolution of sorts.

Wikipedia's precursor, conceived around the turn of the millenium, Nupedia, was intended to be an online encyclopedia with a for-profit business model (via advertising sales). It was housed under Wales' holding company, Bomis. It also intended to function under the traditional pretext of using well-credentialed experts as authors (with many holding doctorates), though, in this case, on a volunteer basis (except for Larry Sanger himself, who, once hired by Wales and his partners, was the sole salaried employee). But once the Sanger and Wales duo discovered web developer Ward Cunningham's open-source "wiki" software - first published in 1995 - the entire project headed in an entirely new, unexpected direction. As summarized by Reagle (2010: 39-41), Nupedia's progress was simply not moving fast enough. Seeking a solution, Sanger came across Cunningham's almost six-year-old wiki model through an acquaintance in the first days of 2001. By January 10, Sanger had emailed Wales with the following: "Let's make a wiki." Despite some pushback from the network of existing Nupedia contributors, Wales and his associates at Bomis were convinced by Sanger's initiative. By January 15, Wikipedia.com¹ was launched. Within one year of operation, Wikipedia had gone from zero to twenty thousand articles on its flagship English-language version (Lih 2009: 88). According to the article "Wikipedia:About," at the time of writing there are 4,665,825 articles in English.

Sanger has since left the Wikimedia Foundation and begun his own project, Citizendium, which I will detail in a later section. Co-founder Jimmy Wales remains the Foundation's

¹ In 2003, Wikipedia.com was transferred from the commercial firm Bomis to its current non-profit status under the Wikimedia Foundation and the domain Wikipedia.org (Lih 2009: 183-84).

promoter as well as serving on its board of trustees. In 2006 he we was named one of *Time*'s "100 Most Influential People in the World" (*Time* 2006).

TRADITIONAL COMPREHENSIVE REFERENCE WORKS AND THE EPISTEMIC TRADITION

"Information is completely dependent upon the social, cultural, political, and ecological elements of its context, treated only as externalities in neoclassical economics" (Braman 1999: 115). In the real world, then, where information is not generated by itself, those who observe and attempt to describe and then organize it are its essential "makers." Traditionally, this task was reserved for professors, librarians, researchers, journalists, lexicographers, and encyclopedists. The "layman" in relation to a given field necessarily had to prove his or her worth by the credentialing process of an institution of higher learning, with the doctorate as the established apex of such a system.

Revolutions of thought and practice have occurred throughout the history of human societies, wherein the *status quo* is questioned and established notions of epistemology and knowledge production are challenged. Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie* of 1751 caused a massive upheaval in the sense that it was "a political as well as an intellectual project" (Burke 2000: 115) that undermined the authority of not only the French aristocracy and monarchy, but also the Catholic Church. As Reagle notes, "the task is not so much to determine whether a particular reference work was objectively and definitely conservative or progressive, but rather whether it was received as such and what that tells of the larger social context" (Reagle 2010: 144).

In Simon Winchester's account of the creation of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *The Professor and the Madman*, we witness the reference work as not only a documentation and

codification of, in this case, an increasingly widespread and influential language, but again as a mirror held up to the society in which it was produced:

There is some occasional carping that the work reflects an elitist, male, British, Victorian tone. Yet even in the admission that, like so many achievements of the era, it did reflect a set of attitudes not wholly harmonic with those prevalent at the end of the twentieth century, none seem to suggest that any other dictionary has ever come close, or will come close, to the achievement that it offers. It was the heroic creation of a legion of interested and enthusiastic men and women of wide general knowledge and interest; and it lives on today, just as lives the language of which it rightly claims to be a portrait (Winchester 1998: 221).

Besides the observation on the social critique of the work, what's notable is the process by which the *OED* was compiled. Under the supervision of its first editor, James Murray, the entire English-speaking world was solicited to provide citations of the earliest documented uses of words in the language. This could only be done by identifying and referencing the oldest English-language books still in existence, a task taken up with particular gusto by one Dr. W.C. Minor - surgeon, American Civil War veteran, antiquarian book collector, and inmate of the Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane in Crowthorne, Berkshire, England (Ibid: 113). Although found not guilty on the grounds of insanity, Minor had been incarcerated for the murder of an innocent man in London, whom he perceived as a threat during a bout of psychosis. He whiled away his many years in prison, starting in the early 1880s when the project was announced, by sending thousands upon thousands of quotations and citations to Murray and his team of lexicographers at the Oxford Scriptorium. For many years, they had no idea that their most prolific contributor was an inmate at an insane asylum. Nor was that a salient issue for their purposes. Like Minor and others of the "legion of interested and enthusiastic men and women of wide general knowledge and interest," today's Wikipedians also cull significant references from

both primary and secondary sources to make contributions to the vast web of articles that now constitute the encyclopedia's English-language and other world language versions.

Of particular note for this study is the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (first published in 1768). This comprehensive and highly influential work can be seen as Wikipedia's foil but also as its aptest partner in the pursuit of academic rigor (in the English language, at any rate). In 2005, the journal *Nature* conducted an experiment to determine how Wikipedia compared to *Britannica* in terms of its articles' accuracy. The parameters were as follows:

We chose fifty entries from the websites of Wikipedia and Encyclopaedia Britannica on subjects that represented a broad range of scientific disciplines. Only entries that were approximately the same length in both encyclopaedias were selected. In a small number of cases some material, such as reference lists, was removed to bring the length of the entries closer together.

Each pair of entries was sent to a relevant expert for peer review. The reviewers, who were not told which article came from which encyclopaedia, were asked to look for three types of inaccuracy: factual errors, critical omissions and misleading statements. 42 useable reviews were returned. The reviews were then examined by *Nature's* news team and the total number of errors estimated for each article (Giles 2005).

Despite the fact that *Britannica* exclusively employs highly credentialed and accomplished experts to compose and peer-review its copy, the results were quite astounding: An equal amount of "serious errors" from each encyclopedia were detected among the pairs of entries: 8; 4 from each encyclopedia. In terms of the less glaring "factual errors, critical omissions and misleading statements," Wikipedia registered 162. But *Britannica* was hardly immaculate in this category; it registered 123. Interviewed for the article announcing these findings, Michael Twidale of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois remarked, "People will find it shocking to see how many errors there are in *Britannica*. Print encyclopaedias are often set up as the gold standards of information quality against which the

failings of faster or cheaper resources can be compared. These findings remind us that we have an 18-carat standard, not a 24-carat one.” Tellingly, while no information regarding the current status of its print edition (or where/how to buy the most recent one) could be readily found on *Encyclopaedia Britannica*’s official website, the Wikipedia page under that title (second only to the official, corporate site itself in a Google search) had this to say: “In 2012, it was announced that the 2010 edition was the last printed edition that would be published” (Wikipedia/Bosman 2012).

WIKIPEDIA IN REAL TIME: STRENGTHS, CRITICISMS, AND DILEMMAS

In the foreword to Reagle’s *Good Faith Collaboration*, Harvard law professor Lawrence Lessig writes, “Wikipedia is a community, but one formed through a practice, or a doing - collaboration. That collaboration happens within a culture, or a set of norms, guided by principles that the community accepts and fights about, and through that struggle defines” (Reagle 2010: x). But at what point does a community, a practice, or a collaboration become a trusted, respected authority? Can it ever be? The philosophical - and, more specifically, epistemological - implications of such a question are deep and wide-reaching. The very nature and essence of reality and how it is converted into “knowledge” are necessarily our points of entry into this topic.

In his *A Social History of Knowledge*, Peter Burke, speaking on the development of the “sociology of knowledge,” explains how “the shift from insight to organized and systematic study is often a difficult one which may take centuries to accomplish” (Burke 2000: 2). But can it ever be truly and fully “accomplished”? Of course, the process of raising any anecdotal insights

based on (necessarily) limited observations to something we might later term scientific theory or even fact is one that is fraught with challenges and unexpected consequences, and to which only the rigor of scientific method can even attempt to provide due diligence. Is an uncredentialed (but Internet-enabled) person up to this task?

Wikipedia's administrators make it abundantly clear that the site is not - and thus should not be used as - a primary source ("[Wikipedia:What Wikipedia is not](#)"). However, as I will expound in this section, Wikipedia has nevertheless become a highly ubiquitous initial reference work for basic information on a subject, especially when one's local library or, for example, a full set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, cannot be consulted in an efficient manner. This has had - in the opinion of many educators (Chandler and Gregory 2010) - a highly deleterious effect on the current state of student research. Journalist and Wikipedia critic Nick Carr has commented, "They [Sanger and Wales] have taken the encyclopedia out of the high school library, where it belongs, and turned it into some kind of totem of 'human knowledge'" (Reagle 2010: 163). He may have a point, but in 2014, this "totem" is now a source of many people's understanding of the world and, thus, may affect their very decision-making once they have gleaned information from a given article. Therefore, I am tempted to not be so glib about Wikipedia's impact, for good or for ill. This is despite Wikipedia's very philosophy and recommendations, as mentioned briefly above. But how world-beating technology such as this operates in real-time has taken on a life of its own.

As detailed above, the essential ingredient to take a moderately innovative concept like Nupedia in the late 90s and developing it into something revolutionary was wiki software. It should be made clear, however, that "wiki" is not "Wikipedia"; nor was creator Ward

Cunningham ever officially affiliated with the Wikipedia project. As a programmer and amateur ham radio enthusiast interested in “pattern languages,” or the meta-level look at how, for example, computer software is designed and implemented (Lih 2009: 55), Cunningham has worked since long before the so-called Web 2.0 era as an independent consultant and programmer in the IT industry. What’s more, his attitude that “people are generally good” (Ibid: 58) led him to share most of his own work readily and often via his site c2.com, which is relatively unchanged since Cunningham launched his WikiWikiWeb there on March 25, 1995. The shared, editable nature of the new system, using a fairly easy-to-learn markup language called CamelCase, was one of the outstandingly brilliant features that originally attracted Sanger to it. To date, such a syntax is used for not only Wikipedia entry editing, but also within the hashtag (“#”) hyperlinked indexing system of Twitter and other social media (e.g., #WardCunningham).

In his book *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*, published in the same year that Wikipedia was launched (and thus silent on its very existence), Steven Johnson offers this useful analogy to the power of open-source software (like wiki):

A city is a kind of pattern-amplifying machine: its neighborhoods are a way of measuring and expressing the repeated behavior of larger collectives - capturing information about group behavior, and sharing that information with the group. Because those patterns are fed back to the community, small shifts in behavior can quickly escalate into larger movements...You don’t need regulations and city planners deliberately creating these structures. All you need are thousands of individuals and a few simple rules of interaction (Johnson 2001: 40-41).

Johnson can be forgiven for not making any reference whatsoever to the burgeoning potential of the brand new “free encyclopedia” of Wikipedia. He nevertheless had aptly and accurately

described the phenomenon as it had already occurred and continues to occur throughout the eons, in both the lives of humans and in non-human societies like those of ants.

Not everyone is comfortable with the analogy of ants, however. Nor with the concept of the “hive mind” that has been postulated by Johnson and others as an accurate description of how open- and/or crowd-sourced projects function. Former president of the American Library Association Michael Gorman commented, “The central idea behind Wikipedia is that it is an important part of an emerging mass movement aimed at the ‘democratization of knowledge’ - an egalitarian cyberworld in which all voices are heard and all opinions are welcomed...[but] the ‘hive mind’ mentality is a direct assault on the tradition of individualism in scholarship that has been paramount in Western societies” (Reagle 2010: 148). Jimmy Wales, however, has been quite steadfast in his assertion that the “hive mind” is *not* Wikipedia’s intention: “[It] functions a lot more like a traditional organization than most people realize - it’s a community of thoughtful people who know each other, not a colony of ants” (Ibid: 149). Definitions of what Wikipedia *is* and *is not* have evolved considerably over the almost fourteen years of its existence. But, as in other “pattern-amplifying machines,” this too is clearly part of its very shape-shifting nature.

Taking a proactive stance as educators in the “war” with Wikipedia, college professors Cullen Chandler and Alison Gregory decided to conduct an experiment. Citing the aforementioned 2005 study by the journal *Nature* (Giles 2005), the authors (a history professor and an instructional librarian, respectively) acknowledged that, contrary to popular misgivings, “Wikipedia averaged four inaccuracies per entry, while *Britannica* had three; in terms of serious errors (i.e., misinterpretations of important concepts) the encyclopedias each weighed in with four”

(Chandler and Gregory 2010: 248). With this in mind, and seeking a novel approach to the rising tide of their undergraduate students' submissions of research papers almost exclusively listing Wikipedia as a legitimate source in their bibliographies, they devised the following:

After students in the course paired up, Chandler gave them a list of topics from which to choose. These topics were either completely missing from Wikipedia, or they had only a "stub" article (the designation that Wikipedia gives to very brief articles that are lacking in structure.)" The first stage of the project was to have the students research their topics, then write a four- to five-page paper based on primary and scholarly sources, and finally (after approval from Chandler) either create a new Wikipedia article or insert their research into the appropriate existing article (Ibid: 250).

The results of this assignment/experiment are very edifying. One of the requirements was that students were to register as Wikipedia users, as opposed to editing or creating pages anonymously, which is permitted, albeit with administrative caveats. This seems to have engendered a much stronger sense of ownership and accountability among the students, at least more than may have otherwise existed, the authors note (Ibid: 251). After the traditional, hard-copy versions of the students' papers were turned in, the project entered a second phase: "students were required to monitor the articles to see what changes other users would make to the page as a whole and to the students' information in particular. The students posted their findings—and often irritated comments—on the forum within Moodle, addressing what changes others had made to 'their' Wikipedia page" (Ibid: 252).

What this study shows is that no matter what the source, intellectual skepticism is an asset to the student, particularly at the undergraduate level and most certainly at the graduate level. A combination of a pragmatic acceptance of the utility and limitations of a resource like Wikipedia with an equally reasonable respect for traditional, peer-reviewed sources led the

students in this experiment to come away with a better understanding of the “nature of the beast”:

Fundamentally, the students came to appreciate what Wikipedia *is* and what it *is not*. Students expressed that they think Wikipedia is acceptable for a quick reference, and that the references for the individual articles can be quite helpful, but they were quick to point out that Wikipedia is not the be all and end all of research. As one student remarked at the conclusion of the project, "It's okay for the layperson to get an overview, but it's not good for research unless you just use it for the references (Ibid: 255).

WEB 2.0 AND THE ECONOMICS OF INFORMATION

In 1999, at the end of what, in retrospect, we might call the “Web 1.0” era, Sandra Braman wrote,

While historically the consumer has not been considered by economists to be part of the production process, there are multiple roles for consumers in the production of information products and services, from that of shaping products interactively (as with a database, or via collaborative work projects) to their role as products in themselves..., to their role in crafting the meaning, and therefore value, of a product. (111)

In the twilight of the dot-com boom, but before Web 2.0 was recognized to have begun in earnest, Braman was nevertheless prescient of the dawning of the new era in which we now live.

The online technology dictionary Webopedia.com defines “Web 2.0” as the following:

...the term given to describe a second generation of the World Wide Web that is focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online. Web 2.0 basically refers to the transition from static HTML Web pages to a more dynamic Web that is more organized and is based on serving Web applications to users.

Other improved functionality of Web 2.0 includes open communication with an emphasis on Web-based communities of users, and more open sharing of information. Over time Web 2.0 has been used more as a marketing term than a computer-science-based term. Blogs, wikis, and Web services are all seen as components of Web 2.0 (Beal).

Based on this definition, it seems quite clear that Wikipedia belongs to this “second generation.”

However, Reagle argues (while also quoting former editor-in-chief of *Encyclopedia Britannica*

Robert McHenry), that the very term “Web 2.0” itself is unclear and that it is “a marketing term and shorthand ‘for complexes of ideas, feelings, events, and memories’ that can mislead us, much like the term ‘the 60s’” (Reagle 2010: 145). What’s more, since, like other sites that both preceded the so-called Web 2.0 era *and* survived the dot-com bust - e.g., Google (search), Amazon, and Craigslist - Wikipedia is not so much of the newer generation of sites/platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram as it is a continuation of the most functional aspects of the Web’s initial HTML-based era (i.e., the “Web 1.0” of the 1990s). Or, better still, perhaps Wikipedia, much like Craigslist and its simple yet powerful format for classified listings, represents a transitional phase, launched slightly before or around the year 2000 but before there was a term for the platforms that later came to be known as Web 2.0. These were the sites that simply worked well and served a highly practical, regular function.

In 1835, the French social critic Alex de Toqueville wrote, “From this foul drain the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilize the whole world. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilization works its miracles, and civilized man is turned back almost into a savage” (Johnson 2001: 35). While he was referring to the industrial cityscape of Lancashire, England, much of the same could be said of the Internet in the early twenty-first century. Web-based platforms have entered into almost every element of the modern marketplace as we discern new and creative ways to shop, to sell, to socialize, to seek a mate, to consume entertainment, to learn, to teach. Meanwhile, the anonymity of the Internet allows for “trolls” to abuse others on message boards. The ambiguous tone of email can sometimes lead to “flamewars” between parties (that may have otherwise been a simple, innocuous communiqués in another format). And these are just two

rather mundane examples (whose contexts can also be reversed). Moreover, the social, physical, and emotional effects of spending so much time in cyberspace have yet to be fully understood.

The Internet as an engine of productivity - like the mills and factories of nineteenth century English cities in de Toqueville's account - is certainly a defining feature of our times.

A full decade before the Internet began to gain worldwide popularity, Harlan Cleveland sounded the call for a brave new world of the economics of information:

As information moves to center stage in the advanced economies, it comes to be regarded as a resource *in itself*. This is new. Until the early 1970s information (science, technology, values, social authority, and organization) was seen as the handmaiden of "real resources": the tangible things that lay in the ground, swam in the water, or grew in the soil, and latterly the air and water that once were regarded as free goods" (Harlan 1985: 20-21).

Despite this new definition of the value of information, computer scientist and author Jaron Lanier warned in a 2006 article titled "Digital Maoism: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism" that "[t]he beauty of the Internet is that it connects people. The value is in the other people. If we start to believe the Internet itself is an entity that has something to say, we're devaluing those people and making ourselves into idiots" (Reagle 2010: 148). In other words, if the perceived *sui generis*, value-laden information that Cleveland describes is allowed to become divorced from the methods of discovery and inquiry that have been honed by trial, error, and concerted effort over the entire course of human history before the digital age, we will have missed the forest for the trees. And as Chandler and Gregory proved with their Wikipedia experiment above, this is already a clear and present danger among the digital natives of those currently under the age of twenty-five.

CONCLUSIONS

With such a vast amount of information now on Wikipedia, the stakes are clearly as high as they have ever been in terms of its potential for use and misuse. Yet we continue to use it and, we hope, its quality continues to improve. That hope may manifest itself as either passive observation or active participation in the project, depending on our interests and passions. As shown above, issues relating to the ownership and production of knowledge, to the very epistemology of project, abound. What is clear, however, is the Internet's ever-burgeoning ability to connect human beings around the world, and how that has changed the very ways we have come to interact with one another. One look at even a snippet from a video dating service from the pre-Internet days convinces me of how - at the very least - much more *efficient* certain aspects of our society have come; without algorithms, it's much more of a hit-or-miss situation.

As mentioned above, Larry Sanger has moved on to a post-Wikipedia project, Citizendium. Jim Giles, *Nature* author of the 2005 article detailing the Wikipedia vs. *Encyclopedia Britannica* study, explains: "Editors with appropriate academic qualifications will have the power to settle disputes about wording, for example, and stamp articles they perceive to be accurate as 'approved'" (Giles: 2006). Perhaps, then, the solution to the harried student would be to consult both Wikipedia and Citizendium in tandem. In a perfect world, of course, a complete edition of the 2010 *Encyclopedia Britannica* would also be located nearby: *Britannica* for the most historical perspective; Citizendium for a fairly (but certainly not entirely) up-to-date interpretation; and Wikipedia for any by-the-minute updates, including disputed or controversial ones.

Regardless of how one decides who and what to believe about the nature of the universe (and/or beyond), a diversity of options is certainly appealing. What's more, on a meta-level, this grand-scale experiment in epistemology has much to teach us: "Wikipedia can serve not only as a reference work, but also, at the same time, as a study of how knowledge is constructed and contested" (Reagle 2010: 168). This might not make for a great movie. But it certainly makes for a fascinating reality show.

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