

Wikipedia, Oral Culture, and the Western Paradigm of Knowledge: a Work in Progress

According to Reilly, Wikipedia is a “complex discourse community and multi-layered, knowledge-making experiment” (par. 7), where students can “advance their ability to achieve critical literacy in their approaches to research and writing” (par. 11). As such, Reilly positions Wikipedia as a pedagogical tool where students can benefit from “active participation in its development, not passive consumption of its content” (par. 4), thus “revealing how knowledge is constructed in this digital media” (par. 6). However, this notion of critical literacy lends itself more to Western conceptions of knowledge as reinforced and defended by referencing secondary sources. The documentary, *People Are Knowledge*, explores the challenges oral cultures face in attempting to participate in and contribute knowledge to Wikipedia, a forum that demands conformity to said practices of Western scholarship (i.e., citation), ultimately posing the question: “is something true only because it’s been validated by a scholarly tradition of academics in universities, or is something true because it is?” (11:01—11:10). Is the focus of Wikipedia more on harvesting the knowledge that has already been documented, or is it to document knowledge itself? If Wikipedia is truly everyone’s encyclopedia like their promotional videos advocate, and everyone is invited to “share” (“Nice People” 0:06) their knowledge under the premise that “what you know is as important as what we know” (0:26-0:38), is one’s invitation to the community of intellectual philanthropy revoked if, in attempts to “educate” (0:39) and “build something that everyone will find useful” (1:20-26), the materials of construction have not been produced by publishing bodies? In short, for the most part, yes it is. As Cohen delineates, the “whole Western tradition of footnotes and sourced articles needs to be rethought if Wikipedia is going to continue to gather converts beyond its current borders” (par. 4), reinforcing the issue raised in *People Are*

*Knowledge* that the “sum of human knowledge exceeds the sum of printed knowledge” (5:32).

Being a “Western institution” (Cohen par. 21), can Wikipedia ever capture the “sum of human knowledge” using a Western formula (i.e., verifiability and neutrality)?

As delineated in the video *Wikipedia: Verifiability and Neutral Point of View*, users can contribute to Wikipedia following two basic principles: verifiability, articles must “rely on published sources like books or newspapers—resources known for fact checking” (0:29-:040), and neutrality, “information must be presented fairly and without bias” (1:00-1:08). Is knowledge merely an objective rendition of fact? Can all knowledge be stripped of bias? Are we not to question sources that have been reputed as scholarly? Have we deferred that responsibility/onus onto the reputations of publishing houses and their editorial boards alone? *People Are Knowledge* highlights the tension between scholarly knowledge and “people’s knowledge,” or “tacit knowledge [which] comes from practice, and [said] practice is embodi[ment]. It’s embodied in experience” (33:08-33:21). As such, is the scholar always the highest authority outside scholarly/academic circles even on matters such as individual experience? These questions point to larger ones like: is there such a thing as Truth in our contemporary world? *People Are Knowledge* addresses the postmodern conception of individuals having not just one Truth, but many truths, and that one needs to be cautious as not to take one version as being the “only truth of a situation” (18:40-18:43). Moreover, as there are different perspectives, there are different “facts,” and we must strive to look beyond these facts as there are “stories and realities that [lie] behind and beyond these things which [are] equally important for us to try and understand” (11:48-11:55), thus bringing into question “this whole business of how factual is fact. How much can you trust the document” (12:00-12:06)? What may be true to one individual may not be to another, and how is that reconciled or represented in an unyielding Western model that aspires to be the “sum of all knowledge” ?

In attempts to conform to the demands put forth by Wikipedia that all contributions need to be verifiable, *People Are Knowledge's* compromise is to create audiovisual documents which would capture and cement the fluidity of an oral tradition as the solution to the problem that the ideas of billions of people are "not being documented in a way that allows them entry into the formal world of knowledge" (5:11-5:23). This innovation raises the question of whether scholarship should be opened up, like the documentary suggests, allowing for other formats of citation to be used as tools for verification. As outlined in the documentary, a consequence of this proposed new stage [...] [takes] all these different modes of producing history [and] make[s] them all open to a kind of equal access to where writers of history have access and can produce from them, but also readers of history have access to them, and that invites readers of history to act as writers of history (39:35-40:18).

If this becomes an accepted practice, would this convention also be accepted in the West as an authoritative source? Would this open scholarship up, or would this just allow oral cultures to have an alternative means to verify and reinforce their claims? Making allowances for other modalities raises other questions: is there something inherently problematic about an oral culture trying to transcribe its knowledge onto a written forum such as Wikipedia? Moreover, in attempting to harness the wealth of knowledge verbally articulated through the ages of oral tradition, is something more lost/sacrificed when that knowledge is forced to yield to Western conventions? Can oral traditions be arrested in words? Or is it, in and of itself, a whole other language, outside of written symbols (i.e., the sensory, the visual, the symbolic, the rhetorical, the nuanced, the lyrical, etc.)? Can oral traditions be legitimately documented in any other form other than the spoken word? And, by extension, what is done to, and become of, that tradition when it resides in a

footnote? As such, this brings our attention to not only what information is and is not being presented in Wikipedia, but how and on what conditions is it allowed to exist in its forum.

In examining the politics behind what gets included in Wikipedia, Reilly's suggestion that we regard Wikipedia as a mirrored-technology "requiring active and reflexive participation for effective use, support[ing] [...] scholarly perspective and highlight[ing] its unique features, features that can be harnessed to enhance a pedagogy focus[ed] on developing a practice of critical literacy" (par. 26), becomes ever more resonant. It is exactly this practice of validation and referencing sources that is a valued practice for aspiring scholars, but is a simultaneous roadblock for those seeking to partake in a discussion without a larger body of written knowledge to reference. These critical literacy skills are indeed useful to refine for scholarly purposes in a Western context, but with that, we are potentially turning a blind eye to other forms and sources of information, limiting our knowledge base to that which already exists as text.

Bearing all this in mind, as Master of Information students, we must be cognizant of the fact that *all* knowledge is constructed by someone (scholarly or otherwise), and our job is to think critically and examine all sources of information. The idea that there could be one source that encapsulates all the sum of human knowledge is both frightening and utopic in the suggestion that everything we know can be harnessed and made accessible to all (or even to one person, or group of specialists for that matter), but also assumes a homogeneity/uniformity in that all our information needs and ways of understanding are the same. In that regard, we must not lose sight of the human element inherent in knowledge itself, and that it can only be registered and made intelligible on individual terms. As an aspiring librarian, it is precisely the individual needs of information users and seekers that I must gear my talents towards with a growing openness to the ever changing format this information presents itself in.

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