

political affiliation to people they barely know, or to subject themselves to Pokes or to "news" flashes when one of their "Friends" updates a Profile.

But at least among college students, those who say no to online social networking have been in the minority. Much as a student in the IM away messages study said she owed it to her friends to let them know her whereabouts when she was not physically in front of her computer, a subject in my Facebook study wrote that "It allows people I know to see what I am up to." For substantial numbers of people, online communities enable them to see and be seen. And by controlling what information is posted, users help ensure they will be seen on their best day.

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The last chapter looked at one-to-one communication, using IM. In this chapter, we have examined broader social networks (IM away messages and Facebook), in which users still restrict the size of their community. The next chapter expands the online social circle to the world of blogs, YouTube, and Wikipedia, where an individual's audience is potentially far more vast—and unknown.

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• • • Having Your Say

Blogs and Beyond

Nothing, said Samuel Johnson, focuses the mind like a hanging. If history is to be believed, the prospect of hanging may also loosen the tongue. Nowhere is this truism better documented than in a West London spot once known as Tyburn.

As far back as the twelfth century, London criminals (or those judged to be such) were hanged in public from a tree named after the Tye Bourne, a brook that ran there. The place retained its grim function over time. By the seventeenth century, it was common for those about to die to confess their sins and ask for forgiveness, following a set formula.¹ The eighteenth century saw a surge of public hangings, mostly of the poor and disenfranchised. On their way to the gallows from Newgate Prison, the condemned were offered alcoholic spirits by local taverns along the route and as a result, commonly arrived at Tyburn rather drunk.² Felons were allowed to speak their minds to the crowd before meeting their fate.

The last public hanging at Tyburn was in 1783, whereupon executions were moved to the confines of Newgate. Nearly a century later, thanks to a series of reform movements and protests over political issues, an 1872 Act of Parliament set aside an area in the northeast corner of Hyde Park that could be used for public speaking. The legislation, formally known as The Royal Parks and Gardens Regulation Act, established the place we now know as Speakers' Corner near the very spot where the condemned of Tyburn had uttered their last testaments.

Karl Marx spoke there. So did Friedrich Engels, George Orwell, William Morris, Emmeline Pankhurst, and Marcus Garvey. For more than a century, Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park has epitomized free expression in the modern world. The procedure could not be simpler: You show up on a Sunday morning and hold forth. Over the decades, the concept of a "speakers' corner" has been adopted in many other parts of the world.³

Speakers' corners attract the passionately dedicated and the doggedly persistent, the articulate and the uneducated, those who are highly convincing and those who should, perhaps, be committed. Like modern-day bloggers, they have full jurisdiction over their words, and their would-be audiences are equally entitled to listen, heckle, or ignore the soapbox performance.

Of course, speakers' corners haven't been the only venues in which individuals can have their say. Two other pre-Internet platforms have been letters to the editors of newspapers and, more recently, talk radio. While control is not entirely in the hands of the would-be "speaker," both newspapers and talk shows offer access to a substantial audience.

What do speakers' corners, letters to the editor, and talk shows have to do with language online? By reminding ourselves of these highly popular precursors to blogs and other Internet-based platforms for individual expression, we discover how today's online tools are satisfying needs that have long been served in other ways.

• • • LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: HAVING YOUR SAY IN WRITING

Modern journalism is a product of the early 1600s, an outgrowth of hand-written newssheets, called *gazette*, which first appeared in Venice in the mid-sixteenth century. These *gazette* brought news of the rest of Europe to Italy. By 1632 the oldest newspaper we know of was printed in England. The first daily newspaper in London was established in 1702.⁴

Eighteenth-century England saw an explosion in the publication of newspapers and magazines. Daniel Defoe began a paper in 1704; the *Tatler* made its debut in 1709, followed by the *Spectator* in 1711. *Gentleman's Magazine*, which published until 1907, was launched in 1731. The growing periodic press was ripe for copy, including letters from readers.⁵

Early letters to the editor took a variety of forms. While a number were independently submitted, others were solicited by the newspapers themselves. Sometimes editors commissioned letters from correspondents in their employ or published letters written by friends. Such was presumably the case with the twenty-three letters that Enoch Cobb Wines, a Congregational minister, wrote to the editor of the *United States Gazette*, narrating Wines's journey from Philadelphia to Boston—reminiscent of contemporary travel blogs.

Like many of his day, Wines signed his name with a pseudonym: Peter Peregrine ("traveler"). Sometimes a pseudonym was chosen simply to preserve anonymity. In other instances, a name such as Publius was selected to imply that the piece was not personal opinion but the voice of the common

man—a tactic adopted by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay in their eighty-five essays, initially published in New York newspapers, that became known as the *Federalist Papers*.

In the first century of letters to the editor, authors tended to have social standing. However, the platform was, in principle, open to anyone. Anonymity allowed "those either so lowly they ought not to presume to rise, or so high that they should not have sunk, to involve themselves in public debate."⁶

While many letters to the editor focused on political issues of the day, there was seemingly no limit to the topics that might show up. *Gentleman's Magazine*, for instance, carried letters dealing with theology, earthquakes, and ghosts, not to mention passages copied from manuscripts or rare books, complete with commentary.⁷

Literary and intellectual luminaries have often taken up the newspaper rostrum. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll) wrote on a pair-combination method for scheduling players in round-robin sports events, such as lawn tennis, and on proportional representation in voting.⁸ Arthur Conan Doyle's letters to the editor dealt with medicine, politics, sports, the law, foreign affairs, literature, military issues, religion, and in 1931, a series on building a Channel tunnel.⁹ George Bernard Shaw (whose collected letters to the press numbered around 155) published on his objection to flogging as a form of punishment (legal in England until 1948) and used the newsprint pulpit to continue arguments with—or show support for—such men of letters and science as H. G. Wells, G. K. Chesterton, Julian Huxley, and J. B. S. Haldane. Yet in the end, Shaw was not certain that this time had been well spent. In the words of the editors of Shaw's public letters, "Shaw calculated that he lost at least four years of his life writing 'superfluous letters,' during which time he could as easily have written three good plays."¹⁰

By the early 1890s, there were more than two dozen daily papers in London. And they were big: over two feet high and eighteen inches wide. One reason letters to the editor proliferated was that given all that space, editors "could afford to be indulgent to readers who wished to communicate their thoughts and opinions to their fellows."¹¹

A similar challenge faced the radio in its early days: Networks needed programming. What more inexpensive and audience-friendly format could one imagine than a conversation?

• • • TALK RADIO: "LAST BASTION OF FREE SPEECH"

The first talk-radio show was in the early 1920s, the honor probably going to a program about farming.¹² In the early years, hosts tended to monopolize the

air waves. Take John J. Anthony, who held court on *The Goodwill Hour*. The program announcer opened each show with the declaration, "You have a friend and adviser in John J. Anthony" and "thousands are happier and more successful today because of John J. Anthony!" How did Anthony engender well-being in others? By paraphrasing—and replying to—letters and telephone calls from his listeners regarding life and the pursuit of happiness.¹³

Talk radio became a long-running success story. While some programs eventually became talk television (such as the *Larry King Show* morphing into *Larry King Live*), talk radio continues to draw audiences and participants because of its very portability. In the office, driving on the highway, cleaning house—a radio is nearly always convenient, and so, these days, is a phone.

How many talk-radio shows are there? As of 1996, there were officially 1,992.¹⁴ A decade later, there were close to 4,000 talk-show hosts.¹⁵

How many listeners are out there? In 1996, 18 percent of adults in the United States listened to at least one call-in political radio talk show at least twice weekly.¹⁶ By December 2002, 22 percent of Americans got their news from talk radio, up from 12 percent in 1995.¹⁷ In their 2007 edition of *Radio Today*, Arbitron noted that for 2006, 47 million listeners tuned in to "news/talk/information" shows each week, while more than 11 million listened to "talk/personality" stations.¹⁸

With the expansion of Internet radio (potentially increasing listenership) and the explosion in blogging (which might siphon off some of the audience), the actual number of listeners is a moving target. However, the staying-power of radio should not be underestimated. Arbitron reported that in 2006, 93 percent of Americans aged twelve and over were listening to the radio at least once a week.¹⁹

Statistics on listeners who call in are harder to estimate. A 1993 survey found that 11 percent of Americans had ever tried to call a talk-radio show, while 6 percent had made it onto the air.²⁰ Another study (this one from the late 1980s) reported that less than one half of 1 percent of listeners had ever called in.²¹ In either event, there are a lot of lurkers out there.

I'm the Host, You're the Guest

The essential elements of talk radio are these: a host, one or more guests, and folks to ask questions—either members of a studio audience or people calling in on the phone (or these days, sending an email or text message). What makes a show successful isn't just the topics discussed, the expertise of the guests, or even the host's personality but also the skill with which the host handles questioners. From the perspective of the listening public, talk radio

feels like what Jerry William, a Boston talk-show host, described as "the last bastion of freedom of speech for plain, ordinary citizens."²² In fact, though, callers are generally at the mercy of the show's producers.

Speech is hardly free if your call is never taken on the air. Nearly all shows have screeners who find out what you want to talk about, determine whether you are inebriated or have an accent that might not be understood, judge if you will sound interesting or boring. If you make it through these hurdles and get the chance to go live, the host still holds all the cards. Hosts can, of course, hang up on callers, but they also have more ingenious forms of control. They might have the engineer turn down the volume on a caller who starts shouting. Automatic devices can block out the caller's voice if the host and caller attempt to speak at the same time. And the host can close the encounter with a "Thanks so much for your call," while the "ordinary citizen" continues on, unaware he or she is no longer on-air.

The balance of power between host and "citizen" varies from show to show. Some contemporary celebrity hosts seem to take perverse pleasure in being rude to callers they find offensive. Other hosts—especially on public radio stations—are models of decorum and work hard at ensuring that callers have their say.²³

Why Is Talk Radio So Popular?

Talk radio is a bit like a Rorschach test, open to individual interpretation. For some, it's a form of entertainment, allowing them to take in the passing show. For others, it's a medium for education—assuming you can believe what you hear. A third function of talk shows is to perpetuate the idea of free speech. Similarly, talk television (in this case, in the UK), has been described as the embodiment of democratic ideals:

On the television [talk show], the doctor is on an equal footing with any of his patients, just as the Archbishop of Canterbury is with a pop star and yet in real life that is not so. People are not equal in society, the little girl who works in the back of the shop is not on equal footing with a professor of Greek, and yet on the box, everyone is the same.²⁴

Undoubtedly, talk-show devotees relish the opportunity to have their say (or to hear like-minded callers do the speaking for them). But an equally important reason for the popularity of talk radio is the companionship it provides. This quest for social connection applies to listeners and those calling in alike.

In the early 1970s, psychologists such as Stanley Milgram began suggesting that urban living encourages superficial relationships, resulting in the diminution of "psychic resources" such as status, love, and attention.²⁵ Talk shows were an obvious medium to help fill the interpersonal gap: They "serve . . . as a companion for lonely people, countering the growing isolation of many in modern society."²⁶

A study of radio talk-show callers to a Philadelphia station in spring 1973 found that "the principal urge motivating people to call a 'talk station' is rooted in a highly personal need for communication—for contact with the outside world."²⁷ The ninety-seven callers who were interviewed seemed more isolated than the Philadelphia population at large (judging from the 1970 U.S. Census). Callers tended to be older, of lower socio-economic status, and more likely to be widowed. The demographic exception was housewives—younger, better educated—who called "during the morning and afternoon [as] victims of a temporary loneliness that accompanies their housework."²⁸

Other research on talk radio and loneliness followed. A study in 1978 argued that "talk radio is more than a mere outlet for opinions. It is a medium for interpersonal communication."²⁹ A decade later, researchers compared those who called in to talk-radio programs with people who just listened. While both callers and noncallers used the medium as a form of companionship and for passing the time, those who called in

found [face-to-face] communication less rewarding, avoided personal communication, were less mobile, felt talk radio was more important in their lives, [and] listened to more hours of talk radio each day.³⁰

The authors concluded that talk radio provided those who called in "an accessible and nonthreatening alternative to interpersonal communication."³¹ This theme is echoed in studies of talk radio from the 1990s:

We may not know our neighbor next door; we may not want to; we may be afraid of the stranger or possible criminal on the street. But radio and TV talk shows have become welcome visitors that help us know what's going on and make sense of an increasingly dangerous, alienating world.³²

Focusing on those who call in, journalist Peter Laufer suggests that

Typically, callers to talk shows are seeking companionship. They are lonely, stuck at home, or stuck in traffic. They feel disenfranchised from society

and desire an opportunity to be heard; they are convinced they have something to say.³³

Seeking companionship. Something to say. Keep these words in mind for our coming discussion of blogs.

Should You Believe What You Hear?

In 1993 the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press found that the most important reason people listened to talk radio was to obtain information. This result, says Laufer, is an "unnerving finding," since "much misinformation is spread intentionally and unintentionally by talk radio hosts," and callers and their opinions are "thoroughly manipulated . . . by individual hosts and the talk radio system."³⁴

Consider for a moment that over half of all talk-radio shows deal with general-interest topics, politics, or public affairs. In the eyes of their hosts, are these shows news or entertainment? If Laufer is correct, we shouldn't be surprised to hear talk-show host Rush Limbaugh proclaim in a 1991 interview that "I look upon my show as an entertainment forum for people" and that "the main purpose of a good call . . . on my show . . . [is] to make me look good."³⁵ Limbaugh is hardly alone in his sentiments. In 1994, a San Antonio talk-show host affirmed that members of his profession were "entertainers," not people "paid to formulate domestic and international policy."³⁶ Of course, news and entertainment need not be mutually exclusive: "more choices and shortened attention spans have led Americans to combine activities wherever possible. Now we want to be entertained while we are being informed."³⁷

In 2005, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press investigated the amount of trust the public had in different sources of news: television, newspapers, Internet news blogs, and talk-radio shows. Asked to rate each medium with regard to whether it "mostly report[s] the facts about recent news developments, or mostly give[s] their opinions about the news," those surveyed clearly saw news-oriented talk-radio shows as opinionated: 68 percent said "mostly opinion," while only 10 percent said "mostly facts."³⁸ Yet since truth ("facts") is generally elusive, we commonly make judgments on the basis of opinions with which we happen to agree—either because they are consonant with our prior belief structures or because we trust the people voicing them.

Laufer argues that the trust many listeners place in what they hear from anonymous callers (not to mention named hosts) reflects our need to connect with others in an anomic world:

people are seeking replacements for the loss of direct personal contact in modern society. . . . Few of us sit around a coffee shop chatting over the morning paper with our neighbors. We grab a coffee to go, drink it in the car during the boring commute, and tune in to the radio for company.³⁹

News or entertainment? Accurate or not? Balanced reporting or shock-value hyperbole? Presciently, TV newsman Dan Rather addressed these questions in a letter to the *New York Times* on March 8, 1994, in which he pleaded that "If we keep blurring the distinctions and standards between news and entertainment, we're all going to have to pay. And I respectfully submit the price is too high."

When Guests Become Hosts: From Talk Radio to Blogs

Talk radio is built on a model in which the host is in a privileged position, controlling access to the broadcast equipment and deciding which callers will be permitted to have their say. Some talk shows are more democratic (or demagogic) than others, but callers always serve at the pleasure of the host.

What happens if you turn the tables? Much as desktop publishing put the power of the press into the hands of anyone with a computer and printer, the Internet turns each of us into a potential talk-show host. The medium, this time, is not spoken radio but the written blog.⁴⁰

• • • PUTTING MARGE IN CHARGE: THE DYNAMICS OF BLOGGING

I should have guessed from the name of her blog that "Marge in Charge" was likely to hold strong opinions and not hesitate to express them. Not that I was a regular reader. I happened upon Marge in the course of research I was doing on how users of the Internet formulate an image of someone's identity based upon information revealed through web searches. Since the person I best knew was yours truly, I did a large-scale ego search on Google, Yahoo!, Lycos, and Alta Vista, drilling down several hundred hits on each. There, at number 155 on Google (as of May 8, 2004), I met Marge.

Marge's blog entry for March 20, 2003, dealt with a *New York Times* piece on IM away messages, in which I had been quoted regarding the study

presented here in chapter 5. Apparently Marge was none too impressed with research on computer-mediated communication. Misreading the article, she began by lighting into me for teaching a semester-long offering on just away messages (which, of course, I had not). But since Marge was in charge, there was no one to correct her. She barreled on ahead:

WHAT? You can take a class that analyzes away messages? Are you [expletive deleted] kidding me? . . . *Away messages?* I'm going to do an independent study on e-mail signatures. I want a B.A. in answering machine anthropology . . . [more expletives] . . . I'm transferring to American so I can get a Ph.D. in AIM.

For readers who didn't know me (or the legitimate research field of CMC), I probably came across as either socially hip or an academic slacker. I took only small consolation in my observation that more than a year after her tirade, the number of comments posted to her blog entry was zero. My pride was hurt, but I felt reasonably assured that my reputation (and that of my university) remained intact.

Dan Rather was not so lucky. On September 8, 2004, *CBS 60 Minutes Wednesday* aired a piece Rather had done about George W. Bush's experience in the Texas Air National Guard. The story suggested Bush had used family influence to evade the draft (this was the Vietnam Era), and that he didn't actually fulfill his National Guard obligations. At 11:59 p.m. that night, the first negative reaction was posted on the highly conservative blog site FreeRepublic.com. A cascade of other bloggers quickly picked up the story—PowerlineBlog.com, DrudgeReport.com, and the newly minted RatherBiased.com. Their argument: The *60 Minutes Wednesday* account was based on forged documents. CBS News conducted an internal investigation, which added more fuel to the blogging fire. Both CBS and Rather eventually apologized for running the story without ample certainty of their facts, but bloggers were calling for Rather's head. On November 23, Rather announced he would end his long career as anchor of *CBS Evening News*, which he did on March 9, 2005—twenty-four years to the day after assuming the post. (In September 2007, Rather filed a \$70 million lawsuit against CBS, arguing that he had been made a scapegoat.)

The incident is reminiscent of a trial-by-talk-radio that occurred a decade earlier. The 1993 nomination of Zoe Baird to be U.S. attorney general was defeated not by the Clinton administration, the Congress, or even the press. Instead, it was largely talk-radio callers voicing strong disapproval of the terms under which Baird had hired a nanny that led to the nomination being withdrawn.⁴¹

With the *60 Minutes* case, the blogosphere meted out one of its first instances of "justice" on the electronic frontier. Rather was hardly the first journalist not to have gotten a story exactly right, but this time his judge and jury were a small, vocal, politically opposed cluster of bloggers.

When many people talk about blogs, they have in mind the online writings of a relatively restricted number of individuals, most of whom deal with political issues or at least current events. These are the so-called A-list bloggers, the ones whose readership surpasses that of many mid-sized newspapers. But when it comes to finding an audience on the Internet, most bloggers have more in common with Marge.

What are Blogs, and Where Did They Come From?

The humble beginnings of blogs trace back to the late 1990s, when a handful of web denizens began compiling lists of the URLs for online pages that the creator of the list found to be interesting. Since these listings were literally logs of web locations, Jorn Barger's term "web log," coined in 1997, made eminent sense. Early web logs included Dave Winer's Scripting News, Cameron Barrett's CamWorld, and Barger's Robot Wisdom, though some purists date the first web log back to 1991, when Tim Berners-Lee, father of the World Wide Web, created "What's New?" pages that linked to other web sites.

Many early web logs consisted of just headlines accompanied by links to pages bearing the actual stories. Other web logs offered brief news summaries or discussions of contemporary topics, alongside the links. One rule of the game was that the logs needed to be updated frequently.

Web logs soon gained in popularity. With increased visibility, the phrase "web logs" morphed into *blogs*, much as "God's blood" became shortened to *'blood* in Shakespeare's day. Free blogging tools made it easy to join the blogging revolution. Ever-more powerful search engines began bringing up hits on the blog postings of obscure bloggers, and hence my encounter with Marge in Charge.

Several people who write about blogs have noted parallels between blogging and talk radio. The analogy was nicely articulated by Bonnie Nardi and her colleagues:

Just as with radio, the blogger can broadcast messages of their choosing, without interruption. Limited feedback analogous to listener call-in on a radio station is possible with comments on blog posts. The comments remain "subservient" to the main communication in the posts, just as a talk show host or deejay dominates listeners.⁴²

In fact, one blogging software platform is called Radio UserLand. Other antecedents to blogs have been noted in the literature as well. Speakers' Corner is sometimes invoked, as are letters to the editor and traditional handwritten diaries.⁴³

Who Blogs, and About What?

As with talk radio, there are blog writers (compare "hosts" and "callers") and blog readers ("listeners"). How many are there of each?

In July 2006, the Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that about 12 million American adults blog (8 percent of Internet users), while about 57 million American adults (39 percent of Internet users) read blogs.⁴⁴ Other research found that 9 percent of people surveyed said they read a political blog "almost every day."⁴⁵

Involvement with blogging varies across cultural milieu. In the UK, only 2 percent of Internet users wrote blogs in early 2006 (a quarter of the U.S. figure).⁴⁶ What is more,

only 13% of those surveyed in the UK had read an individual's blog in the preceding week, compared with 40% in the US, 25% in France and 12% in Denmark. 12% of UK readers had read a newspaper blog in that week, compared with 24% in the US, 10% in France and 9% in Denmark.⁴⁷

Getting precise tallies on blogging is difficult because the medium invites transience. I've created four or five blogs for my classes over the past few years. When the course is over, the blog remains, floating like space junk—but in cyberspace. Am I a blogger? Not really, but I have several blogs in my name. Do I read blogs? Sometimes, but mostly when they turn up in web searches. If a survey asked me whether I write or read blogs, and how many blogs I have, I could at best confound the data.

The scope of blogs has expanded dramatically over the past decade, making blogging more of a multifaceted tool than a specific type of Internet platform. Most blogging services offer a range of options the blogger controls: Who may read the blog in the first place? (Is the blog password-protected? Does it have an unlisted URL?) Does the blog take comments? In these regards, access controls on blogs are akin to privacy settings on Facebook. In fact, the similarity between media goes further. On some blogging sites, the opening page contains a profile of the blogger that looks amazingly similar to what you find on Facebook or MySpace.

The control issue becomes particularly nuanced with individual blogs primarily intended for a recognized circle of friends. On these kinds of blogs, the average number of comments posted by other people approaches zero,⁴⁸ which is probably all for the better. As Nardi and her group found in their interviews with adult bloggers, "Bloggers wanted readers but they did not necessarily want to hear a lot from those readers." Why? Because "many bloggers liked that they could be less responsive with blogging than they could be in email, instant messaging, phone, or face to face communication. They seemed to be holding their readers at arm's length."⁴⁹

In principle, all blogs share four basic features. They're predominantly text-based (though graphic supplements are becoming increasingly common). The entries appear in reverse chronological order (that is, most recent first), with an archive kept of earlier postings. Blogs are frequently updated, and blogs contain links to other web sites. In practice, only the first two criteria are consistently found in today's blogosphere. As the medium attracts ever-larger numbers of users, bloggers are deciding for themselves how often they wish to post and whether they care to invite you (via links) to other URLs. A study of more than 5,000 blogs (done by Susan Herring and her colleagues at Indiana University) found that 42 percent were not linked in any way to other blogs.⁵⁰

Over time, blogs have evolved from strictly current events sites to arenas for more varied self-expression. Herring and her students distinguish between three basic genres of blogs.⁵¹ The first is topical (or "filter") blogs, exemplified by the news-based and political blogs that have figured prominently in the popular media's discussion of blogging. Examples include Matt Drudge's *The Drudge Report* or Markos Moulitsas Zúniga's *Daily Kos*. The second category is personal journals or diaries, following the earlier lead of web diary sites such as *LiveJournal*.⁵²

This genre also might include travel blogs intended for readers back home, open blogs from soldiers in Iraq, or replacements for the annual Christmas letter. Finally, Herring talks about so-called knowledge blogs, in which individuals share their expertise. Examples include John Baez's *This Week's Finds* (on issues relating to mathematical physics) or Lawrence Lessig's *Lessig Blog* (which discusses legal and political issues involving copyright, especially in an online world).⁵³ Other researchers have identified additional blogging genres, including support groups.⁵⁴ Another category we've already mentioned is blogs created for academic purposes.

When you probe beneath the typologies to actual statistical sampling, it turns out that the blogs getting the least press are actually the most prevalent. Of the 203 blogs that Herring and her students analyzed (randomly selected through the blog-tracking web site *blo.gs*), more than 70 percent were of the personal-journal variety. Another study using random data from



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blo.gs examined the demographics of bloggers: How many were males versus females, and of what age? Using two samples drawn in 2003, researchers at Indiana University report that while the overall numbers of male and female bloggers was nearly the same, there were more female teenage bloggers but more adult male bloggers. Among adults, topical blogs—which capture media attention—were overwhelmingly written by males.⁵⁵

Not surprisingly, the style of writing found across blogs varies with respect to genre. Personal journal blogs are more likely to use language that some researchers say exemplifies "female" writing style, while topical/filter blogs contain more "male" stylistic features. Interestingly, this generalization holds true regardless of the author's actual gender.⁵⁶

Why Blog?

People choose to write blogs for an array of reasons. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, adults' top four motivations for blogging in 2006 were

- to express themselves creatively
- to document their personal experiences or share them with others
- to stay in touch with friends and family
- to share practical knowledge or skills with others⁵⁷

The first three reasons suggest that a lot of personal journal writing is taking place. The final category—sharing knowledge or skills—sounds like knowledge blogs. Looking ahead in this chapter, this last group of bloggers seems ripe for participating in Wikipedia.

Bloggers in the Nardi study also shed light on why people blog. Subjects identified five main reasons:

- update others on activities and whereabouts
- express opinions to influence others
- seek others' opinions
- "think by writing"
- release emotional tension⁵⁸

A number of these motivations also appear on the Pew list (whose fifth through eighth runners-up included "to motivate other people to action" and "to influence the way other people think").

Let's dwell for a moment on the function of releasing emotional tension. Several people interviewed in the Nardi project talked about using blogs to "let off steam" or needing to "get it out there."⁵⁹ Elsewhere, teenagers report similar motivations. In the words of one sixteen-year-old who kept a web diary, "When there were days when I just needed to rant, it felt good."⁶⁰ Why blog in these circumstances rather than talk with people face-to-face, on the phone, or through IM? As another teenager commented, "blogs let writers interact while avoiding the emotional risks of one-to-one conversation."⁶¹ Echoing this sentiment are adult bloggers who sometimes wanted an audience before whom to bare their souls but "desired to keep that audience at arm's length."⁶²

Why else blog in place of personal conversations? Beyond some obvious reasons (reaching many people simultaneously, keeping a log of earlier posts, including lots of photographs), another motivation is not intruding upon friends. Blogs are a "pull" technology (like web sites you find on your own) rather than a "push" medium (such as email or IM, which shows up uninvited on your electronic doorstep).⁶³ Readers may choose to open a blog at their leisure—or ignore it altogether, while an email or IM is more in your face.

Finally, some people blog for money. Ana Marie Cox, aka Wonkette, began her blog through a paid arrangement with Nick Denton (publisher of

Gawker Media), who generated income by selling ads on the site. Advertising is now common on A-list topical/filter blogs, which can generate over a million dollars in revenue a year. At the micro level, ad revenue sometimes finds its way into the pockets of small-time bloggers, who are paid a few dollars to post complimentary words about products or services, though other bloggers post such encomia for free.⁶⁴

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In discussing talk radio, we identified four reasons that people listen to—or call in to—such shows. All four apply to blogs as well. Reading (and writing) blogs is a form of entertainment, though sometimes the entertainment verges on personal fantasy. The executive director of Wiresafety.org notes that teenage bloggers have been known to portray themselves as engaging in risqué behavior, even when such is not the case—like the "girls who had blogged about weekends of drinking and debauchery, while in reality they were coloring with their younger siblings or watching old movies with Grandma."⁶⁵ Fact or fancy, these teens were controlling the medium, much like the college student who posted the away message about her enjoyable evening out on the town when she was actually home in front of the TV.

Reading blogs can be educational—again assuming you believe what you read. In their 2005 study, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that only 20 percent of Americans judged news blogs to be trustworthy (that is, "mostly facts"). This was the same study that reported only 10 percent of Americans judged the news they heard on talk-radio shows to be "mostly facts."⁶⁶

For bloggers, the medium constitutes an important platform for free speech. As with Speakers' Corner, potential readers "can choose to listen or walk away."⁶⁷ No one demands your credentials before you take the floor. But bloggers' freedom extends even further to controlling audience access and audience input (a bit like the host, rather than the caller on talk radio).

The fourth role of talk radio—companionship—is equally important for blogs. Many people read and write blogs out of loneliness and isolation. A perfect example is Mommy Blogs, which became popular in the United States in the mid-2000s. Imagine yourself a stay-at-home mom with three children under the age of six. For years, parenting and women's magazines have run stories about educated, accomplished mothers feeling they are losing their sanity, between the tantrums, diapers, and repetitive monosyllabic conversations. Enter Mommy Blogs, where you can blow off steam, remember that you still know how to craft an English sentence, upload pictures of your little ones, and take solace—by reading other Mommy Blogs—that you're not alone.

When we talk about blogs, we generally focus on the written text they contain. But modern blogging software often welcomes visual display. What if you cut out the text entirely and only upload graphics? If the images are still photographs, you enter the world of photo-sharing, made popular by such services as Flickr. If you're into movies, welcome to YouTube.

• • • NUMA NUMA ANYONE? WELCOME TO YOUTUBE

When sons and daughters go off to college, their parents often feel left out. Yes, there are phone calls home, but from Mom and Dad's perspective, most of the action is happening in unknown settings, with unidentified friends and acquaintances. My son's first kendo tournament was such an event. He was somewhere outside Detroit, *shinai* (bamboo sword) in hand, encased in his *do* (chest protector) and *men* (face mask), doing stylized battle with an adversary from I knew not where. What I would have given to be a fly on the wall of the gymnasium.

The price of admission turned out to be free. Teammates of the worthy opponent had made a video of the round and, some time later, posted it to YouTube. Cascading one online technology after another, the opponent matched my son's university with his last name—prominently displayed, as for all kendoists, on his *zokken* (name plate)—and proceeded to Friend him on Facebook.

The People's MTV

Who besides a parent—and members of the two kendo teams—might be interested in viewing other people's amateur videos? Back in the 1950s and '60s, guests used to cringe at the prospect of an evening watching the home movies of friends who had invited them to dinner. Today, however, our capacity for viewing badly shot images of other people's antics seems to be endless. Gary Brolsma, a teenager from New Jersey, achieved near-instant fame in late 2004 when he uploaded to newgrounds.com, one of the early Internet video-sharing platforms, a rendition of himself lip-synching "Numa Numa."⁶⁸

Some background: In 2003, the Moldovan band named O-Zone recorded a song called "Dragostea din tei," which became a best-selling hit in Europe. The words *numa numa* appear in the chorus of the song, meaning something along the lines of "you won't, you won't take me." Other ver-

sions of the piece appeared in Europe, but for our story, the important rendition was a parody done in Japan, which substituted Japanese lyrics in place of the original Romanian by using words that sounded most similar in Japanese.

It was this Japanese version that Brolsma took as the basis for his own video. Brolsma's performance can now be found on many video-sharing platforms (including Google Video and YouTube) and has been played millions of times. That number doesn't include audiences of the countless other versions—made by Austrians, Brazilians, Spaniards, Belgians, Russians, Chinese, French, Finns, and more Americans than most of us have the patience to watch. In 2005 and 2006, viewing home-brewed versions of "Numa Numa"—often dancing along—was a popular high school and college party pastime.

Andy Warhol spoke of everyone getting fifteen minutes of fame. Video sites such as albinoblacksheep, newgrounds, Google Video, and YouTube afford us the possibility of extending that allotment by packaging ourselves online and hoping for an audience. Sometimes these video forums are simply convenient places for posting material intended for a small circle of friends. (Think of the kendo video, but also recall IM away messages or the Wall in Facebook.) If others happen to see your posting, no harm done. More often—as with Speakers' Corner, letters to the editor, talk radio, and open blogs—people doing the uploading have their eye on a larger audience. Like the proverbial Hollywood starlet, they just might be "discovered."

In our post-Napsterian universe, hundreds of upstart musical groups use these video platforms to gain free airings of their songs. For these users, it's important that the audience remembers their name. Other contributors to YouTube and the like are less concerned that viewers know their personal identity than that the song or vignette went up.

Under what circumstances do we care if our name is attached to our creative productions? The notion of copyright protection—for writings, music, photographs—is quite modern. Copyright as we understand it today did not exist for written works until the eighteenth century.⁶⁹ Not until 1831 was music deemed intellectual property by American law; photography was not included under U.S. copyright until 1865.⁷⁰

Copyright law ensures not only that the writer, musician, or photographer is solely privileged to profit financially from the work but also that no one may tamper with the production without the author's (musician's, photographer's) permission. Why, then, in the twenty-first century would thousands of people work on an open-ended writing project for which there is no remuneration and in which only their words, not their names, are known? Such is the enigma of Wikipedia.

• • • THE PEOPLE'S ENCYCLOPEDIA: WIKIPEDIA

Do you want to know when Guglielmo Marconi won the Nobel Prize in Physics? What about the number of plays that Shakespeare wrote, the contents of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, or the consequences of global warming? Traditionally, these were questions that sent you to the library. Today, the online wonder known as Wikipedia is typically the destination of first resort.

Wikipedia allows anyone to have his or her say. And although names don't appear on the main pages of the articles themselves (in part because entries generally reflect many contributors' edits), an active social networking site functions below the surface.

The story behind this new twist on Speakers' Corner (and its descendants) begins in Hawaii.

The Wiki Wiki Line

Need to change terminals at Honolulu International Airport? Then take the free shuttle known as Wiki Wiki. Want to work collaboratively on a document, where everyone may add or edit text? Do so with a wiki—thanks to Ward Cunningham.

In 1995 Cunningham adopted the word *wiki*—meaning 'fast' or 'quick' in Hawaiian—to name a new tool for doing jointly authored writing, using the Internet. With a wiki, a number of individuals are able to write new content in a document but also to edit what others have written. Instead of Person 1 needing to draft a document, then ship it off to Person 2, who does editing and then forwards the revised text to Person 3, everyone can participate at essentially the same time. Wikis have become common in offices and organizations in which many contributors have their hand in a project. Free online software tools make for highly accessible systems, often used by small groups of colleagues who know—and trust—one another.⁷¹

But the same wiki tool can also be used by total strangers. The best-known example is Wikipedia.

Jimmy Wales Meets Denis Diderot

What are the goals of an encyclopedia? The most obvious is to gather together knowledge, presumably as objectively and accurately as possible, but sometimes with an underlying philosophical agenda. Another motivation is

to make this knowledge available to your intended audience. The scope of that audience may differ from one encyclopedia to the next—some are written for the highly educated, while others are designed for children or the masses. A third purpose, less often articulated, is to present that knowledge through articles that model excellence in prose.⁷²

The first important encyclopedia in English (though named in Latin) was John Harris's *Lexicon Technicum*, published in 1704. In 1728 Ephraim Chambers's famous *Cyclopaedia, or Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* appeared, a book that would serve as a model for many subsequent works. In fact, it was the *Cyclopaedia* that provided the impetus for one of the most famous encyclopedias of all time: the eighteenth-century Enlightenment project known as *Encyclopédie: Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* ("Encyclopedia: A Reasoned Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Trades").⁷³

Initially, the plan had been to do a two-volume translation (into French) and expansion of Chambers's earlier publication. However, with the hiring of Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert to direct the project, the work turned into an Enlightenment manifesto, arguing through example the importance of scientific and rational thought, while at the same time demonstrating religious tolerance and challenging sectarian dogma. Thinking back to our three potential goals of any encyclopedia, the primary aim of the *Encyclopédie* was the embodiment of knowledge, but with a firm eye toward the modern, rational, and practical.

For whose benefit was this knowledge amassed? The public at large. All manner of knowledge was addressed: theology but also mythology, geography but also the making of Gobelin tapestries; natural law but also the nature of werewolves. Publication began in 1751. By the time the project was essentially done in 1772 (the work had been issued piecemeal), there were twenty-eight volumes, containing over 70,000 entries.

The *Encyclopédie* had more than 140 contributors, including the likes of Diderot and d'Alembert themselves, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Marquis de Condorcet, Baron de Montesquieu, men of wealth, and members of the clergy, alongside people of more modest stature. Much of the *Encyclopédie*'s reputation derived from the caliber of the authors (and the writing) that appeared in its volumes.

Across the English Channel, a group of Scotsmen were planning their own encyclopedic work, largely as a conservative reaction to the Enlightenment (which, for some, meant godless) *Encyclopédie*.⁷⁴ The first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* was completed in 1771, with much of the text written by its editor, William Smellie, who drew upon sources ranging from Francis Bacon's essays to Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*, Hume's and Locke's essays, the writings of Voltaire, and a spate of magazines and newspapers.

In the English-speaking world, the *Britannica* came to symbolize authority. Some of that authority derived from its writers, who, in the early nineteenth-century editions, included William Hazlitt, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, and Walter Scott. The famous eleventh edition (which appeared in 1911) is known not only for the authors who contributed—including Charles Swinburne, T. H. Huxley, G. K. Chesterton, Ernest Rutherford, and Bertrand Russell—but also for the elegance of its writing. More recent editions have sometimes attracted expert contributors (such as the economist Milton Friedman, the cardiac surgeon Michael DeBakey, and the astronomer Carl Sagan).

Writing style has not been a modern hallmark of contemporary English-language encyclopedias. In the trenchant words of Charles Van Doren, a senior editor at *Britannica* in the 1960s,

the tone of American encyclopedias is often fiercely inhuman. It appears to be the wish of some contributors to write about living institutions as if they were pickled frogs, outstretched upon a dissecting board.⁷⁵

Robert McHenry, a former editor in chief of *Britannica*, wistfully recalls the poetic beauty—and strongly individual perspective—of such entries in the eleventh edition as Swinburne's biography of John Keats. McHenry candidly acknowledges that more recent editions have "a certain flatness, which is then represented by the likes of me as a virtue, the 'encyclopedic voice.'"⁷⁶

Why should writing style be an issue in an encyclopedia? To the extent that a work is widely read—think of the eloquent and much-thumbed King James Bible—its style becomes a model to follow in our own composition.

Admittedly, accuracy is usually a more pressing concern. In his 1964 book *The Myth of the Britannica*, Harvey Einbinder argued that (at least in the mid-twentieth century), *Britannica* was laced with out-of-date information—duplicated from earlier editions and betraying ignorance of contemporary research, along with instances of out-and-out mistakes. In most cases, said Einbinder, the publisher was trying to produce volumes on the cheap rather than insisting upon the highest levels of modern scholarship.

Enter computers. With the new technology came the possibility of having knowledge at your fingertips—at least in principle. Initially, encyclopedic knowledge accessible by computer came in abridged formats on discs or then CDs, such as Compton's *Multimedia Encyclopedia* (1989) and Microsoft's *Encarta* (1993). Then *Britannica* issued its complete encyclopedia on CDs and subsequently online—but with a comparatively hefty price. Knowledge, yes, and in principle for all, but beyond the fiscal reach of most.

Meanwhile, a seemingly unrelated set of developments was taking place in the computing world that would help redefine our conception of an encyclopedia. The roots of these changes go back to the days before the Internet, even before the personal computer, with the creation of a computer operating system named UNIX.

Around 1970, Ken Thompson and Dennis Ritchie, of AT&T's Bell Labs, wrote UNIX as an operating system that could run on a variety of computer platforms. (Previously, individual operating systems were prepared for machines built by different vendors.) AT&T made nearly all of the source code for the program available to universities, which promptly began to innovate. The best-known spin-off was BSD (Berkeley Software Distribution) UNIX, coming out of the University of California, Berkeley. BSD UNIX circulated among many institutions, where programmers modified the system to improve its functionality—not exactly a wiki but a collective enterprise serving a common goal.

In 1984 Richard Stallman from MIT launched a project known as GNU, under the aegis of his Free Software Foundation. GNU aimed to create a free version of UNIX that individuals could use, modify, and redistribute.⁷⁷ The dream became a reality in the early 1990s, when Linus Torvalds, a Finnish software engineer, wrote the kernel of a new operating system (called Linux), which he coupled with material from the Free Software Foundation, BSD UNIX, and additional software from MIT. The result was a genuinely open-source version of UNIX, for which the source code was freely available to be used, viewed, modified, and redistributed by anyone.

That same spirit of sharing was at the heart of development of the WELL (the early social-networking bulletin board created in San Francisco by Stewart Brand in the mid-1980s) and evident in the unpaid contributions of programmers to UNIX and Linux.⁷⁸ It was also central to Project Gutenberg, an undertaking begun by Michael Hart in 1971, which now posts to the Internet (again, without cost) electronic versions of books and other writings that are no longer protected by copyright. Google Book Search goes one step forward (and another back), offering text from a vast collection of current titles, but only in small snippets at a time.⁷⁹ Out of this culture of sharing, coupled with Ward Cunningham's wiki, Wikipedia was born.

Wikipedia is the outgrowth of an earlier free online encyclopedia project, Nupedia, founded in 2000 by Jimmy Wales, with Larry Sanger as editor in chief. Nupedia articles were written by experts in the relevant fields and subject to extensive peer review. The labor of authors and reviewers was volunteered, much as happens in the traditional academic world. The project's goal was to create a work that rivaled in quality traditional commercial encyclopedias.

A year later, Wales and Sanger began Wikipedia, another free online encyclopedia, but this time based on a different principle. Using a wiki platform, anyone (not just experts) was invited to contribute articles as well as to edit those posted by others. Initially, Wikipedia was envisioned as a conduit for generating contributions that would then be peer reviewed and eventually incorporated into Nupedia. The problem Nupedia was encountering is one all-too familiar to authors and journal editors: Crafting accurate, insightful, and artistic prose is arduous, time-consuming work. Three years after its inception, Nupedia had vetted only two dozen articles—hardly encyclopedic. In September 2003, Nupedia ceased to exist, its contents being assimilated into Wikipedia.⁸⁰

In short order, Wikipedia became an Internet phenomenon. As of May 2007, it had sites in 249 languages. The largest—English—boasted more than 1.8 million entries, putting the likes of *Britannica* to shame. The project is “an effort to create and distribute a multi-lingual free encyclopedia of the highest possible quality to every single person on the planet in their own language.”⁸¹ Since aligning itself in 2005 with such search-engine giants as Google and Yahoo!, which provide server space and bandwidth, Wikipedia has gained not only in breadth but brawn. Type a query into these search engines and, with surprising frequency, the first hit you get is a Wikipedia article.

As with a blog, anyone with access to the Internet can be a Wikipedia author, having his or her say. Unlike blogs, in which you may say whatever you please (libel and decency issues notwithstanding), the goal of Wikipedia is to provide objective knowledge. Readers who believe they have a better handle on such knowledge than you are free to alter your posting, a feature that sometimes leads to serial doings and undoings. The end result is that the contents of an entry may change at a moment’s notice. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus might have said, you may or may not be able to step into the same Wikipedia entry twice. However, the history of all edits (including those that others have trumped) is maintained.

Authorship Wikipedia Style

Wikipedia has a handful of fundamental “pillars” that define the encyclopedia’s character and composition.⁸² The first: No original research is allowed. The second pillar is that writing must be done from a neutral point of view. If you believe, as do most contemporary philosophers of science, that all observations are theory-laden, such a perspective may be unattainable. But the spirit in which the guideline is defined is understandable. If you’re

writing about the solar system and assert that UFOs definitely exist, you’re not writing from a neutral point of view. If there is a controversy, then (says Wikipedia) you should present all sides of the story.

As Wikipedia has grown, it has become increasingly uniform in style. Through the urgings (sometimes not so gentle) of fellow writers, contributors progressively prepare entries using a standardized format, include references, and embed links to other Wikipedia articles. A frequent request is for someone to “wikify” a piece. (Recall McHenry’s allusion to the contemporary “encyclopedic voice.”)

As of September 2006, there were 75,761 “active Wikipedians” worldwide, with 43,001 of them contributing to the English edition.⁸³ Of the English-language contributors, more than 4,000 were especially industrious, making over 100 edits a month.⁸⁴

What most users of Wikipedia don’t see when they read an article is the world beneath the surface of the text. It’s this world that raises Wikipedia from being “only” a free online encyclopedia (the user perspective) to an active social community of writers, editors, and sometimes camp followers. For contributors, the result is a cross between a cyber-exchange of letters to the editor, a listserv, a blog, a massively multiplayer game, and a social networking site. Although the elements continue to evolve, here are some examples of the community foundations as of January 2007.⁸⁵

Editing Hierarchies

Anyone may write and edit articles, as well as join in discussions, but not all Wikipedians end up equal. There are multiple organizational layers, including “stewards,” “bureaucrats,” and “administrators.” Positions are filled through community-based promotions.

Identity, Affinity, Fun and Games

Contributors to Wikipedia need not toil as nameless members of a virtual Grub Street. Once participants register with Wikipedia (using either their own names or pseudonyms, as is common in blogs), Wikipedians have the opportunity to post short biographies on their “user” pages, complete with photographs and other information they feel pertinent. They may join affinity groups (roughly analogous to the Groups function on Facebook) or receive greetings from the “Birthday Committee” (again, compare Facebook, which offers birthday reminders, typically resulting in a flood of “Happy Birthday” greetings on people’s Walls). Reminiscent of the WELL of old, you’ll find local Meetup groups, opportunities to Adopt-a-User, and a

"Harmonious Editing Club." In addition to social networking opportunities, there's a Wikipedia "Department of Fun." Categories of "Wikitalainment" include contests, games, songs, trivia, and humor.

Acknowledgments

Another important below-the-surface aspect of Wikipedia that makes the project more than simply altruistic community service is acknowledgment for the work one does. Recognition comes in several ways. The simplest is the personal satisfaction contributors gain by seeing their articles (or edits) immediately appear on Wikipedia. When I asked a colleague of mine who is a dedicated Wikipedia editor why he thought so many people were committed writers and editors, his swift response was, "instant gratification." A more overt form of acknowledgment is having one's entry selected as the "Featured Article" of the day on the homepage of Wikipedia. There is also a formal awards system.⁸⁶

Audience, Accuracy, and Style

Thanks to its legion of contributors, Wikipedia continues to expand. As it has moved to the top of many computer searches, and as an increasing number of academics write for Wikipedia, the project has gained credibility in many quarters. How does it stack up against the three criteria we identified for measuring encyclopedias: content, audience, and style?

The easiest category to address is audience. If you have an Internet connection, you have full access to Wikipedia. In this regard, Wikipedia outstrips proprietary works—either print or online—by a country mile.

The question of content is more complex. Take the issue of completeness. Wikipedia is a work in progress—and projects such as the *Encyclopédie* and the *Britannica* were many years in the making. Since Wikipedians may write on any topic they choose, it's not surprising that coverage is eclectic, with more representation of popular culture and of obscure interests than the breadth of areas (or emphases within each) that a professional editor might have selected. However, it's premature to judge Wikipedia on this score.

The issue of accuracy is a different story. The question here is not just what outsiders think but also how Wikipedia presents itself to potential contributors. Consider these suggestions, from Wikipedia's entry "Contributing to Wikipedia":

Visit [Wikipedia: Pages needing attention](#) to find a list of articles by topic.

So far, so good. But now:

These often need contributions from people who know something about the subject!

What a novel idea: an encyclopedia having authors who "know something about the subject." But the next paragraph is more baffling still:

Make a list of everything you know. Strike through the things that are not verifiable or not supposed to be covered by Wikipedia. Then, find the proper places to write about the items remaining on the list.⁸⁷

Knowledge as grocery inventory? Wales's heart may be in the right place, but his model of epistemology discards at least two millennia of thinking about the nature of knowledge. Imagine Diderot's reaction.

Such concerns are not meant to detract from the magnitude—and importance—of Wales's endeavors. Undoubtedly, Wikipedia has succeeded far beyond popular expectations in creating a collaborative *tour de force* that enables almost anyone, almost anywhere to get a first look at a subject, where most of the information is accurate, most of the time. Nobody is perfect. Newspapers are continually printing corrections to stories. Publishers used to issue errata sheets even in new works. Book reviewers highlight the errors of authors whose manuscripts have passed through traditional vetting processes. The question about Wikipedia isn't simply whether its articles are accurate but, in Larry Sanger's words, whether we can trust them to be so.⁸⁸

From the outset, critics of Wikipedia feared that composition-by-committee, especially when no authorial credentials are required, undermined the credibility of the project. Sanger left Wikipedia in part because he disagreed with Wales's policy of anti-elitism—that is, giving no special credence to those who had expertise in a field.⁸⁹ Robert McHenry described Wikipedia as a "faith-based encyclopedia," where "faith" figures in the assumption that in the give-and-take exchange involved in creating Wikipedia entries,

some unspecified quasi-Darwinian process will assure that those writings and editings by contributors of greatest expertise will survive; articles will eventually reach a steady state that corresponds to the highest degree of accuracy.⁹⁰

McHenry immediately went on to ask: "Does someone actually believe this? Evidently so."

In late 2005, the British journal *Nature* put the accuracy question to the test, comparing forty-two entries in *Britannica* and Wikipedia dealing with scientific topics such as "Agent Orange," "Ethanol," "Prion," and "Hans Bethe." The average number of inaccuracies per article was very close: around three in *Britannica* and around four in Wikipedia.⁹¹ Not surprisingly, *Britannica* replied to the study with a piece called "Fatally Flawed."⁹² The whole discussion brings to mind Einbinder's *Britannica* exposé back in the 1960s. Truth be told, even "authoritative" publications typically have some errors.

Because of the presumed link between issues of correctness and Wikipedia's not vetting authors or editors by scholarly credentials, several alternative online open-source compendia have been launched. One is Scholarpedia, a peer-reviewed encyclopedia edited by Eugene Izhikevich, a neuroscientist in San Diego. Another is Sanger's new project, Citizendium, which he describes as "led" by experts.⁹³

As the dust settled somewhat on the accuracy issue, discussion shifted to writing style. Even hard work and good intentions are no guarantee of stylistic success—just ask any writing teacher. Most encyclopedias don't profess to be models of literary excellence. (Recall Van Doren's image of pickled frogs.) In that respect, the *Encyclopédie* and the eleventh edition of the *Britannica* are exceptions. How does Wikipedia measure up?

The notion of style entails many dimensions: level of formality, clarity, and perhaps even grammaticality, not to mention such intangible qualities as elegance. Critics of Wikipedia have taken the project to task for abundant cases of misspelled words, ungrammatical constructions, and tortuous or illogical sentences. Wikipedia's response is that its contributors actively edit entries, so that these sorts of errors get corrected over time.

Moving beyond sentence mechanics, consider level of formality. A recent study weighed stylistic formality in Wikipedia against the *Columbia Encyclopedia*. Criteria included such measures as use of personal pronouns or contractions, average word length, and number of noun suffixes like *-ment* or *-ism*. The analysis found both reference works to be comparably formal.⁹⁴

But now for the more subtle dimensions of style, along with the equally important issue of what should be included. In his article "Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past," Roy Rosenzweig aptly observed that "Overall, writing is the Achilles' heel of *Wikipedia*. Committees rarely write well."⁹⁵

Rosenzweig asked how Wikipedia compares with traditional reference sources dealing with history. His conclusions give us pause:

historical expertise does not reside primarily in the possession of some set of obscure facts. It relies more often on a deep acquaintance with

a wide variety of already published narratives and an ability to synthesize those narratives (and facts) coherently. . . . Professional historians might find an account accurate and fair but trivial. . . . From the perspective of professional historians, the problem of Wikipedian history is not that it disregards the facts but that it elevates them above everything else.

Another way of describing the problem is that Wikipedia precludes assuming a point of view. Amassing a set of facts is like having the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Possession of the pieces is just the first step. What matters is how you arrange them.

• • • TAKING SELF-EXPRESSION ON THE ROAD

On the face of things, blogs, YouTube, and Wikipedia look like very different animals. Blogs are personal written musings, often essentially posted for an audience of one. YouTube hosts short amateur videos that provide free entertainment for friends and strangers alike. Wikipedia is ostensibly an online encyclopedia, striving to represent objective knowledge.

Yet all three platforms share the critical feature of affording individuals the opportunity to have their say, potentially before a vast audience. This opportunity builds on historical precedents (talk radio, home movies, professionally prepared encyclopedias), but allows for a level of freedom of expression—and participation—that was unheard of even a decade ago.

Wikipedia, YouTube, and blogs have something else in common. All three have been predicated upon availability of a computer with an Internet connection. For that matter, the same has been true (at least until recently) of instant messaging and of social networking sites. What happens to language and social interaction when they go mobile?