
Wikipedia as Imago Mundi

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In a recent Wired magazine article, “Veni, Vidi, Wiki,” Ryan Singel surveys the massive proliferation of wikis in almost every arena of cyberspace, from the workplace to the classroom. Wikis have become enormously attractive to Internet users because they are open-access web pages or networks of web pages that can be modified by interested editors, making them perpetual works-in-progress that evolve and change at the behest of their contributors. Singel reports that the best known of these sites, Wikipedia, the limitless fountain of collected, and sometimes inaccurate, information, has just become the largest encyclopedia in the world. Its popularity suggests not only that digital literacy demands participation and collaboration, but also that our current reading practices and information gathering are highly encyclopedic and reconstructive. As Singel notes, “[W]ikis are remaking the world. But the idea itself is not so novel.”

In fact, this idea has origins in literate practices that predate the age of print, specifically in medieval encyclopedia writing. From Isidore of Seville to Honorius Augustodunensis to William Caxton, understanding the world meant creating and recreating its image, Imago mundi, in a language that would be accessible to more and more readers. Since our students are using and misusing Wikipedia with increasing regularity as a foundation for learning in all of the disciplines, it is important for educators to understand the history of this collaborative, yet contested, literate behavior. In this essay, I want to argue that a conception of Wikipedia as a postmodern manifestation of the premodern encyclopedia will help scholars and teachers to maximize the usefulness of this provocative resource.

Wikipedia needs to be analyzed for its pedagogical utility because it has become the universal lodestone for students looking for ways to begin their research projects or define terms they cannot comprehend in their course readings. College professors and secondary school teachers are increasingly referring their students to Wikipedia as supplements to class notes and guides for further research. Yet the free-access model of the site, which allows anyone to modify definitions or content, is cause for concern for many teachers who perceive Wikipedia as an unaccountable and generally

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unreliable resource. As Sorin Matei, professor of communications at Purdue University, puts it, “He who can sit for the longest in front of the computer is right.” Matei’s statement represents the misperceptions of many who believe that the authority of Wikipedia’s information resides with the most recent and active, not necessarily the most informed, user. On the July 31, 2006, episode of The Colbert Report, host Stephen Colbert tested this widespread belief by asking his audience to edit Wikipedia’s “Elephant” page. During the recurring segment called “The Word,” he issued the following statement:

I love Wikipedia. . . . Any user can change any entry and if enough other users agree with them, it becomes true. . . . We’re going to stampede across the web like that giant horde of elephants in Africa. Find the page on elephants in Wikipedia and create an entry that says the number of elephants tripled in the last six months. . . . Together we can create a reality that we all agree on—the reality we just agreed on.6

Within nine minutes of this episode’s airing on the East Coast, the “Elephant” entry began experiencing a series of edits, including the following sentence by “EvilBrak”: “The number of elephants has tripled in the last six months!” However, within one minute the page was reverted and locked down until the Colbert pranksters lost their editorial momentum.7 As this event suggests, Wikipedia is closely monitored by its users, and vandalism is not tolerated. If, for example, you look up the entry for “Geoffrey Chaucer” and click the “History” tab, you will find a comprehensive list of edits from the page’s inception to its current form. If you click on the page revised by an anonymous user (ISP: 24.155.128.5) at 5:20 p.m. on March 24, 2005, you will see that all previous information had been deleted and substituted with one brief sentence: “Chaucer was a loser.”8 By 7:00 p.m. that same evening, the vandalized page had been reverted to its earlier form.9 The message Wikipedia have broadcast is clear: vandals and disgruntled students of Chaucer beware. Only entries that the informed community of users endorses will be allowed to stand.

Potential contributors should also know that new information in an entry requires documentation and verification—no “original scholarship” is allowed.10 The very notion that the site does not condone originality should resonate with medievalists familiar with the rhetorical deference to authority that appears in premodern texts. Likewise, the hermeneutic debates that fill the margins of many medieval manuscripts are replicated in the “Discussion” tab for each Wikipedia page. For example, if you click into the “Geoffrey Chaucer” discussion forum, you will find a conversation between two editors considering whether or not an “original” translation of the opening of The Canterbury Tales would violate the “no original research” rule.11 These features demonstrate that each Wikipedia page operates as a postmodern palimpsest, in which readers can peel back the digital façade of all previous versions of the entry and the commentary of those who created them.

In my own college classes and course blogs, students have debated the merits of Wikipedia, often admitting that they regularly use the site despite the prohibitions of their instructors. Whereas one student claims, “Teachers tell me not to use Wikipedia,” another confesses,

When I’m learning about something I have little to no prior knowledge on, Wikipedia provides a good foundation for learning about it. It lets me know what the main significance of the topic is before I read in-depth articles about it. I can understand why teachers wouldn’t allow students to reference it since it’s not scholarly, but I rarely find inaccuracies on it and it serves as a helpful tool for me.12

As an instructor who has stumbled over too many Wikipedia citations in research papers, I share the resistance to the indiscriminate use of Wikipedia as a “scholarly” source, but as the latter student notes, its use as a search engine and “foundation” for further research appears to be a credible one, especially in light of the history of the encyclopedia.

Encyclopedias have been produced since at least the first century B.C.E., in an effort to compile the sum of human knowledge into authoritative texts that future readers could supplement with their own discoveries about the natural world. In response to the great scarcity of ancient scientific texts during the sixth and seventh centuries C.E., Isidore of Seville, the patron saint of the Internet, composed his encyclopedic Etymologiae for readers hungry for access to the natural philosophy of the Greeks and Romans.13 Rather
than follow the intuitive structure of his Roman predecessor Pliny the Elder, who began with the stars and planets and then proceeded to the earth and its minerals, Isidore developed more elaborate categories and rigorous hierarchies that would allow for more selective and informed reading. After Isidore, the encyclopedia could be used more efficiently and effectively by an increasingly educated audience.

However, not until the twelfth century did the encyclopedia contain the wide-ranging and popularizing thrust found in the *Imago mundi* of Honorius Augustodunensis (otherwise known as Honorius of Autun). In addition to the more than one hundred surviving manuscripts, this encyclopedia was translated, excerpted, and appropriated by countless writers for use in other works of history, geography, and natural philosophy. As Honorius expected, his work would be publicly criticized and clandestinely copied in the succeeding centuries, much in the way that Wikipedia has been privately utilized and openly scrutinized by today's teachers and students. In the dynamic, albeit slower-paced, spirit of the inconstant wiki, the *Imago mundi* was revised at least five times in a thirty-year span after Honorius completed the first edition in 1122, continued to be expanded by other encyclopedia makers for another two hundred years, and was eventually translated into French, Italian, and Spanish. By the thirteenth century, another inescapable compiler, Vincent of Beauvais, bested the work of Honorius with his own "mirror of the world," his *Speculum maius*, a scholastic achievement of such a vast scale that future encyclopedists felt obliged to orient their texts for audiences outside of the monastic communities in which they were produced.

To appease these new readers, no doubt, Gossouin of Metz combined and verified the encyclopedias of Honorius and Vincent in French octosyllabic couplets around 1246. This *Image du monde* became so popular in the succeeding centuries that it was translated and edited first in prose by Michel le Noir around 1495 in Paris, then reedited in 1517 by Francois Boffereau and J. Vivian in Geneva, and edited again in Paris around 1520 by Alain Lotrian and J. Treper. Looking back upon the history of the *Imago mundi*, it becomes clear that the medieval encyclopedia was a product of collaboration, whose authority rested in the hands of the most recent community of users.

As someone who regularly teaches the history of the English language and the history of the English book, it is William Caxton's 1481 translation of Gossouin's *Image du monde* that serves as an especially useful pedagogical tool. Caxton's *Mirror of the World* is not only the first illustrated English book in print but also one of the first of many encyclopedias produced in English. Caxton's choice to translate Gossouin's poem, as opposed to the many surviving Latin compendia, suggests that he also perceived the universal potential of the popularized encyclopedia. In his prologue, Caxton exhorts his readers by claiming that this present booke, which is called the ymage or myrour of the world, ought to be visyted, rede & known, by cause it treateth of the world and of the wondrouf dvyision thereof. In which book a man resonable may see and vndrstande more clerer, by the visytyng and seeyng of it and the figures therin, the situacion and moeyng of the firmament, and how the vnyuersal erthe hangeth in the mydde of the same, as pe chapitres here folowyng shal more clerly ofwyte and declare to yon.

According to Caxton, the earth and its position in the universe may be understood not only by reading the text and "seeyng" the figures, but also through what he characterizes as a "visitation" of the book. He claims that the book "ought to be visyted" and that a reasonable man may comprehend the book by "visytyng" it. This notion of reading as visiting suggests that this is a text one does not merely consume from beginning to end. Rather, this is a book that is read in short jaunts, a book to which one often returns, much in the manner of our students visiting a perpetually updated wiki or blog. This is the kind of ad hoc reading we engage in when we "Google" old friends or research topics in Wikipedia. Jay David Bolter suggests that these hypertextual websites and search engines constitute "a contemporary encyclopedic vision, a map of cyberspace and to some extent of our culture in the late ages of capitalism and print. It is our equivalent of Vincent of Beauvais or Pliny the Elder." According to this view, Caxton's ideal vision of the "visytyng" reader in the early age of print has been fulfilled in the "late age of print."

What then happened to such encyclopedic reading in the high age of print? One answer is famously provided in a 1945 *Atlantic Monthly* article by Vannevar Bush, Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development. Reflecting on the successes of science in the enhancement of physical life such as food, clothing, and shelter, Bush urges postwar scientists to focus their efforts on
improving the life of the mind by developing more efficient and accessible systems of memory. In a striking condemnation of modern myth of progress, he declares:

Thus far we seem to be worse off than before—for we can enormously extend the record; yet even in its present bulk we can hardly consult it. This is a much larger matter than merely the extraction of data for the purposes of scientific research; it involves the entire process by which man profits by his inheritance of acquired knowledge. The prime action of use is selection, and here we are halting indeed. There may be millions of fine thoughts, and the account of the experience on which they are based, all encased within the stone walls of acceptable architectural form; but if the scholar can get at only one a week by diligent search, his syntheses are not likely to keep up with the current scene.  

The kind of textual overload that Bush describes is in striking contrast to the situation medieval encyclopedists such as Isidore faced. Yet, in the same way that Isidore and Caxton oriented their works to allow for frequent and useful visits from an increasing readership, Wikipedians responded to Bush’s charge to develop a network capable of growing, synthesizing, and accessing the store of human knowledge. Bush even anticipates hypertextual Internet databases such as Wikipedia and search engines such as Google through his vision of “memex,” which he describes as “a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility.” Central to his discussion of the potential for innovation in memory storage and access is the encyclopedia, which he imagines as one day being compressed into the size of a matchbox. At the end of the essay, he waxes prophetic, suggesting that “[w]holly new forms of encyclopedias will appear, ready made with a mesh of associative trails running through them, ready to be dropped into the memex and there amplified.” Like Milton’s archangels, encyclopedic information in the late age of print would have the ability to contract and expand in a way unimaginable within the confines of a printed book.

Yet, despite its relative inaccessibility, the premodern codex exhibited the potential of expansion and contraction through the addition and deletion of folia and an associative capacity through marginal commentary and symbolic illuminations. Many scholars have suggested that digital texts resemble medieval manuscripts more than printed books, particularly in their visual combination of text and image. Even though the Internet has clear origins in print culture, especially the glossy magazine and the illustrated book, the interactive relationship between the visual and textual in cyberspace is more medieval than modern. As Bolter argues, “On the screen as on medieval parchment, verbal text and image interpenetrate to such a degree that the writer and reader can no longer always know where the pictorial space ends and the verbal space begins.” More important than their similar appearances, however, is their common conception of the relationship between text and user. Whereas printers after Caxton increasingly served as authoritative and divisive mediators between writers and readers, readers and writers of the pre- and postmodern eras interacted and interact in equal and often intimate proximity. Geoffrey Nunberg suggests that “with electronic reproduction the user has a much greater role in the process of reproduction. In this sense electronic reproduction has more in common with the fourteenth-century scriptorium than with print capitalism that replaced it.” Scribal copying is the ancestor of Internet downloading—in each case, the copyist and the downloader determine when and where the text will appear. Likewise, medieval scholastic practices such as glossing and commenting serve as premodern hypertexts that offer alternative reading paths and elaborations that are difficult to replicate in printed books. Medieval texts, particularly encyclopedias, encouraged non-linear and highly associative reading paths that now comprise the core of hypertextual literacy.

The standard medieval practices of glossing, commenting, and translating further suggest that premodern texts were dynamic documents whose authority was subject to perpetual scrutiny and reinterpretation. As Mary Carruthers explains, “authorial intention in itself [was] given no more weight than that of any subsequent reader who use[d] the work in his own meditative contemplation.” In fact, writers or scribes often disclosed their anxieties about future corrections of their work, which suggests that manuscript culture was one defined by readerly correction and appropriation—that is, texts were not protected by copyright. If we read Caxton’s explicit to his Mirour of the World, we find England’s first printer expressing
misgivings about the state of his text and fears about its accuracy that had become conventional by the fifteenth century. He confesses,

In which translation I knoweche my self symple, rude and ygnoraunt, wherfor I humbly bypseche my sayd lord Chamberlayn to perdone me of this rude and simple translacion[.]. How be it, I leye for myn excuse that I haue to my power folowed my copye and, as nygh as to me is possible, I haue made it so playn that every man reasonable may vnderstone it yf he aduyseth anyly and entenrily rede or here it. And yf ther be faulite in mesuryng of the firmamet, Sonne, Mone, or of therthe, or in ony other meruayles herin conteyned, I beseche you not tarette the defaullte in me but in hym that made my copye. (184–85)

His posture of ignorance and fallibility, while conventional, reminds us that this encyclopedia is authorized not by the writer-translator but by its readers. Caxton’s reference to the possibility that readers may find “faulite in mesuryng” of the earth, sun, and moon is equivalent to the concerns about the accuracy of Wikipedia pages, whose credibility must be determined by its users.

Medieval and digital encyclopedic work, more than their printed intermediaries, has been justified by its anticipation of improvements, revisions, and even retractions. Consider Francesco Petrarch’s On His Own Ignorance and that of Many Others, in which he satirically describes a fellow scholar who gained his academic knowledge exclusively from encyclopedias such as the Speculum matus of Vincent of Beauvais. Petrarch describes this young Averroist as one who

Multa ille igitur de beluis deque auibus ac piscibus, quot lepo pilos in ursite, quot phamus accipiter in cauda, quot polipus spiris naufragum liget, ut aerii coeunt elephants biennioque uterum tument, ut docile uiuacue animal et humano proximum ingenio et ad secunci tertijque finem seculi uiuendo perfuemiens; ut phenix aromatico igne consumitur ustusque renascitur; ut echinus quo quis actam impetu proram frenat, cum fluctibus erutos nil possit; ut uenator speculo tigrem ludit, Arimaspus griphen ferro impetit, cete tergo nautam fallunt; ut inormis urse partus, mule ranus, uipere unicas isque infelix, ut ceci talpe, surde apes, ut postremo superiorem mandibulam omnium solus animantium cocodrilus mouet.28

[has much to tell about wild animals, about birds and fishes: how many hairs there are in the lion’s mane; how many feathers in the hawk’s tail; with how many arms the cuttlefish clasps a shipwrecked man; that elephants couple from behind and are pregnant for two years; that this docile and vigorous animal, the nearest to man by its intelligence, lives until the end of the second or third century of its life; that the phoenix is consumed by aromatic fire and revives after it has been burned; that the sea urchin stops a ship, however fast she is driving along, while it is unable to do anything once it is dragged out of the waves; how the hunter fools the tiger with a mirror; how the Arimasp attacks the griffon with his sword; how whales turn over on their backs and thus deceive the sailors; that the newborn of the bear has as yet no shape; that the mule rarely gives birth, the viper only once and then to its own disaster; that moles are blind and bees deaf; that alone among all living beings the crocodile moves its upper jaw]29

As writing teachers know, the folkloric and specious nature of this premodern encyclopedic knowledge can still be found in research papers that rely on Wikipedia. However, Petrarch is not suggesting that encyclopedic knowledge is without value. In fact, Petrarch’s hesitations about the information found in encyclopedias did not prevent him from composing an encyclopedia of his own, the Rerum memorabilia libri.30 The writing of his own encyclopedia suggests that he viewed encyclopedic work as participatory—that is, readers must not simply regurgitate information gained from encyclopedias and pass it off as unquestionable truth. Rather, readers are encouraged to read and respond critically to such texts, offering corrections or supplementing existing material. It is this distinctly medieval perspective on the dynamic character of worldly knowledge that persists or, should I say, reemerges in digital culture. Petrarch’s willingness both to critique and contribute to the encyclopedic genre is consonant with the epistemological base of
wikis and many other genres of hypermedia, which demand constant reassessment and reconstruction.

As instructors, we should not encourage the use of wikis as printed texts—that is, students should not simply mine Wikipedia for quotations and facts to include in their research papers. Nor should we foster uncritical acceptance of material published online, just as we should not support naive consumption of any information. Wikis are collections that, in Caxton’s words, “ought to be visietyd” as research guides, and expanded or corrected by their users. In other words, if a Wikipedia page needs to be revised, follow the example of Petrarch and write your own. According to the August 31, 2008, New York Times article, “Don’t Like Palin’s Wikipedia Story? Change It,” one writer did just that. Noam Cohen reported that, on the day before John McCain announced Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential nominee for the 2008 election, a wiki editor by the name of “Young Trigg” completely reworked Palin’s Wikipedia page, adding material from her biography that highlighted her successes as an Alaskan governor and mayor. In addition to the political implications of this online overhaul, this timely revision suggests that digital texts such as Wikipedia are being “visietyd” with enough frequency that they now serve as a primary “image of the world.” More important, however, is our participation in the construction of this new Imago mundi. In the spirit of Geoffrey Chaucer’s correction of his scribe, “So ofte a day I moote thy werke renewe / It to correcte, and eek to rubbe and scrape” (5–6), we should encourage our students to “renewe” and “correcte” digital texts. And it should come as no small relief that instead of having to rub and scrape, they simply need to log on and create.

Notes


3Singel.

4Ibid.


7Liu, 202.


12This discussion can be found on my course blog, “Fundamental Fulminations,” http://fundamentalfulminations.blogspot.com/search?q=wikipedia.


Collison, 60.


All citations of Caxton’s Mirror of the World refer to Prior’s edition of this text.


Bush.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid., 115.


Bibliography


