

Citing, quoting, and critiquing the *Wikipedia*

It has been said there is nothing new under the sun, but the electronic revolution is only the latest of much that *is* new. For most of the world's electronically literate, who number millions, this revolution is embodied in a relationship between two technical wonders: the desktop computer and the Internet-cum-Web. This relationship has in a very few years become not simply commonplace, but is as crucial to our lives as forks and knives, trains and planes, telephones and TV.

ET, like other present-day media products, is heavily dependent on 'e-mediation'. Yet not long ago computers were as large as rooms and the Net and the Web were unknown, and many people who use them are their strict contemporaries. Their origins are both American and European respectively, but for years now they have been so intermeshed that, for most people, they are one and the same thing.

This federated facility – available worldwide all day every day – exists only because of the equipment that services and houses it, and (by no means incidentally) because the world is by and large at peace. In this period of relative global peace it is no surprise that analogues appear in cyberspace to such solid traditional objects as, say, hand-written or typed letters, printed leaflets, and indeed books (in the form of email and downloadable texts).

It was probably inevitable that, in addition to correspondence and the like becoming email, whole books have become screen-readable, among them encyclopaedias. One such development, however, is entirely new, both technologically and sociologically -- a knowledge base that operates in the same caring-and-sharing way as free downloads among people with shared interests.

ET has covered a range of cyber-developments, from various angles. The *Wikipedia*, however, has not yet been a topic in its own right, which is surprising. If however anything deserves discussion in *ET* it should surely be the emergence online in English of not only an encyclopedia, but one that is a free and (astonishingly) open service to unknown people who can alter and add to entries. For traditional publishers this would have been utterly unprofitable and editorially insane. Yet the *Wikipedia* thrives like the green bay tree, and the result is not chaos.

Masters students of mine in Hong Kong have routinely quoted and cited the *Wiki* in their essays and presentations – routinely, and as their first port of call. Yet the *Wiki* services are as inconstant as the moon, and the precise academic role (if any) of such a remarkable interactive and shifting knowledge base remains unclear. Since it originated in English, it would be good to discuss it and its implications in *ET*. Any takers?

Tom McArthur

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