

The Wikipedia - Can Teenagers write an Encyclopedia?

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Tuesday, 14 August 2007
Last Updated Tuesday, 14 August 2007

The vast majority of Wikipedia contributors and editors are under the age of 25. Many of the administrators (senior editors) are in their teens. This has been established by a survey conducted in 2003 and in various interviews with Jimmy Wales, the co-founder of the enterprise.

The truth is that teenagers cannot do the referencing and research that are the prerequisite to serious scholarship - unless you stretch these words to an absurd limit. Research is not about hoarding facts. It is about identifying and applying context and about possessing a synoptic view of ostensibly unrelated data.

Moreover, teenagers can't tell hype from fact and fad from fixture. They lack the perspectives that life and learning - structured, frontal, hierarchical learning - bring with them.

Knowledge is not another democratic institution. It is hierarchical for good reason and the hierarchy is built on merit and the merit is founded on learning.

It is not surprising that the Wikipedia emerged in the USA whose "culture" consists of truncated attention spans, snippets and soundbites, shortcuts and cliff notes. The Wikipedia is a pernicious counter-cultural phenomenon. It does not elevate or celebrate knowledge. The Wikipedia degrades knowledge by commoditizing it and by removing the filters and the barriers to entry that have proven so essential hitherto.

Wikipedians boast that the articles in their "encyclopedia" are replete with citations and references. But citations from which sources and references to which works and authors? Absent the relevant credentials and education, how can an editor tell the difference between information and disinformation, fact and hearsay, truth and confabulation?

Knowledge is not comprised of lists of facts, "facts", factoids, and rumors, the bread and butter of the Wikipedia. Real facts have to be verified, classified, and arranged within a historical and cultural context. Wikipedia articles read like laundry lists of information gleaned from secondary sources and invariably lack context and deep, true understanding of their subject matter.

A recent (late 2006) study by Heather Hopkins from Hitwise demonstrates the existence of a pernicious feedback loop between Google, Wikipedia, MySpace, and Blogspot. Wikipedia gets 54% of its traffic from Google search results. The majority of Wikipedia visitors then proceed to MySpace or Blogspot, both of which use Google as their search service and serve Google-generated advertisements.

Google has changed its search algorithm in late 2005-early 2006. I have been monitoring 154 keywords on Google since 1999. Of these, the number one (#1) search result in 128 keywords is now a Wikipedia article. More than a quarter (38 out of 128) of these "articles" are what the Wikipedia calls "stubs" (one or two sentences to be expanded by Wikipedians in the future). Between 7 and 10 of the articles that made it to the much-coveted number one spot are ... empty pages, placeholders, yet to be written! (These results were obtained in early 2007).

This is Google's policy now: Wikipedia articles regardless of their length or quality or even mere existence are placed by Google's algorithm high up in the search results. Google even makes a Wikipedia search engine available to Webmasters for their Websites. The relationship between Google and Wikipedia is clearly intimate and mutually-reinforcing.

Google's new algorithm, codenamed Big Daddy, still calculates the popularity of Websites by counting incoming links. An incoming link is a link to a given Website placed on an unrelated page somewhere on the Web. The more numerous such links - the higher the placement in Google's search results pages. To avoid spamming and link farms, Google now rates the quality of "good and bad Internet neighborhoods". Not all incoming links are treated equally. Some Internet properties are shunned. Links from such "bad" Websites actually contribute negatively to the overall score.

The top results in all 154 keywords I have been diligently monitoring since 1999 have changed dramatically since April 2006. The only common thread in all these upheavals is one: the more incoming links from MySpace, Digg, Tehnorati and similar Internet properties a Website has - the higher it is placed in the search results.

In other words: if Website A has 700 incoming links from 700 different Websites and website B has 700 incoming links, all of them from various pages on MySpace, Website B is ranked (much) higher in the search results. This holds true even when both Websites A and B sport the same PageRank. This holds true even if the bulk of Website A's incoming links come from "good properties" in "good Internet neighborhoods". Incoming links from MySpace trump every other

category of incoming links.

An unsettling pattern emerges:

Wikipedia, the "encyclopedia" whose "editors" are mostly unqualified teenagers and young adults is touted by Google as an authoritative source of information. In search results, it is placed well ahead of sources of veritable information such as universities, government institutions, the home pages of recognized experts, the online full-text content of peer-reviewed professional and scholarly publications, real encyclopedias (such as the Encarta), and so on.

MySpace whose 110 million users are predominantly prepubescent and adolescents now dictates what Websites will occupy the first search results in Google's search results pages. It is very easy to spam MySpace. It is considered by some experts to be a vast storehouse of link farms masquerading as "social networks".

Google has vested, though unofficial and unannounced and, therefore, undisclosed interests in both Wikipedia and MySpace. Wikipedia visitors end up on various properties whose search and ad placement technologies are Google's and Wikipedia would have shriveled into insignificance had it not been to Google's relentless promotion of its content. Also Read: The Six Sins of the Wikipedia Microsoft's Encarta and MS Student 2007 The Britannica 2007 Opens to the Web Old Reference Works Revived The Encyclopedia Britannica 2006 Revolt of the Scholars The Idea of Reference The Future of the Book The Kidnapping of Content The Internet and the Library Interview with Tom Panelas The Future of Online Reference Will Content Ever be Profitable? The Disintermediation of Content The Future of Electronic Publishing Battle of the Titans - Encarta vs. the Britannica Free Online Scholarship - Interview with Peter Suber Microsoft Embraces the Web - Encarta and MS Student 2006

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