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Wikipedia: Exploring Fact City

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Contributors to Wikipedia have wondered aloud lately if — perish the thought — they are running out of topics. The obvious articles, low-hanging fruit like “China,” “Moses” and “Homer Simpson,” have been written and rewritten hundreds of times. There are more than 2.8 million articles on the English version of Wikipedia alone. Already looking back, Wikipedia this month got its first serious memoir, “The Wikipedia Revolution,” by Andrew Lih, an early Wikipedia (yes, that is what they call themselves), who writes about how “a bunch of nobodies created the world’s greatest encyclopedia.”

But these concerns seem misplaced — Wikipedia can no more be completed than can New York City, which O. Henry predicted would be “a great place if they ever finish it.” In fact, with its millions of visitors and hundreds of thousands of volunteers, its ever-expanding total of articles and languages spoken, Wikipedia may be the closest thing to a metropolis yet seen online.

Like a city, Wikipedia is greater than the sum of its parts; for example, the random encounters there are often more compelling than the articles themselves. The search for information resembles a walk through an overbuilt quarter of an ancient capital. You circle around topics on a path that appears to be shifting. Ultimately the journey ends and you are not sure how you got there.

Wikipedia articles can send you down unlikely alleyways in two ways. First, there are links that direct you to the same article in another language, a trippy experience that sheds light on a culture. Spend time in German Wikipedia, and you find jazz musicians like Thelonious Monk with articles far longer than those written in their own language; you may also come upon odd areas of deep interest, like “pecherei,” the extraction of resin from trees — no English equivalent provided — and 15 different tools needed for the job.

Second, at the bottom of most articles, there are the categories — impromptu neighborhoods, or perhaps civic organizations, that bind together the virtual encyclopedia. There are unsurprising ones, like “Jewish comedians,” found at the bottom of the Jerry Seinfeld article; and then there are the quirky kind, like this one I stumbled upon: “Literary devices playing with meaning.” It was in the latter category that I came upon the article “Mondegreen,” which describes the phenomenon of mishearing song lyrics, which led to “Soramimi,” a Japanese term for hearing lyrics in foreign languages as Japanese phrases, which led to the discovery that the heavy metal band Metallica has a line in “Enter Sandman” that frequently is heard by Japanese as “Let’s go to Chiyoda Life Insurance.” Which led to ...

It is a tale of spontaneous organization and achievement. Until recently, Wikipedia was able to operate on a budget of less than $3 million a year. Today it is still only $7 million, all donations and grants. No advertising, no sugar daddy. A rags-to-rags story of world domination in information that could only have happened in the Internet age.

In “The City in History,” Lewis Mumford tried to explain how cities came to be: “In the earliest gathering about a grave or a painted symbol, a great stone or sacred grove, one has the beginning of a succession of civic institutions that range from the temple to the astronomical observatory, from the theater to the
In its seven years of existence Wikipedia has become one of the top 10 global Web sites. It has many fewer visitors than Google, yes, but it is in shouting distance of Amazon and eBay, with more than 60 million Americans visiting in January. Hundreds of thousands of people — some anonymous, some using pseudonyms, others exactly who they say they are — have thus far come together to collaborate.

A single article, say about the Mumbai attacks last year, can have more than 1,000 contributors. Their discussions on how best to write the article can occupy pages, all guided by one of Wikipedia’s founding principles: “Assume good faith.”

Wikipedia encourages contributors to mimic the basic civility, trust, cultural acceptance and self-organizing qualities familiar to any city dweller. Why don’t people attack each other on the way home? Why do they stay in line at the bank? Why don’t people guffaw at the person with blue hair?

The police may be an obvious answer. But this misses the compact among city dwellers. Since their creation, cities have had to be accepting of strangers — no judgments — and residents learn to be subtly accommodating, outward looking.

Mumford elaborates: “Even before the city is a place of fixed residence, it begins as a meeting place to which people periodically return: the magnet comes before the container, and this ability to attract nonresidents to it for intercourse and spiritual stimulus no less than trade remains one of the essential criteria of the city, a witness to its essential dynamism, as opposed to the more fixed and indrawn form of the village, hostile to the outsider.”

The marvel of Wikipedia — and cities — is that all the intercourse and spiritual stimulus don’t make living there impossible. Rather, they are exactly what makes living there possible.

Mr. Lih at one point enlists the urban reformer Jane Jacobs to back up this point. For him, urban stability is replicated through the transparency of wikis — every change ever made at Wikipedia (every discussion as well) is recorded. Ms. Jacobs, he writes, “argued that sidewalks provided three important things: safety, contact and the assimilation of children.” She may as well have been talking about wikis, he says: “A wiki has all its activities happening in the open for inspection, as on Jacobs’s sidewalk. Trust is built by observing the actions of others in the community and discovering people with like or complementary interests.”

It is this sidewalk-like transparency and collective responsibility that makes Wikipedia as accurate as it is. The greater the foot traffic, the safer the neighborhood. Thus, oddly enough, the more popular, even controversial, an article is, the more likely it is to be accurate and free of vandalism. It is the obscure articles — the dead-end streets and industrial districts, if you will — where more mayhem can be committed. It takes longer for errors or even malice to be noticed and rooted out. (Fewer readers will be exposed to those errors, too.)

Like the modern megalopolis, Wikipedia has decentralized growth. Wikipedia adds articles the way Beijing adds neighborhoods — whenever the mood strikes. It is open to all: the sixth-grader typing in material from her homework assignment, the graduate student with a limited grasp of English. No judgments, no entry pass.

One of Wikipedia’s governing principles is N.P.O.V. (neutral point of view), in much the same way Venice or Amsterdam or New York City in their heyday were uninterested in the religious, ethnic or political fights rampaging across the world. They, like Wikipedia, were polyglot homes for all who arrived on their shores.
But perhaps the most convincing argument for Wikipedia as an urban outpost on the Internet is the deep unease — even anger — it engenders. Alone among the miraculous and destructive creations of the Internet — Google, Facebook, Flickr, eBay — Wikipedia can cause the professional classes to seethe. Or run away fast, arms flailing.

People don't treat ineffectual inventions as taboo — that is reserved for things like evolution, alcohol or, yes, cities. And just as the world has had plenty of creationists, temperance societies and ruralists, there is a professional class of Wikipedia skeptics. They, too, have some seriously depraved behavior to expose: Wikipedia represents a world without experts! A world without commercial news outlets! A world lacking in distinction between the trivial and the profound! A world overrun with facts but lacking in wisdom!

It's all reminiscent of the longstanding accusations made against cities: They don't produce anything! All they do is gossip! They think they are so superior! They wouldn't last a week if we farmers stopped shipping our food! They don't know the meaning of real work!

This argument represents a true clash of ideas. It is clear from Mr. Lih’s account that nearly every time Wikipedia has come to a fork in the road where the project could have chosen to impose more restrictions on who could edit what — even insist on a bit of expertise — it has chosen not to. That has made all the difference. The vindication of those choices — by Wikipedia and cities — is proved each time some yokel overcomes his fear and decides to make a visit and stay awhile.