

Introductory talk

EUROPEAN AND NORTH AMERICAN ENCYCLOPEDIA CONFERENCE

Esteemed guests, respected colleagues, dear friends,

We have all more or less mourned, or almost mourned, the passing of printed general encyclopedias in the last 10–15 years, witnessing the transition of that specific type of encyclopedia the type which is in itself the epitome of encyclopedia as such, into the web form, most visible through the global spread of Wikipedia, which became the most used encyclopedic form of today. I say encyclopedic form, not encyclopedia, because the tremendous success of Wikipedia opened up the question about the change of encyclopedic principles and the encyclopedic concept of knowledge. I am not talking here, obviously, about changes in the modes of use, about technological changes. Those changes created the possibilities to overcome the boundaries of traditional printed encyclopedias, possibilities to constantly update, revise, write, and almost immediately publish articles. It created the possibilities of a world in which, as Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales said, every individual on the planet has free access to the sum of all human knowledge. But what is knowledge? Is every information equal, or equally valuable? With superficial and unreliable on an equal basis with proven and reliable, does not verified knowledge lose its importance? Is the main goal of encyclopedias providing first-hand information about more or less everything, or accumulation of a seemingly boundless multitude of details about one topic? An encyclopedia as I understand it, has the goal not only to present knowledge, but to order it, and even more, to reorder it, a goal that requires one to know what is to be put inside and in which form, and what remains irrelevant. For online users, almost everything is relevant and has to be put in an encyclopedia. But is that kind of work an encyclopedia at all?

In his reflection about Wikipedia, Umberto Eco made a distinction between things that benefit the poor and things that benefit the rich, where the terms 'poor' and 'rich' have no connotations in terms of money, but cultural, intellectual ones. Eco said, the Internet is good for the rich and hurts the poor. While the rich search through various information, the poor pick the first information that arrives. So, for Wikipedia, like all over the Internet, the problem is in its very idea of totality, as it retains everything, both false news and real ones. Editorial control as practised in

Wikipedia serves only up to a certain point, becoming more complicated and fragile as issues became more subtle and difficult.

The difference between Wikipedia and traditional encyclopedias, whether printed or digital, becomes akin to the difference between a library and a bookstore, or even a warehouse of books. The grand ambition of traditional encyclopedias to order and reorder knowledge, to map it, to systemise it, has always been sort of a quixotic project, but it mattered, as it expressed an idea where an encyclopedia was a substitution for a library, which itself was substitution of knowledge, and knowledge substituted the world, as the world is only the world of our knowledge, which is contained in books that are distilled into one great book, the Universal Encyclopedia. Asking myself if that idea is still alive, I can at least hope so, given that in these difficult times, a small group of eccentric and bizarre professional encyclopedists has managed to meet and exchange their own ideas regarding encyclopedias.

BRUNO KRAGIĆ



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