



Is Wikipedia the new encyclopedia of post-modern times? Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness

Norberto González Gaitano

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Is Wikipedia the new encyclopedia of post-modern times?

Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness, by Nathaniel Tkacz, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2015, 232 pp., ISBN 978022619, 2307 and 2444 (e-book)

Wikipedia is ‘the free online encyclopedia that anyone can edit’ with more than 37 million articles (5,000,000 in English) in 291 languages, ranking one of the 10 most visited websites on the Internet. Academics scorn it and recommend that students do not cite it, but at the same time, they use it like anyone else in order to get an initial handle on any subject. Even companies want an entry on Wikipedia, and some do. Twenty editors of the free online encyclopedia were recently dismissed after Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit organization which owns and operates the project, realized they were PR men, writing entries for their companies. But what do we know about the ‘philosophy’ of Wikipedia?

Is Wikipedia the new encyclopedia of post-modern times? Tkacz’s book on the politics of openness, focusing on one of the most relevant and representative offspring of digital culture, Wikipedia, neither asks nor answers this question, though the statement is more than implied.

We are used to looking at the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot as an icon, a mirror and a powerful conveyor of the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment. Can we likewise point to Wikipedia as a mirror of the deconstructionist culture in which we are living? After reading *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*, my answer would be yes. My response is affirmative inasmuch as Tkacz’s book is a ‘deconstruction’ of Wikipedia, very much drawing upon the corresponding philosophical tools of the age. He largely cites philosophers such as Lyotard, Foucault, Latour, etc.

I will build my argument based on one significant statement from Tkacz’s work:

As historical artifacts, encyclopedias have regularly offered great insight into the periods in which they were written. They tell us about what constitutes knowledge at a particular time as well as how various bodies of knowledge relate to one another. Encyclopedias also tell us how knowledge is to be received, how it is to be read, and what is at stake in the acquisition of its contents.

It is needless to say that encyclopedias are also political and commercial artifacts.

Although Nathaniel Tkacz hopes to offer ‘a consideration of political developments that operate under the notion of openness’, he is not trying to teach ‘how to be open or validate some things as open while finding others lacking’ (p. 3). What he *does* debunk is Wikipedia’s pillars and cornerstones: the principle of *verifiability* (that something exists as long as it offers a verifiable source); the NPOV (*the neutral point of view*); the presumption of it being governed in a collaborative way (*ad-hocracy* as opposed to meritocracy or bureaucracy) and the legitimacy of the openness of any project based on the actual and continual possibility of *forking*. Namely, the idea that, in a truly open project, people who disagree with the direction in which things are going can ‘fork’ at any point, creating an alternative version of the project to compete with the original.


In *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*, the author discredits Wikipedia as an instance of the ‘ideology of openness’, one of the sacred cows of the Internet culture. In fact, there are three related case studies taken from the very same encyclopedia: the deletion of the entry *Wikipedia art* (an attempt to compose conceptual art on Wikipedia leading to a proof that the principle of verifiability is self-referential), the ‘resolved’ controversy among Wikipedia users about allowing Mohammad’s images in his entry, and finally, the so-called Spanish Fork which raised the question of whether Wikipedia should or could allow advertising. Going through a detailed analysis of these ‘incidents’ in Wikipedia’s history, Tkacz ‘gives us an insight into how Wikipedia works and tells us a great deal about the people involved’, as Paul Bernal points out in his review for *The Times Higher Education*.

Through a minute examination of these case studies, a common reader who is not an expert on Wikipedia, can discover how the most visited free encyclopedia is organized, for example its system of different kinds of pages (*reader pages, talk pages, history source pages*). Or, for instance, its ‘body of officials’, meaning the agents at different levels of authority who construct any single voice of the encyclopedia (blocked user, unregistered user, new user, auto confirmed user, administrator, bureaucrat and steward); the editing policies and guidelines; the principles or lack thereof ‘for there are no rules in Wikipedia’; neutrality, ‘not original research’ and verifiability; and lastly, the rather revealing philosophical backgrounds of their founders (Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanders). Larry Sanders did a doctoral dissertation titled ‘Epistemic Circularity: An Essay on the Problem of Meta-justification’, and Jimmy Wales’s own Wikipedia page makes clear, in the section ‘Thought and Influences’, that he is a self-avowed objectivist borrowing from the ‘Objectivist’ philosophy of Ayn Rand.

In short, what Wikipedia conveys as an idea and ‘ideal’ can be summarized in Tazck’s words: ‘While outside battle for truth are explicitly rejected – ‘the threshold for inclusion in Wikipedia is *verifiability, not truth*’ [Wikipedia:Verifiability] – Wikipedia nonetheless has a whole body of forceful statements whose function is to establish the truth of any particular statement; a truth of what is neutral, (non-)original, published, reliable, attributable and verifiable. It is this body of written rules that work to define the limits and correct procedures of Wikipedia, its position as a source of authority, and as the base from which the project can be managed’ (p. 110). In other terms, truth is something constructed socially, mainly through discourse, and which is permanently changing; it is not something we find. This in reality is an assertion quite characteristic of post-modern culture. The assumed task of any intellectual in post-modern culture is a deconstructing discourse, as Nathaniel Tkacz does with the successful ‘encyclopedical discourse’, which is Wikipedia.

Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness is a worthwhile read for scholars and specialists in communication – PR men included – in spite of some flaws of the book. Its presumed goal – a reflection on openness as a political concept – is weak like the political philosophical principles that underlie it. The three case studies that are offered, although meaningful, are not enough to *make the case*. Some of the data is outdated as the research was done in 2010 and 2011, and Wikipedia discussions run fast. Finally, the language is often too loaded with philosophical terminology as if the author were mainly interested in displaying his erudition. For sure the essentials remain, like the criticism of the epistemological mindset, or the fact that some controversies are destined to last. For example, Mohammad’s image controversy was ‘closed’ – declared closed – by the managers of Wikipedia in 2011, while Islam’s entry remains a controversial one, but that is of little

surprise, since it is the same with Jesus' historicity, as with any religion, or anything worthy of public attention.

Norberto González Gaitano
School of Church Communications, Pontifical University of Santa Croce, Rome, Italy
 gaitano@pusc.it

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