

Introduction

In his article “Digital Maoism: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism” Jaron Lanier takes a hard look at collectivism and collective action as it relates to information creation and compilation in the online community. Lanier certainly did not shy away from making bold statements. He harshly criticized the overall effect of this type of collective action as encouraging faux-authority, killing context and personal voice, and destroying reliability. Many who responded to his article had quite a bit to say about his opinion on the topic of collectivism, or as some would have it, collective action. Our initial reaction as academic librarians was to agree with much of what Lanier had to say, although we readily admit that we do not know that much about the fine differences between collectivism and collective action – after all, we are not sociologists, political scientists or psychologists. However, we do have an interest in collectivism/collective action as it relates to creating, aggregating and disseminating information. Our response to “Digital Maoism” focuses on what we are going to call collectivism/collective action as we think it relates to creating an authoritative and reliable resource for information and how to get patrons to understand the inherent limitations of this type of resource. We will focus specifically on *Wikipedia* (the current King of Collectives), its pros and cons, and what we ask our users to consider.

Perhaps stereotypical librarian response to collective action building an information resource is “egad!” But collectivism does have its uses; after all, is not any amassing or compiling of information by a group – even a venerable publisher – a type of collective action? Also, we must admit that we are torn because we believe in the principles behind the collective action ideal: widespread collaboration by diverse individuals and utilization of democratic processes.

We do not want to discourage new ways of thinking or new approaches that may revolutionize ways to access and create information. But, revolution does not always produce a good outcome or product. And change solely for the sake of change can be counter-productive. We also think that the inherent flaws of collective action by the mainly anonymous masses, as demonstrated so well in the high-profile online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, cannot be ignored when we guide patrons to reliable sources of information.

So, what is the problem?

Collective action and our main complaints

When we sat down to organize our thoughts about collective action and to try to identify the flaws and inherent problems, we came up with three main areas: lack of authority, responsibility, and context; lack of direction and focus; and reliance on the masses. These areas overlap to some extent.

Lack of authority, responsibility and context

In “Digital Maoism,” Lanier notes that authority, responsibility, and context are all pieces of the puzzle that are missing from something like *Wikipedia*, which has been put together by collective actionⁱ. We could not agree more. Each one of these puzzle pieces imbues the information in a resource with greater reliability, which is exactly what we want for our patrons. So, how can a group of writers who do not act in concert convince us that they are qualified to write definitive statements regarding a topic when they will not identify themselves or provide their credentials? How can an anonymous group be responsible for information when all members of that group do not explicitly stand behind those statements? How can a constantly

changing group, that will not identify those who comprise it, provide any context or “personality” to the way information is presentedⁱⁱ? The answer to all three of these questions is: it cannot. The individuals who make up this amorphous group may be: a) educated researchers who have studied this topic extensively and obtained a degree related to the topic; b) avid and well-informed amateurs or hobbyists; c) capable plagiarists who steal other people’s work (correct or not) and rehash or reword it; or d) anyone with some interest in the topic. If we have no idea who the authors are, we cannot regard the information as anything other than suspect. It also follows that we cannot trust a source that does not require contributors to stand behind their assertions by openly identifying themselves and answering criticism with more than a “nanny nanny boo boo” or “you stink.” The greatest risk to these contributors is that they are banned from *Wikipedia*, unlike other sources, where contributors stake name and reputation on writing a factual, balanced account. Finally, context is often the key to interpreting information. If a user can understand the context within which the information appears, they can better evaluate it. We could not recommend a source such as *Wikipedia*, for example, wherein context is nonexistent because of the presence of so many ever-changing, unidentified voices.

Lack of direction and focus

We also think the multitude of constantly changing voices leads to a lack of direction and focus of the information presented. There is no unifying voice, no leader to guide the masses down more productive lanes rather than less productive lanes, no one to bring the topic back under control or into focus. As Hoiberg noted in his online debate with Wales, lack of direction and control are often *already* problems with resources that attempt to amass all that has ever been “...known, thought, or said”ⁱⁱⁱ With a resource that is already suspect due to the collective action of so many, we can see how easily this could turn into a bloated, unfocused mess. And,

for users who become easily overwhelmed by the sheer mass of information alone, a rambling and disorganized resource just is not helpful. It becomes too daunting for many people who just need to know one little factoid. Wales, for his part, suggested that the wide range of input, a la *Wikipedia*, may result in more balanced and more neutral coverage^{iv}. We certainly agree that a wide range of input is desirable, although we question whether this particular mode of obtaining input would truly result in less biased information.

Relying on the masses

As we stated above, in the collective action scenario for something like *Wikipedia*, there is no leader to guide the masses. The masses guide themselves, and guidance or focus on a particular topic – think *Wikipedia* – usually comes down to a) who cares the most and b) who can devote the most time obsessing over a specific piece of information. In a collective action situation, leaders are self-proclaimed and often have spurious or arbitrary agendas. Additionally, some areas generate more comment, many changes, and detailed fact-checking, whereas others may be virtually ignored. Those who think collective action will attract experts to correct and guide the process and thus provide high-quality scholarly information are relying on experts' free time and good will. What happens when that ends? Or when people become bored or frustrated with the process? There is no agreement, contract, or reward system that keeps experts from leaving or not contributing; despite what many people think, editing information on a regular schedule does not motivate too many experts in whatever field when other deadlines and more prestigious demands on their time and expertise call.

Another problem with the masses and collective action is that people end up *voting* for the truth.^v In a special report about *Wikipedia* in Nature, “disputes about content are usually resolved by discussion among users”^{vi} Our question is “What if you are outvoted even though

you are right?” For example, revisionists to history may be the most active contributors and decide to claim that the Holocaust never happened. Although there is much factual evidence to the contrary, if the revisionists make up the largest group that is determining what the information will be, the truth can be easily buried. In a brilliant satire piece on the *Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert demonstrates how easy it is to make changes to factual information based on whimsy. Colbert states “You see, any user can change any entry and if enough other users agree with them, it becomes true.” and claims, only too frighteningly “Now, what we’re doing is bringing democracy to knowledge.^{vii}” He ends by reassuring people “Together, we can create a reality that we can all agree on: the reality we just agreed on”^{viii} He coins this “Wikiality”^{ix} Colbert’s piece highlights the inherent flaws in collective action as it relates to compiling information resources. This is why juried processes with a variety of experts are a good idea. Changes to information should not be made on a whim; rather, they should be revisions that are based on fact-checking and discussion among experts.

***Wikipedia* Itself**

The Good

Wikipedia is ubiquitous lately, with entries appearing near the top of result lists in Google searches on almost any topic. It is foolish for us to try to pretend it does not exist or is not used. We may have mixed feeling about it, but we realize that *Wikipedia* does have its place. As librarians, we welcome the idea of providing information to the public for free! *Wikipedia* is wonderful as a web log of current events and popular culture. Entries are easy to find and often satisfy one’s curiosity. *Wikipedia* is also very useful when working on a crossword puzzle or settling friendly arguments about random pop culture details. It is also a place to share knowledge without having to defend or provide credentials. Additionally, *Wikipedia* has a wealth

of images and is a source of hundreds of random facts that other sources deem unworthy of inclusion. For academic researchers and students, *Wikipedia* is an okay place to get, quickly and easily, background on a new topic. Good *Wikipedia* editors (Wikipedians) provide long lists of cited works and links to further reading about a topic. Like other encyclopedias, *Wikipedia* can lead users to great sources.

One brilliant feature of *Wikipedia* is each entry's "history" page, where users can view *all* changes and corrections to an entry. If a change or correction has been made in *Britannica Online*, there is no indication of what has been refined. Although that is acceptable in the case of typos and other minor errors, substantive and perhaps more controversial changes (intelligent design in the evolution entry, for example) are another case. Tracking the evolution of those changes might be worthwhile. We also like that users can edit or correct entries. This is the closest thing to peer review that some web pages will ever have.

The Bad and The Ugly

Wikipedia has become a target of satirical sources such as *The Colbert Report* and *The Onion* due to its obvious flaws. Even when the information is correct, the lack of authority makes each entry suspect. We agree with Lanier's point that the entries also lack context and voice. Also, *Wikipedia's* claim that entries are available in many languages gives the misleading impression that a person could read the exact same entry in a language other than English. The English version is much more robust than the other versions of *Wikipedia*, a noble intention, but how can we trust an encyclopedia whose entries are not consistent from language to language?

There is another quality issue. Currently, the entries seem to be well-monitored for obvious mistakes and vandalism using both robots and human editors.^x However, more serious issues regarding quality have surfaced. In response, *Wikipedia* has acknowledged the need for

control mechanisms and have piloted a “stable” version for entries that will remain the same once the entry reaches a certain quality standard^{xi}. So what does that say about the open, everybody-contributes process? Also, who determines the quality? Is it all of the users? What if later users say “uh no, this quality is not good enough?” And what kind of quality do the powers that be at *Wikipedia* mean? That entries read well or are accurate – or both? Again, we are concerned that, as Colbert put it, we are creating "a reality that we can all agree on."^{xii}

Furthermore, even if the entries are correct, what happens when Wikipedians lose interest in keeping entries up-to-date? In an interview aired on *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, Dr. Michael Twidale, a scholar from University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, shares this concern: he says if the Wikipedians "got bored and just went off to, you know, the next cool Web thing, whatever that might be, if they did that tomorrow I think Wikipedia would just degenerate into a froth of spam, porn, graffiti, lies and drivel in less than a month"^{xiii}

Though the goal of *Wikipedia* may be to make available all human, its purpose is not academic research. *Wikipedia* has numerous disclaimers, ranging from a mundane warning about tertiary sources^{xiv} to a more extreme risk disclaimer^{xv}. It also has a surprising essay entry called: "Why *Wikipedia* is Not So Great"^{xvi} In an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jimmy Wales states that students should not cite *Wikipedia* in their papers and projects^{xvii}.

Charter Wikipedians are leaving the project; one of the original creators of *Wikipedia*, Larry Sanger, left because " he found that he was not heading a disciplined crew of qualified writers and editors collaborating on authoritative statements (the Nupedia ideal), but trying to control an ill-disciplined crowd of volunteers fighting over ever-shifting articles."^{xviii}

Users and *Wikipedia*

The creators of *Wikipedia* have a good handle on *Wikipedia*'s purpose and limitations, but our concern is that *users* do not acknowledge those limitations when they approach academic research. Patrons seem unaware of or are actively ignoring *Wikipedia*'s disclaimers and warnings. Since the very name “*Wikipedia, the Online Encyclopedia*” insinuates that it works like a traditional encyclopedia, and since it comes to the top of nearly every Google search, it must be a good source, right? See our previous section for why that just is not so. We were shocked and disappointed to find *Wikipedia* articles (often authored by “anonymous”) cited in some scholarly journal articles, right alongside the usual high-falutin scholarly journals. *Wikipedia* was not the *subject* of the article (that is why *we* are citing it in this paper); *Wikipedia* was cited as an information source. For example, an article in the April issue of the *Analyst* entitled “*Analysis of Gaseous Toxic Industrial Compounds and Chemical Warfare Agent Simulants by Atmospheric Pressure Ionization Mass Spectrometry*” cited a historical “fact” from *Wikipedia*! Though this fact is probably correct, we found that this information is available in the tertiary yet reliable *Columbia Encyclopedia* **and** in a scholarly toxicology journal. Are the authors the same scholars who pooh-pooh tertiary sources and will not allow their students to get background information from Encyclopedia Britannica? How did *Wikipedia* earn the right to be compared with academic reference sources? *Nature*, which did the famous study of Britannica vs. *Wikipedia*, used the phrase “regardless of expertise” in their advocacy for the fledgling *Wikipedia*.^{xix} Yet, would *Nature*'s editors EVER publish an article written by someone who had no expertise in the area about which they were writing? Highly doubtful.

Though many users seem to accept *Wikipedia* as just another reference source, *Wikipedia* has its fair share of critics. Its flaws have been covered extensively in the literature, but the focus seems to be on *Wikipedia*'s contributors (and their lack of expertise), rather than on the users.

While we believe that everyone has the right to decide for themselves what resources are good and what resources are not so good, we want to give patrons the tools to help make that judgment. We understand that our users need more than a risk disclaimer and that librarians need to teach information literacy to help them critically evaluate resources like *Wikipedia*. In addition to our standard evaluation criteria (authority, currency, bias, accuracy), we want students to strive for the best resources for **a specific** purpose and audience. Students need to decide: What is good enough for right now? What will give me some background information? What is good enough for Dr. Soandso's paper? What is good enough for me to use in front of an audience? What is quick and easy, yet still acceptable? When can I settle and when is “good enough” not good enough? Pulsifer suggests that “when the choice is between no article and a slightly inaccurate one, the risk of the inaccurate one is always better”^{xx}. Is that really true? And if *Wikipedia* is the only place that has the information, we have to question where THEY got it. Students may risk using shoddy information, but most librarians would not encourage students to take the risk. Instead, we prefer to work with students to refine their search, rethink topics, or help them to use lesser-known or lower-profile, but useful, resources.

In all fairness, *Wikipedia* is not the only thing that we urge our patrons to use carefully. Because writing, creating, aggregating and disseminating information have all become easier with the advent of the internet, it has empowered anyone who is interested in information. Students are convinced that resources like Google and *Wikipedia* have what they need. Perhaps because this is still perceived as being easier and is a more understandable way of searching for info. Perhaps it is laziness.

Collectivism has added a revolutionary dimension to the world of online information. It is both exciting and daunting; so many more people can contribute ideas or review information

for accuracy, yet we now live in a world where encyclopedias have risk disclaimers. We do not know how long collective action will continue to drive information collaboration online or how Wikipedia will continue to evolve – or even exist. We do know that as everyone deals with the information deluge, librarians will still be a valuable resource for helping patrons evaluate the accuracy and integrity of information sources.

ⁱ “Digital Maoism: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism” Jaron Lanier. *Edge* May 30, 2006. Paragraph 8 through 10. http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/lanier06/lanier06_index.html

ⁱⁱ “Digital Maoism: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism” Jaron Lanier. *Edge* May 30, 2006. Paragraph 8 through 10. http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/lanier06/lanier06_index.html

ⁱⁱⁱ “Will Wikipedia Mean the End of Traditional Encyclopedias?” September 12, 2006. WSJ.com (Wall Street Journal Online). Transcript of email discussion as printed on WSJ.com. Paragraph 41.

^{iv} “Will Wikipedia Mean the End of Traditional Encyclopedias?” September 12, 2006. WSJ.com (Wall Street Journal Online). Transcript of email discussion as printed on WSJ.com. Paragraph 1.

^v “Nature mag cooked Wikipedia study” by Andrew Orłowski. *The Register*. March 23, 2006. Paragraph 29. http://www.theregister.co.uk/2006/03/23/britannica_wikipedia_nature_study/

^{vi} Giles, Jim. "Internet encyclopaedias go head to head." *Nature* 438.7070 (2005): 900. Academic Search Premier. 8 October 2006. <http://search.ebscohost.com>.

^{vii} Colbert Report “The Word” segment. http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/the_colbert_report/videos/the_word/index.jhtml?playVideo=72347 July 31, 2006.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Schiff, Stacy. 2006. "KNOW IT ALL." *New Yorker* 82, no. 23: 36-43. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed October 9, 2006).

^{xi} Giles, Jim. "Internet encyclopaedias go head to head." *Nature* 438.7070 (2005): 900-901. Academic Search Premier. 8 October 2006. <http://search.ebscohost.com>. page 901.

^{xii} Colbert Report.

^{xiii} Copyright 2006 National Public Radio (NPR); SHOW: Morning Edition 10:00 AM EST; September 11, 2006 Monday; LENGTH: 1041 words; HEADLINE: Wikipedia Wins Users and CriticsANCHORS: RENEE MONTAGNE; transcript from Lexis Nexis Academic.

^{xiv} Wikipedia. "Cite." http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:Cite&page=Main_Page&id=78734706. accessed 9 October 2006.

^{xv} Wikipedia. "Wikipedia Risk Disclaimer." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Risk_disclaimer. Accessed 9 October 2006.

^{xvi} "Why Wikipedia is Not So Great." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Why_Wikipedia_is_not_so_great

^{xvii} CITING WIKIPEDIA. *Chronicle of Higher Education*; 6/23/2006, Vol. 52 Issue 42, pA39.

^{xviii} Poe, Marshall. 2006. "the Hive." *Atlantic (10727825)* 298, no. 2: 86-94. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 9, 2006).Citation. Page 93 (PDF obtained from Academic Search Premier)

^{xix} "Britannica attacks." *Nature*, 3/30/2006, Vol. 440 Issue 7084, p582.

^{xx} "Met Mister Know-it-all." Gulli, Cathy. *Maclean's*, 8/14/2006, Vol. 119 Issue 31/32, p64.