



A peer-reviewed student publication  
of the University at Buffalo  
Department of Library and Information Studies

## A new context for knowledge creation: letter from the editor, February, 2007

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Library Student Journal,  
February 2007

### Abstract

Reflecting on the current issue and on how knowledge is created and organized in the digital age, the editor discusses how knowledge is created in the online context. He touches on the debate over the validity of Wikipedia entries, and questions the wisdom of judging a new technology by old standards.

### Letter from the Editor

If there is a theme to this issue, February 2007, it is *Knowledge in the Digital Age*. Michael Sutton asks: Is the Library and Information Science (LIS) field best suited to teaching Knowledge Management? Edith Speller asks: Is knowledge better organized by users than catalogers? And Monique Lloyd asks: How do we address the information needs of a culture with a concept of knowledge different from our own? To these questions I will add one of my own: *Do new ways of organizing and*

*accessing information on the Web lead to the creation of equally valid knowledge?*

Lloyd (2007) notes in an essay addressing the ongoing problem of the proportionally low numbers of Native Americans graduating each year with MLS/MLIS degrees:

Native Americans emphasize an oral tradition, a tradition in which stories can be transitory, changing, and adapted according to circumstances, and contain what mainstream culture sometimes views as fanciful knowledge.... This contrasts sharply with knowledge that is rational and scientific, never changing words written hard and fast in books, with a mass audience. (¶ 9)

The Web has developed a culture of its own, and this culture certainly does not favor knowledge based on “never changing words written hard and fast.” There is right now on the Internet a change taking place in the way information—scholarly and otherwise—is created, organized, and transmitted. This change forces those of us in the LIS field to ask if the knowledge gained from such information is as *valid* as that from traditional sources. Information users on the Internet create knowledge from information sources that generally have not passed through an editor’s office or come

from an expert's pen. And only rarely is it cataloged by a trained cataloger.

Speller (2007) says, "Some commentators feel that distributed classification is inevitable and essential if we are to successfully organise online information, due to the money and labour required to catalogue objects using other methods" (¶ 21). Indeed, traditional organization tools cannot adequately address the new realities of information on the Web. Top-down approaches are simply too inefficient to handle the massive amounts of information available. Similarly, traditional reliance on experts and editors to provide the masses with valid information, with *facts* that are *true*, is no longer a necessary fact of life.

A now-famous study in *Nature* (Giles, 2005) demonstrated that Wikipedia entries contain on average only slightly fewer errors than *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*. Wikiphiles were encouraged and claimed a victory of sorts. *Britannica* (2007) countered with a scathing rebuttal, noting among many other things:

By counting up the alleged inaccuracies for both encyclopedias, *Nature* treated all mistakes equally and failed to observe that *Wikipedia* had many more shortcomings of a fundamental kind. Reviewers told the journal that many of the *Wikipedia* articles were "poorly structured and confusing"—a fact that made those articles resistant to basic fact checking and thus not suitable for comparison with *Britannica*. (p. 5-6)

*Britannica* makes a good point—Wikipedia is susceptible to shortcomings (especially bias) of the very large sort, so simply comparing total mistakes is inherently unfair to *Britannica*. But it misses, as did the original study, a larger point: the two encyclopedias represent two different concepts of knowledge from two quite

different cultures, and to compare them based on simple errors of fact is largely pointless. To compare them in such a way is to fall into the trap of judging a new technology by old standards.

Wikipedia's usefulness is not, as is *Britannica's*, the simple ability to provide reliable facts. Rather, its usefulness is in its coverage of obscure topics, its ability to adapt with amazing speed to new and quickly-evolving topics, its ability to organize an overwhelmingly large amount of Web resources on a topic into a single coherent entry, and its function as a gateway to further resources. It has become, in fact, a great *startingpoint* for finding information on practically any topic on the Web, something not accomplished by traditional cataloging and classification efforts of the past. If Wikipedia were ever printed to paper and bound into a multi-volume set, then the debate between *Britannica* and *Nature* has meaning. But, of course, to do so would be ridiculous.

This is all to get to this point: the Web has become an entirely new *culture* in which bottom-up approaches to information creation and organization are the norm, and knowledge created in this new context is every bit as valid as that from traditional sources. That a piece of information might represent the knowledge of an expert or the musings of an amateur is largely irrelevant in the Web context. An inaccuracy in *Britannica* is (mis)taken as fact, an inaccuracy in Wikipedia is taken with a grain of salt, easily confirmed or proved wrong. In the end, the question is not whether wisdom from the masses contains more factual errors, the question is whether that wisdom is more useful, more efficient. And, I think, the answer is "yes."

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## **Author's Bio**

Eli Guinnee is Editor-in-Chief of *Library Student Journal*, and a copyeditor for *Information Research*. He has worked in reference, interlibrary loan, and circulation at Colorado State University's Morgan Library, as a Cataloguer for the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, and is now pursuing a Master's in Library Science at the University at Buffalo.