

Wikipedia and Politics

Wikipedia is off-line today. I will not weep – it is a pity it is only just for one day. Readers of my ‘Wikipedia and the ship of fools’ (<http://www.ianmortimer.com/essays/wikipedia.pdf>) will know that I think the structure of Wikipedia promotes hearsay, prejudice, supposition and superficiality on an equal footing with genuine information and understanding. It puts the lowest common denominator on an equal par with expert knowledge, so that most people who cannot tell the difference are encouraged not to see that there *is* a difference. The end result is like voting on the truth. Voting on the veracity of a fact will not make it true. Few meaningful points of information can be determined by mass opinion (except mass opinion itself, which is hugely changeable) so the democratisation of encyclopaedia-making is essentially a step backwards, to when all encyclopaedias were the work of amateur enthusiasts (who would write about the world without once stepping outside their monasteries).

Clearly the owner of Wikipedia, Mr Wales, feels he has the right to use the site for his own political ends with regard to American legislation. I cannot comment on the merits or failings of the legislation proposed, and I don’t wish to dwell on the outrageous arrogance of his action; but what I do want to say is that the principle of encouraging people to create a resource which then may be used for the owner’s political purposes is deeply worrying – far more so than a newspaper oligarch using the headlines for his own political spin. At least a media mogul can only further his own ends by making his message palatable to his readers.

Do I make use of wikipedia? Yes, on occasion. Sometimes I need to know what people generally think about a subject. It is not without some value. Do I ever trust what I read? No. One can have free information – on apparently any subject under the sun – or one can have expertly composed pieces on a relatively limited range of subjects. I almost always opt for the latter. In demonstrating that I am in the minority in this, and that the public will opt for free information of dubious reliability, Mr Wales has concluded an extraordinary experiment on people in the Western World. A cynic would say that it shows that the majority of people in western democracies are more concerned with money than truth. But now to martial the combination of naivety and penny-pinching that is revealed by the experiment to promote a personal political opinion is deplorable.

Today I see a whole new, darker future for the internet. One as bad as the real world.

Ian Mortimer

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