

Wikipedia and the Ship of Fools.

Wikipedia is an uneven and divisive creation. On the one hand perhaps no other website allows such free and easy access to so much information. Its ease of use encourages many users and supporters – and their loyalty cannot be dismissed. On the other, no other website is as prone to remove good information and replace it with bad. Its members constantly edit entries in an arbitrary fashion, exercising very little judgement over whether the changes are improvements or not. The resource as a whole does not discriminate in favour of accuracy: a new spurious detail might be introduced to replace a proven fact. It is like a ship of fools, steered by human folly, going round and round in circles, ultimately arriving nowhere.

For those of us who are trying to advance knowledge in some respect, this is deeply discouraging. As the following two examples will demonstrate, you might have a clear and well-evidenced resolution of a longstanding and difficult historical problem. But eventually users of Wikipedia will remove it. What is evidently at work is the politicisation of knowledge – a sort of voting for facts. It doesn't matter if something is proven (as the Henry V detail below shows); if it does not accord with received wisdom, such facts are easily dispensed with. Thus Wikipedia eliminates new knowledge and acts as a brake against the dissemination of new research.

Opinions will be divided as to whether it is a good idea gone wrong, or a bad idea which a few brave souls are struggling to make right, or a bit of both. My own opinion is that it is a divine theory that works to the devil's advantage. Its idealism is its undoing.

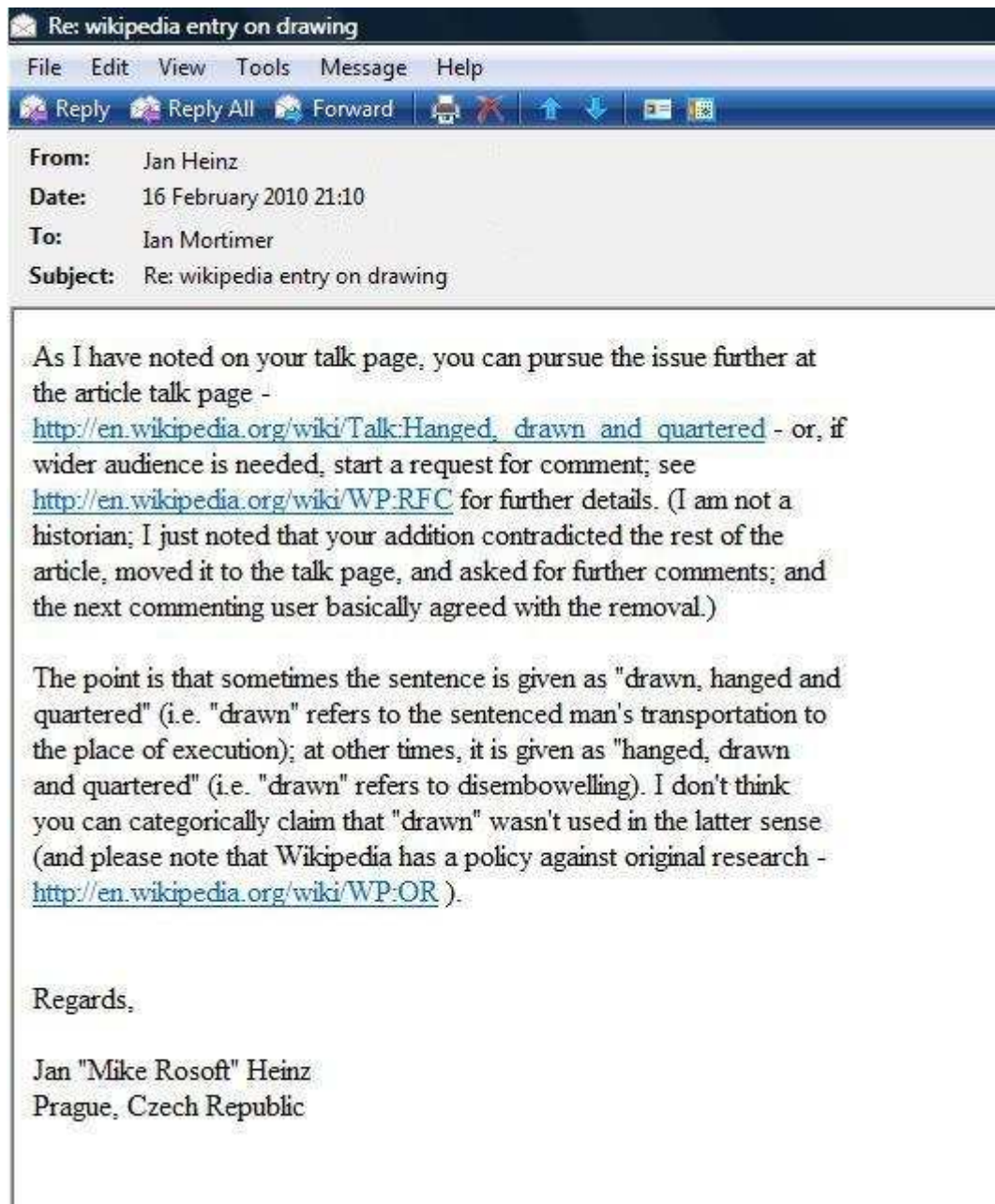
1. Drawing and hanging

At the time of writing (30 March 2010) the Wikipedia entry for 'hanging, drawing and quartering' states that

The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes both meanings of *drawn*: "To draw out the viscera or intestines of ... a traitor or other criminal after hanging" and "To drag (a criminal) at a horse's tail, or on a hurdle or the like, to the place of execution". It states that "In many cases of executions it is uncertain [which of these senses of *drawn*] is meant. The presumption is that where *drawn* is mentioned after *hanged*, the sense is [the first meaning]. That seems like a good statement made on good authority – and I don't blame anyone for following it. But in fact it is beset with problems (outlined in a separate essay). It is not difficult to show the fallibility of this statement in the *OED*, because all the examples in favour of the second meaning are ambiguous or wrong, or relate only to animals. Some weeks ago I set about revising the Wikipedia entry appropriately, stating that for the early modern period there is no doubt that 'drawn' referred to the process of drawing to the gallows on a hurdle, and I quoted Machyn's chronicle, an unambiguous primary source.

One 'Mike Rosoft' deleted my corrections and references within a day. I complained. He explained in an email: 'I am not a historian; I just noted that your addition contradicted the rest

of the article, moved it to the talk page, and asked for further comments; and the next commenting user basically agreed with the removal.)’



Thus, on the basis that one ill-informed person does not know the value of a primary source, and cannot be bothered to check the weakness of the secondary sources previously quoted as authoritative, and because one other ill-informed person agreed with him, the entry was reverted back to its previously misleading form.

The bit that astonished me was where ‘Mike Rosoft’ tried to justify his decision on the basis that: ‘Wikipedia has a policy against original research’. I am a historian – I undertake original research all the time – what on earth am I meant to do but present it? In this context, Wikipedia would appear to have a policy against historians quoting unambiguous primary sources. Quoting unoriginal research – someone else’s conclusion (right or wrong) like *OED*’s dubious ‘presumption’, for example – would appear to be fine. But one cannot quote unimpeachable

primary sources. This is frankly ludicrous in an encyclopaedia: it prioritises ignorance over information, and elevates received wisdom over new research.

The serious implication in such instances is that Wikipedia, which is thought to be a source that questions authority, actually imposes an authority of its own – an inexpert editorial authority. Moreover it does this on an arbitrary basis. If I don't like a detail in an entry I can take it down and put in place my own 'authority'. And so can the next man. And the next. And none of these authorities have to be any better than the first. Any well-meaning scholar who wishes to spread his or her knowledge in an area of expertise might end up repeating my work – only to see it once more replaced by the poor judgement of a well-meaning but frankly inexpert editor. And so the ship of fools sails on, and on, and goes around and around, in meaningless circles.

2. Henry V's dates of birth

Until recently it was not known whether Henry V was born in 1386 or 1387. In 2006, in the course of researching my biography of his father (*The Fears of Henry IV*), I found that he could not possibly have been born at Monmouth in August 1387 because his younger brother Thomas had been born before Christmas 1387. This was not open to doubt: their father's household account for that year 1387-88 noted that Thomas's nurse was given a gift for Christmas 1387. Given that we also have an astrological prognostication for the future king, which states he was born on 16 September 1386 at 11.22 am, you would have thought that the matter was settled there. Certainly the editor of the peer-refereed journal *Historical Research* thought so when that journal published my work on the subject (which appeared as a footnote on my research into his father's date of birth and the royal Maundy). So I amended his Wikipedia entry accordingly, as well as that of his father.

How pointless was that! I cited my sources but all reference to my peer-refereed work has now been removed. Instead '7 August 1387' has once more been supplied as a possible correct date, quoting two sources. One is the biography of Henry V by Christopher Allmand, published in 1997 (ten years before my research), and the other is an amateur historian's webpage. As it happens, the webpage also quotes Allmand's biography, so this is really two citations of the same, now-outdated source. So in discarding my proof that he was not born on 7 August 1387, the good ship Wikipedia has now sailed around in a circle to the point at which it started, and hit the same rocks of error yet again.

Conclusion

Pretty obviously, I might as well not have bothered. By implication, there is no reason for anyone else with any expertise to waste their time updating material. Which is hugely ironic for I looked on a Wikipedia page the other day – on a subject I knew something about – and found an appeal that said: 'this article or section is in need of attention from an expert on the subject'.

This article or section is in need of attention from an expert on the subject.

The following WikiProjects or Portals may be able to help recruit one:

- [WikiProject English Royalty](#) • [WikiProject Politics](#) - [Politics Portal](#)

If another appropriate WikiProject or portal exists, please adjust this template accordingly. (October 2008)

Am I going to volunteer my services? No. It would be a waste of time. Sooner or later someone will simply undo all the work because they do not agree with it. Or because they know a different version of events which they would like to prioritise. Or simply because they *can* change it. I suspect that some people who spend a lot of time editing Wikipedia entries feel a need to justify their editorial position within the Wikipedia ship by changing things for the sake of it – turning the rudder for the sake of feeling in control, as it were. My Henry V experience certainly would back up such a conclusion.

But does it matter? So what if a group of people – albeit tens of millions in this case – want to play games with knowledge? And can they be blamed when the tax-payer-funded higher educational institutions keep such a tight control on peer-reviewed work, preventing most of it ever reaching the public domain? With regard to the second question, no, one cannot blame anyone for looking in despair at how society generates knowledge and information and then withholds most of it from the taxpayers who paid for it. But for that precise reason it matters hugely what is put in its place, and who puts it there. Society has often gone down many intellectual dead ends, and it has made many mistakes; but always the sense of improvement and correction has guided historical endeavour. The reason why scholarship generally has not suffered from the ship of fools problem is that some theories and supposed facts can be proved wrong, and discarded. There is thus a collective sense of general direction among all experts within a particular field: to move away from opinions that were poorly conceived or formed in ignorance. Expert opinion certainly has its faults but to pretend that prioritising non-expert opinion is desirable is stupid, especially in technical matters and doubly so when the non-experts in question are answerable only to other non-experts. You wouldn't have a skyscraper designed by schoolchildren; you wouldn't want untrained and unarmed troops to go into battle, especially if they were commanded by someone who knew nothing about war; so why prioritise non-expert opinion in scholarly matters? There is no guarantee whatsoever that the resultant product has any value.

This is the real issue. By elevating discarded and outdated opinion to the same level or even above that of well-evidenced knowledge, Wikipedia undermines the value of knowledge itself and negates the value of us seeking new knowledge. And this is not just with regard to people finding out the odd fact: Wikipedia's influence extends far beyond the encyclopaedia because people believe in this democratic form of information-availability. Their common recourse to it backs up their opinions. Thus Wikipedia's undermining of knowledge seeps into our common understanding of the world. It is teaching us new areas of ignorance, establishing new myths. The democratisation of knowledge is undermining its value. Needless to say, it should not be this way.

Ian Mortimer,

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