

# Citizendium is citizendumb



ADAM  
GAUMONT

In response to admittedly deserved criticism regarding its quality and reliability, the Wikimedia Foundation has announced that it will be launching Citizendium, a new branch of Wikipedia that will be expert-written as opposed to the current free-for-all format. At this point, it seems almost too obvious to wax philosophic on the merits of Wikipedia, but the infamous online resource is only five years old—a testament to the blinding speed at which the world of information technology changes.

However, although it may be unreliable in some cases, Wikipedia is still extremely accurate—and, in a sense, expertly written as well. There are two main concepts that explain how and why Wikipedia works the way it does: the first is the “Delphi Effect,” whereby, in the words of computer-culture theorist Eric Raymond, “the averaged opinion of a mass of equally expert (or equally ignorant) observers is quite a bit more reliable a predictor than the opinion of a single randomly chosen one of the observers.”

As proof of this, a recent study by the science journal *Nature* found that, comparing similar scientific articles in Wikipedia and *Encyclopædia Britannica* side by side, each resource had the same average amount of errors per article—and in that sense, that the two were equal in reliability. And while this served to debunk the canonical *Encyclopædia*'s claim to perfection as much as it boosts that of its online rival, the point was made nonetheless.

The other basic tenet of Wikipedia—and the reason why it vastly outperforms all other reference sources in terms of breadth, growth and accuracy—is that of open-source development, a movement that has its origins in the early days of computer hacking. This theory holds that non-proprietary software whose code (or in this case, information) is developed and reviewed by a maximal number of users will produce the most robust, reliable and adaptable end-product.

**Of course, the likelihood of intellectual vandalism depends largely on the the likelihood that it will be in someone's interest, political or otherwise, to alter or misrepresent a given bit of information.**

Humans have long dreamed of amassing all the world's knowledge, from the library of Alexandria to the French *Encyclopédie*. But no amount of *gens des lettres* will be able to accomplish this feat; it's only with a massive, vibrant and adaptive effort from damn near everyone that we can even come close. To take away this maximal number of users and reduce it to a few hand-picked experts will therefore only grind Wikipedia's currently steady informational march to a halt.

Apart from over-anxious developers, then, the potentially fatal flaw of Wikipedia is not a lack of accuracy; rather, it's the relative ease with which the site can be abused, tampered with, and otherwise vandalized. After all, if

anyone with an Internet connection and a bit of online know-how can edit it, then even if only one per cent of all users were malicious, that would still be 10 000 vandals out of one million.

Of course, the likelihood of intellectual vandalism depends largely on the the likelihood that it will be in someone's interest, political or otherwise, to alter or misrepresent a given bit of information. Looking for some technical specifications or mathematical formulae? Wikipedia would be a great place to start. Writing a paper on US foreign policy or stem-cell research? Well, you'd best steer clear of the Internet in general, to be honest.

But Citizendium won't be an adequate replacement. Although being expert-written seems, on the surface, to be more scholarly and reliable, such a service would merely be caught between the traditional, tight-knit encyclopedia form and its sprawling online counterpart. Even if Citizendium were equally expert as an established reference work, it would just be one amongst several—though free, which would be its chief advantage—and never quite able to shake off the stigma of its embattled literary appendix. And as nearly every postsecondary instructor will tell you, Wikipedia ought not to be used as one's sole academic reference anyway. It's difficult to believe that this consensus will be quick to change even if this cleaner, more sterile version is introduced.

The solution, then, is not to abandon Wikipedia's open-edit format, but to improve its security. The user-account system is a good start (though it's still pretty soft), and the various disclaimers and lock-downs are actually quite effective. Add in a few more measures to detect the identity of the digital neanderthals and ne'er-dowells out there, and Wikipedia can be a brilliant, reliable and all-encompassing resource for years to come.

## Cod crisis helps piece together fish puzzle



GRAHAM  
LETTNER

Last week, a research team led by Dr Boris Worm from Dalhousie University published a report in the journal *Science* that outlined the accelerating degradation of global fish stocks. Alarming, Worm's research concludes that nearly one third of global sea fisheries populations have already collapsed—and the rate of decline is still accelerating. In order to grasp the seriousness of this matter, you should know that the term “collapse” is defined as a fishery's decline to less than ten per cent of original yields.

In 1992, Canada's federal government declared a moratorium on cod fishing. By this point, cod stocks had plummeted to one per cent of 1960 levels. The fallout from the cods' collapse was 30 000 people out of work and a stark cultural change for Newfoundlanders. A staple industry for 500 years had been in effect wiped out. In 2002 the mayor of Bonavista, a small fishing town of 4000 reported a permanent emigration of 700–900 people, consisting largely of ex-fishermen who, as it turned out, couldn't earn enough money to send back to their families.

By 2002, ten years after the moratorium, cod stocks still hadn't

**“In retrospect, the mistake made is certain: an inability to comprehend long-term consequences resulted in environmental collapse drastically affecting biological geography and, in turn, human geography. As a result, an entire maritime way of life has been disrupted for a generation—and the future is uncertain.”**

recovered. The Grand Banks' cod population has remained at less than five per cent of its 1960 biomass. In retrospect, the mistake made is certain: an inability to comprehend long-term consequences resulted in environmental collapse drastically affecting biological geography and, in turn, human geography. As a result, an entire maritime way of life has been disrupted for a generation—and the future is uncertain.

Yet the current global scenario reported by Worm is much more alarming than Newfoundland's past misfortune. Despite large boats, better nets and improved technology, global catch declined by 13 per cent from 1994–2003. If current over-fishing practices continue, it's predicted that by the middle of this century the last currently eaten seafood species will be depleted. Newfoundland history shows us that *ad hoc* action is no remedy. Repopulation of fish stocks isn't a linear prospect: in ten years an ecosystem cannot recover from near extinction. Clearly reactive action is senseless; what's needed is prevention.

So the question becomes simple: can lessons be learnt from past mistakes,

behaviors changed, and future disasters prevented? The answer is uncertain, but I will venture that the answer is no. Fishermen continue to dispute the claims of scientists because they are still able to catch large quantities of fish.

I account this shortsightedness to the human inability to comprehend complex systems. Cod stocks don't decrease at a steady rate—rather, fish populations that are pushed to the edge of survival eventually tumble precipitously. In fact, under great environmental pressure, fish populations will cluster in ever greater densities—what scientists call hyper-aggregating—which could account for current high-level fish yields.

As a result, expect international governments to resist calls for complete fish bans, and expect the ensuing global collapse in fish stocks. What's more—and more troubling—expect to see the same tragic changes to Newfoundland's human geography played out on a global scale as fishing communities find themselves with no catch and no livelihood. And finally, expect Dr Boris Worm to have a footnote in history as another scientist whose warnings went unheeded.



## OUR WEEKLY LINEUP

### Mini Burger Mondays:

Cure that case of the “Mondays” with 99¢ mini burgers and \$10 jugs. House Rules Apply. 7pm to close

### Karaoke Tuesdays:

Downstairs in the LIBRARY. Like Canadian Idol, only our \$8.99 nachos are cheesier than Ben Mulroney. 7pm to close

### Wing Wednesdays:

Get in V-formation and migrate to the land o' 25¢ wings. House Rules Apply 7pm to close

### Loonie Thursdays:

\$1 Draught downstairs in the LIBRARY. Celebrate the invention of the loonie. 7pm to close

### Finally Fridays: Extended Happy Hour.

“True North strong and nearly free” 3pm to 9pm

### S.O.S. Saturdays:

\$2 Highballs downstairs in the LIBRARY. Your wallet is sending out an S.O.S. – Save On Spirits. 9pm to midnight

### Music Trivia Sundays:

Test your music IQ. No studying required. \$15 Buckets of Domestic beer! 7pm to close

433-6364

11113-87 AVE.

hudsonstaphouse.com



NOW OPENING

EVERY DAY IS CANADA DAY