



## Wikipedia factoids aren't knowledge

By Jesse Corn

1:55 p.m. Sunday, November 29, 2009

The acceptance of the online database Wikipedia as an authoritative source of knowledge is the most damaging development to Western intellectual life in our young century. That is not to say that Wikipedia is useless; however, I am constantly bothered by blind acceptance of this source as an omnipotent authority.

So what is Wikipedia? It is a gigantic database of information and exhaustive debates where anyone who knows how to write can contribute. It sounds useful and certainly is. It contains a galaxy of answers to trivia questions. Who won the World Series in 1909? What are the names of the last five presidents of the General Electric Co.? Information of this kind is catalogued ad infinitum in Wikipedia and is often reliable.

Yet, if one seeks knowledge, then Wikipedia is woefully lacking. Knowledge is something of value; the cumulative production of intellect made through generations of sifting through the nonsense, frivolity and foolishness that mankind so actively and ceaselessly produces.

If one needs a demonstration, search Wikipedia for the topics "Jesus Christ" or "The American Civil War". Topics that require sustained study and concentration to understand are reduced to exhaustive and convoluted recitations of competing viewpoints written by a rabble of busy contributors, and updated daily!

Denis Diderot's "Encyclopedie" was a community effort like Wikipedia. However, contributions to that great endeavor were limited to a group of refined minds, competent in their fields, and dedicated to bringing true knowledge to the masses. These Frenchmen were of the same generation as our Founding Fathers and believed deeply in enlightenment through learning as a way to improve society.

So why are people so enamored with Wikipedia? I think it is a love for the statistical life, which is a fashionable mode of thinking founded on analysis, the breaking down of something into its parts.

In our time, people love to toss statistics at each other as proof of their command of a topic. It is perhaps most apparent in the workplace.

How many of us in private enterprise are now judged on the job not as an individual, but on countless "performance metrics." If you are shoe salesman, then your employer will doubtless focus on your number of shoes sold, average shoe sale price, and may even know the number of socks you sold to children with Irish surnames on Saturdays!

Does this really measure one's performance or value? No, but it keeps managers busy with

spreadsheets and away from the real work of dealing with customers and employees in person.

The same is true in erudition. Endless reduction through analysis can fog one's view of the whole subject of interest.

For example, just because one can rattle off casualty statistics for Appomattox and Gettysburg doesn't mean he understands the genius of a commander like Sherman. Rarely has there been an American general so brilliant, focused, vigorous and confident. To understand such a man requires a sustained effort.

Nevertheless, too many people settle for remembering facts when they really seek the deeper satisfaction of knowing.

So, if you want to understand the Civil War, I recommend starting with the biography of Ulysses S. Grant. If you want to understand the life of Jesus, then read the New Testament.

The difficulty today is in knowing where to look for learning, because we are so overwhelmed with production.

My plea is for seekers of truth not to stop with trivial statistics, but to seek out reliable sources of good judgment. Use Wikipedia for baseball trivia, but nourish your mind with the voices of those who lived the active life and recorded their thoughts for posterity.

Jesse Corn lives in Gainesville.

---

Find this article at:

<http://www.ajc.com/opinion/wikipedia-factoids-arent-knowledge-217993.html>

 [Print this page](#)  [Close](#)