

## Introduction

# Changing Orders of Knowledge? Encyclopaedias in Transition

By Jutta Haider & Olof Sundin

In the West encyclopaedias have long functioned as the standard for defining what can be considered public, established knowledge in a given time and culture. The modern encyclopaedia, with its roots in the enlightenment, has come to symbolise science and reason (Yeo 2001). The encyclopaedia stands for trustworthiness and stability, at the same time as it has actually always changed hand in hand with cultural and technical developments. Most recently, connected to digitisation, encyclopaedias' production, consumption, use, distribution and significance, are changing profoundly, so profound in fact that our society's view of what encyclopaedic knowledge is, who should produce and vet for its reliability and how it should be used seems to be changing in every way. Having said that, our understanding of *Wikipedia* benefits from seeing the historical context of encyclopaedism, which is clearly a continued influence even today (Reagle & Loveland 2013). And at the same time as some mourn the demise of encyclopaedias communicated in print, encyclopaedic knowledge is ubiquitous as never before. It is produced collectively by many people and is a vital part of the web. While understandably a lot has been said about *Wikipedia* and from almost every angle (e.g. Jullien 2012), other contemporary, most often online encyclopaedias, especially professional ones, have not received that much attention in research. Yet they are two sides of the same coin.

All this of course has to do with the enormous success of *Wikipedia*, which, according to *Alexa.com*, today holds a stable position amongst the six most popular websites in the world. Almost invariably it is a link to *Wikipedia*, which comes first in a search engine results page. It has even received one of popular culture's most coveted stamps of approval and features in not one, but several episodes of 'The Simpsons' and obviously there is a *Wikipedia* entry recording this (Wikipedia 2014a). *Wikipedia* is a part of popular culture and fundamental to the information economy of today in a way – it seems safe to say – that no other encyclopaedia ever was fundamental to all parts of the society of its time. This new type of encyclopaedic knowledge is everywhere. Yet the 'old', the professional encyclopaedias are still there and they are far from obsolescent or unchanging. They are transforming themselves in the face of digitisation. Some give up, yet others continue either as general-purpose reference works or in niches and specialisations and even new ones are founded. They are present in schools, libraries and

universities and news media often draw on them in their research. They are diversifying in many exciting and dynamic ways. Some have turned from products into highly specialised information services, while others focus on cultural heritage issues and even new encyclopaedias are being established. It is this change, this dynamic new order of encyclopaedic knowledge at the intersection of *Wikipedia* with other encyclopaedias and other knowledge systems that is the reason for this special issue.

### **From Shelves to Boxes and Networks of Competition**

The traditional encyclopaedias of the past have been moved from the living room shelves to boxes in storage rooms or, if they were lucky, to summer cottages. In its early days the Internet made possible new ways for distributing encyclopaedic information while publishers continued with their economic model based on the premise that an encyclopaedia is an artefact, a product to be sold (cf. Clark 2001). CD-ROM encyclopaedias, such as the English-language encyclopaedias *Compton*, *Grolier* and *Encarta*, demonstrated successfully the possibilities created by multimedia content and ease of digital distribution. Yet that was before *Wikipedia*, before ‘free’ culture and, above all, before *Google*. Since the huge success of *Wikipedia*, to a degree in tandem with the *Googlification* of the Internet, the once popular and authoritative professional encyclopaedias of the past have experienced difficulties, some more so than others. To mention a few telling examples: the famous German *Brockhaus* announced its termination in 2013; the year before, in 2012, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* announced that it will discontinue its print edition, the Swedish-language *Nationalencyklopedin* has severely cut the number of staff in its editorial room and explores new ways to move forward, while the Norwegian-language *Store Norske Leksikon* experiments with new forms for encyclopaedic production at the same time as it lobbies for state funding. At the same time, *Google* has taken things even further with its *Knowledge Graph*. Here *Google* aggregates open data from other sites, such as *Wikipedia*, in order to present encyclopaedia-type information on certain names, places and phenomena. Thereby, *Google* does not just feed *Wikipedia* with user traffic; it uses *Wikipedia*’s data – and eventually other sources – to itself present compact encyclopaedia-type information on certain subjects. The future will show what this might mean for the development of *Wikipedia* and online encyclopaedic information.

Once unquestioned pillars of formal public knowledge in society, encyclopaedias now not only face competition, they also have to relate to different sets of production modes favouring a new order of knowledge. This new order is shaped by search engines, social media and other fast moving, fast expanding enterprises of an ad-based, data-driven attention economy comfortably couched in contemporary consumer culture. Professional encyclopaedias have not only difficulties to

find a business model adjusted for the new economy on the web. They have also seen their epistemological foundation being challenged. For instance, in an – admittedly much criticised, but widely publicised – article in *Nature* from 2005 it was argued, based on a comparative study, that the qualitative differences between *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and *Wikipedia* were unsubstantial (Giles 2005). This was an earthquake in the domain of encyclopaedic knowledge production and it was felt far from the publishers’ editorial offices. The study went viral and it gave *Wikipedia* a stamp of approval making it into an epistemologically valid alternative to the professionally produced traditional encyclopaedias. *Wikipedia* was not only easier to access and free for users; it could now also compete with its content in the same league as traditional encyclopaedias. It was finally established as being worthy of trust – at least sufficiently so for most purposes.

If we turn to reference works and encyclopaedias for a definition of encyclopaedias this is what we get. The freely accessible online dictionary *Merriam-Webster* (n.d.), a sister to the famous *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, defines encyclopaedias as ‘[r]eference work that contains information on all branches of knowledge or that treats a particular branch of knowledge comprehensively’. Fairly identical, the English-language *Wikipedia* describes an encyclopaedia as ‘a type of reference work – a compendium holding a summary of information from either all branches of knowledge or a particular branch of knowledge’ (Wikipedia 2014b), while NE, the Swedish *Nationalencyklopedin*, talks of ‘a reference work, either in print or in digital form, with the ambition to summarise all there is to be known, either in general or in a certain area’ [translation from Swedish by the authors] (NE, n.d.).

Are such reference works valid today? What is their role in today’s information and media landscape characterised by instantaneous access and an abundance of information? How are they produced, communicated and used? How can we understand contemporary encyclopaedism through history? What is their role in scientific communication? How are they and their value imagined by its users? These are just some of the questions that the authors in this theme section address in their individual articles.

## The Articles

For this theme section we invited submission reflecting on the encounter, productive or otherwise, between encyclopaedic knowledge formed by a plethora of traditions and the constantly changing material conditions for production, communication, use and circulation of knowledge. The response was extremely positive and we received a high number of exciting articles that represented both historical and contemporary studies. The historical perspectives relate their results to contemporary circumstances and the research on *Wikipedia* locates the participatory encyclopaedia either in a tradition of encyclopaedism or in larger cultural dis-

courses. The peer-reviewed articles can roughly be divided into three overarching groups, although these overlap: Firstly, a number of articles engage with how understandings of what an encyclopaedia is and what it should do are culturally specific. Secondly, a group of articles situates today's changes in how encyclopaedias are produced, consumed and perceived in various historical contexts, including previous media specific changes. Thirdly, the last group relates to *Wikipedia* as today's dominant encyclopaedia paradigm. One common theme throughout is how encyclopaedias depend on the trust invested in them and how this 'currency' is also played out in the digital world, and has probably become even more important (Sundin & Haider 2013). This goes hand in hand with another common thesis, namely the continued presence of Enlightenment ideals that also permeate digital encyclopaedias (Haider & Sundin 2009). In addition, we have also received a number of papers written from the perspective of practitioners and with 'insider' knowledge. Therefore we decided to give space to shorter non peer-reviewed field reports that provide the theme section with an up-to-date understanding of encyclopaedism and encyclopaedias today by those who produce them.

### **Understandings**

Katharine Schopflin contributes with an investigation into how publishers, librarians and users of encyclopaedias characterise encyclopaedias as well as into how these characterisations are expressed in *Britannica Online*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* and *Wikipedia*. Based on an extensive interview study, she shows in which ways ideas of what an encyclopaedia is, are to a high degree developed in relation to a print paradigm. This is despite the fact that today's encyclopaedias, which people also regularly use, are predominantly digital and online. In her article, Vanessa Aliniaina Rasoamampianina studies how and to what extent authority is attributed to contemporary encyclopaedias and she does that by means of a meticulous analysis of book reviews of encyclopaedias. She draws specifically on the theoretical concept of cognitive authority to show in which ways encyclopaedias' authority is always ambivalent, never stable and under constant negotiation.

### **Histories**

Seth Rudy puts the spotlight on utility, specifically on how ideas of encyclopaedic utility change depending on the historical context. Rudy's contribution provides a historical account of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which is then related to contemporary online *Britannica*. He analyses a certain type of paratext, namely recommendations of how the encyclopaedia should be used, that is how it should be read, according to its publishers. Thereby Rudy demonstrates the subtle ways in which enlightenment ideals continue to imbue today's *Encyclopaedia Britannica*,

despite media changes. Siv Frøydis Berg and Tore Rem scrutinize the relation between encyclopaedias seen as commercial commodities by investigating 20<sup>th</sup>-century Norwegian encyclopaedias. The authors show how ‘speed’ and ‘modernization’ were the most important constituents in the self-descriptions of the encyclopaedias. Berg and Rem conclude their article by presenting a contemporary Norwegian discussion about the funding of a professional encyclopaedia in relation to *Wikipedia*. With this discussion the authors argue that notions of ‘trust’ and ‘trustworthiness’ are at the core of digital encyclopaedias. Ulrike Spree’s contribution contains numerous relevant threads that tie today’s *Wikipedia* back to historical understandings of encyclopaedias. For instance, she shows how, despite fundamental changes, today’s user/producer engagement in *Wikipedia* has clear connections to how users engaged with print encyclopaedias in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and how their involvement was met by editors. She bases this on a comparison of published answers to letters that were addressed to the editor of a traditional German encyclopaedia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with discussion pages on *Wikipedia*. Ulrike Spree also discusses how notions of neutrality that underlie encyclopaedic writing in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany can be situated in the liberal political camp, which was considered a middle-ground capable of mediating between extreme position of the party political spectrum.

### ***Wikipedia***

Kim Osman provides an insightful analysis of how notions of *Wikipedia* as a free and non-commercial resource collide with today’s dominant discourse revolving around commercialism. This is also given a diachronic dimension by relating it to a change in values over time. Specifically, Osman studies the handling of three failed proposals to ban paid advocacy in *Wikipedia*. Finally, Simon Lindgren traces how *Wikipedia* content is employed in scholarly research. He innovatively combines discourse analysis with bibliometrics and shows an overall increase of the use of *Wikipedia* in the scholarly literature in the last decade, at the same time as reference to *Wikipedia* in this type of literature is not fully established as accepted practice, and often accompanied by apologetic statements, thus questioning the trust invested into *Wikipedia*.

### **Tales From the Field**

The four ‘tales from the field’-articles provide valuable insights into the circumstances for encyclopaedic production today. Georg Kjøll and Anne Marit Godal describe how the Norwegian online encyclopaedia *Store Norske Leksikon* combines transparency as advocated by *Wikipedia* with a network of contributing paid and named contributors. Lennart Guldbrantsson discusses the challenge for the Swedish *Wikipedia*, as a crowd sourced project, to attract more women contributors. In an article on the Minnesota based, cultural heritage encyclopaedia *MNo-*

*pedia* Molly Huber, just as Georg Kjøll and Anne Marit Godal, presents an example of a contemporary online encyclopaedia with a local focus that combines controlled editing with user input. Lastly, Michael Upshall attempts to take us beyond *Wikipedia* by introducing a model for encyclopaedic knowledge production based on linked-data and possibilities of the semantic web. Together, and in the light of the research articles, these tales from the field go to show that although *Wikipedia* is today's undisputed point of reference when it comes to encyclopaedias – maybe even more so and on more levels than its grand predecessors ever were – there are many other ways of producing encyclopaedias online, of relating to relevance of knowledge and information and of creating trust.

All in all, this special issue represents authors based in seven countries and four continents, Europe, North America, Australia, and Africa. It also unites a number of different disciplines that are not usually seen together in the same publishing venue and that represent different traditions of doing research, asking questions and of writing. This diversity is a particular strength of this special issue. The reviewers came from equally many countries and also their disciplinary backgrounds are varying. They have contributed with their time, knowledge and expertise. Their inputs have been invaluable and we want to thank them for their efforts.

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**Jutta Haider** is a senior lecturer in Information Studies at the Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University, Sweden. Her current research interests revolve around digital cultures, environmental information, and online information practices. Together with Olof Sundin, she has published a number of articles on encyclopedic practices in contemporary digital culture. E-mail: [jutta.haider@kultur.lu.se](mailto:jutta.haider@kultur.lu.se).

**Olof Sundin** is professor in Information Studies at the Department for Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University, Sweden. His research interest lies in the area of information practices, media & information literacies and digital culture. Together with Jutta Haider, he has published a number of articles on encyclopedic practices in contemporary digital culture. E-mail: [olof.sundin@kultur.lu.se](mailto:olof.sundin@kultur.lu.se).

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