# *Store Norske Leksikon*: Defining a New Role for an Edited Encyclopaedia

Field report by Georg Kjøll & Anne Marit Godal

## Transparency in Production

*Store norske leksikon (SNL)* [Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia] is an edited, online encyclopaedia that strives towards radical transparency. Our aim is for as many parts of text production as possible to be visible to everyone, much like in the model that *Wikipedia* has pioneered. Unlike *Wikipedia*, however, contributors to *SNL* are required to use their full name, and encouraged to supply biographies that explain their background and qualifications within a field or topic.

In *SNL*, it being an edited work, not all contributions by the public are published directly. Before a user's article suggestion or proposed edit goes live online, it has to be assessed by one of the editors. But unlike a traditional encyclopaedia model, where everything had to pass through a central editorial board, *SNL* use assigned and vetted 'department editors' (in Norwegian: fagansvarlige), who submit content directly onto the web page, with editors reviewing submissions *post factum*. This gives readers access to a greater chunk of the publication process, providing insights into the workings behind creating the online encyclopaedia.

The revision history is easily accessible on every article page, and we are working towards developing a system that clearly shows who is behind which edits, and who has supplied which bits of texts. Combined with the requirement on contributors using their full name, this gives the reader greater opportunity to critically assess the content, and question the authority of the text.

We want to play into the hands of people who have constructive criticism and relevant objections to the text the encyclopaedia contains. Articles contain a comment section under the actual article content, and readers are encouraged to submit article changes directly into the text, prompting the editors to change or defend the content.

## Greater Responsibility

Combining an emphasis on interaction with the public with the requirement on signed content, the experts who contribute to the encyclopaedia are made responsible for the work they produce. This sets *SNL* apart from traditional general knowledge encyclopaedias, where the majority of articles are unsigned, and direct interaction with the authors was all but impossible. But it also highlights a key difference between *SNL* and *Wikipedia*, where the responsibility behind a given article rests on an ineffable quantity: the greater, often nameless or pseudonymous, public that have contributed to that article.

The idea of maintaining an updated, general knowledge encyclopaedia in the internet age, where important events happen and are covered very fast, and information is available to with online access at the stroke of a key, strikes many as a Sisyphean task. We are aware of the massive challenge such a task presents, especially since we started out as recent as in 2011, working with a base of content that mostly stemmed from a paper encyclopaedia published between 2005 and 2007.

To deal with this task in the best way possible, we have adopted two strategies: 1) using the tools of the internet, such as social media and reader analytics, to pinpoint content that needs our attention, and 2) create articles that are concise yet accessible, about a limited range of subjects, with an eye towards what types of content are missing from other parts of the web.

## Monitoring Reader Behaviour

With a daily readership of up to 145 000 people, the articles in *SNL* are discussed not only on our own web site. Through the monitoring of e.g. *Twitter*, *Facebook* and news sites, the encyclopaedia's editors learn of mentions of and debates around our articles that take place on the wider web. This helps us understand what content people are interested in, what they like about a particular article, where we should have an article we don't, or where we have an article that is weak or out-dated.

Though most of the editor's work is long-term and systematic, it's important for us to keep an eye on what the public are saying, engaging directly with our readers. Any content that people tell us needs improving, we review as quickly as we can.

Part of the same strategy is the monitoring and predicting of reader activity on our site. Using *Google Analytics*, we prioritise the articles that have performed well over time, encouraging each new department editor to start out with her field's most popular articles. In addition, we try to find content that has fewer hits than it should have, and look at variables such as exit rate and average time on page to identify which articles do not read well.

Following the news and keeping track of the calendar also helps in this regard. If an important national holiday, such as Christmas, is coming up, we can predict that people will want to read about Christmas. If a celebrity has died of a rare disease, we can be sure that the readers will want to read about that disease in *SNL*.

## Relevance of Content, Accessibility of Form

Despite the fact that some encyclopaedias have and have had as their goal to amass and/or disseminate the sum of human knowledge, not all facts and phenomena are relevant for all encyclopaedias. While the English language *Wikipedia* contains substantial entries on

every single episode of the *Simpsons*, achieving this amount of coverage is not a viable goal for an edited encyclopaedia with a user base of 5 million people.

Not all species of animals merit an article in *SNL*, and we cannot reference every published author, touring musician or working architect. Consequently, we work with relatively specific guidelines on what should be considered relevant, with only people, places, phenomena and events that hold a special cultural or historical significance being prioritized. We're conscious, however, of our catering to a Norwegian audience, and maintain a focus on what's important in the national public sphere.

Our position as a national, Norwegian language project together with our publication model, also contribute greatly to the actual form of our articles. The quantity of information on the internet is vast and ever-expanding, and an advanced, linguistically skilled searcher has access to a goldmine of knowledge from every corner of the web. But most people use *Google*, or a similar type of all-purpose search engine, when they look for information. And few of these people rarely go beyond the first page, or even the first number, of hits when looking for an answer to a specific question. It is therefore important that there are open and accessible sources available for this type of use case.

Significantly, even though many Norwegians are competent users of English, finding information in one's mother tongue is part of what it means for information to be accessible.

## Helping Readers Digest the Web

The quantity of information now available through web search is both a powerful resource and a stumbling block for the average searcher. *Googling* 'pregnancy' (or the Norwegian equivalent 'graviditet') will yield a massive number of info sites, news, blogs and forums that has pregnancy as its primary topic. While this can be incredible helpful for people interested in the topic, it can also

be overwhelming and hard to process. Often, what people need is someone who can digest a given, complex topic for them, helping to make sense of what is written and said about something that concerns them. Our vision is for *SNL* to occupy such a role.

Accessibility, by way of being a web site that's open, free to use, highly ranked in search engines and in a not too advanced Norwegian, is one key to achieving such a vision. For a lot of content, *concision* is another.

For all the strengths of the wiki model of writing, what is often lacking from *Wikipedia* articles on important topics, is restraint. Many people coming together contributing with facts, helping telling a story, will often lead to an amassment of text. An editorial publishing model is able to practice concision more easily, since there will be one or two people who can determine the overall direction of a given entry, cutting down and leaving out bits, in order to better get the facts across.

Being able to say the important things, define a field and present key facts in a little amount of time and space, is a virtue, no matter the genre of text. A very large group of our readers end up on snl.no while *googling* something on their cell phone, wanting to check a fact

or understand a difficult word, or figure out if a particular health issue might be serious or not. These people want their answers fast, without having to select among a thousand hits, and scroll through pages of text.

*SNL* wishes to help people navigate the web, and we form the content so that people can seek out and find the gist of an issue quickly. Where there are entries about complex phenomena and events, where the facts are not clear or determined, we want to supply solid, well-grounded analyses.

In our view, a modern encyclopaedia should take into account the cultural and technological context in which it finds itself, and actively use the possibilities that the internet presents. At the same time, it should strive to understand what its role with regards to both technology and society is.

*SNL* started anew, with a fresh editorial board, a mere three years ago. We are a young organisation, which learns new things about our own product and our readers every day. But we have built the encyclopaedia on a very clear and solid foundation, and we see that what we have to offer is needed and wanted, even though the internet sometimes can give the false impression of being a very crowded place.

**Georg Kjøll** is an editor and development manager at *Store norske leksikon*. He holds a PhD in linguistics from the University of Oslo. E-mail: georg@snl.no

**Anne Marit Godal** is the editor-in-chief at *Store norske leksikon*. She holds an MA in political science from the University of Oslo. E-mail: godal@snl.no