

# skatin' on thin ice

the extreme sport of commentating on the world as it might turn out to be

a monthly feature by  
mohammed iqbal

## MICRO-EXPLORATIONS. MEGA-ENCYCLOPEDIA.

I haven't had an opportunity to see the maps that Columbus consulted before setting off on his voyage of discovery. But it's a fair guess that the continent we now know as America didn't figure in any of them.

But we don't find anything alarming about that. Because the very process of map-making (especially in earlier times) consisted of putting down a representation of everything we know – reliable or not – and then allowing people (in this case, intrepid explorers) to either validate or correct it.

Which is why I find it surprising that people are willing to argue against the usefulness of Wikipedia – the free online encyclopedia that has been at the centre of a raging debate.

Don't mistake me. The debate is necessary – but the discussion itself is ignoring a very crucial lesson about the changing nature of our relationship with information.

Last year, *Nature* commissioned a study to find out the accuracy of a sample of articles drawn from Encyclopedia Britannica and Wikipedia. They found only 123 errors in the former but 162 in the latter. Though initially expressing victory, Britannica has traded rebuttals and more rebuttals with *Nature* since then. Wikipedia has stayed out of the war of words, but the spotlight has remained firmly on it.

The public debate has centered around the 'unreliability' of Wikipedia's information trove. Its detractors gleefully point to the obvious pitfalls in its open source process. Its supporters, while acknowledging it is nowhere near being accurate, have emphasized the process “is more traditional than most people realize.” It seems that less than 1% of users actually make edits – adding up to a few hundred committed volunteers. There's also a method in the madness – editors with superior reputations get to override others.

However long the debate lasts, it is apparent that both encyclopedias will co-exist and continue to attract their respective set of loyalists. Yet no one, it seems, has considered noting the different kind of audiences these two products will draw – probably because it is a fair assumption that everyone consulting an encyclopedia only wants accurate information. But is it?

This is where maps and mapmaking can throw some light. And if you think the comparison between encyclopedias and maps is just skin deep, think again. What else is an encyclopedia but an inter-connected mapping of all the data in the world?

Inherent in a map is the idea of 'I am here' – a place which gives us our mooring and is the epicenter of our outward exploration of the map. The further we go from the epicenter the less our individual experience is able to corroborate the data on the map with reality.

Not everything we know about the world comes from firsthand experience – therefore the birth of the concurrent idea : 'we are here.' This tag would apply to a large swathe of the globe where a sizeable number of people live or have visited : the corresponding data on the map is as good as the data wherever you are.

Outside of 'we are here' is the frontier – little-explored territory, anything we know about which could turn out to be wrong. Maps with their physical representation of a reality we know, make it easy – even intuitive – for us to understand this.

Encyclopedias too have their 'I am here' and 'we are here' territories – though not as immediately and intuitively accessible to our faculties. And they have their frontiers too; even though we don't expect them to.

Britannica's supporters want to have nothing to do with the frontiers. In effect, they want the certainty of a line that tells them that everything within the bounds of an encyclopedia is 'we are here' territory.

But reality is far away from that. That line is relentlessly shifting back and forth and is often creeping back within the bounds of even an established encyclopedia like Britannica. (The controversy over who really discovered America – Columbus or the Vikings – is a case in point.)

The users drawn to Wikipedia will, however, understand and accept that reality. They will know that a large part of their favorite encyclopedia is indeed 'we are here' territory. But they will also know that the frontiers are very real and just a click away. But instead of deeming the 'map' useless, they will instead approach it with the same enterprise that Columbus approached his maps – as an opportunity to embark on their own expeditions of discovery.

In that sense, the real use that Wikipedia serves is not as a storehouse of information – that is merely a by-product. Instead, its greatest value is that it gives all of us the opportunity to be explorers and discoverers – each of us doing our bit to push the limits of our collective knowledge a little further.

This exploration is not always in the realm of finding something new. As Kevin Kelly (in his Long Now Foundation lecture) points out, exploration is also the joining of an isolated and lesser known fact within the larger fabric of common knowledge (as Columbus actually did.)

These explorations are also different from the ones we know of in the investment and expertise they require. These explorations are micro-explorations – unleashed by the same forces that have given us micro-markets and micro-trends. These are explorations that can be undertaken by any of us. In most cases they confirm what is already known – in some cases they indicate otherwise. But it is the legitimacy of these micro-explorations that Wikipedia recognizes by allowing any one of us to change its contents.

The Wikipedia revolution – changing us from passive consumers of explorations and discoveries to active creators of our own little expeditions – is just another manifestation of the sweeping changes the Internet has wrought. And it is here to stay.

And finally, if you use Wikipedia, please ignore the debate and continue using it. But do also remember what Thoreau had to say.

“The frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever a man fronts a fact.”



**Bibliography:**

- 'The Wiki Principle'; Economist April 20th 2006 ([http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=6794228](http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=6794228))
- 'The Next 100 Years of Science: Long-term Trends in the Scientific Method.' by Kevin Kelly (Available for download at <http://www.longnow.org/projects/seminars/>)

**About the author:**

Mohammed Iqbal works as a creative planner at Ogilvy & Mather Advertising, Bangalore (India) for a living. His life's work, however, is a grand treatise tracing all of the known universe as an overlapping series of darwinian symphonies. To contact him, email [blaiq@yahoo.com](mailto:blaiq@yahoo.com) or visit <http://blaiq.typepad.com/misentropy>.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 543 Howard Street, 5th Floor, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.