On Truth Systems

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Uberfact: the ultimate social verifier

As a generalist, I reserve the right to indulge in sharp changes of subject.

I'll excuse this one by pointing out that, if democracy actually is nonsense, we're suffering from a serious truth deficit. 9/11 Truthers are one thing—but when you start questioning 7/4, you're into some heavy alternate reality. Here at UR, Philip K. Dick is always in the house.

So: a *social verifier* is an institution, authority, Web 2.0 server, etc, etc, which collects and distributes information that its users *trust*.

Wikipedia is a social verifier. So is the Catholic Church. So is the New York Times. So is UC Berkeley. So are Reddit, Digg, and the new Hacker News (the trusted information being "this link is cool.") So is the scientific peer-review system. And so on.

This is a pretty wide range. Is the concept overgeneralized? Is there anything interesting we can say about all these systems in general? What could Digg and the Catholic Church possibly have in common?

Well, one possibility is that they both suck. No disrespect to Diggers or Catholics, but neither of these systems looks much like the kind of social verifier I'd like to see. Nothing like my dream SV exists, in fact. And I wish it did.

So on the off chance that any coders with a few spare cycles are reading UR, I thought I'd describe this system. Perhaps someone would be nice enough to build it. Unlike the rotary system (which is a *joke*, folks), it's not patented. At least, not by me.

But it needs a name, so let's call it *Uberfact*. Of course, who builds it gets to name it, but any system which follows this general design can advertise itself as *uberfactious*.

Uberfact, or any uberfactious SV, has three unusual features. One, it makes no attempt to separate fact from opinion. Two, its reputation system is *factional*. Three, its ambitions are unlimited.

Typical SVs today, such as Wikipedia or the New York Times, invest great effort in separating fact from opinion (see La Wik's NPOV page). Terms such as "objective" are popular.

In my opinion, this reflects a fact which is quite central to Western history, but is seldom expressed as such. The fact is that *information is power*. In the democratic era this is explicit: who commands public opinion commands the State. Before democracy it wasn't quite this simple, but ideas have always mattered. Anyone who can persuade others to share his or her opinions is powerful by definition, and

very likely dangerous.

The attraction of depoliticized information, of objective truth, is obvious. Facts threaten no one. How could they? An opinion is an interpretation of reality, not an argument with it.

And so the democratic state, which after all is a state and must defend itself like any other, tends to favor objective SVs over those which propagate explicit perspective. Democratic society has integrated this bias so perfectly that it's hard to imagine life without it.

For example, racism is widespread in Western society. Or at least it supposedly is. And it certainly once was. So why isn't there, or wasn't there, a racist TV channel? Surely, in our brave new world of 300 channels, there's enough audience for Confederate Racist Television? Can you imagine the six o'clock news on CRT?

If you can't, you can visit the web site "South Africa Sucks," which I refuse to link to—if you Google it, you will see why. Perhaps CRT's anchorman would be someone like SAS's "The Uhuru Guru." Can you imagine a world in which a child could start in racist kindergarten, continue through racist elementary to racist college, then go to racist journalism school and become a racist reporter for CRT? Which might be part of a whole racist media empire?

If you happen to be a racist yourself, perhaps you find this prospect enticing. Try replacing "racist" with "Communist," "terrorist" or "jihadi." There are indeed terrorist kindergartens in the world, but fortunately none of them are in New Jersey. At least not yet.

This is why the idea of "objectivity" is so critical to the democratic system. By attacking opinion and perspective in general, it suppresses all kinds of thought, but the thoughts it suppresses best are the most unusual, and therefore the most dangerous. If your goal is to eliminate POV from Wikipedia, for example, the hardest kind of POV to eliminate is the POV of the mainstream status quo.

So a tradition of neutrality has the inevitable effect of centralizing and standardizing opinion. A European or American intellectual of 1907 would be shocked and appalled by the society of 2007 in many ways, but I think his general impression would be one of great mental conformity. It's much easier to find popular opinions of 1907 that have no living parallel in 2007, than the reverse. (Gay rights is the only major innovation I can think of.) The process of memetic extinction is quite advanced.

But note that I am thinking in just the same way as the partisans of objectivity. I am describing the aggregate social impact of neutralist social verifiers. Actually, on balance, I think this impact is positive, because I really have no desire to live in a city where there's a racist kindergarten on one side of town and a terrorist kindergarten on the other. (At least not if that city has a single democratic government.)

For Uberfact, what really matters is that objectivity is *not what users want*.

As a user, what I want from Uberfact is an infinite extension of my own personality. If I ask Uberfact some question Q, the best answer I can possibly receive is the answer *I myself* would produce, if I had infinite time to research Q and knew all the information that anyone knows about it.

For example, if my question is "where was George W. Bush born?", an objective SV like Wikipedia will give me a [very reliable answer](). But if my question is "is George W. Bush a tyrant?", I am SOL.

Wikipedia cannot possibly answer this question. And if it even came close to trying, I would have no reason at all to trust it. The answer would simply reflect the collective opinion of La Wik's admins. I'm sure the admins are great people, but why should I care what they think?

What I want to know is: if I knew everything that anyone knows about George W. Bush, and everything that anyone knows about the history and etymology of the word "tyrant," would I decide that the former is a case of the latter? Surely, if Uberfact can answer this question—and answer it with a mouse click, not a week of research—merely objective questions, like where the tyrant was born, will be no sweat at all.

So if Uberfact can solve both of these problems—if it can deliver the goods both subjective and objective—it can simply walk past the epistemological landmine of distinguishing the two. As an Uberfact user, what I get is *my* interpretation of reality.

Can Uberfact do better than this? Yes, in fact, it can.

Suppose my interpretation of reality is *bad*? Suppose I am simply *wrong*? Suppose my opinions are *stupid*? Well, of course, most people with stupid opinions are perfectly happy to live with them. Indeed they tend to insist on it.

But some of us are so crazy that we actually like to improve our understanding of the world. Uberfact would certainly be defective if it didn't assist in this process.

Therefore, Uberfact should tell me not just what I think, but what others think. I should be able to see everyone's interpretation of why George W. Bush is, or isn't, a tyrant. Who knows—maybe they're right and I'm wrong.

I've piled a lot of feature requests onto this product. I haven't said anything about how they're implemented. The MRD is getting fat and nasty. It takes all day to come out of the printer. How, exactly, can Uberfact produce these magical services?

Enter the world of *factional reputation*.

The error that most reputation systems make, I think, is that they assume a homogeneous and unstructured reputation environment. The natural impulse of any good programmer is to generalize and simplify. So we see SVs in which every user has a trustworthiness bit (like Wikipedia's admin flag), or a trust rating / karma as in many discussion boards, or even if you get really fancy a trust graph of who

trusts who else, a la PageRank.

None of these has anything to do with the social structures that human groups actually form. Humans are what primatologists call a [party-gang species](), which means exactly what it sounds like. We have a seemingly irresistible urge to form violent alliances. For the human male, there's really nothing as fun as getting a bunch of the guys together, swimming across the river, ambushing the two-legged scum who live there, burning their village and enslaving their children. And the human female is even worse.

Furthermore, a graph is a somewhat obtuse representation of the reputation system within these gangs. Sure, every tree is a graph, but if all your graphs are trees, use a tree. Human status systems are without exception hierarchical. They have regal aristocrats at the top, arrogant henchmen right below them, and so on down to cringing, boot-licking peasants.

The whole idea of democracy, which of course [comes out of Protestant Christianity](), is that we can defeat these tendencies, and emerge into the Millennium, the New Jerusalem in which all are equal. Well, possibly. It would certainly be nice. If you find anywhere that I can place a bet on this one, please let me know.

The idea of factional reputation is that, at least while the New Socialist Man is still stuck at version 0.43, we can actually work with human nature as it is, not as it should be, and build Uberfact around these notorious primate pathologies.

First, we are going to compromise Uberfact's feature space a little. It will only work, at least work well, for those of us who are basically conformists. For example, I am a [formalist]() and a [neocameralist](), and while there may be one or two of the former by now, I am quite sure I'm the only one of the latter. So Uberfact won't work for me, or for other eccentric weirdos.

Second, Uberfact will only answer questions which many other people who think like you care about. If you are the only Sufi who cares whether the Yankees are better than the Mets, Uberfact cannot help you.

Notice these group labels. In Uberfact, these are called *factions*. Factions are groups of people who see the world in the same way. Factions may form on any issue and for any reason—progressive vs. conservative, Ford vs. Chevy, [emacs vs. vi]().

Any user can have a reputation in as many factions as he likes. But reputation in one faction has no meaning to another faction. To a Ford-lover, it means nothing that you're a highly rated libertarian. What do you know about limited-slip differentials? Jack. Until you prove otherwise.

Every contribution to Uberfact must be associated with a faction, and it is judged by that faction and that faction only. If the contribution is good, it improves your local reputation within that faction. If I have something to share about Ezra Pound, I have to decide whether I'm saying it as a modernist, a postmodernist, a New Critic, etc, etc.

Factions are self-constituting—they are responsible for their own reputation algorithms. Anyone can start a new faction for any reason, but generally they form by the usual process of human group formation—one group gets too large and quarrelsome, and splits into parts. The faction's founders constitute and manage its reputation system.

For example, early in Uberfact's development, there would probably be a libertarian faction. This would then fragment into Rothbardian, Randian, and Kochian libertarians—at least. Various strongly-flavored personalities might spin off their own little factions, and so on.

As a user of Uberfact, you have access to all content produced by all factions. Your process for answering a question, such as "is George W. Bush a tyrant," is in two steps. One, figure out what faction is both (a) interested in this question, and (b) reasonably aligned with your own perspective in the area. Two, find out what that faction says about George W. Bush.

For example, it's easy to imagine upgrading Wikipedia to be uberfactious. Instead of one page for George W. Bush, you could read the story of George W. Bush according to libertarians, according to progressives, according to jihadis, racists, Ford lovers, emacs bigots, and so on—anyone who cares enough to have an opinion about George W. Bush.

One might quickly notice that these pages matched in certain details. For example, jihadis, racists, and progressives probably all agree that George W. Bush was born on July 6, 1946. So all of these groups might contribute to a consensus page, signed by a large number of factions, which might even be similar to today's "objective" page. And since this would probably be the most commonly requested George W. Bush page, it would come up first. An uberfactious Wikipedia doesn't need to be any harder to use than today's neutralist Wikipedia.

However, it would be largely free from "edit wars," because warring gangs would rapidly organize into factions and maintain their own forks of disputed pages. Note the difference between this and the existing bad practice of [POV forking](), which screws up the Wikipedia namespace. Note also the difference between uberfactiousness and system-level forks such as [Conservapedia]()—there is no easy way to compare the views of Wikipedia and Conservapedia on any topic.

The Uberfact approach should also be effective for much smaller and more ephemeral questions, like "what are today's top 10 cool links?" This is a subjective question, just like "is George W. Bush a tyrant," and it demands a subjective answer.

Link sites like Reddit and Digg tend to suffer a kind of democratic degringolade, in which they start out cool and gradually transition to a point of total lameness. That this is the obvious consequence of universal suffrage on the Web should go without saying, at least to anyone who remembers Usenet in 1992.

Paul Graham's [design for Hacker News](#) tries to avoid the degringolade by actually using an oligarchy of human editors, including Paul himself, who will tweak hidden reputation scores. While this will certainly be an improvement on Reddit, I find it excessively algorithmic and antisocial. It has gotten past democracy, but it's not yet unapologetically medieval.

What I'd like to read at Hacker News is simply the set of links that Paul himself finds cool, or would if he had 80 hours a day to surf the net for links. Paul does not, in fact, have 80 hours a day to surf the net for links. But perhaps he has fifteen minutes to rate would-be toadies and henchmen, of whom he has I'm sure a large supply, who could then rate submitted contributions, and so on, producing a kind of ersatz impression of a massively overclocked Paul.

Eric Clapton may be God, but I refuse to believe that anyone else is. So there must be someone who has better taste than Paul. He or she can rise in Paul's hierarchy, then defect and form his own faction— teaching the master a lesson in hacker cool. And so on.

The point of factional reputation is that, since all reputation is in-group reputation, a faction that succumbs to democratic degringolade, or to any other social disease, will simply sink in importance and prestige on the system at large. If the Paul faction is doing just fine, and then Paul drops too much acid and becomes a born-again Mormon, and kills everyone's reputation unless they promote links about the angel Moroni, someone else will step in and feed our need for crack, excuse me, links.

Finally, in the usual tradition of pseudonymous Internet hypesters and vapor-peddlers, I refuse to believe that there are any limits on the power of Uberfact.

The construction of scientific and historical consensus, for example, is a perfect problem for an uberfactious design. Academics have always formed factions, and always will. They have always rated each other, and always will. Academic gang fighting is brutal, and it is conducted with lethal weapons. Get someone's funding pulled and you can kill their career.

In Uberfact, all this fun backstabbing can be totally open and official. There is no reason at all why an uberfactious design can't validate original research or rank researchers—within factions only, of course. [Peter Woit](#) versus [Luboš Motl](#)? [Steve McIntyre](#) versus [Michael Mann](#)? Bring it on, baby. These fights are simply gorgeous spectacles, and we should see them up close and personal. Ideally, I could click back and forth between the McIntyre and Mann versions of the [hockey stick](#) story, for example. Who needs ESPN Classic?

The same is true for literary critics and writers. Again, writers have always formed gang families and will always form gang families. A factional reputation system would just take existing networks of blurb backscratching and make them official.

And then there's journalism. Ah, journalism! But I'm afraid that's another post.

Revipedia: how to defeat the US government, reprise

As usual there are many excellent comments, some quite critical, on the last post. (I am particularly impressed with Lugo's criticisms, although it's a little unfair because Lugo is whacking me on a subject I punted on—but the observations on the US military are dead right. And TGGP, we love you, but I'm afraid that may have been a typo for "post-sucking moron." I'm still not quite sure what this means, but draw your own conclusions.)

Reading the comments, however, I don't think I was clear enough in describing the information warfare project I proposed. People described it as a "think tank." This is nowhere near what I meant. So let me break the every-Thursday schedule, and put up next week's post today.

Think tanks (such as Cato or LvMI) are all very well. Perhaps we can see them as replacements for the sclerotic university system. It is an unfortunate consequence of the post-1945 Bushian *Gleischaltung* of the American university that think tanks cannot actually train students, and this is by no means their only defect. However, the thinkiverse does supply a small, but quite useful, dose of intellectual variety to today's Wal-Mart of ideas.

However, a think tank is not actually a *project*. A think tank sponsors thinkers. It hires them because it thinks they are smart and knowledgeable, and their interests and perspectives coincide with their goals. What it does not do, in general, is *tell them what to do*. Its work is not designed to produce anything like a *product*. Or if it is, the product is simply the set of all the papers produced by all the thinkers. This may be useful, but it cannot be coherent.

The administrators of a think tank are not in any sense project managers. They are support staff. All they do is give the thinkers a place to think. (And, presumably, write said thoughts down.) And a think tank does not have an *objective*. It has a *mission*—quite a different thing.

Take LvMI, for instance. I'm sure most of the folks at LvMI would be quite delighted to see the last of old *Washcorp*. However, is defeating the US government the *objective* of LvMI? Not at all. It has no objective. Rather, its *mission* is to sponsor Austrian economists and libertarian philosophers, who get a chilly reception in the normal groves, either because they are cranks and whiners, or because they are in possession of inconvenient truths. (Mises and Rothbard spent most of their careers in the academic equivalent of broom closets.)

Perhaps, like me, you are a software engineer. I have never worked at Microsoft, but I have a pretty good idea of how Microsoft works. If I were to be hired at Microsoft, I would be hired in one of two very different departments. One is product development, which gives us glorious gazillion-line cathedrals of

code such as Windows and Word. The other is MS Research, which is basically the CS equivalent of a think tank. Ie, it hires PhDs who don't want to teach or can't get a good teaching job, and sponsors their research.

MS Research employs a lot of smart people and I'm sure it's produced something useful, although I can't think of any examples offhand. (Okay, I know one—ClearType—though subpixel rendering is hardly Edison's lightbulb.) If the lack of a PhD did not clinch it, I'm sure that after reading this MS Research would not touch me with a ten-foot pole. Since I would not touch MS product development with a ten-foot pole, I don't think there is a fit. But I digress.

In any case, what I'm imagining is squarely on the product side. It demands not just sagely thought, but actual management. We are not used to thinking of sages as people who can work as part of a team. I'm afraid most sages are not used to thinking this way, either. But I have seen it done and I know it can be done. And if you don't trust me, trust the Manhattan Project.

Let's call the product *Revipedia.* The purpose of Revipedia is to be like Wikipedia, except that it serves as a reliable source on all topics, no matter how technical or controversial, and no matter how detached from reality the centrist mainstream may be.

If Revipedia can be built, there are two possibilities. Either (a) it will confirm that the centrist mainstream is significantly detached from reality, or (b) it will confirm that it is not. *Washcorp*, by actively supporting that mainstream, not to mention deprecating and ridiculing its competition, has staked its legitimacy on (b). So (a), if accepted by a sufficient subset of *Washcorp's* subjects, is sufficient to defeat it.

In other words, (a) by definition convicts USG of the crime of *Lysenkoism*: propagating a fallacious interpretation of reality as a mechanism of political control.

This is a capital offense. There is no way for a government, or any institution for that matter, to excuse or apologize for Lysenkoism. Like cancer, it must be excised completely. When in doubt, throw it out. There is no good reason for an official monopoly whose modus operandi includes the propagation of misperceptions to continue to exist. If the institution performs other functions which are indeed useful or even essential, it is still probably easiest to liquidate it, and build a replacement from scratch.

Replacing organizations is simple. Purging individuals or subunits from existing ones is impossibly time-consuming, tendentious and pointless. If you wanted to convert Tony Soprano's mob into an actual, legitimate waste management company, what would you do, start by replacing Paulie Walnuts with some guy from McKinsey? When in doubt, throw it out.

Note the difference between institutional mendacity and its far more benign political cousin. Ebola and the common cold are both viruses. There the analogy ends.

Politics is modular by definition. If LBJ or Nixon or Bush or any other democratic politician lies to the American people and gets caught, the latter have a straightforward mechanism by which to replace him with some other lying jackass. This is not a perfect cure for political mendacity, but at least keeps the problem under control. When we combine this with the fact that the entire system greatly exaggerates the power of politicians to affect actual policy, we can see that political lies are little more than a cosmetic defect.

But if the New York Times and the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal, every other serious newspaper, every TV station, every public school and every major university, and of course every department of *Washcorp* proper, choose to present their subjects with bogus information, we have a much more serious problem. Because there is no way you can go to your little voting booth and register your disapproval of these fine institutions. D'oh!

Moreover, if this is the case, we should not expect these institutions to correct themselves. Since any detection of Lysenkoism is delegitimizing, since it is grounds for not merely "reforming" but in fact liquidating the institutions responsible, no one has any conceivable incentive to own up. The optimal strategy is stonewalling—simply because no one can gain anything by defecting, and joining the cranks, whiners and malcontents.

If you believe that this can't happen, or that if it does happen any appearance of the truth will quickly outcompete any conceivable fiction, you believe in (b). That is, you believe that the centrist mainstream is basically providing you with an accurate perspective of reality. Is this the case? Vamos a ver.

Let me share my own small piece of experience in the matter. I know exactly when I lost my faith in the mainstream. It was in August 2004, during the Swift Boat affair. I was perhaps something of a neocon at that time, and so I was plugged in to the vast right-wing conspiracy. At least, I was a regular reader of Power Line, as I still to some extent am.

Reader, there are two links in the above paragraph. I guarantee that if you follow both of them, you will end up in different realities. One of them is real. The other is the Truman Show. Do you have an opinion as to which is which? I do. (If your faith in La Wik remains strong, scroll to the end of this section, then read this. And remember who still refuses to release his military records.)

But this is all after the fact. Because I was plugged into the vast right-wing conspiracy, I was reading about the whole affair, in exceedingly gory detail, well before the counterspin started. I have been reading unauthorized information on the Internet for well over half my life, and I think I am pretty good at distinguishing between reality and crap. And the simple explanation—that Kerry is a blowhard who told tall tales about his sailor days—struck me as compelling.

So I wondered: how will they handle this? What happens when, three months before a presidential election, it comes out that one of the two candidates has publicly prevaricated about his military record?

Obviously he will have to drop out of the race. But who else will the Democrats select? And how will they select him? Will they hold an emergency convention? Or will it just be Edwards? I supposed it would probably just be Edwards.

Althouse, whom I don't think I was reading at the time (and still don't—she is a fine writer and has much to say, but she twitters), knew better:

> So it seems that Kerry's idea for how to deal with this huge Swift Boat Veterans problem is to churn up a swirly mass of impressions and imputations and then hope that he is the one who looks clean in the end. The Kerry people seem to be hoping that people are too dim to understand that a group of Bush supporters could operate independently or conspiracy-minded enough to think they all coordinate behind the scenes in plain violation of the law. There is a separate point Kerry has made that Bush should openly denounce the ads and that his failure to do so signifies a willingness to reap the advantages they bring him. That's the clean point, but it has been made, and it apparently hasn't done well enough, because we now see the campaign boat steering over the border into right-wing-conspiracy land.

And there it has remained. I never dreamed that the Kerry campaign would be crazy enough to just plain stonewall. I certainly could not have imagined that it would work.

At least, for some values of the word "work." Kerry lost, of course, in a close race. Perhaps the SBVT affair made the difference. But perhaps it actually helped Kerry. Who knows?

But what I mean by "work" is that the Kerry strategy, just as Althouse describes, has *entered public memory as the truth*. At least, among most thoughtful, reasonable Americans. (Most thoughtful, reasonable Americans voted for Kerry.) And certainly among most professional historians. (Almost all professional historians voted for Kerry.) It has not just entered La Wik and the history books. Via "swiftboating," it has actually entered the *English language*.

Mindboggling! And this is a tiny, tiny detail in history. Almost nothing turns on it. (Except, of course, the small question of whether you can trust the Computer.) But how confident does this make you—say—that what you know about Joseph McCarthy is accurate?

Click that link, too. It's interesting. I have read the Evans book. I can't really recommend it, mainly because it is a work of polemic, not of history. Evans did a lot of archival work and his notes, I'm sure, will be of use to any real historian who wants to study the period. But his subtitle rather gives the game away. I trust his results as far as they go, but I don't trust Evans to include any bit of evidence he might find that would suggest to the reader that McCarthy was, in fact, a major-league asswipe.

Since I strongly suspect that, whatever the truth of his "fight against America's enemies," McCarthy *was* a major-league asswipe, I remain unsatisfied. Evans' book does convince me quite effectively that McCarthy's enemies were at least as unscrupulous as anything you've ever heard about McCarthy

himself—eg, from [La Wik](#). From what I know of *Washcorp,* this is hardly a surprise. (And if the subject interests you, you may enjoy this [reviewer exchange](#).)

The McCarthy drama is a far bigger, far more complex story than anything involving John Kerry. And, as we see, it remains quite debatable. How about, say, the Civil War? Lately I've enjoyed some of the writings of [Charles Francis Adams](#), [James Randall](#), [Claude Bowers](#), [William Dunning](#), and [Benjamin Hill](#) on the period. I believe I've previously recommended [Edgar Lee Masters](#), [Albert Beveridge](#), and of course [John Burgess](#). Suffice it to say that the mid-to-late 19th century as described by these gentlemen has little or nothing in common with the reality purveyed by La Wik or other reputable contemporary sources. And yet they were there—or at least knew people who were. Talk about the [Old Reckoning](#)...

And this is just history. We have not even started on [economics](#). Or the [art of government](#). Or [human biology](#). Or [climatology](#). Heresies abound! Are they right? Are they wrong? Who the hell can tell? Quit trusting authority, and you are alone on a black sea in a black night. The truth is out there. But you have not a thousandth of the time, money, or mind you would need to find it on your own.

And every one of these fields, and many more, affect the profit and power of *Washcorp.* Because you vote, your judgment of them matters. And as we have seen over and over and over again, *Washcorp* has motive, propensity and opportunity to manage that judgment in directions favorable to itself. Nor does such management require any central planning or "conspiracy." All it would take is a thumb on the scale in the marketplace of ideas. Which does not, of course, prove that any such thumb exists.

The other day I was bowled over by a simply stupendous book: [Chronicles of Wasted Time](#), the autobiography of [Malcolm Muggeridge](#). (Only the first volume, *The Green Stick*, is essential.) Please allow me to quote at length from this book. It is not famous. It should be. Page 19:

> "I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all truth of nature, and that man myself," Rousseau begins his Confessions, and then proceeds to construct a vast, serpentine edifice of lies and fantasies. The hazards in the way of telling the truth are, indeed, very great. Seeking it, one can so easily become enmeshed in lies; "A truth that's told with bad intent / Beats all the lies you can invent," Blake wrote. Every man the centre of his own universe; insensibly, we sub-edit as we go along, to produce headlines, cross-heads, a story line most favourable to our egos. How indestructible, alas, is that ego! Thinking to have struck it down once and for all, I find its hissing cobra-head lifted again, deathless.

> Yet even so, truth is very beautiful; more so, as I consider, than justice—to-day's pursuit—which easily puts on a false face. In the nearly seven decades I have lived through, the world has overflowed with bloodshed and explosions whose dust has never had time to settle before others have erupted; all in purportedly just causes. The quest for justice continues, and the weapons and the hatred pile up; but truth was an early casualty. The lies on behalf of which our wars have been fought and our peace treaties concluded! The lies of revolution and of counter-revolution! The lies of

advertising, of news, of salesmanship, of politics! The lies of the priest in his pulpit, the professor at his podium, the journalist at his typewriter! The lie stuck like a fish-bone in the throat of the microphone, the hand-held lies of the prowling cameraman! Ignazio Silone told me once how, when he was a member of the old Comintern, some stratagem was under discussion, and a delegate, a newcomer who had never attended before, made the extraordinary observation that if such and such a statement were to be put out, it wouldn't be true. There was a moment of dazed silence, and then everyone began to laugh. They laughed and laughed until tears ran down their cheeks and the Kremlin walls seemed to shake. The same laughter echoes in every council chamber and cabinet room, wherever two or more are gathered together to exercise authority. It is truth that has died, not God.

I often wonder how, in such circumstances, it will ever be possible to know anything at all about the people and the happenings of our times. Such masses and masses of documentation! Statistics without end, data of every kind, eye-witness accounts, miles and miles of film, video abounding. Surely out of all this, posterity, if so desiring, will be able to reconstruct us and our lives. But will they? I think of [Sidney and Beatrice Webb](#) [Muggeridge married Beatrice's niece] down at Passfield, patiently collecting and collating every scrap of information they could lay hands on about the Soviet regime. Travelling about the USSR to the same end. As experienced investigators, so rigorous and careful. And the result?—a monumental folly, a volume of fantasy compared with which Casanova's Memoirs, Frank Harris's even, are sober and realistic. Or I think of the messages of Our Own Correspondents, here, there and everywhere, and of all the different factors which shape them and slant them and confection them. I remember the yellow ticker-tape piling up in my office at the Washington National Press Building, and delving into it to pull out a nugget to whisk off on my own account to New York and London. Will this be much help to posterity? I doubt it. Comment is free, but news is sacred, was C.P. Scott's great dictum for *The Guardian*. Yes, but whose news?

> This Life's dim Windows of the Soul
> Distorts the Heavens from Pole to Pole
> And leads you to Believe a Lie
> When you see with, not thro', the Eye.

There never have been such adepts at seeing with, rather than through, the eye, as the purveyors of Scott's sacred news; inducing their readers, all too willingly, to believe a multitude of lies.

Or, again, I think of a camera crew on the job. Sound recordist and cameraman umbilically linked as they back away from their commentator, sedately walking and communing; their producer anxiously hovering behind to prevent them from stumbling and falling. Moving with a kind of pas-de-deux step, rather like a matador approaching his bull. Are they holding a mirror up to nature? Cinema vérité or falsité? Where's the plastic grass? Or, as I once saw written on a can of film—surely the perfect celluloid epitaph: 'Dawn for dusk.' The eye is the window of the soul; film an iron-shutter,

says Kafka. On the day that Harold Wilson became Prime Minister for the first time, I happened to be in Chicago, and stood in Michigan Avenue with a camera crew and a microphone asking passers-by what they thought about him and our change of government. To my great satisfaction, I was unable to find anyone, old or young, black or white, smart or stupid, who had heard of the event or cared anything about it. Behind where I was questioning them, up above the *Tribune* Building, there was one of those devices whereby news flashes by in fiery letters. Every minute or so it repeated: DOUGLAS-HOME RESIGNS... HAROLD WILSON NEW BRITISH PREMIER... A fine background to cut to! In Moscow when the great purges were on, some moon-faced Intourist, trying in good liberal style to be fair to both sides, asked one of the British newspaper correspondents there—A.T. Cholerton of the *Daily Telegraph*—whethe the accusations against the Old Bolsheviks were true. Yes, Cholerton told him, everything was true, except the facts. It fits, not just the purges and Moscow, but the whole mid-twentieth-century scene. Perhaps some astronaut, watching from afar the final incineration of our earth, may care to write it across the stratosphere: *Everything true except the facts.*

Yet again, supposing a wish on the part of posterity to know what some of our great ones were really like. John F. Kennedy, say. In the archive, trainloads of material. Photographs and profiles without end; abundance of tape, both video and sound. We can show you him smiling, walking, talking. On stage and off, as it were; relaxing with his family, addressing the nation, eating, dozing, praying. We have his jokes, we know the books he read; you can see and hear him delivering his great speeches, or fooling with his kids. You can pretty well see him being assassinated; you *can* see his assassin being assassinated. What more do you want? Isn't that the man, the whole man, and nothing but the man? Well, not quite. It's like a nightmare I once had. I was calling on someone I loved dearly; the door open, the kettle boiling, a chair drawn up to the fire, spectacles laid beside it. But no one there. Maybe upstairs. With growing anxiety I climb the stairs. Not in the bedroom, though clothes are scattered about; not in the bathroom, though it's still moist and misty from a bath recently taken. Downstairs again; really terrified now. Maybe gone to post a letter. To exercise the dog. Listening for every footstep, starting at every sound, the tension becomes unbearable, and I wake up. In the same sort of way, the methods of representation include every detail, leaving out only the person to be represented. In a sense, they're too perfect. Simulation becomes what it simulates; the image becomes the man. In Kennedy's case, even his signature was done for him by a machine which so exactly reproduced the hand signing his name that experts cannot distinguish between the real signature and the mechanical ones. In the excitement and distress of the Dallas tragedy, no one remembered to turn the machine off. So the President went on signing genial, 'personalized' letters after he was dead.

In this Sargasso Sea of fantasy and fraud, how can I or anyone else hope to swim unencumbered? How see with, not through, the eye? How take off my own motley, wash away the make-up, raise the iron shutter, put out the studio lights, silence the sound effects and put the cameras to sleep? Watch

the sun rise on Sunset Boulevard, and set over Forest Lawn? Find furniture among the studio props, silence in a discotheque, love in a strip-tease? Read truth off an autocue, catch it on a screen, chase it on the wings of *Muzak*? View it in living color with the news, hear it in living sound along the motorways? Not in the wind that rent the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks; not in the earthquake that followed, nor in the fire that followed the earthquake. In a still small voice. Not in the screeching of tyres, either, or in the grinding of brakes; not in the roar of the jets or the whistle of sirens; not in the howl of trombones, the rattle of drums or the chanting of demo voices. Again, that still small voice—if only one could catch it.

Typically when I start to write this way it means I've had a glass of wine, or three. But I still think it's pretty good. Trust me—the book has actual content, as well.

Revipedia is not, of course, a magic oracle. It is a tool to help you, the curious and intelligent person, find that still small voice. Here's how it works. It's really quite simple.

Revipedia—or at least my idea of what Revipedia should be—is best seen as a cross between Wikipedia, Climate Audit, and Uberfact.

According to most scientists, 98% of the facts in Wikipedia are true. Studies have shown that 90% of the rest are accidental errors, vandalism, or other mistakes of the sort that La Wik is designed to correct. Thus precisely 0.2% of Wikipedia pages are contaminated with Lysenkoism, ie, politically constructed distortions derived from "sacred news." Sadly, this is more than enough.

Of course, since Wikipedia is not at all immune to Conquest's second law (every organization not explicitly reactionary tends to become progressive), and since all serious and effective Lysenkoism in the modern era is progressive, this percentage will tend to increase. Now that La Wik is much more than a toy, she wields real power. And power attracts reptiles.

Wikipedia is not a toy, but it succeeded because it started as a toy. It established a pool of amateur, dilettante administrators who, by and large, were foolish enough to care only for the truth. This is very nice, and I personally have found it quite useful. But it is not sustainable.

Banal as these old chiralisms are, the fundamental difference between the modern left and the modern right is that the left is the party of victory, and the right is the party of defeat. In the history of the last two centuries, it is almost impossible to find any issue on which the right has stood and won. Even the exceptions, such as the revival of capitalism in the last few decades, have served the greater interests of the left. Without Thatcher, there could be no Blair. There was no future in the Winter of Discontent.

"Conservatism," so called, is a bargain that trades personal success for substantive destruction. It produces jobs for quacks, each with some patent remedy against the wind of change. No such remedy has ever worked, but the Laetrile market is eternal. And perhaps conservatives have helped here and there in holding us back from Niagara, or at least shored up the barrel staves. In exchange, however, they have

deceived us about the true nature of power in our society. Your mileage may vary, but I find this bargain dubious at best. The unfortunate truth, in my extremely dodgy opinion, is that the only way our civilization can survive leftism is to abolish it completely—along with the political structures that inevitably spawn it. This is not a conservative attitude but a reactionary one, and I see no choice but to accept the label.

So, to a reactionary, Wikipedia is a dangerous ally indeed. However, given the 98% of it that is true, and the vast quantity of human labor that went into constructing that 98%, Revipedia needs to bootstrap as a Wikipedia mirror. When you use Revipedia, every page that has no Revipedia revision just redirects to La Wik. Of course it appears marked as such, to indicate its generally low trust level.

(Note the difference between a mirror and a fork. A mirror remains live and propagates updates, ideally instantaneously. Sadly, not only does La Wik lack any proper data API, provide no diffs but only dumps, and only on a ridiculous every-two-months schedule, she actually goes out of her way to block live mirrors. Perhaps there are some good reasons for this. I can also think of plenty of bad ones. Her image dump is also broken, which is simply unacceptable. Probably the easiest way to fix this would be to fix La Wik herself, if she cares to be fixed. Hey, I said this would take real money.)

Furthermore, when it creates its revised pages, Revipedia tries wherever possible to use the Wikipedia namespace. For example, imagine what the GNXP crowd would do to the scientific racism page, or Climate Audit to the temperature record of the last 1000 years, or LvMI to fractional-reserve banking. Of course, if needed Revipedia can create de novo, but La Wik would have to be very tricky to sustain Lysenkoism based only on devious categorization. Sharing the namespace also helps limit fork conflicts, which are always a problem.

But anyone can edit Wikipedia, right? So why don't they do what they want to do now? Who needs this Revipedia thing?

Yes, anyone can edit Wikipedia. (Annoyed by a particularly horrendous Gouldian fiction, I myself slipped a reference to Gray & Thompson 2004 into the "scientific racism" page, where it looks rather odd but seems to have lasted—knock on wood.) In practice, however, most serious editing in Wikipedia is done by Wikipedians, who by definition are people with the patience to withstand and win edit wars. Most of us are not Wikipedians and will never be Wikipedians. It appears to be quite the time sink.

And once more, as that last link points out: *Wikipedia is founded on the principle that an open system can produce quality, neutral encyclopedic content.* This "principle" may well be true, and it has certainly proved more or less true up till now.

However, it is fatally dependent on the policy of no original research. Which is a perfectly good policy, except that it in turn is fatally dependent on the policy of reliable sources. Which leads us straight to the arms of the foe:

In general, the most reliable sources are peer-reviewed journals and books published in university presses; university-level textbooks; magazines, journals, and books published by respected publishing houses; and mainstream newspapers. As a rule of thumb, the more people engaged in checking facts, analyzing legal issues, and scrutinizing the writing, the more reliable the publication.

This second sentence is especially fascinating. It is perhaps the principal erroneous belief of modern democracy. If you believe that the more people believe X, the more likely X is to be true, you are a demotist by definition. Demotists distrust anything individual, but especially individual decisions, which they hate like the Devil hates garlic. The universal organizational panacea of 20th-century society is the committee. No wonder its buildings were so ugly.

Against this great tide of consensus, I have only two words: one is groupthink, and two is this word. And if you think Citizendium is an even better idea, follow these two links. Paging Dr. Lysenko! Trofim Lysenko to the white courtesy phone? I Risch my case.

So the goal of Revipedia is clear: produce a coherent picture of reality by selective, external revision of Wikipedia. Revipedia does not edit—it *audits*. It digs as deeply into the facts as is needed to demonstrate the truth. It supplies whatever subjective perspective is necessary to convey the whole truth of the matter. It takes nothing for granted, and it has no mercy.

By its very nature, auditing is not an open and unstructured process. If nothing else, to survive Conquest's second law, Revipedia must be explicitly reactionary. Since the masses fear and loathe reaction and reactionaries, the masses are not welcome.

However, there is a small problem: to defeat *Washcorp*, we must capture the support of the masses. Obviously, Revipedia is no private club—anyone can read it. But can anyone write it?

Yes. But in Revipedia, the distinction between editorial staff and mere users is clear. Nothing that presents itself as a truth machine can possibly succeed without some sort of crowdsourcing. But inviting the masses is one thing. Surrendering to them is another.

At first, the only people who will care about Revipedia are other reactionaries, who will simply be happy to have a place to go where everyone agrees with them. As long as they are edited by reactionary administrators, to prevent any progressive slippage, these readers will be just as valuable as Wikipedia's, and the community will grow in the same way—although it will, of course, be much smaller. Reaction is not for everyone. At least, not at first.

So Revipedia is still much like Wikipedia. But its source policy is very different.

First, no source which does not provide open, online access is meaningful. A "link" to an ISBN number is garbage. You might as well say "I read it somewhere." If the source is not freely available, it cannot be

publicly scrutinized and it cannot contribute to an audit. Not only is this policy essential to any fair pursuit of truth, it benefits from the avalanche of pre-1922 content that Google has blessed us with. This lends a wonderful reactionary bias to the whole effort. 1922 is actually quite progressive by the standards of 1822, but it will do.

Second, no source is trusted on the basis of authority, either personal or institutional. It can only be judged on its own merits. So what if people come to you with crackpot physics? I can't recognize crackpot physics, but any decent physicist can. There is no substitute for administrators.

Third, all sources need to be mirrored, so that links don't break. Disk space is cheap. Truth is expensive. As I said: real money.

And finally, as Revipedia becomes influential, it will develop [enemies]. This is good. Adversaries are both a sign of success and a necessity for eventual victory. Revipedia greets them with flowers, and invites them to contribute.

But not, of course, without identifying themselves as such. Contributors to Revipedia come into two broad, voluntary alignments: friends and opponents. Within these parties, an [uberfactious] design can create an arbitrarily deep and complex hierarchy of cults and clans.

The presence of adversaries is essential to the production of truth. It demonstrates that all claims are tested. When you look at a Revipedia page, you can click a tab and see any or all hostile responses. Adversaries can and should develop editorial and administrative structure to make their responses as effective and convincing as possible. A situation in which edited content competes with illiterate drive-by peanut-gallery taunts is not a fair fight.

Ideally, in a healthy and successful ecology, the original Revipedia admins become just one faction among many. Like any other faction, they may splinter. Progressives, Scientologists, creationists, Moonies and other nutjobs all come with their own revisions of reality. As long as an authentic reactionary perspective is available, it needs no special distinction. The truth has a still small voice of its own. If you can only hear it, you'll find yourself listening.

As usual, I've registered the domain and will give it to anyone who is seriously interested.

Resartus: a social revision engine

Thanks to all UR readers who have returned for our fall term. No, it is not September yet, but the air is full of fog and brown apple moths, and little Sibyl Carlyle is at five months. I am delighted to report that she holds her own bottle. She also has a brutal, laserlike, almost creepy stare, and Mrs. Moldbug fervently denies that she in any way resembles Hitler. I suppose her hair is lighter.

And thanks again to those who contributed comments in the OL series. I still intend to edit, or at least select, the comments to construct a coherent thread of response. Or at least one as coherent as the essays themselves. I also will tie up the many loose ends left dangling. But not, as St. Augustine put it, just yet.

Many interesting things have happened over the last month. I will discuss these things, but again, not yet. The next UR post will appear not on the 21st but the 28th, and it will be called something like "US foreign policy from Hamilton to Herron to Holbrooke: two centuries of mendacious, counterproductive bungling." But in the meantime, there's always the War Nerd.

Today, though, we're going to look a little more at the solution I proposed: Resartus. A couple of people have built systems roughly related to the proposal: Lex Libra at resartus.thinkernews.com, Daniel Nagy and Baldvin Kovacs at thiblo.com. Lex has also started a Google group, resartus. Please join this group if you're interested in contributing.

I have registered resartus.org, but I have no intention of running the project. Since the golden rule of software is that who writes the code makes the rules, my suggestions are just that: suggestions. Following the old Roman design of the dual executive, I appoint Daniel and Lex the consuls of Resartus, with joint plenary power. It is their bag, man.

The consulate is permanent, or at least indefinite. Each consul is free to appoint his or her own successor at any time for any reason. I will assign the domain in accordance with the consuls' wishes, no matter how corrupt, incompetent or tyrannical they may prove to be.

Let's take a moment to meet these people. Dr. Nagy, of course, is a frequent commenter here at UR. His homepage is here. So is his PGP key. Daniel is that kind of guy.

As for Lex, I have no idea who he is. I have never met him. (I've never met Daniel, either, but at least we've Skyped.) Lex's handle is only slightly less ominous than mine. And while I promised to protect his privacy, I can't resist revealing this short biography, which may of course be entirely fraudulent:

I currently do coding and product design for a venture backed startup in Cambridge, MA. Like you,

I was once a prototypical progressive. I attended high school at [not Andover—MM] and then majored in history at [not Princeton] (graduated 2006). During college I interned on Capitol Hill, volunteered on campaigns, worked in [] City Hall etc. Gradually, I observed firsthand the many pathologies of government. Midway through [not Princeton] I taught myself to code and dove into the tech startup world. It's amazing how your perspective on politics changes when you start asking, "How can I start a business to solve this problem?" rather than "How could a government program solve this problem?" That change, along with numerous Navrozov moments, soured me on both the university and progressivism.

I think I first found your blog last February when someone submitted your post about the financial crisis to programming.reddit. I followed your links and started reading Rothbard and DeSoto, plus Hoppe, Leoni, Szabo, Sailer, Stefan Zweig, Grand Duke Alexander, etc.. It's been a fascinating trip. So thank you!

You see the grade of young minds we're corrupting here at UR. Quality over quantity. If Lex gives you any trouble, however, you can address him derisively as "Princeton."

In any case, Resartus is theirs—to (a) see through, (b) screw up or (c) let die on the shelf. The idea is out there, and if they don't do it I suspect someone else will. If you are not interested in working with Lex and Daniel, even if they are not interested in working with each other, DNS has no shortage of names. Feel free to fork. I will use this space to promote anyone who builds anything even vaguely inspired by the idea.

But I do want to use this week's post to clarify my own "vision" of Resartus. After this, I will butt out. Since Daniel and Lex have irrevocable plenary power, they are of course free to ignore anything I say. They are also free to ignore anything you say. My impression, though, is that they are sensible people who know how to listen, and I expect they will listen to you as well as to me. Obviously, nothing like Resartus can happen without an enormous community contribution, in design and administration as well as mere content.

For simplicity, I'll describe Resartus in the present unconditional tense, as though it actually existed and I, not Lex and Daniel, was its designer and administrator. Please remember that neither of these statements is true. The consuls may or may not use any of the ideas below. If you don't like their decisions, please don't complain to me.

Resartus is a *social revision engine*. Perhaps the easiest way to explain this is to explain what it is not. Here is an example of what Resartus is not: createdebate.com. (Thanks to Alan Gooding for pointing me to this site.)

Here is the first "debate" I saw when clicking there today. Its creators, who I suspect are young men very like Lex, and who have clearly put a lot of hard work into the venture, must be tearing their hair out over

"Who is the badest Celebertiy?" and its like. But what can they do? *Alea jacta est.* The Onion, as so often, [nails it](#).

A social revision engine is not a chat board. If it degenerates into a chat board, it is dead. The world has no shortage of chat boards. It may even have an excess. Resartus is designed to complement Wikipedia—a remarkably valuable and useful service, though untrustworthy in general and often malignantly deceptive on controversial issues. Think of it as Wikipedia for controversial material and (perhaps eventually) original research, and you won't be too far off.

One of the conclusions this leads me to is that Resartus, at least as such, is not cut out to be a classic "Web 2.0" or [YCombinator](#) style startup, like the unfortunate createdebate.com. Ie: it cannot be corporate. It needs to be transparent. It could have a corporate side and a transparent side, but it needs to separate them awfully well. Imagine how many people would have contributed content to La Wik if its domain had been, say, cyberpedia.com, and their articles had been sucked into a one-way database and surrounded by ads. [Google](#) may be able to get away with this, but you can't.

(As a veteran of more than one Silicon Valley bubble, my feeling is that the Web 2.0 era is starting to feel a little played out, anyway. One large problem is that, with "cloud" services like Google App Engine, Amazon EC2, etc, hosting an application is starting to verge on the trivial. The lower the fixed cost, the more the community model outcompetes the capitalist model—no capital, no capitalism. Another problem—especially for Resartus—is that smart people don't click on ads, at least not unless they're actually searching for products and services. Over time, I expect transparent social networks to outcompete corporate ones. Maybe it's time for Web 3.0.)

This is not to say that a buck cannot be made off the thing, if it succeeds. Look at the antics of [Jimbo and his friends](#). But success is a prerequisite, and it's my impression that resartus.org would outcompete resartus.com, even if the latter was not owned by some spammer. If you are full of piss and vinegar, please feel free to prove me wrong.

In any case: on to the product. It may not be commercial, but it remains a product. This means it deserves what, in the biz, we jokingly call a "PRD." I will avoid elaborating on this acronym. Trust me, you don't want to go there. Let's do more or less the same thing, but make it fun.

A social revision engine exists to help you, the reader, make up your mind about a controversial issue without appealing to external authority. For example, [Wikipedia's policy](#) suggests:

> *Material that has been vetted by the scholarly community is regarded as reliable; this means published in peer-reviewed sources, and reviewed and judged acceptable scholarship by the academic journals.*

> *Material from mainstream news organizations is welcomed, particularly the high-quality end of the market, such as The Washington Post, The Times in Britain, and The Associated Press.*

Here at UR, we refer to these fine institutions collectively as the *Cathedral*. Note that La Wik does not stoop to filling us in as to *why* we should believe the Cathedral. It is simply infallible, like the Vatican. Om mane padme hum. ["Trust the computer. The computer is your friend."](#)

The process by which the "scholarly community" and the "mainstream news organizations" produce their reliable material is quite different from the process by which the Vatican produces its. The claim that the former is infallible—or even nearly infallible, or even fallible but eventually convergent toward the truth —is not one to be scoffed at. The Cathedral is a grand old edifice, a fabulous achievement of Western civilization. It is full of many fine people, many of whom do excellent work. As a whole, I don't trust it at all and I think it needs to go. But this is just my own two cents. If you do trust the Cathedral, you have much less need for Resartus.

Need? Well, need is a strong word. You don't need anything, besides oxygen and oat mush. But you should *want* to use Resartus. Or at least someone should. As with any product, we need to start by considering the *users*. No users, no traffic, no nothing.

Users of Resartus come in three categories: *readers*, *writers*, and *developers*. The developers are the people who build and administer the site—such as Daniel and Lex. Developers should not be writers; this is a conflict of interest.

Initially, everyone who visits Resartus will be a writer. The elusive "pure reader" will only arrive after a considerable degree of success. Nonetheless we discuss this individual, because every plan is a plan for success.

The Resartus reader—call her Janet—wants to make up her mind on some controversial issue. This issue is *relevant* (important enough to be worth Janet's time). It is *binary* (it can be defined as a question whose answer is "yes" or "no.") And it is *disputed* (plenty of people are strongly convinced of each side of the question). For example, "who is the badest Celebertiy?" is clearly disputed, but it is neither relevant nor binary.

Janet reads Resartus because she is confident that it provides her with the *best available perspectives* on *both sides* of this controversy. Moreover, these arguments need not be excavated from a comment thread, or even from two comment threads. They are structured and organized for Janet's benefit.

I like the word *trial*, or (interchangeably) *case*, for a dispute on Resartus. The site is certainly not designed to be used for trials in the judicial sense of the word—at least, this is not a market requirement. However, a judicial proceeding is the epitome of relevant, binary and disputed. Janet is a juror in the case. For whatever reason—perhaps she just wants to know the truth—she intends to decide it. (This is her job, not Resartus's. We produce no verdicts.)

In my opinion the rocket should be a considerable distance from the ground before anyone tries to use it

to second-guess the actual judicial system. Think of the libel issues. But there are some exceptions already: I think Resartus would be a fine tool for exploring the cases of Bruce Ivins or Floyd Landis. (Indeed, the Trust But Verify blog has taken a very Resartus-like approach to the Landis case.) And do we really know who killed the Kennedys?

Every rocket, however, must start on the ground. With no flammable materials nearby. So I think the best subjects for initial Resartus trials are scientific and technical controversies, preferably ones which have not (such as global warming) experienced democratic polarization.

Technical trials are as far from the "badest Celebertiy" as we can imagine. I am especially fond of them because in many cases, I simply have no idea who is right. For me these cases include string theory, peak oil, and polywell fusion. Each of these can be phrased as a triable proposition: string theory is not a science, global petrochemical production is likely to decrease in the near future, Bussard's polywell may be a viable solution for energy generation. These are not issues which Joe Sixpack has much of an opinion on, but they are certainly relevant and more or less binary, and you will certainly find strong views on both sides of each.

Social networks, in general, degrade over time. I am very conscious of this because my first social network was Usenet. Usenet in, say, 1990 had some excellent things going for it: (a) the average IQ of someone with a Usenet account was about 120, and (b) almost all accounts were administratively responsible. When this changed, Usenet was no longer viable. There is really nothing like the old Usenet today.

Resartus needs mechanisms to prevent such degradation. Many mechanisms. As many mechanisms as possible. The simplest one: start at the top. If you can resolve controversies in high-energy physics, you can deal with global warming. If you can deal with global warming, you can deal with the Russo-Georgian war. But if you start with the "badest Celebertiy," or anything close, there is no hope.

It may be hard to round up a quorum of high-energy physicists. So another fine source of early trials is our old friend, the software industry. Emacs versus vi would be a fun trial. Or Python versus Ruby. Or even Linux versus Windows. The relevance here is debatable, but fun is often a good replacement for relevance.

But I am assuming a non-obvious design decision here. There is another way Resartus, at least at first, is different from createdebate.com: it hosts *one main trial at a time*. Think of Resartus as a hall of justice, with one courtroom. All cases are tried, sequentially of course, in that one room. Eventually the hall may expand and have several courtrooms, but not until necessary.

Why? Our goal is to create a critical mass of high-quality discussion. To do this, we need a critical mass of high-quality writers, preferably generalists who can dive into as many different subjects as possible. Especially at first, this is a very limited group. If we divert this group off into 74 different permanent

ongoing arguments, we have no critical mass in any of them. Imagine creating Usenet all over again: how would you do it? You would start with one group, misc.general, then split it and split it again as the thing became unwieldy.

(Moreover, if we only have one courtroom, we have an excuse to put *deadlines* on our trials, which should focus the attention wonderfully. Two weeks, for example, should be enough to solidify the major points on just about anything.)

Of course, completed trials are not deleted. They are moved to the back burner. Discussion may not even need to be closed, although it probably should at first. Ideally, in a successful Resartus, a wide variety of trials are continually maintained and updated, so that Janet can get the dirt on whatever subject she wants to understand. For example, the ultimate use of Resartus might be a complete revision of modern history, with trials on every political controversy for the last 200 years. Who was right in the War of 1812? I really don't know. And I would like to. But the rocket has to get off the ground first, and creating a community is like making gunpowder explode: it takes compression.

For scheduled trials, you need a scheduler. Initially, at least, this must be the developers. Lex and Daniel do not just write code; they decide what Resartus is going to focus on, when. They schedule, configure and administer the trials. They do not rely on random IP addresses to submit questions like "who is the badest Celebertiy?" Crowdsourcing has its limits.

Moreover, we have yet to answer the difficult problem: how to ensure that, from a world of random IP addresses, we somehow construct the *strongest* possible arguments on both sides. This is a mission-critical feature for Resartus. If Janet cannot be confident that she is seeing the best case on each side, Resartus is useless to her. She has no way of knowing that she is watching the string theory C-team go up against the loop quantum gravity A-team. She may know an ass-kicking when she sees one, but this kind of ass-kicking tells her nothing.

It may be possible to solve this problem with a karma system, like [Slashdot's](), in which quality is determined entirely from peer votes. I am not a believer in democracy, but Slashdot has done a pretty decent job with their moderation system. So have [Reddit]() and [Hacker News](). Certainly Resartus needs something of the kind. There are many problems with nondirected moderation, but one of the main ones is that people vote for content rather than quality. It goes without saying, or should, that plaintiff's lawyers should not be voting defense lawyers up and down. Since the general Resartus approach is to separate the sides of a case—more on this shortly—we avoid this deadly pitfall.

There is another mechanism, however: human editors. I would like to think it's possible to construct a quality filtering system which is entirely user-generated. But the only way to test this is to compare it to the work of a human, and a good one.

In other words: it may be possible to produce a flat, purely crowdsourced trial which still satisfies Janet's

needs. It is a goal. It may be possible to reach this goal. Or not. If so, it will take a lot of tuning and community-building.

Before this point, however, scheduling a trial involves securing the time of at least one *editor*. Following the judicial metaphor, the editor is like the attorney. (Attorneys in a normal judicial trial do not solicit input from the spectators, but there's a first time for everything.) Editors are appointed by the developers for each trial. They may be experienced Resartus writers, or guest experts from outside the community.

For example, a trial of string theory is one thing. A trial of string theory in which the prosecution is edited by [Peter Woit](#) and [Lee Smolin](#), and the defense is edited by [LuboÅ¡ Motl](#), is quite another. You might get the same results without the celebrities. But you might not.

In general, at least one side of a Resartus trial will be in some way revisionist—ie, inconsistent with the wise and holy teachings of the Cathedral. The revisionist side is either attacking some canonical belief, or promoting some unconventional one. Either way, without an editor, we can expect the case to be hopelessly disorganized and mispresented. The opposite, canonical side has a much better chance of being able to get by with mere crowd moderation.

I've described the ingredients of a trial. Now let's zoom in a little and take a closer look at the process itself. These details are more shaky than the broad strokes above, and I wouldn't be surprised if Daniel and Lex just throw them all out.

Like a modern Western trial, a Resartus case is *asymmetric*. Again, the burden of argument falls on the revisionist, who needs to make a case that the canonical interpretation of reality is wrong. Few will bother, at least at first, using this tool to make a case for the conventional wisdom. By definition, it has no shortage of defenders.

Thus we can describe the revisionist editor (or editors) as a *prosecutor* (or *prosecutors*). If this reminds you pleasantly of [Cicero](#) and his ilk, it should. Although in the end it was abused and resulted in a few too many decapitations, the Roman idea that anyone could prosecute anyone for anything was one of great coolness. Certainly the [Verreses](#) of our day could use a Cicero or two. And in Resartus there are no verdicts, and certainly no proscriptions.

The prosecutor opens the trial by stating a brief, but explosive, conclusion. For example:

String theory is pathological science.

To support this claim, the prosecutor then composes a *statement*. The statement should be short, but no shorter than necessary. It explains all the logic and facts necessary to understand the connection between Oswald and the Templars, or other revisionist argument.

The content of the trial is an *annotation tree* against the prosecutor's statement. Annotations can be

added by either prosecution or opposition. They may be *local* to some part of the statement, in which case they are marked (as unobtrusively as possible) much as footnotes. Or they may be *global*, with no such connection. Janet may want to follow local annotations, or she may just want to see a list of all annotations.

There are three classes of annotation: *exhibits*, *queries*, and *objections*.

An *exhibit* is a document that expresses some fact pertaining to the case. The document is to be taken on its own merit; there are no "reliable sources." However, links to non-Resartus sites need to be *archival quality*: there should be a reasonable guarantee that the target of the URL will not change, that the URL is not and will not be firewalled, etc, etc. The developers maintain a list of archival-quality link targets. To exhibit a document from a non-archival source, copy it to Resartus.

A *query* is a *sincere request* for additional information or clarification. A rhetorical question is not a query. The difference between objections and queries is a matter of taste, of course. But taste matters, which is why we have the category.

An *objection* is an arbitrary counter-statement. Like the original statement, it is open-ended. It should be short and to the point.

The response to a query is a clarification, which can then be annotated as if it was part of the original statement. The response to an objection is a set of counter-annotations. Thus the annotation ping-pong continues recursively on down, until both sides are satisfied that their point has been made and their opponents are simply dense. At that point, they leave it to Janet.

One of the basic principles of Resartus is that *stonewalling is not an effective defense*. If Verres does not show up for the event, Cicero can still create a trial that is every bit as damning.

Protection against stonewalling is provided by *auto-annotation*. If Verres does not query or object to Cicero's statement of his atrocious crimes, Cicero can add his own queries and objections, and answer them himself. Autoqueries (so familiar in the FAQ form) and autoobjections should be colored, labeled or otherwise distinguished, because like any rhetorical technique they can be abused. However, there is nothing more humiliating than discovering that one's opponent has anticipated all of one's objections.

The problem of producing this annotation tree is essentially a collaborative editing process. But unlike most collaborative editing processes, it is the product of two groups, not one. There is no reason to expect the prosecution and the opposition to be able to collaborate, or even engage in a civil conversation. They are enemies. Their aim is to humiliate and destroy each other. Verres' head is on the block, as is Cicero's reputation.

Within each side, we can expect great amity and civility to prevail. Both the prosecution and the opposition are teams. All are working for the same victory. The prosecution has the advantage of an

editor, and probably for early trials the opposition should have one as well. (Otherwise, the task of prioritizing, editing and (perhaps hardest) unifying annotations must be left to good old voting.)

Prosecution and opposition also need separate discussion boards. Messages on these boards are not annotations. They will not be seen by Janet. They are for internal purposes only. To participate in these discussions, or to enter annotations, a Resartus user needs to pick a team. There is no crossing over. If you decide halfway through the trial that your side is actually wrong, dropping out is your only recourse. Adversarial discipline is essential.

If Janet really exists—ie, once undecided readers actually show up—it may be desirable to have a third discussion board, for the undecided reader. Undecideds can share their questions and concerns, which will probably be scanned by both prosecution and opposition and raked into the annotation tree. Once they reach a conclusion, however, they must post it and drop out.

Why the separation? Because I have been reading Internet boards for (god help me) more than half my life, and I have never once seen a productive group discussion between two factions. At least, I have never seen such a discussion that couldn't obviously have been improved by providing a private board for each faction, and a structured arena for them to explore the disagreement. And I also have never seen this technique applied, which means that it either (a) sucks and is stupid, or (b) is totally cool and will take over the world.

Which one is it? That's for you to find out, if you're interested. Hopefully someone is. In any case, I think I have laid out enough details to make it clear what I mean by "Resartus." The actual Resartus is in the hands of Lex and Daniel. Hopefully it will be something cool.

The next UR post will appear on August 28, 2008.

Duelnode: another free startup idea

Monday, October 8, 2007 at 1:00 PM

Of course, most free things aren't worth crap. And "free software" is certainly no exception. However, since I already spend most of my day working on free software, when I think of stuff that there is no possible way I will actually do, I feel the need to share it with the world, as if I was some kind of deranged homeless person.

This is not actually my most shameful confession. It is not even my second most shameful confession. My second most shameful confession is that not only am I working on free software, I'm working on my own programming language. This is so shameful that what I tell most people what I'm doing, I don't even bother. I just say I'm writing a novel.

But my most shameful confession is that I once applied to business school. Fortunately, they had the good sense to reject me. Probably because of that essay I wrote about my summer in Orania with the Boeremag. I guess that's not what they mean by a threatened minority group.

I do know a little of the black arts of capitalism, however, and from that perspective, my previous startup idea—[Uberfact](#)—leaves a lot to be desired. The problem is that it's not actually a service, it's just an idea. A "technology," as I would say if I were working the room. "With our patented technology, you can..."

(Of course it is not patented either. I am a full-on Richard Stallman free-software communist. I hoist the red and bloody flag of the no-intellectual-property-anywhere liberation front. Everywhere else I am as black a black reactionary as they come, I make Pio Nono look like Barack Obama, but I say free the code, man. Because information wants to be free.)

Duelnode is actually a website that, with the extremely rough marketing description I'm about to present —do they call it a "PRD?" Are they still calling it that these days? I've been out of this crap for a while— you could actually go out and build. In fact, I have registered the DNS name, and if you have a plausible plan to build Duelnode I will give you the domain free. Email me.

And if you think it's a good idea but you think I'm a total asshole and you don't want to deal with me at all, you can call the product by its generic name, a *dueldrome*. Duelnode is just another dueldrome. There should be only one, there can be only one, if Duelnode is built properly there only needs to be one. But there need not be only one.

Of course, there are many dueldromes and many duels. But a true duel is a contest of two. And one alone may claim triumph. Our aim at Duelnode is to crown a new generation of young heroes, the iron, eagle-crowned champions of Web 2.0, the strong and silent gods of the late-night Dew-and-Domino's dorm-

room bull session.

As in Uberfact, the purpose of the Duelnode is to *discover the truth*. But by sharpening this process of discovery to a pure conflict of two wills, we reduce the struggle of ideas to its essence: the fight for power.

A duel is not a debate. It is not a discussion. It is not a conversation. It is certainly not a collaboration, except perhaps in the French sense of the word. It is a battle of enemies. There are only two outcomes: vindication and humiliation. Granted, every man has an inner ass, and every woman too, and in any clash of arms both sides may enfool themselves. But in no contest may two emerge triumphant. One alone may walk unscathed and undefeated from the Duelgon, axe moist with the ichor of his broken foe.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Duels at the Duelnode are not fought, of course, with axes. They are fought by typing. We are not building the monomachial equivalent of [Internet hunting](#). A duel is simply a contest of words, an argument, a flamewar, such as has infested the electrons since Usenet was a little boy.

What's new about the Duelnode is that it, or any other dueldrome, is a place where people can hold *structured* arguments. They don't just rant past each other for pages and pages, like we do at UR. They actually have to construct a logically sound rhetorical structure, however stupid each of its points may be.

A Duelnode duel always has two participants: a *challenger* and a *defender*. Typically the defender is older, wiser and more respected, and the challenger is younger, smarter and more annoying. This may be inverted, of course, but under any circumstance the challenger is the party who demands satisfaction, and the defender the party who accepts.

Together, challenger and defender enter the Duelagon—the ancient chamber of honor, whose name evokes the Greek words for "two" and "pain." They shake hands (virtually, of course), bow to the north and south, salute the east and west winds, and then begin the duel. Typically there is no time limit. Battle is simply to the finish. However, arbitrary rules may be devised and mutually accepted, ideally by the combatants' seconds—it is ungentlemanly for the duelers themselves to bandy words over the terms of honor.

The challenger begins the duel by asserting a *proposition*. A proposition is a clear and unambiguous statement of fact, morality, aesthetics, or any mix of the three. "George W. Bush is a tyrant" is a proposition. "Eric Clapton is a better guitarist than Yngwie J. Malmsteen" is a proposition. "The [Maine](#) was blown up by a secret team of al-Qaeda frogmen sent back in time by Nikola Tesla's three-way time machine" is a proposition.

A proposition must be supported by an *argument*. An argument is a combinatoric statement that depends on a number of *subpropositions*, using the familiar AND and OR operators. So, for example, we might argue that Eric Clapton is a better guitarist than Yngwie J. Malmsteen, because either (a) Clapton is God, OR (b.1) Clapton has actual soul, AND (b.2) Yngwie's frantic shredding sounds like a rabid weasel with its

claws stuck in an autoharp. (Of course there should be an actual graphical UI on this, so that it's not utterly and completely geek-o-rama.)

The defender then responds to the challenger's argument, for each proposition either (a) conceding it; (b) dismissing it contemptuously, as unworthy of serious consideration; (c) equating it to some other proposition stated by the defender, or negation of some proposition stated by the challenger (ie, putting a symbolic link in the argument tree); or (d) responding with a counterargument.

Arguments may depend on *supporting documentation*. All supporting references must be in publicly available and freely redistributable form. No reference to any information that is either behind a subscriber firewall, or available only on paper, is honorable. Ideally, supporting documents should be uploaded to Duelnode itself, but if copyright permissions prohibit this they must be hosted on a site with a stable archive policy. Furthermore, Duelnode does not attempt to distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy sources.

The process of argument construction continues until the tree is fully populated. In other words, until each dueler has given the other complete and final satisfaction. The resulting duel is saved permanently —disk space being cheap. After the duel is closed, it cannot be edited, and anyone can browse it during combat or after. Dueling in private, while presumably an optional feature for our fat-walleted corporate customers, is simply pathetic. As Hunter S. Thompson put it, it's like hunting wild boar from the back of a pickup truck with a can of spraypaint. The whole point of the duel is to humiliate your enemy in public, to ride him, to make him your pwny.

To maximize the quality of the duel, and ensure that as many arguments as possible are aired and expressed, our duelers may be assisted by the public at large, acting as *kibitzers*. Kibitzers are just commenters. While their comments are not in any way official and need not be responded to, they may weigh in on either side of any proposition, offering friendly and helpful advice to our sweating, roaring gladiators.

Kibitzers are not recapitulating the duel at some lame, peanut-gallery level. They are improving it. A duel does not have a single message board, to which all and sundry may post their little orts of wit and wisdom. It has two. To comment on a duel, you must select a dueler to support. Therefore, a duel's kibitz thread consists of people who basically agree with each other and are on the same side, and therefore it tends to consist of signal, rather than noise. Typically the aim of kibitzing is to suggest lines of thought the supported dueler should explore, references that may be fatal to his enemy, and so on.

But how does Duelnode decide who wins? Well, obviously, either side can concede defeat at any point. If they intended to lose, they would have never entered the Duelagon. But sometimes accepting their sad and abject pwnage, especially at the hands of a master dueler, is one way to salvage a little grace from the bitter experience of defeat.

However, normally this is not the case. While at least in any question of fact, one side must be right and the other wrong, people who are wrong don't, in my experience, tend to admit it. They get all petty and whiny, they sneer and brag and bluster. If you just asked the duelers themselves, what you'd hear is that both sides are both vindicated and humiliated. Which is obviously quite impossible.

This is where Duelnode ties in with Uberfact. Kibitzers (and duelers themselves) can organize themselves in Uberfact-style factions. A duel of factional champions is an excellent way to explore any disagreement between any two groups of people, whether they are wingnuts and moonbats, Sunnis and Shia, Catholics and Jews, etc, etc. Remember, the Internet routes packets—not punches, bullets or dirty bombs.

Moreover, Duelnode's uberfactions may not dedicate themselves to some specific cause, but to Truth itself—or at least the truth as they see it. Of course, everyone has his or her own truth. And often, they are stupid and suck. Nonetheless, when we have a completed duel and we have a variety of well-organized factions each of which has picked a winner and a loser, we have as much information about the conflict as we could possibly compose.

A good example of where Duelnode is needed is this How to Talk to a Climate Skeptic page. Of course, the title of this page really should be *How to Condescend Pompously and Officially to a Climate Skeptic.* But it isn't. And each "talking point" should include a complete rebuttal, constructed by *actual climate skeptics*, and then rebut that rebuttal with another argument by the author, Dr. Einstein, or "Coby Beck" as he so modestly dubs himself. But it doesn't. (Let's just say that anyone who's willing to disagree with Alexander Cockburn, Freeman Dyson, and LuboÅi Motl is a braver man than I.)

What I'd really like to see in the global-warming "debate"—which is not actually a debate, of course, but a battle—is a Duelnode duel between two men who really have a reason to despise each other, such as Michael Mann and Steve McIntyre. Frankly, in a decent century, these two would have already settled their disagreement with pistols. Certainly each thinks of the other as a small and dishonest man, little better than a criminal. Why can't the world have a place where they can have it out, where they can give each other the satisfaction honor demands?

Certainly it would be great sport. Or, in other words, great entertainment. To be very crude, great entertainment means many eyeballs, and many eyeballs means lots of ads for penis enlargement, Coffee Fool ("See what the coffee companies don't want you to know!") and sleazy subprime mortgages. Hey, Google employs half the smart people in the Western Hemisphere, and it has to pay them somehow.

But this is not to say the "technology" is actually worth anything. It's just a matter of building the website, something anyone who knows Ruby on Rails can do in a few days. After that it's all graphic design. Which means that someone should be willing to do it for free. I'd like to think that someone can put together a Duelnode with no ads, like Wikipedia or Craigslist, which like all the rest of this communist free-software crap just exists for the purpose of pathetic, egotistical self-aggrandizement by

people who were obviously picked on in high school. However, I have registered both duelnode.com and duelnode.org, so would-be Duelmasters can take their pick. Whatever, dude. I'm a free-software hippie!

One way to think of a dueldrome is as the adversarial equivalent of a [wiki](#). It turns out that "wiki" just means "fast," but I always think of it as having some kind of Kumbaya we-all-love-each-other bogus-Hawaiian love-and-peace connotation. Maybe it's something you chant on [Kill Haole Day](#). Run fast, haole! Wiki wiki!

But anyway, there is no reason at all why you can't add a simple dueldrome module to any wiki in the world. The dueldrome: for when we can't just get along. I get the impression that most wikis are seething masses of pent-up tension and general chimpanzee behavior. Certainly [La Wik](#) herself would be much improved by a weekly duel.