

The Politics of Wikipedians

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A film director named Jaron Lanier recently published [an essay titled “Digital Maoism”](#). The essay is a dreadful mishmash of name-calling, whining, and downright incoherence, but insofar as Lanier has a point, it is this: people often attribute facts and claims to “Wikipedia”, as if it was some giant hive mind that combined all our individual thoughts into one group opinion. But, in reality, Wikipedia is simply written by people, people with individual voices and ideas. And technology is making us lose sight of that.

(I maybe doing Lanier too great a service by attributing such a coherent view to him as nothing quite so clear is ever actually expressed in the article. Nonetheless, I will continue as if this is Lanier’s view.)

It is an interesting point, but what Lanier finds so frightening is precisely what I find so exciting about these technologies. I still remember the light bulb that went off in my head when my friend Dan Connolly answered a question by saying “According to Google, X is the case.” “Google” had said no such thing, of course, but the Google algorithm had processed all the links on the Web and send Dan the page it thought most relevant to his query. It was this particular page that said X, of course, but the notion that Google itself was answering questions in this way was a revelation.

The same is true of Wikipedia. There are individual people, obviously, but what makes Wikipedia so fascinating are the technical and social processes that combine their work, turning it into something no individual person is responsible for or would necessarily endorse.

I often find myself wondering what Wikipedia would say about such-and-such a subject or how important Wikipedia thinks something else is. I refuse to edit my Wikipedia page, not only because it’s bad form, but because I’m genuinely curious about how Wikipedia sees me. It’s an odd thing, to think a site that anyone can edit actually has opinions or concerns or a point of view on the world, but it does, and it’s a fascinating one.