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OF ELECTRONIC ENCYCLOPEDIAS AND THE CULTURE OF FORGETTING

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Abstract: *Electronic memory is a contemporary development of the time-honoured ambition to accommodate within a single database all information (≠ knowledge) pertinent to humankind. Upgraded from a metaphor for, to an equivalent for, human memory - the individual and collective retention of the detailed past – the electronic encyclopedia has produced epiphenomena of a practical as well as a philosophical kind, in education as in society at large.*

Such is the electronic encyclopedia – elenc for short – with an input not self-generated but requiring to be introduced by human agency. One representative electronic encyclopedia in general use today (here given the appellation WOW) makes a practice of accepting all submissions irrespective of initial accuracy; it thus hosts “a large body of unacademic content”. The expectation, not always fulfilled, is that later amendments will adjust mistakes of fact, misguided opinions, defamatory statements, and so on. No article is ‘screened’ by an independent eye, though there are certain specific policies on inclusion and exclusion, a particularly interesting one being the concept of ‘notability’. Discipline is maintained by an Arbitration Committee; the Community of users itself; and voluntary ancillaries. The organization’s actual staff are strikingly few.

In day-to-day use the electronic encyclopedia is open to the charge that it encourages plagiarism and other uncritical repetition of material that may or may not be accurate. Its coverage of topics is not strictly proportionate to the needs of all potential users, but is biased in favour of sciences and preoccupations of the contemporary world, and in particular the Internet culture. This is a defect inherent in its technological history, and one impossible to correct either systemically or by starting afresh. The result is that the electronic encyclopedia effectively tailors ‘memory’, a fragile thing at best, for present and future users: it promotes “a culture of forgetting”.

Ambitious humankind has constantly dreamed of locking up all knowledge in one bright casket to which everyone has a ready key. In June 1751, Jean le Rond d’Alembert, faced with the task of reducing what he called the “infinitely varied” branches of human science to a unitary family tree, defined the double aim of his and Diderot’s great *Encyclopédie* as follows:

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Qua encyclopedia, it must set out, as far as is possible, the order of and the linkage between [*l'ordre et l'enchaînement*] items of human knowledge [*connoissances humaines*] *Qua* reasoned dictionary of sciences and of arts and crafts, it must contain for each science and each art (whether liberal or mechanical) the general principles on which the latter is based and the most essential of the details of which the latter's body and substance consists (D'Alembert, *Preface*).

D'Alembert was conceiving of knowledge, it should be noted, not as a miscellaneous heap of individual entries, but as a network of lateral connections, like links on a webpage.

Two hundred years after D'Alembert, and less than one human lifetime ago, the buzz was "computers" - main-frame Titans in mausolea whose doors were kept closed whenever possible lest dust get into the works. Today, successive sophistications of the computer - floppy disk (remember it?), laptop, Kindle - have poked into every corner of remembered human knowledge. For the ancient Greeks, Memory was a thing numinous: Mnemosyne, the mother, by Zeus, of the Muses, a mystical mumbling of *m*'s. Latterly, traditional (or official) human memory has become an increasingly fallible retention, by the individual and collective mind, of an increasingly amorphous past. Who learns poems at school? Bright new instant electronic memory, though still an anthropogenic input, reigns no longer as a metaphor, but as a substitute, for oldie human memory, acid or benign; indeed some (but not I) find it an improvement. Enter the "electronic encyclopedia", fruit of the ambition to ultimately digitalize all information (information \neq knowledge) pertinent to the human race within a single monster, Greek *téras*, of a database. (Everybody loves a monster).

You can still, even today, buy the traditional repository of knowledge, the multi-volume printed encyclopaedia. The *Britannica*, of course, stands - like Jeeves - alone, there is none like it. A second-hand set will cost you anything from \$325 to \$2000, though how often are you going to look at it? The *World Book Encyclopedia*, designed for US high school students (*Dieu m'en garde!*), discounts at \$1029. After that, there is not a great deal of choice. But for instant reference (not to be confused with profound understanding), and to spare your shoulder muscles, you log in (if you were ever logged out) to Google and click on an electronic encyclopedia. This I shall call an *elenc* for short. The noun, invented for the occasion, artfully evokes a classic philosophical term: the Greek word *elenchus*, "control" - not as in "control freak", but as in "controlled experiment" or "financial controls" - and a favourite word of Socrates, who would have been the first to test out the electronic encyclopedia - the *elenc*, I should say - for its inherent intellectual weaknesses.

Ah, were there only a terrestrial version! (All systems of knowledge were contained, as you will remember, in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, not an Earth book, which had already supplanted the great *Encyclopedia Galactica*). Were there only an optimal exhaustive *elenc* for access to which you, the impoverished student or assistant lecturer, did not have to pay through the nose. This envisioned *elenc* - let us baptize it *WOW* - drawing on all ages, all continents, all tongues, would replicate "reality" in the same sense as Google Earth *is* the one-for-one

territorial map invented by Borges and Casares ([Bustos Domecq 1946]). The obvious objection that *WOW* would take up an infinite amount of room is unsustainable in this age of the terabyte, equalling very approximately 10^6 MB (one million megabytes) of digital information. To get some idea of scale, a terabyte (four of which can be purchased in the USA for as little as \$150) would be well able to accommodate 10^3 (one thousand) copies of the complete 32-volume oldie *Britannica*.

The ideal *elenc*, democratic custodian of memory, would wow by its impartiality, representing every conceivable point of view. All its staff and co-workers - evenly distributed by gender and age, by socioeconomic status, by continent - would understand both how to present information attractively and authoritatively according to a certain conception of literacy, and how to adapt electronic systems and computer technology. They ought to be many - on the scale of a National Library, to take a familiar benchmark - since the objects of knowledge are vast as the sands in number and origin; their personal cognitive and linguistic abilities should be complementary rather than overlapping. If you think all this is utopian, you are not wrong. I'm just setting up an ideal by which to judge what actually happens in practice.

What we need now is a case study: an actual *elenc*. I shall continue to call it *WOW*, a simpler title than the Swiftian *W---p----a*. A champion of *WOW* might, and in the event does, describe its aim as

...an effort to create and distribute a free encyclopedia [the adjective 'electronic' is missing] of the highest possible quality to every single person [i.e. every individual, not every unmarried human being; clumsy writing does not faze *WOW*] on the planet [Earth, in case you were wondering] in their own language (Wales 2005).

These last four words, a curious echo of the Biblical story of Pentecost, are highly misleading, since *WOW*'s English editions outweigh its French, by a factor of 10, and its Japanese, by a factor of 5.

If you are for Alexander Pope's dictum about critical method - "A *little learning* is a dangerous thing:/Drink deep, or taste not..." - you may be alarmed at *WOW*'s admission that while being "the most popular general reference work" it also hosts "a large body of unacademic content" (*Wikipedia*, preface). This raises important questions about the relationship of "quick reference" to "connected knowledge", questions which I will sideline here since they are very familiar to any teacher of university students who is reading this article. (One can "quickly refer to" a point on the map of Bucharest without ever understanding the principles of cartography or having a clear mental picture of how the city's regions functionally interrelate.) All the same, *WOW*'s declared foundations lay it open to the accusation of being a flawed and irresponsible research tool, and considerable reservations are necessary about its American-funded pilot educational programme, one that discards "ancient prejudices" (centuries of scholarship), relies for coordination on young "campus ambassadors", and leaves the student entirely at liberty to develop her own critical method (fun is the name of the game). Possibly the method works

more effectively for applied sciences, which is why the Poznan Medical University in western Poland is giving it a go, in the hope of cutting costs and obviating the B.Sc. thesis. One “ancient prejudice”, at least, is left in place: students get “a lot of practice” in finding and summarizing appropriate sources for their topic. In contrast stands the distance teaching strategy of, for example, the Open University, which – whatever its *dirigiste* propensities – does provide pre-digested discussion of course material, the balanced viewpoints of experienced academic professionals, and a usually rigorous support network.

WOW, like any other *elenc*, enjoys the advantage, as against the printed encyclopedia, of instant modifiability. Suppose unassailable evidence came to light that the plays attributed to Samuel Beckett were in fact the work of an otherwise unrecorded genius, de la Flèche de Jambon, the truth having been successfully concealed by a mafia of Irish actors. Although this new information would impinge upon not only the history of 20th-century theatre but the whole narrative of European culture, the editors of any printed encyclopedia would still have to wait for the next edition to put the record straight. An *elenc*, on the other hand, can do the job at the touch of a button, or more exactly by Find & Replace. Now this *overwritability* is a functional gain, but it also has a downside: what is overwritten may be thrown away; the direction sign is obliterated by the graffiti. *Overwritability* thus entails *deletability*, and, as we all know only too well, what is electronically deleted will disappear forever, by clumsy finger or by unexpected power-cut: the very antithesis of memory. And of course we are assuming all along, quite unjustifiably, that what comes in is more ‘correct’ than what goes out; and this in turn presupposes an arbiter of correctness.

What to include in one’s *elenc*? Each and every piece of information relevant to the experience of all conceivable individuals, past, present, and near future? The fact that Farmer Deng Maoqi of Huajianping in Lanzhou Province had a duck’s egg for lunch on Welcoming the Seasons Day in the third year of the reign of the emperor Kang Xi? In the event, *WOW* pretends to omniscience, whether or not we take this claim at face value (a question with interesting sociological implications). It accepts, with little attempt at taxonomy, almost every saleable entry thrown at it from outside, whatever the quality of the writing, and without reference to accuracy. Just over one half of the originators of entries never reappear; like the bee, they leave their sting and fade away. The coordinators’ touching belief is that with successive adjustments the original entry will, by a quasi-Darwinian process, become completely viable. Rare exceptions to this omnium-gatherum are made for “sensitive” material, defined in-house, such as would harm the public interest (politically? morally?) if placed on view, though public perception has changed considerably since the impact of *Wikileaks* – or rather, to preserve the illusion of anonymity, since the impact of that offspring of *WOW* which unilaterally, “in the public interest”, rips apart confidential political communications. (Another of these miscellaneous offspring, the most recent, is *Qwiki*: not, as you might suppose, a facility for furtive electronic sex, but a radio station).

Never is an article screened by an independent “authority”, probably not a word *WOW* would approve of; thus there is no requirement for careful sourcing of

information. This is in itself an epistemological transformation, if not yet a revolution. All external “improvements” to an article are edited in immediately and non-judgmentally, for which a synonym is “uncritically”. Here we might parody Socrates and comment that “the unexamined entry is not worth entering”. The result may thus contain mistakes, lunacies, or defamatory matter until such time as a further edit comes along, and even afterwards. In justice it should be added that *WOW* will delete a libellous passage “on request”. The record, the “memory”, of this sedimentary process is a reference page with the editing history of each article, in reverse chronological order. With a fine show of democratic openness, debate over entries, familiarly known as “edit war”, is tolerated, which seems to me to trivialize the serious business of knowledge to a video game.

This does not mean that criteria for inclusion and exclusion, “content policies”, are entirely done away with; on the contrary. Bald dictionary-type definitions are ruled out, an encyclopedia being an encyclopedia. Only established knowledge qualifies; here is no workshop for testing controversial or state-of-the-art ideas. Taking of sides is forbidden; the policy of *NPOV*, which sounds like a Soviet secret service but turns out to stand for Neutral (rather than No) Point of View.

Far the most interesting criterion, however, is ‘notability’. An entry is discarded if it is not ‘notable’ enough. This is glossed as ‘having received significant coverage in reliable secondary sources such as mainstream media or major academic journals independent of the topic in question’. So many questions are begged in this short sentence that it is hard to know where to begin. How much ‘coverage’ is significant? What makes a source ‘reliable’? How far back in time are we looking? To 2004? To 1984? To 1904? To 1604? Is a citation about rabbit demography, in the *University of Bucharest Review*, whose subtitle is *A Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, on or off the board? In relation to music, to take a telling example, ‘notability’ is discussed in terms of artists and bands, albums, chart results and singles, so we know exactly where we are at: minor rock star, have him in, minor classical musician, forget him.

In this particular *elenc* the ultimate safety net is the Arbitration Committee, which tends to show reckless authors the yellow card rather than the red. ‘Author’ here is a very misleading term, since every entry submitted ceases to be in any sense the property or creation of its submitter. Discipline in a looser sense is maintained by the organization’s Community, a fine old North American term studied by the sociologist Robert Putnam, and scented with clambakes, Bob Dylan, and the Village Pump. Equipped with its ‘Portal’, and rashly describing itself as “a temple of the mind”, *WOW* has unkindly been described as “cult-like”, thus aligning it with the abominations of Scientology.

WOW confesses to ‘a type of bureaucracy’, a clear power structure geared to its Volunteer Administrators. They, and not the user, arbitrate on the quality of the contributions offered from various quarters. How are they chosen? Why, they are *nominated*. As one nominates Good Citizens for awards. These “Volunteer Administrators” sounded vaguely familiar; then it clicked, and I went to my Plato:

Those young men whom up to now we have been speaking of as Guardians, will better be described as Auxiliaries, who will enforce the decisions of the Rulers (Plato 429b).

To carry out the apocalyptic job *WOW* has valiantly set its sights on, there are no more than 150 human employees. Of course outside contributors take the bulk of the strain, and you might also object that an organization making such a parade of openness and collaboration has no need to operate on the scale of the commercial *Britannica*. Even so, the narrowness of the professional base is surprising, and reminds me a little of the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*, in which the all-powerful mouthpiece turns out to be an ornery little white-haired old guy frantically pulling levers on his elaborate machine.

The last of my observations is about the day-to-day use of *elencs*. There is automated, not to say idiot regurgitation of “original” (if I may use the adjective) *WOW* entries, as if this were something virtuous, on thousands of mirror sites such as *Reference.com* or *Answers.com*. Indeed so handy is *WOW* - so much trouble, alternative enquiry, sifting, and exercise of the brain does it save – that the once dreaded “homework” has altered its meaning. In the new IKEA, or home-assembly, approach to learning, you buy the ideas with the holes ready drilled; all you have to do is screw them together with the tools supplied. No amount of media literacy tuition will eradicate the “copy-paste” mentality. This form of student plagiarism is, the British Open University decided, after some intramural debate and hawing, not wholly reprehensible. But ethics apart, the universal tendency to resort first to the *elenc* and to take its information as gospel needs to be deplored for the redundancy and repetitiousness it begets. Occam’s Razor and all that: entities shouldn’t be multiplied unnecessarily. The reader has probably come across “Gresham’s Law” in economics. Sir Thomas Gresham was the financial agent of Queen Elizabeth I who defined the principle that a country’s coins made of the more expensive metals have a tendency to disappear to foreign parts: epigrammatically, “bad money drives out good”. I here offer a contemporary variant, the Gresham-Witt Law: “bad information drives out good”.

If “the culture of memory”, title of this conference, means anything (*quod est demonstrandum*), it refers to a shared pool of experience, ideas, events and expression among a given population. The Internet is such a shared pool, with the difference that memory is carried externally, like fish eggs. *WOW* itself admits to what it calls, as if that explained everything, the demographic factor. Editors are

...predominantly...young males with high education levels in the developed world...Systemic bias may follow that of culture generally [a circular argument?] It may more specifically follow the biases of Internet culture, inclining to being young, male, English-speaking, educated, technologically aware, and wealthy enough to spare time for editing. Biases of its own may include over-emphasis on topics such as pop culture, technology, and current events (Quilter 62).

Entries on topics broadly classifiable (though *WOW* eschews taxonomies) as “culture and the arts” stand in proportion to “philosophy and thought” in the ratio 30:1, in itself sufficiently damning, and to all ‘religions and belief systems’, even

militant Islam, but that speaks in Arabic, by 15:1. To ‘biographies and persons’ by 2:1. Social science, the study of the ranks slightly higher than history, the guardian of memory, and markedly higher than physical science. Sport and what *WOW* glosses with a mealy-mouthed tag as “explicit content” (as though nothing else in life were explicit) are of course amply served. This imbalance means that it is easier to verify the date of birth of a minor 1980s porn star than the date of birth a minor 17th-century Croatian poet. I will not dwell on a microtyranny common to *elencs*, Twitter and Facebook, the arrogance of assuming, divisively, that the whole population of those needing information is identical with the whole population of Internet users.

WOW in its present form is stuck fast, in a dilemma which had been identified thirty years ago:

...The social consequence of a technology cannot be predicted early in the life of a technology. By the time undesirable consequences are discovered, the technology is so much part of the whole social and economic fabric that its control is extremely difficult (Collingridge 11).

Its situation is a paradoxal one, created inevitably by its insistence on openness, its being free in both the cognitive and the financial sense, and its obstinate refusal to evaluate. It cannot convincingly retreat from its media perch. Nor can it redesign itself in the IT sense, since this would mean an expensive process of going back to the start and experimenting with new formats.

Perhaps the most unsatisfactory thing about *WOW*, in the present context, is the way it artificially simplifies what is in real life a complex and subtle issue.

If any one faculty of our nature may be called more wonderful than the rest, I do think it is memory. There seems something more speakingly incomprehensible in the powers, the failures, the inequalities of memory, than in any other of our intelligences. The memory is sometimes so retentive, so serviceable, so obedient; at others, so bewildered and so weak; and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond control! We are, to be sure, a miracle every way; but our powers of recollecting and of forgetting do seem peculiarly past finding out (Austen, ch. xxii).

Memory is a great deal more fragile than we appreciate. This is so whether one is talking about separate items or about the contour of memory as a whole. But it applies also, to a degree that we forget to allow for, to electronic memory. I don’t here mean the catastrophes and crashes that I referred to earlier, though these are painful enough. But in the way *WOW* chooses to operate, and in the skewing of interest in favour of the here and now, there seems to be a kind of quite involuntary censorship, with blocks of specialist information being eroded, or left unworked on, or simply consigned to oblivion. You might see it as a form of loss of biodiversity, appropriate to the future towards which we are heading our planet.

I end with an item that prompted my creative indignation and this paper. *WOW* had posted, provisionally as always, an entry about a Christian missionary to central Africa at the turn of the nineteenth century: let us call him Alexander Baker. One could almost say that Baker’s shortcomings were, firstly, to have been a missionary, a successful one; secondly, to have benefited from imperialism, of all

things (we are taught) the most deplorable, at its height; and lastly, to have lived so long ago, for the more remote in time, as a general rule, the less fascinating to the Internet community. In consequence, his entry was marked up by *WOW* for deletion, on the grounds that it was “*not notable enough*.”

I ask: who are these small people, that they should decide on our behalf? That they should tailor for us what we remember? What the electronic encyclopedia actually promotes, is not a culture of memory, but a culture of forgetting.

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