

## **The University in the Age of Google and Wikipedia.**

Some reflections by way of selective synthesis  
of the 8<sup>th</sup> Ethical Forum of the University Foundation  
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*Who has never used Google? Who has never consulted Wikipedia? Probably not a single European academic. Almost certainly not a single European student. Search engines and free online encyclopedias are having a profound and irreversible impact on many aspects of university life. This impact is further amplified by closely linked initiatives such as the digitalization of university libraries and other printed material, online visual access to the entire planet, the cross-referencing of scientific publications, the proliferation of scientific blogs and of lecture courses available online, and the irresistible development of efficient networks of students who exchange tips on courses and teachers as well as home assignments and exam questions.*

*Most of us have no doubt about the great actual and potential usefulness of these developments. Yet, many are worried. Are we witnessing the privatization of the knowledge accumulated by mankind? Are we driven into ever cheaper but more superficial and less critical techniques for gathering information and assessing academic work? Are we pushing into inexistence anything that is not googleable, indeed anything that is not made salient by the operation of Google's algorithms? Does Google's ability to prioritize information not endow it with a tremendous and unaccountable*

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<sup>1</sup> The present text is a written version of the concluding remarks improvised at the end of the Forum. It is written under the sole responsibility of its author, but draws much of its inspiration from the instructive introductory presentations by Vincent Blondel ("Google as a search engine"), Alain Strowel ("Google as a digital library and global publisher"), Yann Forget and Thierry Desmedt ("How does Wikipedia work? And should universities be thrilled?"), from lively panel contributions by Philippe Colombet, Sylvia Van Peteghem, and Yvo Volman, from a set of prepared interventions from the floor by Erik Duval ("The real impact is still to come"), Frank Roels ("Three rules for the good use of the new tools"), Maxime Lambrecht ("A radically different type of quality control"), Frederik Questier ("Let's integrate our knowledge into the global brain!") and Paulien van der Zee ("Ethnic art research saved by Wikimedia"), and from the preparatory work by the Ethical Forum's organizing committee (Erik De Keuleneer, Benoit Frydman, Hilde Garmyn, Bart Pattyn and Jacques Willems). Most of the contributions are downloadable from [www.fondationuniversitaire.be/en/forum8.php](http://www.fondationuniversitaire.be/en/forum8.php).

*power over what gets known and what is ignored, over what is deemed important or insignificant?*

*The question is not only what we need to do about these putative threats, for example by minding the design of intellectual property rights or by training our students for a critical use of what they find online. We must also ask ourselves what new positive duties emerge from the mind-boggling potential for knowledge creation and dissemination triggered by the blossoming of the web. For example, has it not become a new mission for all of us in higher education, whether students, researchers or professors, to contribute to the range, accuracy, intelligibility and user-friendliness of the information made easily accessible, worldwide and free of charge, thanks to a fast expanding variety of scientific blogs and to huge cooperative enterprises such as Wikipedia ?*

These are the questions around which the 8<sup>th</sup> Ethical Forum of the University Foundation, held in Brussels on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 2009, gathered academics from all Belgian universities and a wide variety of disciplines, together with representatives from Google Europe, from Wikimedia and from the European Commission's DG "Information Society". The instructive presentations and lively debates made me both even more enthusiastic and even more apprehensive about what is going on in this area.

## **Enthusiasm**

Why even more enthusiastic? Ever since I first visited the Democratic Republic of the Congo, I realized what an absolutely crucial, epoch-making difference the web could make in all areas of life and not least in higher education, especially in the poorest parts of the planet. Once minimal conditions are met in terms of electricity supply, broadband and laptops, cheap and immediate access to all types of information from all over the world could propel the most desperately isolated island of learning into a fertile consumer, processor and producer of first-rate knowledge. The more information is available in this way and the more searchable it is, the greater difference it will make. Even if one entire dollar needed to be paid to Google for access to a book currently hidden at the back of a shelf in the basement of University of Ghent's library, this would obviously still be much cheaper time-wise and/or money-wise for someone working in a different building of the same University, let alone in the remote suburbs of Kinshasa.

This is wonderful enough. But the wonder does not stop here. The web has also created a potential for huge co-operative enterprises of an unprecedented kind for which Wikipedia provides an impressive paradigm. The authority conferred by the authorship of scholars whose reputation is at stake, is here being replaced by a no less effective anonymous filtering device. As pointed out by Clay Shirky (*Here comes everybody*, New York: Allen Lane, 2008), the quality of Wikipedia is being enhanced every day as a result of the work of well-meaning and sufficiently competent individuals

spread all around the world more than offsetting the damage perpetrated by vandals or incompetent visitors.

This co-operative work is not limited to the organization and presentation of existing knowledge. It can also consist in the creation of knowledge, as nicely illustrated by Paulien Van der Zee's experience in the field of ethnic art. Making works of art from remote peoples available on the web with information provided in the native language of those peoples enables the latter to make invaluable contributions to ethnographic research.

Moreover, the web has become a remarkable instrument for gathering information that may help guide public policy. For example, it has been said that recording the number of searches for the item "flu" proved a faster and more reliable way of tracing the swine flu epidemics than any more conventional tool. This also applies to the guidance of individual choice, for example when Google provides you spontaneously with a number of books you may want to buy given that you had showed interest in a particular title or with links to the sort of music you actually do like without your having requested anything. If you are looking for a partner, it may even give you the contact details of the person who is exactly right for you. Infuriatingly intrusive, you often feel. But indisputably useful, you sometimes reluctantly concede.

## **Apprehension**

These are the reasons why I grew even more enthusiastic as a result of listening and reflecting during the forum. Why am I also becoming more preoccupied? I mentioned that the web should provide an opportunity to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor parts of the world, and Sylvia Van Peteghem, chief librarian of Ghent University, took legitimate pride in the fact that all the public domain books scanned by Google in her library are being made available free of charge worldwide. Yet, it turns out that the most recent Google settlement will restrict access to books scanned in the libraries of the US and the UK to people living in those countries. The overall net effect will be a further advantage for US and UK academic institutions over those of the rest of the world: while getting free access to countless old books hidden in European libraries, they will share with one another, and not with the rest of the world, the bulk of what they have in their own stocks. Google may be able to shift the blame to the European publishers' lobby, but the worrying consequence, for European universities, would nonetheless be as described.

Secondly, one might have hoped that the development of the web would have decreased the dominance of Anglo-American culture. There are some signs of this happening, for example, as the proportion of Wikipedia articles in English has fallen from 100% to 25% of the total. However, the fact that books published outside of the US and the UK have been excluded from the recent Google Books settlement implies that the degree of penetration of non-Anglo culture into the US and the UK will be even less

than it currently is. What is not easily Googleable is in the process of vanishing altogether. Here again, wherever the blame needs to fall, the trend triggered by the present framework can legitimately be regarded as problematic.

Worst of all perhaps, Erik Duval, in particular, warned us that reflecting on Google or Wikipedia is already out of date. According to his children, even Facebook is for old people. And they do not mean by that what I first thought they meant – namely that it is an activity to be set aside for after our retirement, when we shall have more time to waste. They rather mean (as interpreted by their father) that the sort of web in which they will be living is not one in which they will be browsing for information and using search engines, but one in which they will be relentlessly traced and chased by other people, businesses or organizations for the better or for the worse.

### **What is to be done?**

So, there is plenty of room for enthusiasm, but also ample room for fear. What should be done? Many suggestions were made. Let me just mention four, easy to understand, not always quite as easy to implement. Firstly, we should engage full-heartedly more than we have ever done in collaborative activities such as Wikipedia. A constant improvement of both the accuracy of the content and the user-friendliness of its presentation is within our power, and part of our responsibility.

Secondly, we need to publish more and more in free-licence mode. Making all we are involved in freely downloadable on the web, publishing high-quality e-books free of charge must be turned into an everyday habit. The more high-quality material is made available in this way, the higher the pressure will be on the prices capitalist firms — from Elsevier to Google — will try to charge. Some respectable and likeable publishers will be saddened, perhaps even go out of business. But their role is to contribute to the dissemination of information, not to hinder it.

Thirdly, control over unprecedented capacities to gather, locate, select, organize and process information involves a huge concentration of power that cannot be held accountable in the standard “democratic” way. The most promising way to address this challenge is unlikely to consist in state-run alternatives to private businesses. It is rather to be sought in the direction of a ubiquitous, relentless guerrilla in favour of more transparency, less secrecy, more accessibility, and against all sorts of attempts by private businesses, their lobbies and their lawyers to appropriate information and enforce intellectual property rights, sometimes under the fallacious pretence of fostering cultural creation or defending the legitimate interests of poor intellectual workers. Not bureaucratic control but vulnerability to new entrants will be the best protection against abuse of power.

Last and not least, we need to be far more innovative in the way we teach. For the better and for the worse, our students live in an informational environment radically different from the one we lived in. This changes what

they need to learn and how they can best learn it. There is more and far better to do than develop defensive strategies like plagiarism detectors or Wifi disactivation in lecture rooms. As they will spend their lives with an exponentially expanding universe of information at their fingertips, it is less and less important for them to stock information in their brains, and more and more important to learn to select, assess and organize it.

These are just four of the many things that urgently need further thinking and resolute action in our universities as they venture ever more deeply into the profoundly novel, frightening but exciting era of Google and Wikipedia.