

Be very wary of that wacky Wikipedia

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When the Internet's newborn cries set dreamers dreaming of the treasures that would come with the free global flow of information, their greatest dream could well have been Wikipedia. It is perhaps the finest gem of the World Wide Web. But you've got to be careful.

History, and even truth, can end up with a lopsided slant, as anyone turning to it for a description of, for example, the life and times of Martin Brian Mulroney, 18th prime minister of Canada, can discover.

An encyclopedia unlike any before, Wikipedia is a growing, living — maybe too living — thing that can change from moment to moment, sometimes from second to second. This is because it's an encyclopedia anybody can edit.

You want to create an entry, or add to one, or "correct" one, go to en.wikipedia.org and go ahead.

Of the 3.1 million current entries, 912,195 are in English. In other languages, there are more than 1,000 in Tatar, more than 1,000 in Basque.

China considers Wikipedia such a threat to peace, order and good government — it doesn't care to have the people in the People's Republic learn too much about Tibet or bloody deeds done in Tiananmen Square — that for the third time it has blocked access to the site.

All kinds of Wiki, and Wiki-like, ventures are showing up, not least a stab by the *Los Angeles Times* at "Wikitorials" — online readers were invited to add their own wrinkles to the paper's editorials, an opportunity that drew foul-mouthed perverts like flies. Wikitorials came to a quick, sadly hilarious end.

Wikipedia itself can fall prey to this sort of thing, and it's not necessarily the work of screwballs. Last month there was the unfortunate case of its biography of Jimmy Wales, the man who founded the company in 2001.

The flap started when Wales's biography was edited to play down the role of a guy named Larry Sanders, who'd left Wikipedia in 2002, by deleting references to Sanders as the co-founder.

Kibitzing experts, who generally keep Wikipedia honest, spotted the changes and changed them back. But they were changed again. And changed back again. Twice more. The busybody who was attempting to dump Sanders on history's (and Wikipedia's) trash heap? Jimmy Wales.

The Wales entry now includes a page comparing the original *and* his edited version, and *Wired News* archly noted that he who edits his own biography risks opening the door "to rather immature behaviour and loss of dignity."

Not that there is any hint of immature behaviour or loss of dignity in the changes that appear to have been made to Brian Mulroney's Wikipedia biography, but neither is there the slightest evidence that he's the one who edited it.

Nevertheless, in the pages of this particular history, Mulroney's reputation has been cleaned up.

Nowhere is there any mention of the \$300,000 in cash he received from Karlheinz Schreiber in the 18 months after stepping down as prime minister, money Mulroney said he was paid as a consultant and promoter when Schreiber started a pasta company.

This is remarkable, because if you Google "Mulroney' `pasta", you find a quotation from what was presumably an earlier, if not the original, Wikipedia entry that reads, "It is unclear what services Mulroney performed for Schreiber to earn the money; Mulroney says it was for introductions for Schreiber's pasta business."

But in the biography this now links to, that sentence no longer exists. In fact, the words "earn," "money," "introductions," "pasta," and even "Schreiber" don't appear at all.

Having sued the federal government (he settled for \$1 million and costs and an apology) because of RCMP allegations that he had received kickbacks from Schreiber during the Airbus affair, and since his testimony indicated that his contacts with Schreiber had been minimal, although Schreiber had raised money for his leadership campaign, the \$300,000 he received on leaving office in 1993 continues to be an embarrassingly stinky pile on the Mulroney broadloom.

The kicker is that way down at the bottom of the Mulroney material, Wikipedia provides a link that takes you — whoosh! — to the Airbus affair entry, and there it is, in quite different wording: how the \$300,000 wasn't revealed until 2003, and how "Mulroney had not previously admitted accepting any commissions from Schreiber."

You will also find the historian Robert Kaplan's criticism of Mulroney "for trying to hide the fact" that he received the dough.

Whoever fiddled — maybe it was mice — with the information wasn't as careful as they might have been.

Slinger's column appears Tuesday and Thursday.

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