

Changing The World - Overnight.

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Many of us remember the encyclopedias that our parents bought for a few dollars per volume at the grocery store -- one volume per week. Although a pale comparison to Encyclopedia Britannica or the other "serious" shelf-sagging reference works of the day, these popular "knowledge bases" fueled many a homework assignment through high school. (By the way, how did you learn to spell 'encyclopedia'? I still mentally recite that rhyme from Jiminy Cricket.)

Regardless of their place on the price and quality spectrum, all of those encyclopedias and atlases suffered from one glaring problem: especially for (although not limited to) technological and scientific subjects, the corpus of knowledge was changing far faster and more dramatically than the "annual update" volumes could possibly track.

The Unexpected "Changing Of The Rules."

We now know that the heydays of the stagnant reference works were numbered, although at that time neither their publishers nor their customers could foresee it. The Aug. 6, 1991 advent of the Web quickly changed all the Reference rules, and for good reason. The current "Encyclopedia Britannica 2005 Print Set Suite" sells for \$1,495; the Web is (essentially) free. I speculate that it's a rare home indeed that now sports that one-time status symbol.

The reason is, of course, obvious today -- the Web provides an incredible, vast information resource on virtually every subject imaginable (and on many subjects beyond many of our imaginations) literally at our fingertips. That's the upside. But that's also the downside, since it's often quite difficult to winnow the knowledge wheat from its chaff. (That's one skill I strongly believe should be thoroughly taught throughout secondary school, but that's another discussion.)

Some traditional expert-edited encyclopedias have, kicking and screaming as they watched their traditional business shrink, eventually offered online access (for a fee such as \$70/year). Similarly, some have offered their content on (searchable -- yes!) DVDs (for around \$40). But the brainchild of Ward Cunningham and Jimmy Wales, called a "Wiki" in general and "Wikipedia" specifically, has rapidly changed all these rules -- again!

Wikipedia (named for an airport bus in Hawaii) can be summed up as follows (from, of course, [Wikipedia](#)):

"A Wiki (wikiwiki) enables documents to be written collectively ([co-authoring](#)) in a simple [markup](#) using a [web browser](#). A single page in a wiki is referred to as a "wiki page", while the entire body of pages, which are usually highly interconnected via [hyperlinks](#), is "the wiki"; in effect, a very simple, easier to use [database](#).

A defining characteristic of wiki technology is the ease with which pages can be created and updated. Generally, there is no review before modifications are accepted. Most wikis are open to the general public without the need to register any user account. Sometimes session log-in is requested

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to acquire a "wiki-signature" cookie for autosigning edits. More private wiki servers require user authentication."

The reality is far more interesting than the definition, though. In effect, anyone (anyone!) can easily start their own topic in Wikipedia and espouse their insight. They may be an expert on the subject and provide salient information, or they might have lower intentions and have their article mislead. But that doesn't matter much, because anyone (anyone!) can subsequently edit the entry, changing it to meet THEIR interpretation of the subject. And so it goes, usually with the (always changing) result narrowing towards the consensus of truth.

"Wikis generally are designed with the philosophy of making it easy to correct mistakes, rather than making it difficult to make them. Thus while wikis are very open, they provide a means to verify the validity of recent additions to the body of pages. The most prominent, on almost every wiki, is the "Recent Changes" page—a specific list numbering recent edits, or a list of all the edits made within a given timeframe."

This is clearly not a perfect process, and the veracity of a given article can wax and wane over time due to "Wiki vandalism" and other actions. Yet recent studies by IBM show that:

"... most [vandalism](#) to Wikipedia is reverted in 5 minutes or less" due to the huge community that watches the Recently Changed page list.

I'm sure that the expert editors of old style "frozen in time" paper encyclopedias must be aghast at such chaos. Yet when today's online global community participates as described above, the articles do generally converge toward quality.

One Person Can Change The World. Overnight.

To me, this is a wonderful example of the virtually overnight emergence of a phenomenon that was never even contemplated by those who participated in the growth of the Internet. It's an example of the power of a single individual's concept to rapidly change (eventually to decimate) an entire long-established and once profitable industry by suddenly eclipsing much of its relevance. And it's also an example of how an empowered, global, volunteer community can choose to take the reins of improving the accessibility of human knowledge across a vast [spectrum of topics](#).

The encyclopedia industry was blindsided. They never imagined that they could be marginalized, much less by the antithesis of their long-valued process of expert editors and verified content experts. In a way, this is similar to what happened to best buggy whip manufacturers when the automobile replaced the previous common mode of transportation.

This is a Big Thing.

How To Protect Yourself.

The question we must all ask is not IF our own business might be prone to such an upheaval, but as to HOW and WHEN it may well happen. (Consider that a very forward-looking encyclopedia company might conceivably have foreseen this result of the Internet. If so, they might have found an innovative way to introduce new value in the new environment, rather than waiting for others to do so in a way that rendered their established business somewhat obsolete.)

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The trick then for each of us is to visualize where technology is headed, and constantly explore the forms that our businesses might have to morph into to remain relevant to the changing market. Then, if we have confidence in how things are/might be changing, we may have to do the hardest thing of all -- sacrifice some or all of our current business to MAKE THE CHANGES HAPPEN before our competition, or the competition that we would never expect, appears and changes all the rules.

Do you remember Bill Gates' famous 1995 memo, "*The Internet Tidal Wave*," that changed Microsoft's direction overnight due to the [threat of Netscape](#), even though the change in direction dramatically delayed or cancelled various products? On Nov. 1, 2005 [he did it once more](#), driven by bold "Web Services" moves by Google and others that, again, hold the potential to [marginalize some of Microsoft's value](#). This willingness to recognize and accept the inevitability of a changing environment, and to "do onto others before they do onto you," is one way to survive the sea changes.

Keep in mind another history - dinosaurs did not adapt to *their* changing environment and so left nothing but their bones as legacy. Every business, too, faces potential extinction in the face of the double-exponential growth of technology -- even businesses that physically manufacture things, considering the potential for nanotechnology to grow/build things from atoms, upwards. We should each be sure that at least A FEW people in our organizations are tasked to look beyond the next quarter's/year's/decade's event horizons to identify what may happen. And businesses' officers must also be tasked (and measured on) their ability to steer their ships in perhaps scary directions to avoid the shoals of obsolesce.

It's not easy. It can be frightening to "eat your young" (to potentially diminish the value of established product lines by introducing radically new directions). But as Jim Harris stated in "*Blindsided*,"

"Eighty percent of the technology we will use in our day-to-day lives in just ten years – hasn't been invented yet!"

Lots of danger to established businesses, yes. But also vast opportunity.

On which side of the fence will your business fall?

Don't Blink!

This essay is original and was specifically prepared for publication at Future Brief. A brief biography of Jeff Harrow can be found at our main [Commentary](#) page. Other essays written by Jeff Harrow can be found at his [web site](#). Jeff receives e-mail at jeff@theharrowgroup.com. Other websites are welcome to link to this essay, with proper credit given to Future Brief and Mr. Harrow. This page will remain posted on the Internet indefinitely at this web address to provide a stable page for those linking to it.

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