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CONSIDER THIS

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#43 The Wikipedia and the Death of Archaeology

For more than 200 years, moderns have sought to divine the life stories of the ancients through the practice of archaeology. Through such efforts, we can learn something about the quotidian existence of not only those prehistorians that left no written descriptions of their daily lives, but also of our more recent forebears, who rarely saw fit to tell us what they ate for breakfast or which penny dreadfuls and broadsheets they liked to read.

Of course, archaeology permits us at best to see through a glass very darkly. Not only are we limited by the vagaries of what has survived through fortuitous chance, but by the fact that few materials used in daily life are designed for long-term survival under harsh conditions. As a result, not much has been consistently preserved from before the last millennia other than a limited number of works of art, personal adornment and handwritten books, records and plays. For more, we must grub around in the ruins of palaces and hovels to see what has survived the unforgiving embrace of dirt, or search about in the more preserving, but much less accessible, chilly depths of the sea.

Hence, the further back we look into the past, the less we are likely to find, and the more limited are the types of artifacts we can hope to discover. For a few hundred years of history, we may discover glass and metal, crockery and bones, and (particularly in arid regions), scraps of basketry and fabrics. For a while longer, there are seeds and pollens, stones and bones. But soon enough there are only enigmatic stone flakes and tools – not much from which to intuit how a people lived, what they knew, and how they understood themselves, their gods and the world around them.

But surely we must know all we need to know about the post-Gutenberg era? Well, not really, as so little that may be of interest in the future seems to have much value in the moment to those that own it (the contents of your garbage can as you read this, for example). How great the gap can be between those two perceptions can be demonstrated by the archaeology projects that are ongoing at any point in time. Those efforts include simple explorations of the contents of privies that stood in the backyards of colonial Boston, and far more ambitious efforts to investigate, and even raise, ships from the last century.

If such is the case, certainly there must be some better way to preserve the reality of modern existence, thereby avoiding the future need to use trowels and screens, laboratory analysis and intuition to recreate what has so recently been real?

In fact, there is.

Consider this: Given a sufficient amount of server space and the commitment to maintain it, a resource already exists that may not only sound the death knell of archaeology, but also the opportunity to enable a greater depth and sophistication of anthropology than has ever existed before. So radical an innovation would this new anthropological methodology represent that it deserves its own name.

Call it *Wikipediology*.

Is the Wikipedia sufficiently comprehensive to replace the tangible record of the past as a subject of study? According to the Wikipedia's description of itself as of 18:14 UST on October 29, 2006 (the entry was last updated at 15:18 UST the same day), this most dynamic of all on-line resources currently hosts

more than 5 million articles (over 1.4 million entries in the [English-language version](#) alone). In all, there are 229 language editions, sixteen of which already have more than 50,000 articles each.

But, you may ask next, is the Wikipedia accurate enough? After all, there is an ongoing controversy over whether its accuracy is the equal of a traditional encyclopedia.

That question, I think, entirely misses the point. Why? Because I believe that the real significance of the Wikipedia is not its status as a compendium of information, but rather its ability to provide a record of how we see ourselves, our heritage, our current events and our culture in real-time as those perceptions evolve. And that significance clearly transcends the utility of the static, shelf-bound reference works traditionally described as encyclopedias.

I would encourage you to consider this definition of the Wikipedia, which captures the importance of the Wikipedia more concisely:

The Wikipedia is the most detailed, comprehensive, concise, culturally-sensitive record of how humanity understands itself at any precise moment in time

Viewed in this light, when the Wikipedia is "inaccurate" due to bias or limited understanding rather than simple error, it becomes more interesting because it is inaccurate. Looked at from this perspective, the word "inaccurate" ceases to have any meaning, because the Wikipedia is being used to determine how we see the world, and not whether that view is "accurate" in any empirical sense. In this light, the more accurate an entry is, the less useful and interesting it becomes. And, of course, what those that contribute to a given entry have found to be worth including is most interesting of all.

But wait (as they say) – there's more!

Since the Wikipedia exists in many non-identical, language-based independent editions, each of which is constantly changing, all of the editions taken together provide a real-time record of not only how our perception of ourselves morphs over time, but how that perception differs culturally around the world as well.

Let's conduct a simple test to determine what the Wikipedia would tell a future Wikipediologist in a few moments, as compared to what a traditional archaeologist could only guess after significantly greater labor.

We'll use this [brief account](#) of the contents of Katherine Nanny's late 17th century privy in what is now downtown Boston. That account provides no end of interesting guesses about the life of Ms. Nanny, an evidently feisty personage who divorced her husband in 1671, accusing him of (among other bad acts) "whoredomes," and "abuses of the marriage bed." For example, do the scraps of fine material indicate that Katherine dumped her husband's clothes down the chute rather than send them to her faithless husband when he requested them, after absconding with the pregnant servant girl? Or perhaps that she simply made the family's clothes? That the Nanny's were comfortably well off, or that Katherine was a seamstress for the well-to-do?

Or what of this?

Most intriguing of all were 250,000 seeds and pits from fruits, nuts, and spices, analyzed by Lawrence Kaplan and Marie Mansfield King of the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Cherry and plum pits made up 95 percent of the total, far more than any normal household would consume. Was Nanny making brandied cherries, or a steeped alcoholic drink called cherry bounce? "It looks like she was making preserves," says state archaeologist Brona Simon. "I think it was her business, a cottage industry." "There had to be something going on," Bob Hasenstab agrees, speculating that granary weevils, pollen, spoiled flour, and cherry pits meant Nanny was baking cherry pies.

Intriguing though these guesses may be (or not, depending on how you feel about granary weevils), merely guesses they must remain.

Note also that analyses such as these obscure the true purpose of archaeology to begin with, which is not to determine how Katherine Nanny in particular spent her time towards the end of the 1600s, but what life was like in general in Boston at that time. And the contents of one privy, no matter how interesting, do not a cultural portrait of an entire people make.

Now let's consult the Wikipedia to see how it would compare, using a Wikipedia definition of an archaeological artifact commonly found from the same period: the spoon. Likely enough Nanny's three-holer (a commodius facility, to be sure) must have yielded at least one spoon, which could have been interesting from its style, composition (silver or pewter) and maker's mark, if any. But beyond that – not much.

In contrast, consider the following extracts from the Wikipedia [entry](#) on this humble implement.

Extract from "Uses":

"Teaspoons are commonly employed by [heroin](#) addicts to "cook" the drug in by use of holding a flame underneath. The resulting liquified heroin is then transferred to a [syringe](#) and injected.

As of the 1940s, a combination utensil of spoon and [fork](#), the [spork](#), has been in use. Likewise, small, often flat, disposable [wooden spoons](#) are commonly given away with ice cream, cakes, and [malts](#) for use during their consumption. The [runcible spoon](#) is a spork with a cutting edge like a [knife](#).

Partial list from "Spoon Types," with separate supporting entries in each case:

- [Iced tea spoon](#)
- [Dessert spoon](#) — between tablespoon and teaspoon in size
- [Demitasse](#) spoon
- [Bouillon](#) spoon
- [Grapefruit spoon](#) — a spoon with serrated edges for cutting into and eating [grapefruit](#) halves
- [Egg spoon](#) — used for hens' eggs; smaller than a teaspoon
- [Caviar](#) spoon — usually made of [mother of pearl](#), [gold](#), [animal horn](#) or wood. [Silver](#) cannot be used because it affects the taste.
- [Absinthe spoon](#) — a flat, [slotted spoon](#) used to prepare [absinthe](#) for drinking
- [Plastic spoon](#) cheap and easily mass produced
- Spoodle — a cross between a spoon and a ladle, often used in [European cooking](#), particularly for [soups](#) and [stews](#)
- [Slotted spoon](#)
- [Wooden spoon](#)
- [Runcible spoon](#) — invented by [Edward Lear](#) in *The Owl and the Pussycat*, but later given a real meaning
- [Love spoon](#) — a carved wooden spoon given as a token of betrothal
- [Silver spoon](#) — a small spoon given to a newborn child to ensure good fortune; used as a metaphor for someone born to riches
- When a precious serving spoon is used for an [anointment](#) as part of a [coronation](#), it can be given the status of [regalia](#).
- [Cocaine spoon](#) — a very small spoon used to sniff [cocaine](#)
- Ear spoon — a small spoon used to remove [earwax](#)
- [Souvenir spoon](#) — may be any of the above types of spoon, but an important additional function is to signify or hold a memory of a place or event, or to display as a 'trophy' of having been there, thus also a classical memento from pilgrimage sites; they are often in more fancy materials and highly ornamentive, depicting sights, coat of arms, associated characters, etcetera.

Try and pull that richness of cultural and factual detail out of a privy!

But there is also more in this single entry, weaving together idioms and everyday practices, and much more, encapsulating within a single Webpage a snapshot of early 21st century life that incorporates details otherwise doomed to disappear beyond the horizon of time sooner rather than later.

Such as the following sampling:

- In the [culinary](#) world, a "spoon" is a restaurant owned and opened by a notable [chef](#) who sets the restaurant's overall tone and menu, but who largely leaves the day-to-day management to others while the chef operates one or more principal ([haute cuisine](#)) restaurants. Spoons are less expensive, but offer many recipes from the [high end](#) restaurant.
- [Wooden spoon](#) is a phrase used to describe the "achievement" of a team or individual in finishing last in a contest, a wooden spoon being a common and almost valueless object, in stark contrast to the contest winners who will often receive a trophy made of silver or similar precious metal. The term originates from [Cambridge University](#), wherein professors used to dangle a wooden spoon humiliateingly before students who had failed their [tripos](#).
- Spoon! Is the battle cry of the cartoon hero parody [The Tick](#).

Of course, There are also links to other significant resources, including the many [quotes](#) – both humorous and non - that can be found at [Wikiquote](#), each focusing on the word "[spoon](#)."

Does all of this add up to simple collection of disconnected trivia? Perhaps. But in the anthropological sense, another name for a "simple collection of disconnected trivia" is "culture." In contrast to the contents of a privy or a shipwreck, each virtual artifact comes with its connotations intact, supplied through electronic links. And in real time, too: our spoon entry was last edited only two days ago.

I personally believe that the Wikipedia is too important a cultural resource to risk losing. As a result, I have a suggestion to make to one of the preeminent beneficiaries of the rise of the advent of the Web, I propose that Google partner with the Wikipedia to archive and maintain the entire Wikipedia at some regular interval - not less than annually – and make the copies available to the public indefinitely, perhaps creating and endowing a trust to fulfill that mission, and giving it a suitably grandiloquent name. The "History of Humanity Project" might do nicely. Enabling future Wikipediologists to compare how a given entry changes over time, and how entries on the same topic in different languages compare at the same time, could offer a depth of understanding and study undreamed of in the history of the world.

How about it Larry and Sergey? What do you think?

There remains, of course, one final question. What of the romance of archaeology? If the Wikipedia is the ultimate crystal ball within which all may be seen, will technology have once again made our world a more comprehensible, but less pleasantly mysterious place in which to exist?

After all, I think not. One need only look once again to the Wikipedia entry on the humble spoon, and find reassurance in an external link to "The Spoon Project." The description of the link explains that The Spoon Project presents a "Gallery of people with spoons on their noses."



Spoon Man
From
[The Spoon Project Website](#)

Perhaps the significance of this creative endeavor will be instantly comprehensible to future Wikipediologists, who will immediately place it into its proper socio-economic and political context.

But I'm betting not.

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