

Giota Alevizou, **The Web of Knowledge: Encyclopedias and Authority in the Digital Age**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2026, 336 pp., \$26.95 (paperback).

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In ***The Web of Knowledge: Encyclopedias and Authority in the Digital Age***, Giota Alevizou provides a richly theoretical yet accessible genealogy of the encyclopedia as both media (plat)form and genre. Alevizou’s goal? To chart the encyclopedia’s evolution from Enlightenment ideals (vis-à-vis Diderot) to the contemporary landscape of Wikipedia in the (post)digital era. Drawing on more than two decades of “research, reflection, and reinvention” (p. xi), Alevizou explores how mediation technologies transform the form and purpose of encyclopedias and what these changes reveal about our relationship with authority and collective intelligence. As Jimmy Wales remarks in the foreword, Alevizou’s project underscores how “epistemologies underpinning encyclopedic projects, both historical and digital, are deeply intertwined with power dynamics and socio-economic structures” (p. xv). While scholarship about Wikipedia has declined in the last decade, there is plenty of exigence for its renewal, especially in the wake of generative artificial intelligence (AI). Large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT not only train on Wikipedia’s content, but they have also exacerbated the Wikipedia “detour” (Ford, 2022) that has limited the number of visitors, and thus engagement, the site receives (McDowell, 2024; Vetter et al., 2025).



In terms of methodology, Alevizou employs a multidisciplinary framework that integrates media archaeology, platform studies, and the sociology of genre to investigate the trajectory of what she terms “encyclomedia.” Something especially productive about this framework is Alevizou’s use of sociocognitive genre theory (Bazerman, 1997; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995) to help elucidate the sociality embedded in current and former instantiations of the encyclopedia. Alevizou’s primary argument examines how the encyclopedia’s digital transformation (1) occurs across various mediating technologies and sociocultural imaginaries and (2) represents a uniquely new order for knowledge production and mediation. Rather than being static repositories of content, encyclopedias are dynamic sociotechnical infrastructures that shape how a society values, organizes, and accesses knowledge as well as how its members cognitively interact and learn with, through, and across the genre.

One specific contribution that sets this book apart from other monographs (Ford, 2022; Jemielniak, 2014; Leitch, 2014; McDowell & Vetter, 2021; O’Sullivan, 2009; Reagle, 2012; Tcakz, 2015) is its exploration of how authority has been affected by Wikipedia as a mediating technology. In particular, Alevizou argues that Wikipedia as epistemic infrastructure represents a new order of knowledge production. In this new order, authority has shifted from institutionally ordained (e.g., *Britannica*) to procedural and

participatory. "This reconfiguration," writes Alevizou, "positioned [Wikipedia] not simply as a knowledge repository, but also as an 'encyclomedium' . . . [upon which] knowledge is co-produced through negotiation and procedural governance" (p. 179).

The book offers a media archaeology of the encyclopedia as it bears witness to early forms of the printed page, to CD-ROMs and the multimedia screen, and, finally, to AI-driven data platforms. A three-part structure helps illustrate this trajectory: (1) "From Scroll to Platform: Genealogies, Media Technologies, and Encyclopedic Knowledge," which includes chapters 1–3; (2) "Eras, Transitions, and Transformations," including chapters 4–6; and (3) "Rationalizing Authority: Encyclopedic Epistemologies in the Digital Age," covering the final two chapters and conclusion.

Part I, "From Scroll to Platform: Genealogies, Media Technologies, and Encyclopedic Knowledge," chapter 1, "From Roots to Routes," establishes the historical impetus for the genre as Alevizou traces the encyclopedia back to the Enlightenment desire to systematize human experience, while also exploring predigital technological visions. Chapter 1 is particularly useful in demonstrating how the encyclopedic serves as a conceptual metaphor for engagement with new sociocognitive ecosystems. Chapter 2, "Encyclopedic Genres and the Digital Information Economy," operationalizes Alevizou's theoretical framework, especially by making connections between genre theory and platform research. Combining these approaches allows for exploration of how Wikipedia retains certain values of the genre while introducing others, for example, "collaborative authority" and "distributed intelligence" (p. 19) in line with free/libre and open source (FLOSS) imaginaries of the 1990s' utopian culture in chapter 3, "Encyclopedic Dynamism and Epistemologies."

Part II, "Eras, Transitions, and Transformations," provides analysis of the "Multimedia Era" of the 1990s as Alevizou theorizes how mediation technologies and socioeconomic structures shaped the development of online encyclopedias (both commercial and commons based). In chapter 4, "From Page to Screen: The Multimedia Era," the author revisits the CD-ROM encyclopedia through cases like Microsoft's Encarta, illustrating where information began merging with entertainment and EdTech. Chapter 5, "From Paywalls to Platforms: Encyclopedias in the Digital Knowledge Economy," explores the shift toward "encyclopedic utilities" during the early 2000s' Internet boom, comparing monetization strategies of legacy models with the rise of open-source projects like Wikipedia. Finally, chapter 6, "Editing 'Authority': Wikipedia and Commons Knowledge," focuses on how Wikipedia's ethos of collective authorship created new tensions and hierarchies regarding authority, neutrality, and expertise.

At least part of Wikipedia's success, and why it came to supplant all other encyclopedic models, is due to its "accidental radicalism," new features of the genre that allowed rapid growth, as well as specific sociotechnical circumstances, which enabled it to assume a prominent position in digital attention economies (i.e., Google search rankings). While similar to Joseph Reagle's (2009) exploration of Wikipedia as a "happy accident," Alevizou emphasizes these radical elements to illustrate the genre's dynamism in the broader sociotechnical environment.

Part III, "Rationalizing Authority: Encyclopedic Epistemologies in the Digital Age," tells the story of Wikipedia (and in the process the Internet more broadly) as Alevizou demonstrates how knowledge is

reconfigured through platformization and automation. Chapter 7, "Rewriting Authority: The Changing Value(s) of Encyclopedic Knowledge," analyzes press coverage to trace how authority shifted from institutional models toward platform logics of participation and engagement metrics. In the context of the growing ubiquity of AI on the Web, Wikipedia becomes more authoritative precisely because it is reviewed by humans. But even before that, in the 2010s, Wikipedia's reputation improved leading up to and after its 20th anniversary, especially in a climate of misinformation. Despite this improved reputation, Alevizou notes how the encyclopedia continues to suffer from representational and geographic biases. One minor weakness of this book, which the author acknowledges, is its primary focus on Western conceptions of knowledge. However, this is mitigated by her discussion of knowledge equity initiatives that seek to center marginalized communities (pp. 200–203).

In chapter 8, "Epistemic Qualities and AI Threats," the book turns to contemporary issues—especially the risks that LLMs pose both for Wikipedia specifically and the digital knowledge commons in general. This chapter will be of particular interest for those who would like to better understand how the shift toward AI answers (in search engines, social media, mobile apps, virtual assistants, and generative AI websites—indeed across the entire digital information ecosystem) endangers the future of Wikipedia while also exacerbating issues related to information provenance, systemic bias, and the potential for AI model collapse.

These issues are taken up again in the conclusion, in which Alevizou acknowledges that the future of Wikipedia as a human-led site for the commons and a "living archive of democratic knowledge" (p. 238) is unknown. "Whether Wikipedia can retain this role in the age of synthetic intelligence," she writes, "remains an open question, but its cultural relevance and its symbolic power as an imperfect yet enduring epistemic experiment are perhaps more vital than ever" (p. 238).

Ultimately, *The Web of Knowledge* is an essential text for students and researchers of communication theory and digital media, Wikimedians and Wikipedians, as well as those who want to learn more about the modern history of the encyclopedia. It serves as an excellent primer on how we assess interconnected epistemologies, both in the past and in a new era of AI. By the end of the book, Alevizou challenges anyone interested in protecting knowledge integrity in the digital ecosystem, arguing that its future "will depend significantly on our collective ability to regulate, contest, and consciously design these digital infrastructures, ensuring they remain both epistemically robust and publicly accountable in an age defined by synthetic intelligence" (p. 249).

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