Editing Encyclopedias for Fun and Aggravation

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Abstract   This collaborative, retrospective autoethnography begins by offering an overview of the encyclopedias with which we have been involved, as both contributors and consulting editors, over the past decade. We then review our strategies for recruiting authors and maintaining their interest to ensure the highest quality entries; it also covers the mechanics of processing these entries. Next, we discuss the actual and perceived benefits of editing an encyclopedia, the most significant issues we encountered, and our solutions. Finally, we contextualize the previous information in light of recent changes in the scholarly publishing industry.

Keywords   Book-editing · Book publishing · Contributors · Encyclopedia · Entries · HNET · Online publishing · Plagiarism · Remuneration · Research · Scholarly publishing · Wikipedia · Word counts

Introduction

In recent years, we (the authors of this article) and some of our colleagues have edited encyclopedias on varied aspects of the social sciences. This trend is likely a result of market conditions being favorable for these sorts of projects, editors' and publishers' willingness to develop encyclopedias, and a natural outgrowth of the deluge of edited books during the past three decades in the diverse fields of social

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science. Perhaps foolishly, many of us also decided to take the plunge and edit encyclopedias of our own.

Our motivations were diverse. Some of us were attracted primarily to the idea of editing an encyclopedia because of the financial remuneration. The advances appeared to be more substantial than what we had traditionally received for previous book-editing projects. Other reasons for our participation ranged from the desire to somehow contribute to the literature in a certain field to the satisfaction entailed in authoring or editing a manuscript for publication thus having a final, printed product.

As the authors of this piece, we decided to construct it as one part autoethnography, or a "how to" piece for individuals considering editing this type of encyclopedia, and another part helpful advice for authors who might consider submitting one or more entries to an encyclopedia. This article also builds upon selected research and writing one of the authors has done on compiling scholarly edited books [2] and one other published piece written by the editor of an encyclopedia [1].

Needless to say, throughout our careers we have frequently explored the possibility of working on encyclopedias in our areas of expertise. This process typically entailed conducting a relatively simple market analysis, as there is little to be gained by producing an encyclopedia on topics already covered in a number of recently released encyclopedias.

When we decided to edit our very first respective encyclopedia projects, assuming the rarified position of general, consulting or project editors, (terms used interchangeably throughout this article), we brought different levels of book-publishing experience to these projects. One of us had 11 books in print at the time, including sole-authored, co-authored, edited and co-edited formats, while the other had co-authored two previous books and is currently serving as chief consultant and contributing author on an edited book project for an internationally based publisher. We had both contributed several entries (also refered to as pieces and articles) to different encyclopedias—in other words, we generally knew what we were getting into. However, it quickly became evident that we may have had a tendency for sadomasochism, the kind one can experience when engaging in this kind of project. Some of us apparently have a high tolerance for pain.

After writing our respective proposals and enduring some minor haggling over the contracts, each of us was able to strike a deal with our publishers. Just to give the reader some sort of perspective, between the time that the contract was signed and the book published can take anywhere from 3 to 5 years. For example, with one of the projects one of the writers is involved in, 3 years have passed since the ink dried on one of these contracts, written for a project that comprised a two-volume encyclopedia set with a total of 135 entries, or close to 600,000 words—a considerable amount of work for the authors and the editor. On the other hand, the other co-author has edited two social science encyclopedias, each of which consisted of two volumes with entries from both US-based and international authors. This experience is similar to that of Beede who took approximately 5 years to complete his encyclopedia.1 All of the above-mentioned projects required considerable effort and often infringed upon other professional and personal

responsibilities. On average prospective editors should plan on allocating between 18 months and 3 years to prepare a scholarly encyclopedia for publication and expecting an additional 6–9 months before the manuscript is published. During this period the editor will be required to review the entire manuscript and make various minor modifications as deemed appropriate by the publishers editing staff.

Recruitment of Authors

Over the years, each of us has developed a stable of writers on whom we can usually depend; at the very least, we certainly know their work habits. One of the contributors to this article began his search for contributors by sending e-mails to almost all of them he has worked with. His initial list of suggested entry topics was fairly rudimentary; he began by rank-ordering potential entries based on word count, and when that became unwieldy, he created a more comprehensive conceptual framework. He also allowed prospective authors to propose topics, after which point he arranged the ideas into some sort of meaningful rubric.

This same author also poured through all of his old e-mail messages and contacts, simultaneously consolidating his database and reaching out to individuals who might make ideal contributors. Offers to write particular entries slowly trickled in, making it evident that the author needed to generate entries another way. Generic e-mail requests for contributors were sent to a network of political violence scholars, and another to a network of European criminology academics. He had the best success, however, with notices placed on the HNET net, a website devoted to disseminating information of interest to social scientists and on an Asian scholar computer network board.

The other colleague begins soliciting contributors once an encyclopedia's entry list has been approved by his publisher. He then advertises on HNET and solicits contributors among academic and research colleagues with whom he has previously worked. When he uses HNET, he posts the title of the publication, contributor parameters, entry due dates, and a brief synopsis of the proposed contents. This method of advertisement draws a respectable number of inquiries; obviously, the more the better. This same information is often forwarded to potential contributors recruited through the aforementioned networking process. Writers are then vetted through a Google search or by phone, and some are selected to receive additional information, including the entry list. At that point, the author engages those selected to contribute and invites them to refer the original posting to any colleagues they believe are well qualified to address the various topics covered in the entry list. This technique expands the universe of potential contributors and has proven to be a successful strategy in identifying ideal writers.

Establishing Word Counts

In tinkering with a variety of encyclopedia entries, it is wise to predict an appropriate word count for each piece. Like entries (e.g., biographies) should have

similar word counts, and a general rule of thumb suggests that that the entry length should be related to its importance (i.e., topics that have major relevance to the book's overall theme). Thus, it takes some skill to balance the lengths of your entries with those of the other authors, also factoring in the editors' preferences. Publishers often impose a predetermined limit on the total number of words that will be accepted for publication in the completed manuscript. This number is usually established prior to the start of the project, allowing for slight modifications as the project develops.

Mechanics of Processing

As the inquiries to participate start to arrive (sometimes as many as 20 per day), it is helpful to develop a number of form e-mails to cover such necessities as contract details and rejections. However, it's also wise to offer to keep those you reject in mind; you never know when you might encounter delinquent contributors who need to be replaced or additional entries that should be written.

Many authors tend to be appropriately and predictably concerned about the remuneration involved in a project of this type. One of the contributors to this paper makes a point to explain to potential and actual entry writers (also identified as contributors in this paper) that it's difficult to determine compensation details at the beginning of the process. For instance, he explained to a would-be entry writer that, according to the acquisitions editor, writers who contributed up to a certain number of words would receive complimentary copies of the published set. Those who contributed shorter entries would receive some sort of honorarium (i.e., financial compensation) that had yet to be worked out. The actual amount of compensation typically depends in part on how many entries a contributor ultimately writes and their respective lengths. It would also be comparable to the kinds of rates that our colleagues have offered for similar projects; the rates our publishers allowed us to offer are typical for encyclopedia contributions.

The other co-author of this paper generally knew at the outset what contributors would be paid based on the word count assigned to each entry. Even if the word count exceeded the pre-assigned limit, the fee would not change unless a prior agreement authorized the additional words.

For one of us, once he had identified a potential contributor, he sent a formal e-mail invitation specifying that all pieces must be written in a scholarly or academic manner. In other words, the contributor must take a balanced approach to the subject matter, and any contributions should offer sufficient documentation from appropriate sources. A general rule of thumb is to include at least one bibliographic citation per manuscript page. This same editor also requested that writers avoid citing material from www.wikipedia.com, avoid jargon, and be cautious to avoid plagiarism.

In some cases, entries were sent out for external review and authors were asked to make revisions based on the reviewers' comments. Although this step slowed down the process ultimately it led to a better product.

In sum, the key components of a successful encyclopedia are qualified and dependable writers who can meet deadlines. Additionally, the contributor agreement and associated documentation must contain specific instructions on entry requirements, including formatting issues, style guidelines, word counts, and due dates. Generally speaking, an encyclopedia article needs to thoroughly address the main topic, include appropriate sub-headings, use non-technical language, and include an adequate number of relevant bibliographic citations.

Problems with the Process

Not unsurprisingly in projects of this size, both co-authors' experiences editing encyclopedias involved addressing particularly serious issues such as inappropriate contributors, bad writing, and instances of plagiarism.

Dealing with Inappropriate Contributors

One of an editor's many duties is to deal with individuals who might not be well suited to write entries for a particular project. In the course of editing, both co-authors of this article often received inquiries from individuals who were not qualified or who were simply ideologues—and sometimes both. As professionals, we needed to vet these people without insulting them. In some cases, prospective writers failed to provide personal information or qualifications. We would attempt to research these individuals on the Web, and if unable to find the information we needed, we would typically request a copy of their vita. Most met our request, but some—typically graduate students—didn't have this type of document prepared, while others never responded at all. Of those graduate students who submitted a vita and those who, for one reason or another, did not appear to be academics, we needed to assess their relevant backgrounds (i.e. courses taken, previous experience(s) writing for publication, etc.) to determine if they were qualified to address the chosen topics. Obviously, those who did not submit replies were not given further consideration. In some instances, we quite bluntly asked the potential entry writers what they believed made them qualified to write certain entries? Some confessed that they were graduate students struggling to get published, in which case we suggested that they collaborate with a supervisor on the project. As with previously mentioned attempts to secure more information, some got back in touch with us, while others did not. Those who did were often required to produce writing samples.

We always made an effort to get back in touch with potential and actual contributors in an expeditious manner, which most writers seemed to appreciate. Some chosen entry writers, however, took a long time (2–4 weeks) and several e-mails and/or phone calls on our part to confirm their participation. Likewise, there were always one or two individuals who never responded at all. In the meantime, based on the "you snooze, you loose" principle, the first qualified writer who expressed an interest in a particular entry was generally assigned that entry. Potential writers who demonstrated an initial interest in that same entry but then waited 2 months to get back to us were frequently disappointed to learn that their

initial entry selection(s) had been given to other writers. Therefore, since editing an encyclopedia is a fluid process, we suggest that editors advise prospective contributors to select alternative entries in the event that their primary choices are no longer available.

We frequently granted extensions to entry deadlines when requested, but even so, there were writers who still failed to deliver. The first author of this piece encountered prospective entry writers who demanded contracts up front. His standard reply was to explain that writing a contract for every selected author would be a considerable waste of time, paper, and postage, as some authors will likely drop out or ask for extensions, thus requiring contract revisions or cancellations.

This same editor made a practice of sending out official contracts only upon receipt of a satisfactory entry; he informed writers early on that they would receive mailed contracts after a typical review period of 1–3 weeks. The other contributor to this article sent a contract upon each writer's agreement to participate in the project. More about this process will be discussed below.

Note that the practice of granting extensions often places the editor in a position where his or her options are somewhat limited. Depending on the final publisher-imposed deadline and other commitments, the editor may attempt to find another contributor, delete the entry from the project, or write the article himself.

Our experience has shown that establishing firm entry-submission deadlines is crucial to avoiding chaos. Editors should decide on a realistic timeframe for submissions whereby after that point, missing entries should be reassigned if necessary. This policy needs to be communicated to all entry writers, and editors should be prepared to follow up with contributors on a periodic, timely basis.

Moreover, late entries received only after substantial follow-up tend to require considerable revision relative to the stated facts, sentence structure, and length. It's often apparent that these entries were written in a hasty, non-professional manner to meet the originally established deadline or subsequent deadlines. Depending on the quality of the piece, its importance to the final manuscript, and the editors' time constraints, we may choose to revise the entry ourselves or to return it to the author with specific comments. We have also encountered writers whose revised entries, submitted late in the process, present the additional issue of plagiarism.

Confronting Bad Writing

Although this may not have been easy to determine when we read their CVs or writing samples, editors should also be prepared for the possibility of working with contributors for whom English might not be their first language, resulting in significant grammar issues within their submitted entries. When one of this article's authors politely suggested to such a writer that he pursue some sort of assistance with the English language, his request was not well received. In this day and age, where access to spell check functions on word processing programs and Web resources is readily available, one would think that grammar and citation issues would be a thing of the past. Unfortunately, this problem still remains.

The severity of a contributor's writing problems would determine whether we would revise and restructure the problematic parts of these entries after attempting

to establish the author's intended meaning or simply reject the piece. Our experience has shown working with the contributor to improve this type of submission tends to be the simplest solution—one that satisfies all involved. This problem, however, is compounded if numerous entries containing similar grammatical errors need to be addressed.

Since contributors are not drawn solely from English-speaking countries, reference book editors often must deal with bad writing (e.g., sentence structure, grammar and word choice) from their entry writers. If a contributor is qualified to address the topic, punctual in meeting deadlines, and easy to work with, then we have always been willing to go the extra mile and work with that writer to ensure that his or her entry is submitted for publication.

Despite clearly delineated requirements about length, style and tone, these specifications did not always sit well with potential contributors. For example, in early solicitations, we would occasionally receive requests from individuals who had an ideological axe to grind. Thus, in a polite fashion, we began to request that any interested writers avoid diatribes. Another frequently occurring problem involves writers who fail to adhere to the required word count for specific entries. Some writers submit entries that fall far short of the required word count, while others exceed the number by several hundred words or more. In the case of an entry that lacks the pre-assigned word count, the editor should specify those areas that can be solidified to add more substance to the discussion. Conversely, an entry that far exceeds the word limit needs to be edited, with extraneous or repetitive information deleted. In each case, and time permitting, the problematic entry should be returned to the writer citing specific points that need to be addressed before the entry will be accepted. That said, it is our experience that many of these entries can be modified to ensure that relevant and important facts are cited and that irrelevant and redundant information is deleted from the entry.

Despite our constant reminders that the average reader is not likely to specialize in the subject of the encyclopedia and that it's best to assume the average person's reading level is about that of an American undergraduate student, some contributors submitted drafts that were clearly written for the writers' peers as opposed to a general audience. A word of caution: In our experience, addressing this issue with the writer often spawns a heated discussion, as some writers take offense at the idea of toning down an entry.

Plagiarism and the Use of Wikipedia

On some occasions in which we received a particularly disjointed entry, we were cautious enough to check for plagiarism. One way to do so is to select key phrases from the entry and run a search on Google. Another popular method is to submit each entry into a plagiarism detection-website such as www.turnitin.com.

To our chagrin, this process usually confirmed what we suspected—that a writer made the mistake of plagiarizing copy. Dealing with these matters takes a great deal of tact, as we've found that entry writers confronted with this dishonesty are usually unwilling to accept responsibility for their actions and instead blame the problem on a co-author or on a research assistant. The confirmation of plagiarism can then

warrant a full revision of the entry or the offending writer's removal from the project. We recommend that encyclopedia editors who plan to submit drafts to www.turnitin.com advise potential authors in advance that this type of resource will be used to examine submitted copy.

After dealing with this issue more than a few times, one co-author of this paper developed a policy of issuing a general warning to prospective contributors. Predictably, some contributors chose to drop out of certain projects. One potential contributor responded that the fact that an e-mail of this nature needed to be sent out meant that the encyclopedia did not appear scholarly enough and thus decided to drop out of the project. Others e-mailed the editor with messages of solidarity empathizing with his predicament and sharing similar horror stories. Short of writing back to those who dropped out, this editor simply deleted them from the contact list and looked for replacements.

In sum, our combined experience has shown that periodic and random checks as noted above sometimes avert potentially major ethical and copyright issues. Ultimately, this kind of safety measure helps to avoid discrediting the publication, the publisher, editor, and the other contributors who have invested their time and expertise in an encyclopedia project.

Contributors Who are Overly Concerned About Remuneration

In one editor's entry-writing experience, the compensation allotted for contributors has ranged from nothing to $75 and a copy of the finished product. Generally, compensation is based on word count; for example, an article comprising 1,000 words could pay $25–$30, whereas a 2,000-word article would warrant payment in the $60–$75 range. Some publishers offer a copy of the work for entries containing a pre-established number of words. Should contributors opt to receive a copy of the encyclopedia, they would not receive monetary compensation unless they then contributed an additional entry.

An encyclopedia's retail value can range anywhere from $150 to $500. Although publishers discourage this practice, some contributors choose not to hold on to their complimentary copies. These resources can be sold on eBay or gifted to libraries (with the added benefit of a tax deduction). One of the contributors to this article noted that his wife is currently writing an encyclopedia article and is being compensated $250. In jest, he asked her to pass on the name of the editor so that he, too, could write an article for that level of compensation. Nevertheless, this type of fee for a single encyclopedia article is highly unlikely with most projects.

Entries Returned to the Editor by the Publisher

For a variety of reasons, the publisher may return a completed entry to the general editor. The publisher might feel that the entry requires additional work, in particular clarifications or that the author needs to address other concerns or questions. In certain cases, the general editor then returns the entry to the appropriate author outlining the publisher's concerns and requesting a revision by a firm deadline. Therefore, upon receipt of the revised version, the editor should carefully review the

entire entry to verify that the publisher's concerns have been addressed and that the revision did not generate additional issues. Otherwise, depending on time constraints and/or perceptions of his expertise the consulting editor handles the revisions himself.

How to Minimize the Hassles

There are a handful of methods upon which encyclopedia editors can rely to minimize the aggravation often involved with this type of projects. These include:

Follow Up, Follow Up, Follow Up. Based on our previous project management experience we were adamant about constantly following up with actual or potential contributors. If they were late, we would e-mail them to politely ask for a status update. Approximately a month before the entry due date for a previous project, the first author of this article sent a reminder to all contributors along the lines of "Dear Contributor: This is a reminder that I will be expecting your entries, 'title,' with the respective word count. Let me know if you are experiencing any difficulties with this project and/or if I can be of any assistance."

Occasionally, authors would e-mail us back after receiving what we thought were clear instructions to complain that they misinterpreted the word count or other important aspects. Contacting the authors as soon as possible is key to avoiding or reducing confusion.

In order to minimize hassles, it is wise to *restrict the number of entries* that each contributor can agree to write. One of the co-authors of this article wound up on the hook for eight entries when repeated e-mails and phone calls went unanswered. Critically needed entries that he had assigned failed to materialize, so he had to write them himself. Several of these articles had to be deleted due to publication time constraints. Hence, it becomes very important to establish firm deadlines.

One co-author of this article *establishes a project spreadsheet* (e.g., in Excel) to track each entry from initial assignment to final completed draft and creates a project-specific e-mail address in order to effectively manage editor-author communications. The spreadsheet should include the number/title of the article, contributor's name, date the entry was assigned, times when follow-up e-mails/ phone calls were initiated, entry due date, date the entry received editorial approval, and the date the entry was submitted to the publisher. This provides a holistic view of the entire project and serves as a quick reference to monitor entries which appear to be in trouble.

Additionally, editors should *establish a project-specific e-mail address* to effectively manage a high volume of project-related correspondence and to segregate this information from other e-mail communications. This will help consolidate all publisher-editor-author electronic communications and should be incorporated into your project management protocols.

After receiving the publisher's firm deadline for submission of the completed manuscript and prior to the entry solicitation process, you might *consider establishing two deadlines* based on the total number of words written by each prospective contributor. For example, establish one deadline for articles up to 2,000

words and another deadline for articles exceeding 2,000 words. Additionally, deadlines must allow sufficient time for the editor/author to revise entries if necessary prior to their submission to the publisher.

To make the editing process more manageable, you might also *think about assigning articles an alphanumeric system of cataloging*. In most cases, this system will be a three-digit number, i.e., 001–140, and will reflect the total number of entries contained in the manuscript. Moreover, utilizing a three-digit numbering system allows the editor to make adjustments to the original entry list and allows for the inclusion of an alpha character, i.e., 001a, b, c…) to the table of contents in the event a new entry is added. The addition of a new entry during the life span of a project usually occurs when the editor feels it is necessary to expand the scope of the book or when he or she determines that a subject not previously addressed needs to be assigned to provide a more comprehensive finished manuscript. Concomitantly, a previously assigned entry could be deleted due to a contributor's failure to honor the original commitment or to complete the entry to the editor's satisfaction. This system of cataloging entries allows the editor to quickly identify the deleted entry at some future point in the publication process. In an encyclopedia project that can easily span 2–3 years, the entry list (table of contents) will remain fluid. Entries are often added or deleted based on a number of factors, some of which are cited above.

Finally, editors are often required to submit ideas for pictures, maps, graphs, or other illustrative and instructional material. This usually occurs when approximately 75% of the project has been submitted and approved for publication. Furthermore, project editors are usually responsible for obtaining, in writing, permission to use copyrighted material. This documentation needs to be submitted to the publisher prior to the publication of the manuscript.

Side Benefits

At one point in time, one of the writers of this article considered selecting different subsets of entries to his encyclopedia project and spinning off a number of edited books or encyclopedias in conjunction with the same publisher. After e-mailing about a half-dozen contributors about their willingness to use their entries for both purposes (i.e., the original encyclopedia and a new writing project) and receiving a lackluster response from his editor, he decided not to proceed.

Another benefit of taking on an encyclopedia editing project, has to do with the networking aspect of producing a high-quality reference work. This exercise can be personally enriching, as ideas are exchanged and, in many cases, interaction occurs with people from different backgrounds and cultures who come together to promulgate knowledge and make it available to the average person as well as the specialist.

Finally, remuneration for this type of work is usually not commensurate with the amount of effort expended. However, most publishers do provide the project editor(s) a monetary advance distributed over the course of the project. Generally speaking, advances to editors are usually timed to coincide with set percentages of

the completed manuscript. For example, some publishers allow for a draw upon acceptance of the entry list and again at the quarter, half, and manuscript completion stages, with the final draw usually paid at the time of publication. It is important to note that completion refers to the total words submitted against the total words cited in the original publisher-editor written agreement. It is also important to note that this advance is typically against future royalties if indeed editor royalties have been incorporated into the original agreement.

Conclusion

Online publishing coupled with the downturn in the economy has had a major impact on the reference-book publishing industry. Moreover, the availability of Internet sites such as Wikipedia and other Internet-based information sources have contributed to the decline of hard-copy reference works. Advances in information technology and Internet search engines provide instant access to information with a click of a mouse. Although this says nothing about the quality of the information, as competition with Internet-based information increases, some publishing firms are reluctant to invest the necessary resources they once did to produce high-quality encyclopedias. With so much information available online, the idea of periodically updating hard-copy encyclopedias is losing much of its appeal, as information quickly becomes outdated and the cost to the publisher is often prohibitive.

Some publishers currently sell hard-copy encyclopedias via their Web sites. From a business standpoint, it would make sense to offer periodic updates on the topics covered in the original work. This option could serve as a one-stop-shop for specific information and enable the publisher to more effectively compete with the myriad online information sources.

That said, we—still personally enjoy being able to sit quietly and turn the pages of a book (or an encyclopedia, as is the case) that we helped to write, edit or otherwise manage. Although the encyclopedia-editing process can be frustrating and time-consuming, and while it often lacks adequate monetary compensation, there is a certain level of satisfaction in opening the pages of a reference work and knowing that we were instrumental in bringing that publication to fruition.

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