Editing an encyclopedia - features, facts, and fantasies

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"You must know an awful lot", is a common comment, when people learn you have been editing a general encyclopedia - to which the honest answer is, "Not a bit - but I do now know where to look things up". And indeed, the need to look things up does seem part of the spirit of the age. As information floods in, through all the media, we are faced with the task of making it accessible. We stand no chance of remembering it all, so we have to find ways of putting it on one side, pending the moment when we need it. We have also begun to train our children for this brave new world: project-based programmes of continuous assessment have become the norm, asking the child to investigate, to explore, to look up. Even our leisure activities are affected. Consider the many knowledge-based game-shows on radio and television (such as Mastermind) and in the press (such as crosswords, played daily by millions), all asking us "Do we know?", "Can we remember?".

In the eighties, issues of information storage and retrieval came very much to the fore, along with a demand for products which would give intelligible and ready access to this information - notably, the single-volume encyclopedia. I have been editing the Cambridge Encyclopedia, the latest and largest work in this genre, during the past three years. The quantitative aspects of the book are easily stated: a million and a half words in nearly 1,500 pages; over 31,000 entries, including a 128-page Ready Reference section on tinted paper, and a 16-page full-colour section; over 800 illustrations; over 75,000 cross-references; the use of a second colour throughout; nearly 100 contributors and consultants. This is the stuff of which blurbs are made. But what does it all mean? What makes a single-volume encyclopedia distinctive?

One thing I have learned, from this project, is just how personal, subjective, and indeed creative good encyclopedia writing is. It is by no means a routine, mechanical exercise in fact-finding. The creative element is especially strong in the first half of the project, when one is setting targets for coverage and treatment, defining stylistic level, and working out with contributors how to write material at that level. The routine, of course, emerges later, in the form of the hard, grinding slog which ensures consistency, up-to-dateness, and high standards of presentation. One does not go out much, during the last nine months of encyclopedia editing.

What makes this particular work distinctive? An important early decision was to go for information content, and to avoid the "pretty picture" approach to encyclopedia compilation. Some encyclopedias seem uncertain of their role these days: they are a cross between a reference book and an art book or travel guide - lots of lovely pictures of people and places, but limited information about the pictured topics, and many topics not covered because of the resulting lack of space. The Cambridge Encyclopedia has nailed its flag firmly to the information mast. It has no photographs at all, and its line drawings are always functional, playing an essential part in exposition. As a consequence, large amounts of space became available, and this was a major factor enabling us to increase coverage so dramatically, compared with other works in the genre.

In terms of treatment, the most far-reaching decision was stylistic. As a linguist, I was particularly concerned to attack the problem of accessibility. My experience of encyclopedias was that, often, the entries were understandable only by specialists. Could we devise fresh norms of style which would make complex subjects intelligible to the general reader yet at the same time be fair to those subjects, by retaining their particular tone? The Cambridge Encyclopedia is, in part, a linguistic experiment, in which entries vary in stylistic level, depending on the subject, within the perspective of plain English. Getting the style right proved to be the second most time-consuming aspect of the whole enterprise.

And the most time-consuming? The cross-references. Single-volume encyclopedias usually try to package their information in relatively short chunks - for example, just over half the entries in the Cambridge Encyclopedia average 125 words. This is of considerable help to the general reader, who usually wants a quick answer to a short question, and doesn't want to have to wade through a column or two of dense prose in order to find it. But plainly, this kind of presentation is less helpful if you are interested in an overview of several topics (e.g. if you were researching a school project on the instruments of the orchestra). A systematic approach to cross-referencing is the way to help such enquirers, and in the Cambridge Encyclopedia this becomes a major feature - there are over 75,000 in all. These are not the equivalents of the traditional asterisks - used in front of a word in an entry to tell you that the concept is dealt with elsewhere in the book. I see the cross-references as teaching aids; often they send readers to associated concepts which may not be mentioned in the entry at all. The strength of this approach becomes apparent in the clustering of references found in longer entries, such as art or World War 2.

So what skills does an encyclopedia editor need? There are indeed several practical, critical skills, such as the ability to type, and the ability to proof-read (which is when one discovers one is not as good a typist as one thought one was). Only in this way, for example, has the world been spared a new British political party (the Social Demoncrats), a new country (Wet Germany), and - my favourite, when a headword was omitted - a conflation of British Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson with the adjacent entry, for laxative! What fantasies one could contrive, if there were time! But more important are the personality traits which seem to be crucial.

You have to have a genuinely catholic range of interests. You cannot edit a subject well if it bores you. At the very least, you have to have a high regard for all intellectual traditions, and learn to develop a tolerance and respect for other people's enthusiasm and industry. Especially in such areas as religion, politics, and history, there has to be resolute fairmindedness. It is so easy to slip up - for example, to betray a Eurocentric bias by saying the British "discovered" a country (when native Indians had lived in it for generations).

You have to be organised, especially when you are dealing with around 100 contributors, whose material is coming in on 100 different time schedules, and at several different stages of editorial involvement (headword discussion, style drafts, first full draft, revision, further revision . . .). The good news was that we were working computationally, the whole book being edited on a large hard disk, using a fine text-management system known as INMAGIC, which gave us great indexing power and immediate information retrieval. The bad news was that three-quarters of the way through the project our computer system proved to be too small (the engineer who analysed the problem said that the poor disk had been "worked to death"!) and had to be replaced.

You have to be able to switch on and off, as you move from subject to subject. My notes tell me that one morning, in the middle of the project, there was a series of phone calls from (a) the pharmacologist, wanting to discuss some new data on AIDS drugs, (b) the ornithologist, with various ideas about illustrations, (c) one of the religious studies team, replying to my query about the options for Biblical references, and (d) the development editor at Chambers, who had queries about (e) the use of hyphens and dashes in chemical formulae, and (f) the dating conventions for historical battles. During all this, I was (g) attempting to edit the literature entries. It was a fairly typical morning. You have to use identifying letters even to recall it accurately.

Above all, you have to be a deeply suspicious person. Trust no-one. This is a lesson I learned very early on, when I was compiling the first sets of "facts" for the Ready Reference section (a distinctive feature of this encyclopedia). The ten longest rivers? or largest seas? If you look these up in your favourite reference work, you will be given a listing. But if you look them up in some other reference work, you will be given a different listing. Everything depends on the criteria the compiler has in mind, such as (in the case of rivers), does the distance include the longest headstream? At the very least, therefore, the reader should be given a note about the methods used in obtaining such data. And as an editor, you learn to take nothing for granted, and to remember the principle that there are no facts but editing makes them so.

Lastly, having worked out a general schedule, you must then teach yourself to forget it, and live only for the day - or indeed, for the entry. There is one cardinal principle: you must imagine that the entry on which you are currently working is the only entry that anyone will ever look up. Only in such a frame of mind is it possible to give the entry the full attention it needs. The day you bring into consciousness that you have still 17,659 entries to go, you are lost. Mind you, this procedure is likely to foster depression in production managers, because delivery of the typescript (or, in our case, discscript) will certainly be late (in our case, six months late), as a consequence, but it is the only intellectually honest way to proceed.

I see encyclopedias in a new light, after this experience. I have learned how personal, selective and biased they are. And I now feel strongly that single-volume encyclopedias, above all, should make these biases of selection explicit. The Cambridge Encyclopedia is the first of the genre to have a proper preface, explaining at some length what the editor has been up to. The preface is an integral feature of the work - following a respected tradition in reference books which began in English with Dr Johnson, but which seems to have been lost sight of in small encyclopedias.

I also now see the world in a new light. Indeed, I can no longer read the newspaper without mentally evaluating each event in terms of the number of extra lines the event will require. I have begun to think in terms of a "one-line death" or a "four-line revolution". Oh brave new world, that has such people in it!