

# EDIT IT AGAIN, SAM

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People sometimes ask me what is the worst problem I have to wrestle with, in editing a general encyclopedia. The conceptual structure of the work? Maintaining communication with contributors? Ensuring editorial consistency? Checking factual content? Planning the cross references? All wrong. It is keeping an eye on the typographic gremlins which emerge at night and change your impeccably typed entries.

You leave an entry late at night, and it reads perfectly. The next morning, you call up the entry on your computer screen and an alien word waves at you. More than on any other project, you learn to trust nothing, to re-read everything. Only in this way was it possible to avoid having the *Cambridge Encyclopedia* introduce to the world such institutions as the (presumably sweet-smelling) Chanel Tunnel or (presumably the opposite) Puking Opera. Or, to take a random selection, the Society of Fronds, New Mork City, the American Civil Wart, and the Wet End of London. Then there was Carthage, 'refounded by Julie Caesar', and Beethoven, 'handicapped by deadness'. We spotted these. Maybe there are others, still lurking in the printed pages, waiting to be noticed.

There's no task quite like editing a general encyclopedia – a project whose scope is, quite simply, everything. I took the job on in 1986, not realising just how much would be involved. It was a greedy project, eating up three and a half years of life, to produce that first edition – and a fair part of the lives of my family, whom I remember meeting occasionally. I work from home, Johnsonially, at the top of a house at the top of a cul-de-sac (but in Holyhead, not Gough Square), and all the inputting, editing, and co-ordination was done from a study which became progressively smaller as the contributions grew. Nor was the rest of the house immune. Editing a general encyclopedia changes the way you live and behave. You cannot even read a newspaper or watch TV any more without thinking of your entries. World events, births, deaths, prizes, inventions, all suddenly become very personal. When an entry is complete, and someone does something to change it (such as dying), you don't take it kindly.

'How do you begin such a work?' I am often asked. The first step is deciding on the biases you want to reflect in the book, the balance of coverage you want between your topic areas, and the level of treatment for each entry. You realise straight away that an encyclopedia is not a comprehensive guide to anything: it is a selection, made subjectively by a human editor. It is in many ways just as creative as writing fiction. Encyclopedias – because of the constraints on their space – occupy a world of half-truths. They tell only a fraction of

what could be said about a topic – and in that selectivity, there is much creative potential. ‘It’s how you tell ’em’ isn’t just a catch-phrase for comedians.

Once you’ve made your decisions about balance, you have to find people willing to write the entries at the length and level you want (I tried to keep in mind an intelligent sixth former). This proved unexpectedly difficult, especially as I wanted to avoid another trap that encyclopedias often fall into – providing expertly written but largely unintelligible entries. My background is in linguistics, and I am a great believer in developing accessible styles of English for technical domains. But I know such writing does not come easily. Some specialists are very skilled at it, but most are not. My biology team, from the Natural History Museum, were very good at it – presumably because of their long experience of putting information across to members of the public. But several contributors needed considerable rewriting – a highly time-consuming task, as every rewritten entry had to be carefully checked with its original writer. Factual errors don’t impress anyone, not even in plain English.

It was surprisingly difficult to find certain kinds of information. One of the innovations of my encyclopedia was to put a large *Ready Reference* section at the end of the book. It included, for example, all the political leaders of the world’s countries since 1900. You might think that would be a straightforward compilation. Far from it. Especially in the more turbulent states, finding out who was actually in charge in a given year (or month, or week), what his title was, and which body he led (we are talking about such names as ‘Chairman of the Glorious Committee of the New Revolution’) often proved impossible to discover from conventional printed sources. We would resort to phoning the embassies, and even they sometimes weren’t sure. Some were very suspicious of our request for information. Once I was actually asked ‘Whose side are you on?’

I say ‘we’, because as the programme grew, staff levels increased. We built an extension at the back of our house, and then an extension off the extension. The original encyclopedia spawned a concise, then a factfinder, then a biographical, then a concise biographical. Each in due course had its new updated edition. The original book sees its fourth edition later this year, with the others not far behind. Then in 1996 the database was taken over by AND International Publishers, based in Rotterdam, and soon we were in the world of CDs and internet search engines. I learned very quickly that a CD encyclopedia is not simply an electronic version of the book. The user approaches it with a whole range of different questions in mind, and an appropriate level of editorial support has to be there so that these can be answered. If you want to find, for example, ‘novelists’ from ‘France’ in the ‘19th century’ who were ‘female’ (and so on), then we can tell you – but to do this, there has to be in place a sophisticated entry classification system, and this takes a lot of work to create. There are four full-time people working in the extension these days, handling all the development work, as well as maintaining the database for book publication, and providing downloads for organisations that want to license

our material. You can buy knowledge now: it is sold by the kilo(byte).

There is one other, less well-known aspect of encyclopedia editing, and that is the apparent role of the publishing deadline in causing the world crises that it is its business to record. For many years my deadline for a new edition was around the end of October. But that is not a good time to have an encyclopedia deadline. (Nor, come to think of it, was 1989 a good year to be attempting to impose encyclopedic stability on the world.) You will want evidence. Our first deadline was 15 November 1989. On November 9, the East Germans opened the Berlin Wall. A year later, our deadline for the updated reprint is 30 October. On 3 October, the two Germanies unite. Because there are so many changes to make (all references to East and West Germany have to be revised), we put the deadline back to November 30. On November 28, Mrs Thatcher resigns. A year later, we have a deadline of 30 October 1991 for the next edition. On 19 August there is a coup in the Soviet Union. You know the rest of that story. If people are going to change things dramatically, we concluded, they will start things off during the summer months. But we were wrong. A few years on, and having changed our new edition deadlines to March, what happens? In February 1998 we realise that the Clinton/Lewinsky affair is not going to go away. In February 1999, Kosovo blows up. In February 2000, our set of newly written entries relating to the Northern Ireland Assembly suddenly becomes out of date. Any scientific observer would surely detect a cause-and-effect pattern operating here.

I am currently in between deadlines, and there is space to write this article. But there is no real escape. When you edit a family of general encyclopedias, it is like having the old man of the sea around your neck. Each month, week, day brings its quota of new prize-winners, new prime ministers, new discoveries, new disasters. The spirit of the next edition is always there, beckoning silently in the wings.