

Controlling the Dissemination of Information, on Wikipedia and on Aztlan

John Major Jenkins. January 7, 2012.

The following sequence of exchanges reveals the process by which unwanted fact-based contributions are filtered out of an academically controlled website, called Aztlan (operated by FAMSI). Ironically, the turn of events (in which the moderators censored me) precisely mimicked the very issue of ideological control, on Wikipedia, that I was trying to share with that e-list. The irony seems to have been lost on the three Aztlan moderators.

1.

Hoopes's post to Aztlan (the second in which he sings the praises of Wikipedia):
January 5, 2012:

I strongly encourage anyone who would like to add additional information to do further additions and editing to this and other Wikipedia entries. The WikiProject Mesoamerica has done a wonderful job of following relevant entries, editing and fact-checking them, policing content, and even rating them as best the editors are able. It, along with the diligent work of countless volunteers, is what has helped ensure a relatively high quality of Wikipedia entries on Mesoamerican topics.

WikiProject Mesoamerica

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Mesoamerica

I encourage other interested listeros to consider participating in this admirable contribution to high quality public knowledge.

Saludos,

John

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2.

(attempted post to Aztlan, held under moderator review)

From: [John Major Jenkins <kahib@ix.netcom.com>](mailto:kahib@ix.netcom.com)

To: Aztlan@lists.famsi.org

Subject: Re: [Aztlan] Votan / pros and cons of Wikipedia

Date: Jan 6, 2012 9:08 AM

Wikipedia is a good resource for many things, namely, basic definitions and simple facts. However, it must be acknowledged that abuses have occurred on Wikipedia and continue to occur. This is particularly the case with people seeking to misrepresent living people, and in highly politicized areas of public debate such as, frankly, the 2012 topic (and its related entries, such as "the 2012 phenomenon", "Mayanism", "Tortuguero Monument 6", "Izapa", and my own name entry.) Factual errors as well as misleadingly clever polemical crafting of how something is presented can be identified in all of these Wiki entries. Of course, defenders of Wikipedia point out that anyone can contribute. The problem here is that not everyone has large blocks of time to constantly police aggressive and insistent misrepresentation, usually promulgated by two or three attack dogs protected by cryptic user names.

For example, in my own early efforts to remove libelous and misleading statements on my own name entry page (which I did not set up), I was able to have some success after two weeks of sleepless nights, only to have more disinformation posted within weeks. So, in this regard, Wikipedia is a useful tool for dishonest Wiki members who seek to craft false narratives about controversial people and controversial topics. The following link from The Progressive describes some of these abuse tactics in a political context, and is from a few years ago. A search of the Internet reveals many ongoing cases of Wikipedia abuse.

<http://www.progressive.org/blogressive020106>

The Wikipedia abuse issue speaks to larger problems with the Internet, copyright enforcement, ethically compromised academic protectionism, intellectual honesty among the professional classes, and media distortions of complex academic topics---which ties into another recent post by Joshua. Frankly, anything on Wikipedia connected to recent breakthroughs in understanding ancient Maya astronomy & calendars needs to be taken with a rather large grain of salt.

John Major Jenkins

3.

Aztlan moderator's rationale for not posting my comments to the list:

---Original Message-----

From: David Hixson

Sent: Jan 7, 2012 8:29 AM

To: "kahib@ix.netcom.com"

Cc: michael ruggeri , "John F. Schwaller"

Subject: Your Aztlan Post

Dear John,

Your recent post was reviewed by all three moderators and we agreed that it was not appropriate for Aztlan. The main focus of your post was to involve the list in a personal issue you are having with certain other individuals on open public forums outside of our listserv. We agreed to post occasional messages by those involved in the 2012 topic if they simply provide scholarly sources for others to read and evaluate. Back-and-forth discussions regarding this topic, or personal gripes between individuals regarding how this information is received will not be passed along to the list. Our welcome message (the document that outlines appropriate behavior on Aztlan) specifically mentions that our list is not a place for "soapbox oratory or those with axes to grind" it also specifically forbids "flame wars" where personal gripes between individuals play out on-list. Please keep this in mind when crafting future posts for dissemination on Aztlan.

Sincerely,

The Aztlan Moderators:

David Hixson

Michael Ruggeri

John Schwaller

Dr. David R. Hixson, Ph.D.

Maya Archaeologist - chunchucmil@yahoo.com

Aztlan Co-Moderator - aztlandave@yahoo.com

4.

January 7, 2012

David Hixson (aztlandave@yahoo.com), Michael Ruggeri (michaelruggeri@mac.com), and John Schwaller (schwaller@potdam.edu) (the Aztlan moderators),

Actually, your assessment of my intention is incorrect. First of all, the post does not centrally involve the 2012 topic. My post was about the reliability of Wikipedia as a source of information, in response to someone else's post which gave the incorrect impression that Wikipedia is thoroughly accurate and reliable, and provides an effective democratic process defined by its members. I was using an example from my personal experience with Wikipedia to underscore a point that I was making, but also provided a link to a piece in The Progressive that indicate a larger ongoing problem with Wikipedia. It is that larger problem, well known but ignored in the thread, that I was cogently putting on the table for discussion. You seem to be willing to provide a platform for a one-sided endorsement of Wikipedia without allowing for a discussion of its well-known problems.

I don't see how you interpret my words as inciting a "flame war." There were no back-and-forth gripes. I wasn't even directing my comments to John Hoopes; I was directing my comments and the informative link to the general Aztlan community. You are over-reacting. Please re-read my post. The statements are factually accurate. That the topics on Mesoamerican studies I mentioned are indeed "politicized" on Wikipedia and are

inaccurately portrayed is simply a fact of the matter, a larger problem beyond any personal disappointments I may have had with agenda-driven professional scholars. Anyone who has studied Tortuguero Monument 6 or Izapa or “the 2012 phenomenon” can clearly see that.

By the way, your policy of only posting new publications does not seem to apply to Van Stone using Aztlan as a billboard for his radio interview a few weeks ago, or Hoopes’ advertising his Psychology Today piece (that was not a NEW publication, it was a recycled interview reposted from elsewhere.) Once again, you are clearly applying a double-standard and are censoring relevant intellectual discussion and debate about meaningful topics. If you’re going to allow initial posts on topics which may be a gray area concern to the list, then you can’t disallow subsequent responses to the already approved thread.

It’s ironic that the same reflexive mechanism of censorship and mitigation that plagues Wikipedia, seems to be occurring right here on Aztlan. A validly presented counter-position that threatens the fragile worldview or personal interests of a controlling elite, must be disallowed. The means of disseminating information and defining the narrative must be thoroughly monitored and controlled, and facts which undermine that hegemony must be eliminated. The fish in water doesn’t even know it’s in water.

John Major Jenkins

P.s. In regard to the content of Van Stone’s interview, which you approved as a valid contribution to the list, you may wish to consider what Van Stone actually said:

Mark Van Stone on the John Gambling Show:

WOR710.com:

http://wor710.com/topic/play_window.php?audioType=Episode&audioId=5608972.

December 21, 2011.

2:14: Mark Van Stone: “There may have been some [Maya groups] that believed 2012 was an important, significant, *end-date* but every example that I’ve found where they actually said something [about 2012] they pretty much expected the status quo to continue for thousands of years.” **[Not at all what Gronemeyer and MacLeod report]**

JG: “Well, obviously it didn’t because their culture has unfortunately disappeared, along with the Aztecs...”

MVS: “That’s right, they missed the big one, the Conquest.” **[The Maya disappeared?]**

3:30: JG: “Okay, so did this whole end of the world, this December 21, 2012, come from some PR agencies?”

MVS “Well, it was a perfect storm of scholarly speculation and people who wanted to have certainty, uh, there were some scholars who were speculating ... the, uh, Maya calendar...” **[he thinks twice and avoids naming Coe as the originator of the 2012-doomsday idea]**

4:52. MVS: “Everybody knows that the world is coming to an end ...they see it in their jobs, the great degradation of the environment ...” **[Van Stones asserts in no uncertain terms that “the world is coming to an end.”]**

5:59: JG: “So you think this whole Maya thing, one year from now [December 2012] thing is a lot of crap?”

MVS: “Well ... yes, in a word ... that one word takes care of it” ... 6:14 (5 seconds later): “The world *is* ending! Things are *terrible!*” **[the whole 2012 thing is a lot of “crap”, but the “The world *is* ending! Things are *terrible!*”]**

My cliff-note summaries are in brackets and bold (above). Well, what are we to make of this? FAMSI approved and posted Van Stone’s 2008 essay on 2012; it’s still there in the archive. It’s wonderful that FAMSI and Aztlan both endorse Van Stone’s work. We are obviously in good hands with Van Stone’s clear-thinking and non-doomsday approach to the 2012 topic – JMJ.

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For more information on the future of creating false consensus, controlling the dissemination of information, and crafting false narratives in online websites, see: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/mar/17/us-spy-operation-social-networks>. This is merely the beginning stage of a process that will no doubt continue. In the same way that the Internet itself began as a top-secret military & government application, the software that enables a single user to manage dozens of fake personas in various online contexts (as discussed in the link) will soon be used by unethical scholars, politicians, and others who wish to purge conversations of unwanted contributors and concepts. Indeed, this is already happening on a less high-tech level, where meat puppets and sock puppets infiltrate and distort certain highly politicized topics, such as “2012”, on sites like Wikipedia.