Commonplace

Dystopedia

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A few months back on Twitter, [some wag suggested](#) that you can cause a great disturbance in the Force – and sow a bit of serious fear and confusion – by taking almost any Wikipedia article about the world today and putting the descriptions of the key things in it in the past tense.

It's true. It's totally dystopic.

Take water, for example. Today it reads:

Water is an [inorganic](#), [transparent](#), [tasteless](#), [odorless](#), and [nearly colorless chemical substance](#), which is the main constituent of [Earth's hydrosphere](#) and the [fluids](#) of most living [organisms](#). It is vital for all known forms of [life](#), even though it provides no [calories](#) or [organic nutrients](#). . . .¹

But now read it this way:

Water was an [inorganic](#), [transparent](#), [tasteless](#), [odorless](#), and [nearly colorless chemical substance](#), which was the main constituent of [Earth's hydrosphere](#) and the [fluids](#) of most living [organisms](#). It was vital for all known forms of [life](#), even though it provided no [calories](#) or [organic nutrients](#). . . .

Or take oxygen.

Oxygen is the [chemical element](#) with the [symbol](#) O and [atomic number](#) 8. It is a member of the [chalcogen group](#) in the [periodic table](#), a highly [reactive nonmetal](#), and an [oxidizing agent](#) that readily forms [oxides](#) with most elements as well as with other [compounds](#). By mass, oxygen is the third-[most abundant element](#) in the universe, after [hydrogen](#) and [helium](#). . . .²

But now:

Oxygen was the [chemical element](#) with the [symbol](#) O and [atomic number](#) 8. . . .
By mass, oxygen was the third-[most abundant element](#) in the universe, after [hydrogen](#) and [helium](#). . . . Oxygen used to be continuously replenished in Earth's atmosphere by [photosynthesis](#), which used the energy of sunlight to produce oxygen from water and carbon dioxide. . . .

And more past-tense tension:

The **Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS)** was the [highest court](#) in the [federal judiciary](#) of the [United States](#). It had ultimate (and largely [discretionary](#)) [appellate jurisdiction](#) over all federal and [state court](#) cases that involve a point of [federal law](#). . . . The Court held the power of [judicial review](#), the ability to invalidate a statute for violating a provision of the [U.S. Constitution](#). It was also able to strike down [presidential directives](#) for violating either the Constitution or statutory law. . . .³

Democracy ([Greek](#): δημοκρατία *dēmokratía*, literally “rule by people”) was a form of [government](#) in which [the people](#) had the [authority](#) to choose their governing [legislation](#). Who people are and how authority was shared among them were core issues for democratic development and [constitution](#). Some cornerstones of these issues were [freedom of assembly](#) and [speech](#), [inclusiveness](#) and [equality](#), [membership](#), [consent](#), [voting](#), [right to life](#) and [minority rights](#). . . .⁴

Or:

The **United States of America (USA)**, commonly known as the United States (U.S. or US) or America, was a [country](#) comprising 50 [states](#), a [federal district](#), five major [self-governing territories](#), and [various possessions](#). At 3.8 million square miles (9.8 million km), it was the world's [third or fourth-largest country by total area](#) and was slightly smaller than the entire [continent](#) of [Europe](#). [Most of the country](#) was located in central [North America](#) between [Canada](#) and [Mexico](#). With an estimated population of over 328 million, the U.S. was the [third most-populous country](#) in the world. The capital was [Washington, D.C.](#), and the [most populous city](#) was [New York City](#).⁵

The dystopic nature of this exercise is effective. It works because many of us have come to recognize the lingua franca, structure, cadence, and content of a Wikipedia article, and rely on the site to provide us with entry points into learning more. In fact, they are *the* entry points, online, as each of the above articles surfaces first in a Google search online for the noun.

You can try this at home for each of these terms. You'll see that even the little knowledge panels that appear during a search on the Google page — based on Google's “knowledge graph,”⁶ originally powered by Freebase data,⁷ originally, in

turn, a resource of structured data built by Metaweb — are drawn mainly from Wikipedia.

Wikipedia, it turns out, is our air. A noncommercial, not-for-profit resource, it belongs to all of us, and not to anyone else. It is the successor project to the crowning achievement of the Enlightenment, back when we were starting to become (believe it or not) more rational: an enormous print encyclopedia designed to collect and present all knowledge. It promotes a self-conscious approach to rights — to contributor rights, to use rights, to *user* rights — as its first order of business. And not only is the actual process of knowledge creation on Wikipedia one that also produces more equity and fairness within the act of authoring and editing — never closed to anyone, never static; not only is it an encyclopedia that even 10 years ago rivaled and usually surpassed the quality of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and other longstanding print and online references; but today this powerful website, consistently one of the world's most popular sites, shapes knowledge creation as well as reflects the state of what we know.

How great that we can control it!

Now imagine if we could write not only the articles, but control our own future. Imagine if

Addison Mitchell McConnell Jr. (born February 20, 1942) was an American politician who served as Kentucky's [senior United States senator](#) and as [Senate Majority Leader](#). McConnell was the second Kentuckian to lead his party in the Senate, the longest-serving U.S. senator for Kentucky in history, and the longest-serving leader of U.S. Senate Republicans in history.

Or:

Donald John Trump (born June 14, 1946) was the [45th president of the United States](#). Before entering politics, he was a businessman and television personality.

Imagine if we could support platforms like Wikipedia and the Internet Archive that empower our work as progressives. Imagine if we could provide support to organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation and the Free Software Foundation to insure that our liberties, now so often under threat, were looked after by powers that are responsible and that we ourselves control. Imagine if we could create publishing platforms and knowledge tools — like PubPub and the Underlay, here at the Knowledge Futures Group — that we could govern and share with all communities

in the struggle. Imagine if we could vote for things and people – and edit our future as freely as we could edit text online!

Dystopia — or . . . utopia?

We actually have this power.

Footnotes

1.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water>

↵

2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxygen> ↵

3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supreme_Court_of_the_United_States ↵

4.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy>

↵

5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States ↵

6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge_Graph ↵

7. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freebase> ↵