

Editing it like it isn't

People often ask me what is the worst problem I had 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 to you. You learn to trust nothing, to reread everything, more than on any other project. Only in this way was it possible to avoid having the Cambridge Encyclopedia introduce to the world such institutions as the Chanel Tunnel, the Society of Fronds, New Mork City, and the American Civil Wart. Then there was Carthage, "refounded by Julie Caesar", and Beethoven, "handicapped by deadness". Maybe there are others, still there, waiting to be noticed.

It was a fascinating task - a project whose scope was, quite simply, "everything". It was a greedy project, eating up three years of my life, and a fair part of the lives of my family, whom I met from time to time. I work from home, and all the inputting, editing, and coordination was done from a study which became progressively smaller as the contributions grew. Nor is the rest of the house immune. Editing a general encyclopedia changes the way you live, your world view. You cannot even read a newspaper or watch TV without thinking of your entries. World events, births and deaths, prizes and 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. You realise straight away that an encyclopedia is not a comprehensive guide to anything: it is a selection, made subjectively by a human editor, or a slightly less human committee. In our case, there were certain weaknesses in the world of single-volume encyclopedias which we felt it was important to make good - the lack of a truly international perspective, in particular. I read through several encyclopedias before commencing the project, to see what they were like. You could count the number of entries they devoted to the life and culture of such parts of the world as Australia, Japan, Africa, South America, or China on the fingers of a fairly small hand. In this day and age, such parochialism in an encyclopedia seems absurd, and improving international coverage became one of our most urgent aims.

Once you decide on the balance you want between your topic areas, and the level of coverage, you have to find people willing to write the entries at the level you want (I tried to keep in mind an intelligent sixth former). This proved unexpectedly difficult, especially as I was determined 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 have learned that such writing does not come easily. Some specialists are very skilled at it, but most are not. My team from the Natural History Museum were very good at it - presumably because of their long experience in putting information across to members of the public. My astronautics specialist, the Director of the Solar System Exploration Program at NASA, proved to be another natural. But several contributors needed considerable rewriting - a highly time-consuming task, as every rewritten entry had to be carefully checked. Factual errors don't impress anyone, not even in plain English.

It proved surprisingly difficult to find certain kinds of information. One of the innovations of the encyclopedia is the large Ready Reference section printed at the end of the book. It includes, for example, a complete listing of all political leaders since 1900. I thought this 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, what his title was, and which body he led often proved impossible to discover from printed sources. We would ask the embassies, and more than once even they weren't sure!

Thanks to a remarkable collaboration between contributors, editorial staff, and publishing staff, and a level of commitment which had some people working all night through on more than one occasion, to keep to schedule, the work was finished only three months late. But of course it isn't over. When you edit a general encyclopedia, it is like having the old man of the sea around your neck. Each month brings its quota of new prize-winners, new prime ministers, new princesses . . . The spirit of the next edition is always there, beckoning silently in the wings.