The challenge of designing a collaborative reference source for Southern African Literature

Graham Stewart
Faculty of Arts and Design
Durban University of Technology
South Africa
stewartg34@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
Finding the right balance between editorial control and the widest possible participation by contributors is a critical challenge for the editors of the ESAACH Wiki. The Wiki is the online collaborative reference repository of the Encyclopaedia of South African Arts, Culture and Heritage (ESAACH).

The Verbal Arts section of the ESAACH Wiki was developed in the first phase of the project, and now comprises an extensive set of reference entries, compiled over a twelve year period. With its roots in a Southern African literary history project started in the 1990s, over four thousand entries have now been published on the Wiki, with the intention of utilising commons-based peer production to continue its development as a one-stop reference website of Southern African literature.

User analysis shows that the ESAACH Wiki is extensively searched by Internet users looking for information on Southern African literature. This article considers how best to open up the resource to a wider group of contributors.

Participation may range from a traditional print editorial model at one extreme to an open, un-moderated model at the other. Selected South African literary and biographical reference sources were compared to determine the most appropriate guidelines for an ESAACH entry.

(198 words)

Key words: encyclopaedia, collaborative reference source, online repository, South African literary history, commons-based peer production.

Introduction

While acknowledging the limitations of specialist literary encyclopaedias in general, and the online varieties in particular, in providing reliable guides to literary history, I would argue that a moderated model with clear guidelines for contributors will assist rather than inhibit scholarship in the area of South African arts, culture and heritage. This article aims to clarify the challenge of collaborative authorship by examining existing practice and suggesting guidelines for future development.

The developer of an encyclopaedia faces an awkward choice when introducing the subject of such a large scale project. To make any pronouncement on the extent of the project is to risk gushy overstatement on the one hand or to trivialise its aspirations on the other. I admit to having

succumbed elsewhere (Stewart 2010: 132) to the temptation of tracing the roots of ESAACH 'back to Denis Diderot and the 18th century encyclopedists' (Rosenzweig 2006: 119). But it is worth recalling Jorge Luis Borges' parody of an encyclopaedia, the 'Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge' where bizarre and perspective-shifting categories prove that any classification system is doomed to be as conjectural and ambiguous as is the universe itself (Borges, in Foucault 1994: xv).

A sound starting point for gauging the place of encyclopaedias in the world of scholarship is the term used by librarians, for whom an encyclopaedia is a 'tertiary' source. In library science parlance, 'tertiary' sources occupy the lowest echelon of the reference hierarchy, with primary and secondary sources ranked more highly in importance and depth. Tertiary reference works, including encyclopaedias and 'companions' provide overviews of fields of study, with a deliberate shallowness which should also be their greatest strength. To fit its purpose correctly, a good encyclopaedia should provide comprehensive but relatively superficial entries, systematically arranged for easy access, and sufficiently detailed to direct the interested reader to deeper, more detailed or nuanced material in books, critical commentaries, annotated bibliographies, histories and so on. In the best literary biographical reference sources, entries are carefully-crafted miniature essays that convey the most important facts about their subject, together with a synopsis of the most representative critical viewpoints, and a balanced assessment of the writer's contribution and influence within the world of literature.

Today, the ubiquity of Wikipedia has brought a new urgency to the need for academics and teachers to regulate their students' use of encyclopaedias, by training them to be critical of the content they find there. The pervasive influence of Wikipedia and the tendency for students to search no further than their first few Google hits will be mitigated if the purpose of tertiary information sources is fully understood. Encyclopaedia entries may then be regarded merely as springboards to the serious study of primary and secondary works. Frustrated teachers have disparaged encyclopaedias as 'the Reader's Digest of deep knowledge' (Rosenzweig 2006: 137) but intelligently used, they are a boon to learning.

From the inception of the ESAACH project, the dilemma which has faced the editorial team is the sense of an ordered, conventional print-based publication at one extreme, and the open, collaborative and potentially inaccurate mashup[1] of the Wikipedia model on the other. The apparent contradiction, however, is not unique to the world of online reference works. Our predicament is located within the wider debate around open access to information, which continues to loom large in the sphere of publishing generally, but is particularly pertinent to academic and scholarly publishing. Rosenzweig's observations on historical scholarship (2006: 117) and my own analysis of South African literary reference works later in this article further explore the problem of maintaining academic standards in online publication.

In the rapidly evolving field of online information provision, terminology and definitions can be elusive and difficult to pin down. Nevertheless, a search through the literature of the diverse field of World Wide Web studies provides a context within which online reference sources may be evaluated. A wiki is a 'Web 2.0' collaborative writing tool closely associated with the open access movement. The collaborative writing possible using a wiki fits a community writing and editing model typical of Wikipedia and known generically as 'commons-based peer production' (CBPP) (Benkler 2002: 375) or 'crowdsourcing' (Kazman and Chen 2009: 76). We have discussed elsewhere (Stewart and McNulty 2010) the collaborative possibilities of the ESAACH wiki in relation to Lessig's notion of the 'Read-Write' society. Lessig (2008) advocates the abandonment of copyright laws, which he claims are largely ignored by a younger generation of Internet users anyway, to free users of the online digital world to be 'creative, collaborative and independent' (Stewart and McNulty 2010; 261). However, concerns in the academic community of the inherent threat of intellectual

piracy, and the loss of proper attribution and of funding for published research, are widely expressed. One of the key themes to emerge during ESAACH workshops has been attribution and recognition of encyclopaedia contributors (Dikibo 2010). As many of the potential researchers and writers are in the academy, the question of how their contributions would or would not be accredited is a significant concern. Set against these misgivings is the argument promoting 'open-access knowledge repositories' (Emigh and Herring 2005: 2) as democratic, inclusive and ultimately the most desirable route for online publication.

The ESAACH Project: why use a wiki?
ESAACH promotes the creation, teaching and dissemination of literature, visual and performing arts by providing 'reference material otherwise lacking on the subject, which can also be of use in schools' (Mzamane and Stewart 2009).

There is a clear distinction to be drawn between a collaborative *publication*, where contributors' individual entries or essays are subject to editorial control (see, for instance, Killam and Rowe 2000, below) and *collaboratively-written entries* (e.g. Wikipedia).Rosenzweig refers to the notion of an 'owner-centric' authority model as opposed to the 'free-form' of Wikipedia (2006: 146). Notwithstanding Emigh and Herring's observation (2005: 9) of a tendency towards standardisation and formality in Wikipedia entries, an understanding of the differences between traditionally edited print encyclopaedias and a collaborative online reference sources remains a key consideration for ESAACH.

When the ESAACH project adopted the wiki model for publishing online the content of the existing South African Literary Database (SALIT) (Stewart and van Wyk 2000: 1), it introduced a two-tier publication trajectory for the future ESAACH text. The plan to establish a conventional editorial committee structure, in which individual sub-editors would oversee the scholarly and thematic aspects of their domains (Verbal Arts, Performing Arts, Visual Arts and Heritage) included the commissioning of comprehensive introductory essays by selected contributors considered to be authorities in their fields. These broad survey-type articles would set the tone of the publication, and be supported by a range of shorter essays on sub-themes to be identified by expert participants at a series of workshops. The existing SALIT entries would provide an extensive but shallower reference layer. As it turned out, the wiki tier of the publication plan effectively launched the entire contents of the old SALIT Database online, accompanied by an invitation to a small number of academics nominated by the project panel to start the process of revising the online entries and providing feedback on the quality and accuracy of the content. However, as the theme of this article attests, the project is still grappling with the question of how open the ESAACH wiki should be. Currently we retain a conservative approach to collaboration, with most of the content inherited from Johan van Wyk's SALIT project, and participation still limited to a handful of associates.

We have a choice of three possible levels of participation, with a traditional print editorial model at one extreme, and an open, un-moderated model at the other. The most likely compromise is a Wikipedia-like structure of administrators and moderators to exert editorial control and ensure quality.

ESAACH may look to the notorious Wikileaks site for some direction in the matter of editorial intervention (Danielson 2011: 39). Wikileaks uses the collaborative wiki technology to pursue a vigorous transparency agenda, which amounts to a form of political and corporate whistle blowing on a monumental scale. To begin with, such an overwhelming quantity of leaked confidential documents made available over such a short time, had the effect of burying really critical disclosures under sheer weight of numbers. Furthermore, the relative importance of one piece of material over another was difficult to identify. Wikileaks found an interim solution in 2010 by making a number of

agreements with conventional print media publications (including the *New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Der Spiegel*), who were given exclusive rights to select and publish the most newsworthy stories to emerge from a careful sifting of the information. Essentially, the newspapers took over the task of editorial control both by identifying important documents in the huge, undifferentiated heap, and by using the material as the source of conventional investigative reporting. The implication for ESAACH may be that its later conventional print edition will, in the long term, have a similar winnowing influence on uneven content in the Wiki.

Can a Wiki do literary history?
To gauge the extent to which current encyclopaedias and literary companions provide a reliable guide to literary researchers, and to identify good practice that could be adopted for the ESAACH project, Rosenzweig's approach to the comparative analysis of reference sources in historical research has been adapted here to selected South African literary and biographical encyclopaedias and literary companions, both in print form and online. As the most feasible option open to the ESAACH Wiki is the 'limited filter' or 'community editing' model used by Wikipedia, the assumption behind this comparative analysis is that there are lessons to be learned that will contribute towards the formulation of sound principles for the writing of ESAACH Wiki entries. Rosenzweig justifies his focus on Wikipedia thus: 'one reason professional historians need to pay attention to Wikipedia is because our students do' (2006: 136). I would argue that the same can be said in relation to students of literature. Rosenzweig puts forward minimum criteria that characterise a good entry, and then tests how similar subject matter in different traditional and online reference sources measure up. Somewhat to his own surprise, he concludes that the quality of the information is generally comparable. There is value in the present study of using Rosenzweig's approach in applying a common set of criteria that constitute a 'good' entry, and thus gaining a sense of best practice. Touching on the open access issue, Rosenzweig (2006: 138) points out the extent to which subscription-based resources have increasingly limited access to knowledge so that only a few privileged institutions can afford them, and hence how important it has become that freely available online resources should be well crafted, and require the participation of experienced researchers and academics. This is an argument that chimes with the notion of commons-based peer production as articulated by Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006) and by Lessig (2008). As Hess (2005: 13) has observed, the library has traditionally nurtured access to information under the stewardship of librarians – the library has been a 'protected space' for knowledge commons. The advent of the Internet has thrown the net of responsibility much more widely, and transferred stewardship to the collective participants in scholarly networks, such as online reference sources like the ESAACH Wiki. I would argue, along with Rosenzweig, that scholars have a similar responsibility to participate actively in commons-based projects in their disciplines. The following comparison of print and online reference works is intended to provide some direction in creating content for South African literary reference works online.

Comparison of entries in reference works.
To determine the most appropriate set of guidelines for the ESAACH Wiki, entries from a range of cognate sources were compared. Following Rosenzweig's (2006) methodology, entries from a selection of encyclopaedias and companion publications were correlated and examined according to a common set of criteria. A form of 'purposive sampling' was used to select the most representative cross-section of reference works, and of entries (Denscombe 2010: 35). The selected reference works had content similar in their broad aims to ESAACH, essentially brief pen-portraits of authors, adopting a neutral position while mentioning a range of critical stances, and giving a selected list of works published. Each entry was considered in relation to five of the criteria identified by Rosenzweig, viz.: coverage, level of detail, article length, factual accuracy, writing style, quality and length of bibliographies. Within the limited scope of the study, five writers: Sindiwe Magona, Perceval Gibbon, Dennis Brutus, Can Themba and Farida Karodia were chosen to reflect as wide a

diversity as possible from contemporary to early twentieth century, well-known to relatively obscure, and - with the exception of drama - the primary genres. While all of them are English language writers (ESAACH aims to include writers in all South African languages), they also reflect the diversity of South African society.

Publications both of the conventional print kind and online were selected for the purposes of this study: Adey, Beeton, Chapman and Pereira's *Companion to South African English Literature*, 1986 (referred to as Adey's *Companion*, below); Killam and Rowe's *The Companion to African Literatures*, 2000 (Killam's *Companion*); *The Dictionary of South African Biography*, Volume 3, 1977 (*DSAB*); Joyce's A Concise Dictionary of South African Biography, 1999 (Concise *DSAB*); South African History Online (*SAHO*); ESAACH; and Wikipedia.

Differences in the accounts of Sindiwe Magona's output in Killam's *Companion* and in *SAHO* demonstrate key distinctions between an entry typical of a traditionally edited scholarly work and that of an online reference source. Putting aside the differences in intention between the publications themselves - the literary focus of Killam's *Companion* as compared to the wider historical biographical aims of *SAHO* – there is evidence of a critical distance in the *Companion* lacking in the much more fact-based *SAHO* entry. In *SAHO*, Magona's many awards and achievements are faithfully listed while Killam's *Companion* provides a more analytic perspective, acknowledging the quality of her short stories in *Women at Work*, but –for instance - questioning the effectiveness of the 'oral tradition' device she uses to frame her autobiography *To My Children's Children*. The Wikipedia entry echoes the style of the *SAHO* piece and offers no critical perspectives. Now the Wikipedia entry is governed, at least in theory, by Wikipedia's NPOV policy: ''Neutral point of view' is one of Wikipedia's three core content policies. The other two are 'Verifiability' and 'No original research.'' (Rosenzweig 2006: 121-122). Let us for the moment accept NPOV as a useful principle for encyclopaedia entries, but examine its effect in the Sindiwe Magona piece. The Wikipedia and *SAHO* entries have a neutral tone, but could be accused of offering no point of view at all, just a bland listing of facts. Another of Wikipedia's core principles is 'no original research' (by which they mean 'unverifiable interpretations') but this does not imply that references to opposing positions should be entirely excluded. The intention of Wikipedia's NPOV policy appears to be closer to the journalistic principle of presenting more than one point of view on any subject. The tendency that can be detected in the two online entries of an adherence to factuality does not necessarily signal a weakness if the intention is to provide an outline sketch to launch the reader into further research, and the examination of other sources that would invariably reflect divergent critical viewpoints. But why stop short of offering critical perspectives in the entries? It is arguable that a more discerning commentary, which could still steer a middle path without violating NPOV, would produce a more considered response from the reader. A reader who approached works of Sindiwe Magona (or indeed to critical reviews of her work) with a sense of challenge provoked by conflicting viewpoints expressed in the encyclopaedia entry is likely to engage more fruitfully with the material that one who is confronted merely with a list of literary awards.

The only writer amongst the chosen five to be found in *The Dictionary of South African Biography* is Perceval Gibbon. There is some irony here as he was the only one of the five not actually born in Southern Africa (Dennis Brutus was born in Zimbabwe). As a non-South African, Gibbon's inclusion would also have been based on the judgement of the editors that although he spent only a few years in the country, his work nevertheless had a significant impact on South African events (de Kock 1968: viii). The Gibbon entry in the *DSAB* (Beyers 1977: 324) is the most eloquent of all those chosen for this study. Although the *DSAB* is a general and not literary reference, the entry - written by Ernest Pereira - offers a balanced evaluation of Gibbon's contribution to South African writing while also providing a succinct but comprehensive outline of the writer's life. By contrast, the entry in Adey's *Companion* has much less critical depth, but admittedly is allowed only half the number of words.

Whereas the *DSAB* entry distinguishes between the derivative style of Gibbon's verse collection *African Items*: - 'mainly expatriate in sentiment' (ibid: 324) - and the imaginative accomplishment of *The vrouw Grobelaar's leading cases,* and goes on to endorse the novel, *Margaret Harding* as 'impressive', Adey's *Companion* goes no further than to acknowledge that Gibbon's short stories anticipate those of Pauline Smith and Herman Charles Bosman (Adey *et al.* 1986: 90). Killam's *Companion* entry also recognises the short stories as foreshadowing those of Smith and Bosman (Killam and Rowe 2000: 104) but offers a critical depth matching that of the *DSAB* by appraising *Margaret Harding* as worthy of comparison with Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*. As far as the online entries are concerned, both ESAACH and Wikipedia are found wanting, as is the case with the Sindiwe Magona and Farida Karodia entries, which are also short and fact-based with no critical commentary at all.

Having died in 1968, Can Themba was, in addition to Gibbon, the only other writer in the sample who qualified for an entry in the *DSAB*, yet Themba is inexplicably absent from all its volumes (Volume 4, published in 1981 ought to have featured Can Themba but there is no entry in that volume or in Volume 5 published in 1987). The omission goes uncorrected in the *New Dictionary of South African Biography* published in 1995, which contains a foreword by Nelson Mandela in which he welcomes the new edition with its inclusion of 'unsung heroes' (Verwey 1995). It may be that the banning by the apartheid state of Can Themba's work had long-term repercussions on his reputation as a writer. Gardner (1984: 354) has observed a similar pattern in the case of Dennis Brutus, whose banning had the effect of removing his work from libraries, bookshops and publishing lists in South Africa during his most productive and creative years. As a result, during the 1990s when restrictions were lifted, previously banned writers like Brutus and Themba had been effectively expunged from public record. After being declared a 'statutory communist' in the 1960s by the South African authorities, Can Themba may have shared the same insidious state-engineered obscurity as Dennis Brutus, which may account for the peculiar lacuna in the *DSAB*. The posthumous award of a Presidential Order in 2007 does, however, redress his apparent neglect by the *DSAB*, and Themba is well represented in all the other reference sources consulted in the course of this study.

There are relatively substantial entries on Can Themba in the Killam *Companion*, ESAACH and Wikipedia. The Concise *DSAB* entry is a minimal 46-word factual summary, while the *SAHO* entry is merely a stub[2]. The ESAACH entry, written by Michael Wessels, presents a good balance of broad coverage, succinct in-text clarifications of key concepts suitable for the general reader and literary critical comments. The ESAACH entry (like the Wikipedia piece) presents a valuable listing of Themba's contemporaries in the 1950s *Drum* writers' group that would likely send the interested reader off in valuable directions for further research. Both online entries, for instance, provide Mike Nicol's authoritative and accessible 1991 *A Good-Looking Corpse: World of Drum – Jazz and Gangsters* as a secondary reference source. The economy and clarity of the ESAACH explanation of forced removals is a good example of how a succinct social perspective can add to the value of an encyclopaedia reference:

> [T]he apartheid era, a time in which the racial and social segregation that had always been part of South African life was translated into a programme of accelerated social engineering that adversely affected the lives of most sections of the population. These were the years of the passing of the notorious legislation that tore communities apart and displaced millions of people. (ESAACH. Can Themba Entry – Michael Wessels).

Killam's *Companion* contains a more tangential comment, mentioning that Themba 'spen[t] most of his productive literary life in Sophiatown … before it was bulldozed under the provisions of the Group Areas Act' (Killam and Rowe 2000: 283). Critical comment on Themba's writing and an evaluation his literary legacy feature in the ESAACH article which mentions Themba's use of

township slang and clever imagery to evoke both the vibrancy and the repression of township life. Reference is also made to later writers who found in Themba a source of inspiration (for example Mbulelo Mzamane's 'Dube Train Revisited'). Similarly, Adey's *Companion* refers succinctly to Themba's 'wryly cynical and sadly nostalgic vignettes of life in Sophiatown' (Adey *et al.* 1986: 195). Killam's *Companion* alludes to Themba's writing as playing out the inner contradictions of 'new Africans' – university educated intellectuals whose creativity and aspirations were thwarted by repressive racial laws and what Themba regarded as narrow white liberalism.

In terms of 'accuracy of facts' (another of Rosenzweig's criteria for evaluation of encyclopaedia entries) there are relatively insignificant differences among the reference sources consulted here. There is disagreement amongst sources about the birth years of both Perceval Gibbon (1878 or 1879) and Sindiwe Magona (1942 or 1943). The obvious advantage of an online source that can be continually updated is demonstrated in the ESAACH, *SAHO* and Wikipedia entries on Dennis Brutus, all of which recorded his death in 2009. The issue of accuracy in wiki entries can, however, be overemphasised as a *sine qua non*. Larry Sanger, co-founder of Wikipedia (and an epistemologist by profession) (Roush 2005: 21) reminds us that an encyclopaedia should reflect 'received knowledge, not absolute knowledge' (ibid.) In a collaborative source, the value of having multiple authors and a policy of ongoing editorial revision, is that a claim in an entry that something is 'generally known' can be subjected to repeated verification. Although no longer associated with Wikipedia, Sanger continues to view it as a manifestation of having faith in people being able to work together. His view reflects the narrative of 'commons-based production' referred to by Hess (2005:13) and a belief in the power of collaborative stewardship[3].

If we accept that one of the essential roles of an encyclopaedia is to direct its readers to other sources, then one of the most the most valuable elements of an encyclopaedia entry would be its list of references or selected bibliography. All the reference works examined for the purpose of this comparative study provide helpful (if not comprehensive) lists of references, and in the case of the online reference sources, links to related Internet sources. Only *SAHO* falls short in this respect, where the Dennis Brutus references and links are confined mainly to newspaper articles and obituaries published at the time of his death. His most important volumes of poetry – *A Simple Lust*, *Stubborn Hope*, etc. – are, however, listed within the body of the text. A significant omission from all the entries is that of references to secondary sources such as major critical essays or books. In Dennis Brutus' case, for instance, critical articles by Bernth Lindfors, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Nadine Gordimer are listed amongst over 80 references in McLuckie and Colbert's 1995 bibliography. However, none of these is referenced in any of the encyclopaedia entries. Even if one follows the argument that such references belong in an annotated bibliography, McLuckie and Colbert's definitive work is itself not referenced.

The problem of striking an equilibrium between coverage and level of detail, while working within a specific length of article may have differing solutions for conventional print and for online entries. Article length is largely irrelevant in an online context which, unlike a printed book, places no physical constraints on word count. But as much online material attests, precision and economy in writing style are rare attributes. The 48 words apportioned to the Dennis Brutus entry in the *Concise DSAB* seems to come in below what might be considered a reasonable word limit – the entry does manage to include the word 'poet' but goes no further, devoting the rest of the brief account to his activism. The only secondary material referred to amongst the Gibbon entries were the film and dramatic adaptations of *Margaret Harding* in the late 1980s, both of which were mentioned in Killam's *Companion*.

Although beyond the scope of the present discussion, it is worth noting that the online reference sources take full advantage of the potential of the Internet with hyperlinks to content elsewhere on

the World Wide Web. ESAACH and Wikipedia in particular provide links to primary and secondary material available on other websites, and to audio-visual material, including documentary films and interviews in the case of Dennis Brutus.

ESAACH Guidelines
ESAACH has developed two sets of related guidelines, one for the Wiki and another set, differentiated into minor and major entries, for the intended print-based publication. The print edition of the encyclopaedia, in addition to the major entries on movements, themes, genres, and periods, will be made up of biographies - single author entries of 500 to 1000 words. The guideline to contributors recommends weaving together 'threads of self-narrative (autobiography) with third-person narrative (biography); survey of the artist's work; social context and significance; and appreciation and evaluation' (Mzamane and Stewart 2009).

Guidelines for wiki entries are more procedural in nature, specifying a content structure including date of birth and death (if applicable) of the author, followed by a short biography explaining who the author is, by outlining his or her upbringing, education, accomplishments, and career. An extract of 200 to 500 words from one of the author's texts may be added, and should be followed by an extensive bibliography of the author, including publication dates, publishers and titles of texts. Images of the author and book covers, and any other images that may be of interest may be included along with audio or video clips of readings or interviews. Links to reputable sites with further information, PDF documents of books or literary criticism should appear at the end of the entry. The Can Themba entry on the ESAACH wiki (see discussion above) exemplifies this structure.

If Emigh and Herring's observation that Wikipedia entries come to resemble 'traditional print norms' over time (2005:9) then we may expect the content of the ESAACH print and wiki versions to converge as the project continues, so ensuring quality and consistency across the different publication media.

Notes
[1] An online document or application combining content or data from different sources.
[2] An entry consisting of only a few sentences, and too short to be considered as a definitive reference until developed further
[3] See McHenry 2004 – 'The Faith-Based Encyclopedia' for a forceful challenge to this belief.

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