

‘Everything About the Past’: Wikipedia and History Education

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Abstract. Wikipedia has emerged as a prime source of historical information for secondary school pupils who use it as their first source for their class assignments. On the basis of two case studies, this paper demonstrates that Wikipedia has raised much enthusiasm among the pupils, often to the detriment of conventional sources, which have ceased to be references for comparison. It also highlights the undeniable fact that the pupils, in their assignments, mix conventional and unconventional sources, which raises discussions about the role conventional gatekeepers of historical sources should play to be part of this new phenomenon of convergence.

Keywords: History education, Wikipedia, Convergence, Historical sources, Cultural Heritage.

1 Introduction

In a 2006 article under the title ‘Can History Be Open Source? *Wikipedia* and the Future of the Past’, historian Roy Rosenzweig (2006) reflects about the challenges *Wikipedia* poses to professional historians and tries to answer the question whether history could be open source. One of his points is that *Wikipedia*, despite some factual errors and issues of styles due to the multiplicity of authors, is a valuable source of historical information. Rosenzweig (2006, pp. 126-127) notes that in the domain of biographies of historical figures, *Wikipedia* competed with the classical and commercial rivals, and scored better than many of them in terms of coverage. He then wonders: ‘Why should we care?’ before providing his own answer: ‘One reason professional historians need to pay attention to *Wikipedia* is because our students do’ (*Ibid.*, p. 136). In this paper, I want to discuss *Wikipedia* as it was used by 13-14 year-old pupils during their history classes at two schools I observed for a period of six months in the Netherlands. One central point I was interested in was the claim that the World Wide Web has given access to a variety of sources. What follows is mostly based on the analysis of written assignments in those classes, where *Wikipedia* appeared as the first, most cited source of historical information. For each class, I will provide brief background before discussing the significance and place of *Wikipedia* in the learners’ opinion and/or based on its actual use for assignments. In the end, and building on its overwhelming significance, I will suggest that *Wikipedia* has emerged as an ideal convergence platform for conventional and unconventional sources of historical information.

2 Case Study I

The first class I observed from April – June and then from September –November 2010 was at the Helen Parkhurst Daltonschool [HPDS], located in Almere, a few miles northeast of Amsterdam. As the school name indicates, the class applied the Dalton Plan, the teaching and learning approach initiated and developed by American reformist Helen Parkhurst [1886 - 1973] in the early 1900s. This approach was based a number key principles, namely *freedom*, *self-regulation*, and *cooperation* (Van der Ploeg 2010, pp. 124-132; see also Parkhurst [1922] 1924, p. 16; Parkhurst 1951, p. xvii; Bokhorst 1924, pp. 19-20 & 33). Using their freedom of choice, the pupils chose assignments among four options: writing a fictional story about a child of their age in the Middle Ages, drawing a map showing the routes of the United East-Indies Company [VOC] and of the West-Indies Company [WIC], and a WebQuest. I will only discuss the latter because it was the only one that clearly instructed the pupils to list, justify and then evaluate the online sources they used. The WebQuest could be defined as a Web-based assignment about a specific topic with specific guidelines and instructions on steps to be followed.

Among the WebQuests,¹ the pupils had to choose to work either on seventeenth-century Dutch painters or on the VOC. The various WebQuests had two parts: the *pre-research* part, and the *research-proper* part.² In the pre-research part, the pupils were requested to list their sources, and to indicated their relevance for the assignment, as well as the level of their reliability. In the research-proper part, the pupils had to write a piece of text with some illustrations. Following these instructions, the pupils had to ‘collect data for each aspect about the painter [and the VOC]’, and, since ‘you can only use a few data’ to produce a poster, to ‘make a good selection, so that the one viewing your poster can have an image of the painter [or the VOC] that is as precise as possible’. All the 8 WebQuests that were returned, including two jointly done by two pupils, were short summaries on different aspects – early and later lives, paintings, VOC birth, its aims, its history, *etc.*, and none of them contained quotations.

The most interesting part for the purpose of this paper is the pre-research one, which contained a list of online sources, a rating for and a short comment about each of them. As the Table 1 shows, all the websites used for the WebQuest assignment could be classified into eleven categories, ranging from Wikipedia and the government-sponsored Historical Canon of the Netherlands, to academic, news, and personal sites:

Table 1: Categories of Web sources used for WebQuest assignments

¹ All WebQuests were taken from *Histoforum*, a website for ‘ICT and History’ run by retired history teacher Albert van der Kaap.

<http://histoforum.digischool.nl/> (Viewed 21 January 2011).

² See the example of *Schilders uit de Gouden Eeuw* [Painters of the Golden Century] <http://histoforum.digischool.nl/lesmateriaal/internetgids5.htm> (Viewed 21 January 2011)

		Pup 1	Pup 2	Pup 3	Pup 4	Pup 5	Pup 6	Duo 1	Duo 2
Wikipedia		1	1	2	?	1	1	2	1
Personal sites		1	1		?			1	2
Heritage sites	<i>Heritage Inst.</i>		1	1	?	1			2
	<i>Others</i>	1	1		?		1		
Commercial sites			1	1	?		1	1	
Educ. sites		1	1		?	1	1		
Official sites					?	2			1
News Media sites				2	?		1		
Canon of the NL		1			?		1		
General Info sites			1		?	1			
Academic sites		1			?				

The categories in this table appear in the order of frequency of use. The figures in each Pupil or Duo column correspond to the times one category was used for one WebQuest. Pupil 4 certainly used the online sources for her assignment on Rembrandt but failed to mention which ones.

2.1 The 'first' source

Of all the ten categories of Web sources used, Wikipedia emerged as the most popular. All the pupils used it, at least once, except for Pupil 4 for whom uncertainty persists due to the lack of references. In all cases, the Wikipedia pages were the ones dedicated specifically to the subject, that is, to the painters or the VOC. For instance, Pupil 1 and Pupil 6 both worked on the VOC and cited the VOC Wikipedia page³ as the first and second source, respectively. Pupil 3 worked on the same subject and cited Wikipedia twice, providing the following comment: 'For my own research I used the following sites: www.wikipedia.nl [and] www.geschiedenis.vpro.nl'. Then he provided the sites from which he had downloaded pictures, which included another Wikipedia page.⁴

³ Wikipedia, 'Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie'.
http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vereenigde_Oostindische_Compagnie (Viewed 25 January 2011).

⁴ Wikipedia, 'Handelsposten van de VOC in het Midden-Oosten'.
http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handelsposten_van_de_VOC_in_het_Midden-Oosten (Viewed 25 January 2011).

A close analysis of another assignment on Rembrandt shows that essential details were taken from two Wikipedia pages - the English one and the Dutch one – on that painter. The left column of Table 2 shows the first four sentences from biographic texts from the four Web pages used as sources, while the right column shows the duo’s summary that emanated from them:

Table 2: Example of the use of the Web as a source of raw material [left column] for pupils’ multiple-source summaries [left column].

<p>Wikipedia.nl: ‘Rembrandt van Rijn was born on 15 July 1606 in Leiden on the Weddesteeg, as the ninth child of a miller, Herman Gerritsz and Neeltje van Zuytbrouck, a daughter of a well-established baker. Rembrandt attended the Latin school and was about 14 years when his parents registered him at the University of Leiden. Obviously the venture stopped there because Rembrandt had indicated that he wanted rather to become a painter. By 1619 he was already an apprentice of the Leiden-based history-painter Jacob van Swanenburgh’.⁵</p>	<p>Rembrandt van Rijn was born in Leiden [<i>sic!</i>], he was the son of a miller Harmen [<i>sic!</i>] Gerritsz van Rijn. Rembrandt had a few school experiences in Amsterdam and Leiden, and at the time he went to settle in Leiden in 1625. There he became a painter. In 1632, he moved to Amsterdam, and lived a long time at arts trader Hendrik’s.</p>
<p>People.zeelandnet.nl/acoomens: ‘The Dutch most famous artist was born in 1606 in Leiden to Hermen [<i>sic!</i>] Gerritsz van Rijn, a well-established miller. After a few short experiences as student in Leiden and Amsterdam, he settled in 1625 in Leiden as an independent painter. In 1632 he moved to Amsterdam, where he stayed at arts trader Hendrik van Uylenburgh’s. One year later Rembrandt got married with Saskia, the niece of his host’.⁶</p>	
<p>Wikipedia.org: ‘Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn was born on July 15, 1606 in Leiden, in the Dutch Republic, nowadays the Netherlands. He was the ninth child born to Harmen Gerritszoon van Rijn and Neeltgen Willemsdochter van Zuytbrouck. His family was quite well-to-do; his father was a miller and his mother was a baker’s daughter. As a boy he attended Latin school and was enrolled at the University of Leiden, although according to a contemporary he had a greater inclination towards painting; he was soon apprenticed to a Leiden history painter, Jacob van Swanenburgh, with whom he spent three years’.⁷</p>	

⁵ Wikipedia, ‘Rembrandt van Rijn’

[http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rembrandt van Rijn](http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rembrandt_van_Rijn)(Viewed 24 January 2011)

⁶ Toon Oomens, ‘Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606 - 1669)’

<http://people.zeelandnet.nl/acoomens/rembrand.htm> (Viewed 24 January 2011)

⁷ Wikipedia, ‘Rembrandt’

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rembrandt> (Viewed 24 January 2011)

<p>Spreekbeurt.info: 'Rembrandt was born on 15 July 1606 in Leiden, Rembrandt his father [<i>sic!</i>] was owner of a mill. This mill was not suitable as a residence. Their house was near the mill, on the Weddesteeg. Rembrandt his parents [<i>sic!</i>] were not rich but also not poor'.⁸</p>	
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A comparison among these 20 sentences shows that each of the sources in the left column provided an element that the duo used for the summary in the right column. All the sources mentioned the date and place of birth, and thus made the duo confident to repeat the same information, although in a less detailed way. The Dutch and English Wikipedia pages seemed to offer so many details, which the duo has shortened. For instance, instead of mentioning that Rembrandt became a confirmed painter after a three-year period of apprenticeship with Jacob van Swanenburgh, they just mentioned that 'he went to settle in Leiden in 1625. There he became a painter'. The wording of the statement about Rembrandt's short school experiences was inspired by the text from People.zeelandnet.nl/acoomens, while the formulation - There he became a painter - summarised the two Wikipedia texts that suggest that he had to stop his studies because he was more inclined to become a painter.⁹

As Table 2 shows, Wikipedia seemed to have relegated conventional sources to the second-category zone. None of the conventional references on Rembrandt and his work - The Rembrandt House Museum, the Rijksmuseum, the Canon of the Netherlands, to mention a few - do not appear in this assignment. Where they appear, they almost always come as second or third on the list. For example, Duo 2 used 6 sources in this order: 1- the Dutch Wikipedia page on Rembrandt;¹⁰ 2- Toon Oomens' personal website;¹¹ the Rijksmuseum;¹² 4- Cultuurwijs [Culturewise];¹³ 5-

⁸ Anouk Claassens, 'Rembrandt van Rijn'

<http://spreekbeurten.info/rembrandt.html> (Viewed 24 January 2011)

⁹ By moving to and forth among various sources of information and selecting details from each source, the pupils were performing what Jenkins and colleagues (2009:85-85) called 'Transmedia Navigation', consisting in 'The ability to follow the flow stories and information across multiple modalities'. They were 'hunters and gatherers' encountering 'the same information, the same stories, the same characters and worlds across multiple modes of representation'.

¹⁰ Wikipedia, 'Rembrandt van Rijn'

[http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rembrandt van Rijn](http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rembrandt_van_Rijn)(Viewed 24 January 2011)

¹¹ Toon Oomens, 'Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606 - 1669)'.

<http://people.zeelandnet.nl/acoomens/rembrand.htm> (Viewed 24 January 2011).

¹² 'Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1969)'

<http://www.cultuurwijs.nl/nwc.rijksmuseumamsterdam/cultuurwijs.nl/i000072.html>

(Both viewed 25 January 2011).

¹³ cultuurwijs.nl: 'Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1969)'

<http://www.cultuurwijs.nl/nwc.rijksmuseumamsterdam/cultuurwijs.nl/i000072.html>

(Both viewed 25 January 2011).

Rembrandt400-Leiden [Jubileum site];¹⁴ and 6- a personal site by someone called Corosa.¹⁵ As this listing shows, the conventional sources appear only on the third, fourth and fifth places. For the pupils, Wikipedia contained *everything*, and if something was not there, it was probably because it did not exist or was not worthy knowing. One WebQuest comment summarised the dominant view among pupils: ‘...The 2nd [best site after Wikipedia] was entoen.nu [The Historical Canon of the Netherlands], *which is also a sort of Wikipedia* but much less known. You can also find everything here’ [Italicisation is mine]. This means that Wikipedia is becoming a reference against which conventional sources are judged and evaluated.

2.2 The ‘best’ source

Generally speaking, Wikipedia prompted much more enthusiasm among the pupils. Pupil 1 rated Wikipedia’s information on VOC with an 8/10 and commented in these terms: ‘[It provides] Much information about its history’. The Historical Canon of the Netherlands, which he also used, received an 8/10 too, with a different comment: ‘[It discusses] How the VOC expanded’. As for Duo 1, who used both the Dutch and English Wikipedia pages on Rembrandt, they rated both with a 5/5, with these comments: ‘[Information] About his life and his paintings’ for the Dutch page, and ‘[It tells] Everything about Rembrandt van Rijn’ for the English page. Toon Oomens’ personal website¹⁶ received a 4/5, with this comment: ‘[It tells] A little bit about his [Rembrandt’s] life, but more about his work’. These few comments and ratings, which could be generalised for the WebQuest assignments, show that the pupils highly valued Wikipedia. Of all, Pupil 6 – the one who just commented on sources – was the most eloquent about Wikipedia:

As almost always, Wikipedia is the best, [because] there is always very much information. It seems as if all professors have written their information there. The 2nd [best site] was entoen.nu [Canon of the Netherlands], which is also a sort of Wikipedia but much less known. You can also find everything here. There are other useful sites as well but these are not as elaborated as the 1st [Wikipedia] and the 2nd[The Canon]. I judged these sites simply by typing ‘The VOC, the United East Indies Company’ in Google.

This comment infers that Wikipedia is beyond any possible comparison. It also implies that the information is ‘almost always’ reliable and authoritative, as it seems to be emanating from ‘professors’. The ‘almost always’ pushes to think that the pupil has some reservations, but these are overwhelmed by the amount and authority of

¹⁴Rembrandt400-Leiden, ‘Wie was Rembrandt van Rijn’

http://www.rembrandt400-leiden.nl/nl/wie_was_rembrandt/ (Viewed 12 April 2011).

¹⁵ Corosa, ‘Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn: schilder, tekenaar en etsner 1606 – 1669’

<http://home.tiscali.nl/~corosa/rembrandt/> (Viewed 12 April 2011).

¹⁶ Toon Oomens, ‘Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606 - 1669)’.

<http://people.zeelandnet.nl/acoomens/rembrand.htm> (Viewed 24 January 2011).

information found on Wikipedia. Unlike Pupil 6 and most of other pupils, Pupil 2 is both enthusiastic and critical about Wikipedia. For her,

Wikipedia *is* often clear *but* sometimes a little bit difficult. It *is* mostly reliable *but* everyone can publish something. The site *is* well structured and you can choose what you want (such as history, arts, biography, etc.) [Italicisation is mine].

The *is...but...* reasoning shows that Pupil 2 knows how Wikipedia works, especially that everyone, including credentialed and non-credentialed authors, could publish and edit articles. She appears to be more enthusiastic than critical, because, her last *is* [well structured and you can choose what you want] did not call for a *but*. Her general feeling is that the site is ‘mostly reliable’. As Table 2 has shown, these reservations seemed to have been compensated for by other websites. When the same information kept coming up on various sites, it was deemed reliable and taken into account in the summaries.

3 Case Study II

The second class I observed, from January-June 2010, was located at Het Baarnsch Lyceum, in Baarn, in central part of the Netherlands. Like in the other case study, the pupils were aged 13-14. Unlike the HPDS class, this one was much more traditional, with a teacher most of the time standing in front of the class and imparting knowledge. To understand and then map the use of online sources by pupils, I collected their written assignments on “The Netherlands in the 17th century”. In a document sent to the pupils, the teacher wanted them ‘to write an article about one development in “The Netherlands in the 17th century”...’ and indicated the type of sources they should use. It was mandatory to use at least four sorts of books -and at least five sorts of websites. In the books category, the pupils had to use the *textbook* to check the ‘aspects’, the ‘major lines’ and some ‘details’; a *general Dutch history book*; an *encyclopedia* for specific concepts, figures, and situations; and a *specific book on your main subject*. In the Web category, they had to use *specific [Canon] ‘windows’* and similar windows from *other ‘canon sites’* including *regional canon websites*; a website of choice with an overview of *Dutch history*; *Wikipedia* for specific concepts, figures, and situations; and *online exercises/educational websites*. The pupils had to form groups of two [duos] based on their affinities. Table 3 shows not only the various uses of both online and analogue sources:

Table 3: Uses of Web and print sources for class written assignments

	Duo 1	Duo 2	Duo 3	Duo 4	Duo 5	Duo 6	Duo 7	Duo 8	Duo 9	Duo 10	Duo 11	Duo 12	Duo 13
Web	20	3	1	5	6	24	10	6	12	8	10	5	6
Print	1	6	9	3	4	6	10	4	4	2	5	4	0

Remark: Duo 3 mentioned *The Dutch Memory* as the source of 32 images they used.

With regard to Table 3, predominance of [long or short] quotations or of paraphrasing does not mean their exclusiveness. However, combinations show that paraphrasing predominates where long quotations are absent and vice versa, while ripping [Duo 13] excludes any other possibility. Two major points emerge from this table: in the first place, Web sources outnumber analogue counterparts; in the second place, Web sources provided primarily images and quotations in greater quantities in comparison with analogue sources.

For the purpose of this paper, I will only focus on Web sources to examine the place Wikipedia occupies. As Table 4 shows, all the Web sources the pupils used could be divided into 11 categories, namely, 1-*Canons*, both the Canon of the Netherlands and regional canons; 2-*Wikipedia*; 3-*Educational sites*; 4-*Heritage sites* including both those of heritage institutions or run by other non-heritage organisations; 5- *Commercial sites*; 6- *Personal or family sites*; 7- *Blogs*; 8- *General information sites*; 9-*Religious sites*; 10-*Academic sites*, that is, those run by, and containing contents emanating from, academic research institutes; and 11-*Newspaper sites*. Wikipedia and the Canon appear *ex aequo* to be the most recurrent, as 11 out of 13 duos cited or used material from each of them at least once.

Table 4: Sorts of Web sources used for class written assignments

		Duo 1	Duo 2	Duo 3	Duo 4	Duo 5	Duo 6	Duo 7	Duo 8	Duo 9	Duo 10	Duo 11	Duo 12	Duo 13
Canons	<i>Canon of the NL</i>	2	1		2		4	2	3	5	3	1	2	3
	<i>Reg. Canons</i>						1	1		2				1
Wikipedia		4	1		2	2	9	4	3	2	4		2	1
Educ. sites		8	1		1							4		1
Heritage sites	<i>Heritage Inst.</i>			1			1	1		1	1	2		
	<i>Others</i>	2				1	4	1		1		1		
Pers./fam. sites		3				2	2	1					1	
Commercial sites						1				1				
Blogs							1							
General Info sites		1										1		
Religious sites							1							

4.1 Learner-led convergence

A comprehensive study of the sources used for the assignments in both classes shows that about 70 percent of the sources were conventional, while the remaining 30 percent were unconventional. Table 1 and Table 4 show that 7 categories out of 10 and 7 out of 11 were conventional, respectively. These figures remain roughly the same if one considers the frequency of individual sites. In terms of frequency, each website is counted not as one source, but as a provenance of individual materials (texts, images, *etc.*). In Table 4, for instance, Wikipedia is counted as one category, whereas it was cited 35 times. An analogy could be made with individual books as independent sources, and the library as the provenance or mother source. Viewed from this perspective, unconventional sources represented 22 percent [18 out of 23] in the first case study (Table 1), and 32 percent [47 out of 69] in the second case study (Table 4).

The point that should be stressed is that conventional and unconventional sources were used in a complementary way in the assignments. For instance, as Table 2 shows, Pupil 6 used 2 unconventional sources and 4 conventional ones for her assignment on the VOC. The unconventional ones included Wikipedia, which provided the pupil with ‘Everything about the VOC’ and earned a 9/10 rating; and Belgian travel [commercial] site Malesie.be,¹⁸ which was commented on simply with ‘VOC’ and received 7.5/10; while the conventional ones included the Canon, which also discussed ‘Everything about the VOC’ with a 8/10 rating; the VOC Knowledge centre of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies [KITLV], which the pupil rated with a 7.5/10, even though she found ‘Much information about the VOC’ on it; the historical news part of Absolutefacts.nl,¹⁹ which received a 7.5/10 for providing ‘Relatively much [information] about the VOC’; and Kennisnet’s ThinkQuest,²⁰ which scored only 7/10 for informing ‘About the VOC’. From the comments and ratings, it would be deduced that the understandings that Pupil 6 got of the VOC was primarily based on the information found both the unconventional Wikipedia and the conventional Canon – where ‘everything’ could be found –, and complemented with details from Malesie.be, the VOC Knowledge Centre, Absolutefacts.nl, and Kennisnet’s ThinkQuest.

¹⁸ Malesie.be, ‘VOC Algemeen’.

http://www.malesie.be/voc_algemeen.html (Viewed 15 February 2011).

¹⁹ Absolutefacts.nl, ‘Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie’.

<http://www.absolutefacts.nl/geschiedenis/data/voc.htm> (Viewed 8 March 2011). This site is classified as conventional or mainstream because its contents are authored and edited by a team of knowledgeable editors specialising in the history of the Royal House and Castles, in automobile and political history, and in the history of the Church, faith, and philosophy (see: <http://www.absolutefacts.nl/redactie.htm> [Viewed 8 March 2011]).

²⁰ Stichting Kennisnet [ThinkQuest], ‘De Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie’.

<http://mediatheek.thinkquest.nl/~jra511/> (Viewed 8 March 2011). This is a conventional source *par excellence* because Kennisnet is a government-funded expertise centre for ICT in education.

Similar mixtures of online sources were omnipresent in the second case study as well. For example, one duo decided to discuss sciences in the Golden Century [17th century] focusing on mathematician and astronomer Christiaan Huygens [1629-1695], philosopher Spinoza [1632- 1677], and self-taught astronomer Eise Eisinga [1744-1828]. The first page dedicated to Huygens mentions two sources: the Canon's page on Huygens,²¹ and the Dutch Wikipedia page on the same scientist.²² In other words, no other reference or source was used on this page but the above-mentioned Web pages. Using long quotations from Wikipedia, the duo provided information about Huygens' education, emphasizing the fact that his early ambitions were in conflict with his father's plans. On the next page, the duo quoted twice from the Canon, which it also paraphrased to highlight Huygens' admiration of René Descartes, and his discoveries in mathematics, physics, and clock making. Another duo chose to focus on 'The Golden Century: Economy and Politics', by focusing on the VOC, the Hanseatic League [1356 - ca 1450] and Slavery. In the section on the VOC, the duo cited Wikipedia,²³ which inspired their discussions on commercial competition and the 1602 [political] decision by 'the States General, the government of that time' to found the VOC. Then fetching from an educational website,²⁴ and the Canon,²⁵ they presented the organisation of the VOC, the birth of *share-holding*, a practice introduced by the VOC to raise funds to build new ships and meet other obligations.

All these aforementioned instances clearly indicate that convergence is taking place between conventional and unconventional sources in the history class, thanks to the Web. The Web is held responsible for this change, because, by making historical sources accessible outside their physical environments, it has made all the marks of conventionality and *mainstreamness* invisible. The fact of going to a museum or an archive, would *ipso facto* tell the pupil that what he or she would find in there is conventional and checked by some credentialed authorities for reliability. On the Web, the pupil would access the same object without seeing the physical museum or archive, which would make the object not different from the one coming from Wikipedia, a weblog, or a commercial site. In most cases, the pupils I interviewed said they ignored the source of their texts or simply mentioned that they had found them on Google, which poses a problem of the still-to-be acquired new media literacy skill of judgment or source evaluation (see Jenkins *et al.* 2009, p. 79). One assumption could be that an increased presence and participation of conventional contents on unconventional platforms, such as Wikipedia, would be beneficial to

²¹ The Canon of the Netherlands, 'Christiaan Huygens 1629-1695. Wetenschap in de Gouden Eeuw'. <http://entoen.nu/christiaanhuylgens> (Viewed 10 July 2010).

²² Wikipedia, 'Christiaan Huygens' http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christiaan_Huygens (Viewed 10 July 2010)

²³ Most of the hyperlinked words are also hyperlinked on the Wikipedia page they cite: http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vereenigde_Oostindische_Compagnie (Viewed 10 July 2010).

²⁴ Scholieren.com, 'Spreekbeurt Geschiedenis. De VOC'. <http://www.scholieren.com/werkstukken/16720> (Viewed 10 July 2010).

²⁵ The Canon of the Netherlands, 'De VOC 1602-1799. Nederland breidt uit over zee'. <http://entoen.nu/voc/vo> (Viewed 10 July 2010).

learners, especially those who still have to acquire the source evaluation or judgment skill.

4.2 Institutional involvement

If convergence is certain on the part of young history learners, it remains to be seen among the traditional, conventional providers of educational contents. This brings back the reflection initiated by Rosenzweig (2006, p. 140) about Wikipedia and what the role of professional historians - I should add all the gatekeepers of conventional historical information - should be on that unconventional, *gated* source of historical knowledge²⁶:

Should those who write history for a living join such popular history makers in writing history in *Wikipedia*? My own tentative answer is yes. If *Wikipedia* is becoming the family encyclopaedia for the twenty-first century, historians probably have a *professional obligation to make it as good as possible* [Italicisation is mine].

Some audacious cultural heritage institutions are breaking from the conservatism that has characterised most institutions in the last decades, by opening up part of their collections to unconventional content-makers. More institutions will most likely follow if the pathfinders report successful results of their innovative endeavours. The Netherlands' National Archive has inaugurated this convergence trend among Dutch heritage institutions by offering 1,000 pictures to Wikipedia Commons, the photo database of Wikipedia in September 2010.²⁷ By doing so, the National Archive was authorising tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Wikipedia authors and editors – I should add *Googlers* for whom Wikipedia almost always tops the result list (Rosenzweig 2006, p. 137) - to use them to illustrate their articles, which, as it appeared in WebQuest assignments, are the first and the 'best' the pupils go to for historical information. The National Archive reported that

²⁶ The concept of gatewatching is used to describe the new quality-control and value-conferring mechanism on user-content-generated websites. Involving no authority or hierarchy in the traditional sense, 'Gatewatching, instead, relies exactly on that ability of users to decide for themselves what they find interesting and worth noting and sharing with their peers' (Bruns 2009, pp. 73-74). It consists in continuously and collectively observing 'the output gates of conventional [news] organizations, as well as of the primary sources of [news] information' (*Ibid.*). In this process, the authority previously vested in a few experts [curators, editors, journalists, *etc.*] is in the hands of 'large numbers of amateur contributors... [who] create dynamic in which "good" information drives out "bad"' (David 2007, pp. 179-180).

²⁷ Nationaal Archief, 'Nationaal Archief-foto's op Wikipedia: ex-premier Gulielmus Kok zeer populair' (The Hague, 28 January 2011).

<http://www.nationaalarchief.nl/nieuws/nieuws/nationaal-archief-foto-s-op-wikipedia.asp?ComponentID=17607&SourcePageID=16483#1> (Viewed 1 February 2011).

In a two-month period over half of the [1,000] National Archive photos were linked to Wikipedia articles by the Wikipedia community. The entries illustrated with National Archive pictures were viewed more than 400,000 times in this period, with the most page views coming from the Dutch version of Wikipedia.²⁸

This could be called the beginning of a new phase – the convergence phase – that is likely to be the leitmotiv of this and the next decades. Previous phases included digitisation of collections, their presentation online, their transfer from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 for some, among others. In all these previous phases, which include the current attempts to integrate social media networks, maintained heritage professionals in their gatekeeping positions, and thus maintained the status quo as content generation and object exploitation were concerned. With convergence, heritage professionals give full access to a large community of content generators, who not only appropriate and domesticate materials, but also spread them over the Web, thereby increasing their chance of reaching the young history learners. Unlike the first type of convergence I mentioned above, which results from the fact that search engines display a mixture of categories of sources in the order of their popularity and without any sign showing their [un]conventionality, this one results from a conscientious effort on the part of the keepers of conventional sources. In other words, collections move from gatekeepers' hands and land into gatewatchers' ones.

The gatekeepers of the conventional sources of historical information could also take advantage of Wikipedia, by simply joining it as contributors and editors. Similar convergences have taken place in many other cultural sectors. For instance, the TV and music industries are undergoing this phenomenon via YouTube, where major mainstream channels – the Oprah Winfrey Show for instance - appear side by side with amateur contents (Burgess and Green 2009, pp. 41-42 & 91); the British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], too, frequently encourages and has recourse to amateur contents (Gillmor 2004, p. 104). Similarly, the film and game industries have already entered an era where do-it-yourself tools enable fan film- or game-makers to generate their own media contents, using in a creative way the original mainstream contents (Jenkins [2006] 2008, pp. 136-137 & 153-155; see also Deuze 2007, p. 75). It would therefore appear normal and even profitable for young history learners if heritage institutions, credentialed historians, and other keepers of the conventional sources moved in that direction too.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

5 Conclusion

One point appears clearly throughout this paper, namely that the same popularity of Wikipedia among the wider public²⁹ is observed among young history learners. The predominant use of Wikipedia texts and pictures, often many times in one assignment, shows that that collaborative encyclopedia has conquered the pupils' hearts. It appears in their comments that Wikipedia contains *much information about... or everything about... the past*, while conventional sources would offer just *information about... or a bit of this or that aspect...* For that reason, it has become a reference against which other sources, including conventional ones, are evaluated and judged. Yet, that does not turn Wikipedia into a conventional source of historical information as no traditionally established authority ensures the reliability of the information it conveys. If policy makers and conventional providers of historical information are to help young history learners take advantage of Wikipedia, they should find ways to facilitate convergence between conventional and unconventional historical sources. One simple reason that should motivate them is that that convergence has already taken place among the ones they are supposed to serve. Their duty is to catch up as soon as possible.

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²⁹ Wikipedia is more visited, read, and cited by much more people than mainstream, conventional institutions' websites such as *The New York Times*, the Library of Congress, and its direct rival *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Rosenzweig 2006, pp. 118-119).

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