

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

A CONSERVATIVE'S ANSWER TO WIKIPEDIA

SEEING A LIBERAL BIAS ON THE POPULAR ONLINE ENCYCLOPEDIA, A TEACHER LAUNCHES CONSERVAPEDIA—TO GIVE A DIFFERENT ANGLE ON THE FACTS, HE SAYS.

By Stephanie Simon, Times Staff Writer
June 19, 2007

Andy Schlafly was appalled. He was teaching a history class to home-schooled teens and one student had just turned in an assignment that dated events as “BCE,” before the common era—rather than “BC,” before Christ.

“Where did that come from?” he demanded.

Her answer: “Wikipedia.”

At that, Schlafly knew he had to act. In his mind, the popular online encyclopedia—written and edited by self-appointed experts worldwide—was riddled with liberal bias. Dating events without referring to the New Testament was just one example. How about Wikipedia’s entry on golfer Zach Johnson, winner of the 2007 Masters? Not a single word about how Johnson gave credit for his win to Jesus Christ.

Thus was born Conservapedia.com—labeled “a conservative encyclopedia you can trust.”

Schlafly, 46, started small, urging his students to post brief—often one-sentence—entries on ancient history. He went live with the site in November. In the last six months, it’s grown explosively, offering what Schlafly describes as fair, scholarly articles. Many have a distinctly religious-right perspective.

Take the Pleistocene Epoch. Most scientists know it as the ice age and date it back at least 1.6 million years. But Conservapedia calls it “a theorized period of time”—a theory contradicted, according to the entry, by “multiple lines of evidence” indicating that the Earth is less than 10,000 years old, as described in the Book of Genesis.

“We have certain principles that we adhere to, and we are up-front about them,” Schlafly writes in his mission statement. “Beyond that we welcome the facts.”

Conservapedia defines environmentalists as “people who profess concern about the environment” and notes that some would want to impose legal limits on the use of toilet paper.

Femininity? The quality of being “childlike, gentle, pretty, willowy, submissive.”

A hike in minimum wage is referred to as “a controversial manoeuvre that increases the incentive for young people to drop out of school.”

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

And the state of the economy under President Bush? Much better than the “liberal media” would have you think: “For example, during his term Exxon Mobile has posted the largest profit of any company in a single year, and executive salaries have greatly increased as well.”

With fewer than 12,000 entries and typos galore (the misspelling of Mobil above; the mayor of L.A. is referred to as “Anthony Varigoso”), Conservapedia isn’t about to supplant Wikipedia—which boasts 1.8 million articles in English alone.

But the all-volunteer site has several thousand active readers and writers. Schlafly encourages his students to use it as a reference, saying that the articles are more concise than those on Wikipedia. On the home page, just above the daily Bible verse, he tallies total views: 12.3 million and counting.

Conservapedia’s critics for the most part have no problem with the articles heaping praise on former President Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, former prime minister of Britain. But they worry about material presented as fact in science and medicine entries that typically seek to debunk evolution, condemn homosexuality and raise fears about abortion. They’re also concerned that children who stumble onto the site will assume everything in it is authoritative.

Schlafly says students can always follow the footnotes to get more information, but few links connect to dissenting—or even mainstream—views.

“The project specifically targets high-schoolers, and that’s probably what I find most dangerous,” said Andreas Kjeldsen, 27, a Danish graduate student who wrote several entries on medieval history before stopping in protest.

Many, perhaps most, of Conservapedia’s articles are free of ideology. There are brisk, straightforward entries about hundreds of topics: the tuba, Claude Monet, the nation of Latvia, Robin Hood, polygons, the Renaissance.

But consider the entry on Hillary Diane Rodham Clinton (b. 1947). She “may suffer from a psychological condition that would raise questions about her fitness for office”—namely, “clinical narcissism,” Conservapedia asserts. Evidence of her instability includes her “ever-changing opinion of the Iraq war.” Though Schlafly demands that entries be rigorously footnoted, these sentences are not.

Schlafly calls the armchair psychology “borderline in acceptability” for his site, but he defends the Clinton article on balance as “an objective, bias-free piece from a conservative perspective.”

The whole point of his encyclopedia, he said, is to provide a different angle on the facts—ones that a student researcher wouldn’t necessarily find on Wikipedia, or in the school library.

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

Schlafly, the son of Republican activist Phyllis Schlafly, is a Harvard-educated attorney who practices in Chester, N.J. He does not know most of Conservapedia's contributors; they're spread out across the world and communicate through online pseudonyms. He promotes writers he finds trustworthy to be systems administrators, who are able to block editors and protect certain articles from changes.

Even among this elite group, there's no ideological conformity. Terry Koeckritz doesn't take the creation account in the Book of Genesis literally, but he enjoys the site and spends hours writing articles on topics such as Fox News.

"It is what it is," said Koeckritz, 56, a computer consultant in Reno. "A family-friendly, Christian-friendly encyclopedia."

That makes it an interesting window into a foreign world for college student Tasha D. Jones, 24, who says she loves to browse random pages and see how writers have inserted Biblical quotes or framed historical events in religious terms.

"It gives me a better understanding of how people feel religion relates to our lives," said Jones, who attends Sacramento City College and has contributed articles on lemons, mangoes and other nonpartisan topics.

The articles change constantly, as most are open to editing by anyone online; on a recent day, a few showed dissenting views. An entry about kangaroo origins, for instance, stated that most scientists believe in evolution. (It was the last line in the entry, after a lengthy discussion about which marsupials Noah may have brought aboard his ark.)

In other cases, a glance at the entry's history—which shows editing over time—makes clear how quickly dissenting views are deleted. Dr. Peter A. Lipson, an internist in Southfield, Mich., repeatedly tried to amend an article on breast cancer to tone down Conservapedia's claim that abortion raises a woman's risk. The site's administrators, including Schlafly, questioned his credentials and shut off debate.

After administrators blocked their accounts, Lipson and several other editors quit trying to moderate the articles and instead started their own website, RationalWiki.com. From there, they monitor Conservapedia.

And—by their own admission—engage in acts of cyber-vandalism.

In recent months, Conservapedia's articles have been hit frequently by interlopers from RationalWiki and elsewhere. The vandals have inserted errors, pornographic photos and satire, including this addition to an entry on Atty. Gen. Alberto R. Gonzales: "Mr. Gonzales is a strong supporter of torture as a law enforcement tool for use against Democrats and third world inhabitants."

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

The vandalism aims “to cause people to say, ‘That Conservapedia is just wacko,’ “ said Brian Macdonald, 45, a Navy veteran in Murfreesboro, Tenn., who puts in several hours a day on the site fending off malicious editing.

Such aggression has reinforced the view among some Conservapedia writers that left-wingers are out to suppress their free speech.

“I had heard it spoken of, but it had never really hit home before just how hostile they are,” said a 15-year-old in New Jersey whose mother asked that her name not be used.

The girl, who is home-schooled, wrote an article for Conservapedia on Irish dancing and uses the site to research papers. But the biggest lesson she’s taken away as a young conservative is: “There are people who want to destroy us.”

stephanie.simon@latimes.com