

Of Pixels and Power

In the movie *Spiderman*, as Uncle Ben lay dying, felled by a robber whom his nephew Peter Parker had neglected to pursue, he said, "With great power comes great responsibility."

Born and raised in the Information Age, I have seen the Internet grow up with me. As a toddler, I endured the crackling pings of the modem. As a child, I relied on giant drives with a few hundred bytes. Now, as a teen, I cram a million times more data into a tiny USB so lightweight I barely feel it around my neck. Computers—hardware, software, networks, processing, pixels—follow one trajectory: faster, smarter, more convenient, more powerful.

Adults debate whether the Internet is harmful or beneficial, how long we kids should stay online, if e-books are better than printed ones, yadda yadda yadda. But the Net is merely a tool; by itself, it is neither good nor bad. What matters is how we use it. After all, a laser can hack off armor, shields, and limbs; but it can also zap kidney stones, cataracts, and tumors.

Intentions can pave the road to heaven, hell, or somewhere in between. An hour of online study or chat may be fine, but 20 straight hours of gaming is an addiction. Whether books are made of silicon or fiber does not matter as much as whether they are read or ignored.

With Google Earth, I can visit Kathmandu, Colorado, and Cologne. Through Skype, I can chat with friends in Sydney, Seoul, and Singapore. On YouTube, I can watch Ninoy sacrifice himself for freedom, Pacquiao dominate hapless opponents, and Pinay chef Cristeta Comerford cook for the White House. All without leaving my chair.

Of course, using the same websites, terrorists can view cities, examining their security or lack thereof; touch base with their fellows, hatching dastardly plots; and create molotov cocktails, following zoomed-in instructions.

But white and black mixed together make gray, and much of the Net is in the gray zone. We often find it hard to tell if marketing sites sell genuine meds or dubious cure-alls; if celebrity clips are uncensored or doctored; or if research is done for commercial or academic purposes, or possibly, shades of the two.

Caveat emptor.

Wikipedia calls itself “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit.” Experts can and do discuss the Bose-Einstein condensate or Picasso’s Blue Period. But saboteurs exploit Wikipedia for their own ends. Neo-Nazi slogans pop up in the middle of World War II accounts. “Magical Rainbow Fish” entries appear (magically!) without proof.

No wonder most teachers ban Wikipedia as reference material in class.

But Wikipedia more often than not comes out first during a web search, and Wiki language is understood by almost every Juan. Hyperlinks to related topics make navigation easy. We click the mouse rather than lift hefty tomes (which reportedly was what my parents had to do when they were in school). Countless people, including teachers themselves, whether they admit it or not, turn to Wikipedia as an info source.

Since Wikipedia is so powerful, can its contents be regulated? The high-ups in Wiki-land say they try their best to check everything that enters the site. So I decided to test their claim: I would sign up for Wikipedia, write something, and see what would happen.

I was instantly foiled. As I inputted username and password, the screen blared, “Account creation from this IP address (114.108.192.6) has been temporarily restricted. This is probably due to persistent vandalism!” Lest you think I am an evildoer, I investigated further, only to find that this Internet Protocol is not limited to one computer (mine), but is also assigned to other nearby routers. I dared not knock on neighbors’ doors to profile possible vandals, so I had no choice but to look for another entry point.

Next stop: school. Perhaps due to vandalizing classmates, I didn't have much luck here either. Net cafés? Worse. Finally I turned to my saintly aunt, who wouldn't vandalize a fly. She lives in a quiet town, so there must be fewer Wiki vandals there. On her computer, I tried yet again, and at last saw with mine own eyes the signup page in all its glory. Hallelujah!

Now came the hard part. Well, the harder part. I had to actually contribute something. I browsed carefully, and finally, on *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* page, I added what I thought was an innocuous fact: "Captain James T. Kirk became an admiral at Starfleet."

However, the next day, my "minor edit" was red flagged. "You did not quote the origin of this edit," Wikipedia intoned. "This is a warning. Any more un-credited edits and we will track you down and behead you." Or something like that.

But my experiment was a success. The Wiki people are indeed trying to ensure the veracity of their info. And the editors had taken the time to check my contribution, since James T. Kirk as Admiral remains in the *Star Trek* entry to this day. Go ahead, check!

My belief in the Wiki validated, I vowed to be vigilant. I was about to report the Neo-Nazi war cry to the Wiki police when to my relief, it was taken down after two days. I corrected entries on "The History of the Philippines," relying on an impeccable source—Agoncillo's "History of the Filipino People." And as a bona-fide Wiki member, I felt it my duty to at last delete the "Magical Rainbow Fish" page, which I did with great relish.

This was heady stuff. I am just a teen who loves sci-fi, history, and democracy, but I can make a difference. Never has so much power been granted to so many—and to so young.

In the novel *Jurassic Park*, the physicist Ian Malcolm says, "Most kinds of power require a substantial sacrifice...Whatever kind of power you want. President of a company. Black belt in karate. Spiritual guru...Whatever you seek, you have to put in the time, the practice, the effort...Once you have attained it, it is your power...[and] the result of your discipline."

According to Malcolm, traditionally, powers have “built-in control.” When a novice in karate finally attains the black belt—and the skill to kill efficiently, he has also mastered with it the discipline—paradoxically—not to kill indiscriminately.

But the world’s newest power—that of science—often disdains discipline. Rampaging dinosaurs cannot be controlled. Without discipline, scientific power destroys. Malcolm decries the hubris of scientists who play God just for the sake of a theme park—but his words also apply to us, who are continuously tempted to abuse the Internet’s godlike power: “You can do it very young. You can make progress very fast. There is no discipline...only a get-rich-quick, make-a-name-for-yourself-fast philosophy. Cheat, lie, falsify—it doesn’t matter.”

The Internet gives anyone with a machine and a cable subscription access to virtually unlimited knowledge, mostly for free. What the Net does NOT teach is wisdom. If anything, the Net erodes our already scanty self-control with the umpteenth link to games or porn even when we think we are safe in .edu or .gov sites. What starts out as plain homework can quickly become a haphazard journey on the Info Superhighway to drool over the latest PHAT gadgets, to download FTASB the latest hits, and to beat Level 12587 of the latest MMORPG, all done simultaneously, GIGO notwithstanding, hi-ho Silver, away!

Social networking sites enable friends and foes to Comment, Like, Retweet. We can Share photos, messages, music. Twitter and text enable us to congregate, voice our concerns, even topple dictators. Thanks to tech, EDSA miracles are now happening in the Middle East.

But people often use social networks in less honorable ways. True, Charice Pempengco did become famous through YouTube. But “LOL” after “LOL” after “LOL” can delude naive netizens into thinking that their every act makes the world Laugh Out Loud, while other mortals’ posts are FUBAR. The Net is the perfect medium for self-glorification, not only for would-be Hitlers, but also for self-centered-but-otherwise-run-of-the-mill *KSPs*. To you who

report every ingredient of your every meal, who give every account of your every ablution, who post every video of your every move: The world does not always revolve around you.

Social networking sites urge us to make friends online. My parents reconnected with old batchmates through the Net, enough reason to celebrate. But many friends and relatives, who are not yet 13 (the minimum age for Facebook), lie about their birth years to “friend” strangers solely to boast about how many “friends” they have. Will these “friends” really be around when they are troubled or in pain? And don’t get me started on cyber-bullying.

The Internet is the greatest democracy in history. Everyone has the right to view, vent, voice, blurb, blog, block. In cyberspace, kings and peasants are equal. I can “friend” President Obama, while my cousin can get Prince William’s status updates.

A teacher blatantly taught the wrong thing in my cousin’s class. Everyone knew it. Later she cried after seeing derogatory remarks on the web. What the kids did might have been cruel, but this example shows how the Net can empower the lowly and the young. That’s why China erected the Great Firewall—as a hedge against liberty. The Net sets people free.

Human cognition and behavior are steadily being transferred to the Internet. When was the last time we remembered everyone’s birthdays, without scheduled email reminders? Or relied on snail mail, rather than Instant Messaging? Or used typewriters, rather than Word?

My generation has never known life before the Net. We cannot abstain—nor do we want to escape—from it. No security ware can eliminate all diversions, detractions, or distractions.

Will we control the Internet, or will we let the Internet control us?

Because we are deluged by megapixels, terabytes, and URLs from without, discipline, focus, and steadfastness must come from within.

With great power truly comes great responsibility.

Thank you, Uncle Ben.