

You can look it up: Marty in Wikipedialand

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

Told that there is an online encyclopedia, I did the natural thing: I looked to see how it treated me. Of course, I hoped to find something like this:

Marty, Martin E., b. 1928, West Point, Neb. Professor emeritus, University of Chicago; longtime contributor to the Christian Century; author of many books. Honors include: Nobel Prize for Peace; Pulitzer Prize for Literature; Bollingen Prize for Poetry; Medal of Freedom. Military record includes Distinguished Flying Cross. His *String Quartet in F* was premiered by the Vermeer String Quartet. An exhibit of his paintings drew record-breaking crowds to the Whitney. A three-time letterman in cross-country . . .

You get the idea. The entry I feared finding was something like this:

Marty, Martin E., b. 1928, West Point, Neb. Professor emeritus, University of Chicago. Knew personally several Pulitzer Prize winners; bested others in the World's Worst Poet contest; in 1939 won the presidency of the Battle Creek Youthful Philatelists; came of age a year too late to serve in World War II and was too cowardly to stay the course with his classmates in the Korean War; liked to listen to the Vermeer String Quartet; several of his doodles have been framed by friends; cheered his sons at high-school cross-country meets.

Again, you get the idea. The former would have been written by a lying friend and the second by a not sufficiently truthful enemy.

The encyclopedia in question is Wikipedia, which has been in the news thanks to what happened to John Seigenthaler (see *USA Today*, November 30; *New York Times*, December 11), who was defamed in his entry. As he put it, some "sick mind conceived [a] false, malicious 'biography'" that lingered 132 days in the online

encyclopedia, the authors of which have been “unknown and virtually untraceable.” Seigenthaler phoned the founder of Wikipedia and was told that he could not learn who wrote the false item because Wikipedia didn’t know who wrote it.

Eventually Wikipedia announced that henceforth entry-writers would have to identify themselves. (And eventually the culprit was traced through cyberspace and apologized for his prank.)

Alerted to the issue by Seigenthaler’s complaints, I “googled” Wikipedia and my name and found 138 entries. Most of them were benign and factual, usually referring to my part in the Fundamentalism Project or to my articles on “civil religion.” But my scanning did lead me to revisit a painful instance from a year ago. After the Asian tsunami I was quoted in a *Washington Post* article in a way that had me agreeing that after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 the Jesuits “roamed the streets” of Lisbon, hanging people. Thanks to Theresa Carpinelli, a tireless corrector, my innocence became manifest, but there is little opportunity to clear myself entirely once such a quotation is out there in cyberspace.

So, to guard against future contributors to Wikipedia, let me register this for the cyberspace record: Marty, Martin, b. 1928. Instructed on his first day by the midwife never to mess with the Jesuits, because, she said, someday you will be saying, “Some of my best friends are members of the Society of Jesus.” No earthquakes or tsunamis are going to disrupt our friendships as we “roam the streets.” Take that, Wikipedia.