

WikiNews: A World Flattener?

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Wikinews attempts to produce a news service using Wikis and the input of a collaborative community of volunteers. This takes place within the changing world of today's news media that are deeply affected from the Internet phenomenon and ubiquitous technologies. Participatory journalism has already appeared in other forms and has been hailed as a major altering force in the news landscape. Wikinews being a project of the Wikimedia Foundation (WF) has inherited several properties from its sister project Wikipedia. These include the Neutral Point Of View (NPOV) policy and the exclusive use of Wiki technology. Although WF appears to be an ideal organisation for such a collaborative project, Wikinews has failed so far to attract a critical mass of users. An important factor for this failure appears to be the foundation's institutional characteristics that have restricted Wikinews from facing the new challenges of its news environment.

Introduction

New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman, has identified the "self-organising collaborative communities" on the net as one of the world's ten flattening forces (Friedman, 2004). These communities have gathered individuals around areas of interest (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and managed to create a new mode of production quite distinct from markets and hierarchies based around the concept of what Yochai Benkler calls commons-based peer production (Benkler, 2002). Commons are freely licensed to everyone. Each member of the community voluntarily contributes to any part of the creation process. Although its driving motives are not direct monetary rewards or exclusive property rights, they have in many cases competed and sometimes outperformed conventional hierarchy and market mechanisms. Examples include the Apache web server and the Wikipedia encyclopaedia that have surpassed in popularity their respective commercial counterparts of Microsoft IIS and Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Friedman acknowledges that collaborative communities already have an impact in his own profession, journalism (Friedman, 2004). Interlinked blogs, peer review of news articles (slashdot, plastic) and grassroots article publishing (KuroShin, Ohmynews, Indymedia) have successfully appeared in cyberspace. In the midst of all these new services the Wikimedia Foundation, the project that runs Wikipedia, launched its own community-based news production project on December 2004. Wikinews, as it was named, is different than any of its counterparts as it uses Wiki technology for the production of news stories. Such technology has been successfully deployed in the Wikipedia project and it allows anyone to add, edit and write articles given some basic rules. Wikinews has also adopted the Wikipedia regulation of Natural Point Of View (NPOV) meaning that stories must not be biased (Wikinews, 2006a). The following text will attempt to analyse the Wikinews project in the context of the today's rapidly changing news production landscape.

The changing face of news media

Traditional news reporting has been for many years based on the doctrine "few talk and the rest merely listen" (Moglen, 1997). The intrinsic properties of conventional news mediums such as television, radio and newspapers have helped to estab-

lish this attitude. The output of these reporting channels does not easily facilitate original input or feedback from the public. The media companies fully control the production and are able to filter any input in order to present a story that they believe would generate the most viewers, listeners or readers and possibly help protect their business or political interests. The expert journalist reports on running issues and the public apathetically accepts the facts presented. An analogue can be made here with the typical doctor-patient relationship. The doctor prescribes medication and the uninformed patient has no option than to follow her advice. Thus this kind of journalistic process can be named news as prescription.

A new medium though has infiltrated the daily life of the individual and presents radical changes for doctors and journalists alike. The Internet today is widely used and its access interfaces are currently expanding beyond the conventional home and office use. Mobile and home entertainment devices are integrating its functionality and increasing its influence. The Internet unlike its conventional counterparts allows for a wider range of use and reduces the cost of publishing and transmitting information. This has undermined the expert power of the information gatekeepers be it doctors or journalists. A patient today can be more informed than the practitioner on issues concerning her disease and will often challenge, compliment or even refute a doctor's advice based on information she gathered on the net (Khanna, 2006). Similarly individuals in the news context using the interactivity that the Internet provides will attempt to express an opinion, report an unreported fact or angle and in some cases falsify a journalist's report. An indicative example of this change has been the bloggers revelation of the fabricated documents presented by CBS News concerning George W. Bush's Air National Guard (CNET, 2004). News as prescription is under fire and even its most dominant figure, Rupert Murdoch, has acknowledged that "citizen participation" is to alter how traditional journalism operates for good (Guardian, 2005).

Peer news production has been at the forefront of changing and facilitating the new needs of the "patient" public. Citizens create blogs presenting their articles in chronological order and linking each other to create their own news networks. Various portals present selections of blogs and prescribed news stories to be heavily commented by the participants (typical Slashdot.org stories have over 400 comments). Other sites accept article submissions that are then reviewed by the

community according to their ideological, thematic or quality controls (KuroShin, Ohmynews, Indymedia). Traditional media have also recognised the importance of these new services and some have incorporated them in their web presence, as the UK Telegraph's "Your view" and blog services demonstrate. Wikinews is called to find its place in this new world, but before going into that let us first have a look at its salient characteristics.

Wikimedia Foundation

Wikinews is a project of the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation. The foundation was formed after the unexpected success of Wikipedia and runs a number of projects such as Wiktionary, Wikiquote and Wikibooks. Wikipedia was created in 2001 to provide additional content for the PhD-edited and reviewed Nupedia encyclopaedia. This new project was based on Wiki technology allowing anyone to create or change articles. Wikipedia proved a great success in its own right and Nupedia was dropped. Today it contains more than 4 million entries and has more than 45,000 registered editors (Giles, 2005). Its creator Jimmy Wales, the current chair of the Wikimedia Foundation, appears to be a passionate supporter of Ayn Rand's Objectivism. This philosophical movement supports the existence of a mind-independent reality that the individual perceives via sensory perception and is able to rationally process in order to gain knowledge ("non-contradictory identification"). This position might have influenced the "absolute and non-negotiable" Neutral Point Of View (NPOV) policy on Wikipedia that has also been transferred on other Wikimedia projects including Wikinews (Wikipedia, 2006b). Besides this policy all Wikimedia projects have also inherited much of Wikipedia's technological infrastructure, which is based on its GPL licensed software MediaWiki.

The Wikimedia Foundation is organised in a way that encourages volunteers to contribute in its projects. Its non-profit nature assures the contributors that their unpaid efforts are not used to generate income for its owners. Hence the Board of Directors does not gain direct monetary rewards and the resulting products are licensed under the GNU Free Documentation License or the Creative Commons licenses. Thus all works are freely available for use and modification, a fact that highlights the public benefit character of the foundation. Another crucial factor in engaging community support is transparency and openness (Tsiavos, 2006). Information on the foundation's decisions, budget and directors are openly available to anyone creating a trust-based relationship with the contributors. This attitude encourages donations and merchandise sales for the foundation that covers basic costs including payments for the 3 permanent employees, office expenses, hardware and bandwidth costs. One here might wonder what is the driving force for the board of directors in freely organising such a project. The answer is publicity and reputation that can easily translate to indirect economic benefits. Its founder, Jimmy Wales, for example using his Wikipedia credentials has received \$4 million venture capital investment for his Wikia company and is one of the directors of the Socialtext group that specialises in Wiki-based solutions for businesses.

Volunteer engagement and Wikimedia projects' promotion stretches beyond cyberspace. Non-profit associations have been set up in Germany and France and more are to follow in

different countries around the world. A yearly conference is also organised each summer to bring the community together to exchange ideas and interact, creating a greater bonding and commitment around the project. Such initiatives are important as they generate local interest and publicity and so increase contributor participation and readership. Wikinews had the advantage to be a part of this established Wikimedia network, which provides it with potential users and contributors as well as with technical infrastructure and policies. Such an advantage though might have opposite effects if the project was not to quickly identify and change established Wikimedia practices that do not apply in its own context.

Wikinews

Wikinews aims at synthesising news reported on mainstream media sources and publishing original reports from members of its community and the public (Wikinews, 2006). The service is run using a bundle of technology, aggregate participant action (market), norms and policy regulation (Lessig, 1998). Its technology side operates using MediaWiki that was originally built for Wikipedia. MediaWiki is now redeployed and its functionality has been slightly altered to facilitate Wikinews special needs. News stories are initially submitted under its "Stories in development" section where users review their relevance and correct or augment their content. Eventually and if the stories have reached a sufficient level of quality the community-selected administrators publish them on the main Wikinews page. Even then users are allowed to change the articles, which are only protected from editing two weeks after they are first published. The detailed version history of the changes is stored and anyone can browse it. Using this function users are allowed to make up to three reverts a day to an older article version and so undo changes they believe are inappropriate. In order to prevent vandalism and deal with urgent matters such as copyright infringement or offensive material administrators are allowed to delete pages, protect stories and block users.

It is clear though that these technological restrictions alone are not sufficient to bring a desired result. The fact that anybody is able to change the content of a page requires a sufficient number of readers who can spontaneously revert inadequate alterations or vandalism. Eric Raymond's open source remark that "given enough eyeballs all bugs are shallow" seems to also apply for Wikis (Voss, 2005). Especially in the case of vandalism (e.g. delete or replace the contents of an article) the fact that reverting the changes requires less effort than to vandalize a page has successfully worked for Wikipedia (Lih, 2004) and appears to apply for Wikinews too. Such defences are further increased as users have the option to "Watch" a page meaning that they receive an email notification when updates are made and so are able to quickly make any reverts if necessary. Vandalism though is just a minor aspect of what the community needs to achieve in order to collectively produce a news story.

Consensus needs often to be reached in order to create an article. To facilitate agreement each article contains a "discussion" page where the community can analyse it. The dialogue though is not open-ended as certain norms have been created following the official Wikinews policies. These, amongst other, ask contributors to present facts only if these have been published in a reputable source and in the case of

original reporting only if the evidence is verifiable (e.g. audio recording of an interview). The Natural Point Of View (NPOV) policy is also heavily used in the discussion and so an attempt is made to present all sides of a story “without bias” (Wikimedia, 2006a). Adherence to these norms has been partly achieved through the extensive introduction tutorials and documentation that senior group members often reference to “educate” newcomers. As one would expect though consensus is not always reached and so in some instances a vote is initiated to resolve a conflict.

Article writing through using the successful Wikipedia recipe is not enough. The outcome needs to be appealing to a news audience. Creative Commons Attribution licence of its content does allow the free propagation of the news and RSS support permits the display of headlines on other sites, but these have not yet helped Wikinews to reach a critical mass of users. Hence a vicious circle is created, not many readers result in a small number of contributors that lead to few articles making Wikinews reading not worthwhile. The NPOV has achieved a great deal for Wikipedia that has managed to fill the market gap of the slowly updated traditional encyclopaedias (Lih, 2004). It does though not seem, in its own right, to generated a great deal of excitement in the news context. Opinionated news and commentary has been one of the driving forces for other successful peer news production services like slashdot. NPOV prohibits such stories condemning Wikinews to eternal neutrality.

The problem is further increased, as the top news categories, again following the Wikipedia paradigm, are not topic or country specific, but rather language centred. This presents a great obstacle for common ground community building as the issues vary from local New Zealand stories to obscure, for some parts of the world, sports to technology specialised topics. It has been suggested that a successful wiki thrives on the divide and rule idea (Schröder, 2005), meaning that one needs to bring together the arguing sides to achieve a better product and engage the community, but in the Wikinews case the wide range of topics make such an approach impossible given the variant non-conflicting background of its contributors. Keeping all the above facts in mind let us now try to draw some conclusions.

Conclusions

Wikimedia Foundation does provide an ideal organisational structure for the development of peer production projects. Its communal decision making mechanisms, non-profit character and transparency are just some of the characteristics that help create trust and engage the community. The massive deployment of MediaWiki to support the Wikipedia project has also given the foundation unique knowledge on wiki technology, which it currently uses exclusively on all its projects. Wikinews has inherited this wealth and is called to make use of these core competences (Hamel, 2002) in the changing world of news production. The result though has so far not been as successful as one would expect. Having a closer look at the news context should give us a better insight of the possible causes of Wikinews failure to reach the critical mass of users.

Peer news production has been challenging the old prescribed news models. Its various shapes and forms have been com-

bined, reconfigured and deployed (Khanna, 2006) to provide an all-inclusive service to the public. Blogs are not just articles, but also allow for basic commentary. UK Telegraph has intergraded blogs in its conventional news structure. kuro5hin allows for Slashdot-like peer-reviewed comments in addition to its community published articles. Indymedia’s local news sites provide forum discussions to engage the community. Wikinews in contrast follows the almost institutionalised Wikimedia dogma of using wikis as its exclusive technology. This approach, which possibly derives from its founder’s interest in the commercial side of the wiki circuit, has resulted in a monolithic and un-colourful service.

Wikis and the so much praised NPOV policy are not irrelevant and do contribute in the peer production news landscape. NPOV though in its own right is un-intriguing for the users that need an additional non-wiki space to express their opinions and read what others think of the running news. Moreover, Wikinews ought to change its structure and focus around topic centred news moving away from the Wikipedia-inspired language categorisation. This should allow the creation of interest-based communities (Prahald & Ramaswamy, 2004) rather than just gathering same language speaking individuals that have nothing else in common.

Breaking from its institutional context norms and “non negotiable” policies ought to help Wikinews reach the so much desired critical mass of users. In doing so it might enable it to provide rich news content and more importantly original reporting from the mobile connected individual. Such aims though currently seem at best ambitious. Wikinews’s vision is definitely a world flattener, but its practice is myopic to say the least. Wikimedia Foundation needs to look beyond its own successful recipes for ideas of realising its world changing dreams.

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