The Construction of Knowledge on Wikipedia

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Abstract

Wikipedia is arguably the single largest, and most widely used, repository of knowledge on the internet. Every day around 15% of internet users worldwide visit the site at least once to get a brief, preliminary understanding of various topics. Undeniably, the website has significant power to influence popular understandings of the topics it covers. This raises the question of whose understandings are represented on the site, whose understandings are undermined and how does this process occur? My thesis aims to begin to answer these questions by investigating the editing process in detail.

Overview

According to the internet traffic monitoring website Alexa.com, Wikipedia is the 6th most accessed website on the planet. On any given day, between 10 and 15 percent of users will access the website, either to look up a piece of information or to contribute to the project. This gives Wikipedia almost unparalleled reach compared to other reference sites and most other sources of information. Because of this, what is said on

Wikipedia matters. Even if Wikipedia is only the first source that a person looks at relating to a topic, it still has the potential to significantly influence an individual's final viewpoint on any given issue.

This becomes an issue when an article is so heavily weighted in one direction that it ignores important critique or shunts it off onto a different article. An example of this comes from the article on 'pornography', where feminist critique amounts to 3 sentences on the main page, which receives 12,000 hits a day, and any further discussion has been shunted off onto the 'feminist critique of pornography' page, which only manages around 100 hits a day. This isn't to say that all articles on Wikipedia is inherently biased. Other articles on controversial topics, like Intelligent Design, manage to maintain a much higher standard of balance despite being on a topic that the average Wikipedian is unlikely to be sympathetic to. Interestingly, the Intelligent Design article is of a high enough quality to be have maintained 'feature article' status for many years despite consistently being open to editing by anyone, whereas the pornography article has been semi-protected for some time yet maintains a lower level of quality (according to Wikipedia's own ranking system) overall.

So how does this happen? Why do some articles end up becoming prime examples of balanced writing whilst others devolve into to a lower quality? Why don't interventions aimed to increase article quality, such as semi-protection work? Are there interventions that would work? The aim of my thesis is to explore these questions by conducting case studies of editing behaviour on a variety of different Wikipedia articles. To do this, a fine grade, edit by edit, analysis of the archives of each article is being conducted. The hope is that developing a more nuanced, empirical understanding of the editing process on Wikipedia will contribute to a more complete theory of the processes of Open Collaboration on cultural projects. Of particular interest is discovering what forms of collaboration lead to more inclusive, plural and democratic involvement of various groups into the project so that the democratic potential of this form of organisation, so often written about in the past few years, may actually be realised. Ultimately, as more of society's knowledge is dependent on the architecture (both technological and social) of Web 2.0, developing an understanding of modern knowledge that takes into account how the knowledge is generated as well is used is also a prime consideration.

At the Doctoral Symposium I hope to engage in stimulating debate, particularly over such issues as the supposed social benefits of this form of cultural production assumed by scholars such as Benkler and the applicability of such maxims as 'with enough eyes, all bugs are shallow' to the cultural sphere. I'm also fascinated by the idea of engaging with students coming from radically different perspectives to myself and look forward to having some of my own assumptions challenged.

Biography

My primary research interests are around the impact that the influx of communication technologies from the late 20th century until now have had on society, particularly as we are faced with the first generation to have grown up in an era of ubiquitous computing. Questions such as what this change means for how we think of knowledge, how a society deals with an overload of information and whether this shift inevitably leads to more democratic forms of society are all central to my Ph.D. work. Outside of my formal studies I have also been involved in a variety of studies looking at the junction between education and technology, the most prominent of these being a study which sought to reveal how young people in hospital use ICT to maintain a connection to their school and their peers. Other projects I've worked on include a survey of 150 low income Australians, looking at how welfare arrangements in Australia, particularly activity requirements, impact upon the disadvantaged and the Independent Fiskville Investigation, which is an inquiry into practices at the Victorian Country Firefighting Authority's training practice at Fiskville.

Supervisor

TBA (My supervision arrangements are currently under review, please contact my schools RHD co-ordinator, Dan Woodman, at dan.woodman@unimelb.edu.au if required until such time as my new supervisor has been arranged)