



DECOMMERCIALIZATION AND ANTI-ELITISM: EARLY YEARS OF WIKIPEDIA 2001-2002

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This paper adopts a sociology of knowledge approach to analyse the two debates on Wikipedia regarding the period 2001-2002: decommercialization, and the accusation of anti-elitism. The first problem concerns Wikipedia's policy on raising capital using one of three possible models: as a subproject acquiring money from another profit-making company, through advertising, or as a charitable organization. A choice would require consideration of the structural tension between the means of raising capital and Wikipedia's ideology of free information and as an encyclopedia. The second problem, which eventually led to the Wales/Sanger split and is related to the Wikipedia vs. Britannica debate, requires an epistemological understanding of the Wikipedia community's use of textual validity rather than educational credentials in evaluating article quality. This problem centres on Wikipedia's novel cooperative knowledge generation (CKG) based on consensus, a social hierarchy determined by merit, and institutional rules that continue to change and are strikingly different from the traditional academic model. Both problems prompt an investigation of the early culture of Wikipedia's knowledge generation process that could have implications for how it institutionalizes later.

Keywords: Sociology of Knowledge, Wikipedia, Dispute resolution, Textual Validity, Free Information.

Introduction

Wikipedia¹ is controversial, especially in the academic circle. Its lack of academic legitimacy has led to universities banning students from citing Wikipedia, and there are criticisms from the academic world regarding the quality of its articles (e.g. McHenry, 2004). On the other hand, Wikipedia is popular and the concept of an encyclopedia that is free of charge and free to use, which undergoes constant editing by its own users, is novel. Research on Wikipedia derives from multiple disciplines, which have investigated it as a business model, a means of teaching and learning, a social movement, novel software design and information technology, social hierarchy, social process and community. It raises questions of propagation of information, human-computer interaction, policy discussion in the form of rumours, knowledge preservation, legitimacy of knowledge and the motivation behind altruistic behaviour. At the centre of the academic debate regarding the accuracy of its content is its novel cooperative knowledge generation (CKG) for encyclopedia construction, which is at odds with the traditional academic model.

¹ Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that "everyone can edit". Being a popular website and having a novel mode of knowledge generation, which is very different from the traditional academic model, it has been the subject of much research in recent years in vastly different disciplines (Yam 2012).

According to *Nature* (Giles 2005), the accuracy of its articles is comparable with that of its academic counterpart Britannica, a controversial claim that provoked a heated response from Encyclopaedia Britannica (2006) followed by *Nature's* (2006a, 2006b) point-by-point rebuttal.

The first two years of Wikipedia's establishment has witnessed the initial phase of an experiment on cooperative knowledge generation with the aim of generating free content. As a non-profit-making project it does not generate profit and does not hire experts to write articles. Following Nupedia's² failure owing to the structural tension between its academic mode of knowledge generation and its ideology of free information (Yam 2012), its founder Jimmy Wales and editor-in-chief Larry Sanger moved on to their next experiment, this time using the software wiki and radically removing all expert peer review processes. While it has abandoned the academic mode of knowledge generation and hence embraces volunteer contributions, the problem of acquiring capital still exists.

Decommercialization: Structural Tension Revisited

Just as in any other model of production, Wikipedia needs to raise capital for its daily operations, which include both software and hardware such as servers. Originally, Wales funded Wikipedia with his profit-making website Bomis, but as business declined there was a need for more funding, and he subsequently suggested showing advertisements alongside encyclopedia entries (*Technology Quarterly* 2008). This raised a structural tension issue: that between commercial interest and volunteering motivation.

Online advertisement is an important source of revenue for websites.³ However, the mental category of an organization that earns money, namely a profit-making company, would conflict with its role as a non-profit organization and potentially discourage volunteers through a perceived failure to adhere to its original ideology.⁴ Moreover, the encyclopedia's insistence on a neutral point of view would also be jeopardized by having advertisements,⁵ which would apparently contain one-sided praises of a particular product or service. Consequently, after many editors opposed the idea Wales announced that there would not be advertisements on Wikipedia (Rodgers 2006). This was a relief to some Wikipedia editors who had protested against advertising in Wikipedia.

The economic paradigm which establishes an equivalency of "doing something" by earning profit is pervasive. That is not to say that social movements and charitable organizations do not have the need to acquire capital. In fact, in a highly commercialized world, capital becomes an important motivation for action regardless of the nature of the organizations, which exist in a world from which they cannot isolate themselves despite discontent. The necessity for capital and the emphasis on extrinsic motivation can unfortunately be at odds with institutions such as Wikipedia which emphasize an intrinsic motivation. Wikipedia is actually more critical: it discourages editing for money as this is seen as a potential conflict of interest (Goldman 2009). However, this is not a problem faced solely by Wikipedia.

The problem of conflict of interest in raising capital has also arisen in two other realms of life. In the academic world there has been a debate regarding the influence of commercialization and an emphasis on

² Nupedia was Jimmy Wales's first attempt to create a free-content encyclopedia in 2000. Because of its expert written and review system, it attracted few volunteers and was a slow project with a limited number of written articles. Wales started Wikipedia as a subproject to create some articles for Nupedia in 2001, but Wikipedia quickly superseded its precursor and Nupedia was finally shut down in 2003.

³ For a detailed discussion of the economics of online advertising, see Evans (2008).

⁴ In fact, both profit-making and non-profit organizations have the need to raise capital. The problem lies in the psychological perception of Wikipedia by its volunteers. There are numerous talk pages in Wikipedia for this issue even years after Wales announced his stance on no-ads, for example http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_talk:Advertisements/Wikipedians_against_advertisements

⁵ On the other hand, other commercial service providers that claim to provide neutral services such as the search engine Google have no trouble displaying various advertisements alongside their web content.

commercial competitiveness in research activities (Lerner 1999; Slaughter & Rhoades 1996). This is especially true in this post-industrial world of commercialization and ever-rising productivity, creating structural tensions in academic institutions (Fairweather 2002; Rowle 1996; Slaughter & Leslie 1997; Wuthnow 1987, 1989). However, academic integrity rather than free information is at stake in academic institutions. That said, research on Wikipedia and on academic institutions could be useful reflections of each other. We also witness this dilemma in institutions upholding altruism or a cooperative lifestyle, for example between charity and social entrepreneurship (Dees 2012).

Anti-Elitism: The Wales/Sanger Split

The Wales/Sanger split refers to the departure of co-founder Larry Sanger in 2002 (*The Australian* 2006). Wales remained on the Wikipedia project, while Sanger (2004) later openly expressed his concern about two problems in Wikipedia: a “lack of public perception of credibility” and “the dominance of difficult people”, both pointing to an alleged anti-elitist culture. The first problem involves the legitimacy of Wikipedia in relation to societal stakeholders, and the two problems are related. Had Wikipedia adopted a traditional academic model (hence not “anti-elitist”), it would have excluded non-academic people, including the difficult ones, and would have enjoyed the same legitimacy as academic institutions. It is risky to depart from a well-known and working model in which the public have faith. To understand the early history of Wikipedia would require a deeper understanding of how and why this anti-elitist culture took place, which might affect its article quality and the perception thereof.

Several points are of importance in this discussion. First, while Sanger’s (2004) accusation of anti-elitism would seem to be in line with other criticisms over the academic standards of Wikipedia, such as Giles (2005), Sanger has openly expressed his support for Wikipedia and states that he is only trying to make it better:

Let me preface this by saying that I know Wikipedia is very cool. A lot of people do not think so, but of course they are wrong. So the following must be taken in the spirit of someone who knows and supports the mission and broad policy outlines of Wikipedia very well. (Sanger 2004)

Second, after Sanger’s departure he went on to establish Citizendium in 2007, a wiki-based encyclopedia that allows only editors registered with real names and has reinvented many of Nupedia’s features, amongst them an expert peer review system. It would have been interesting if Citizendium had developed a popularity comparable with Wikipedia, knowing that Sanger must have learnt from the downfall of Nupedia and the inadequacy of Wikipedia. Unfortunately, Citizendium suffered the same problem as Nupedia – a lack of incentive to contribute – and hence has had limited development, at least in terms of number of articles (Yam 2012).

Going back to the launch years of 2001-2002, a community of editors quickly formed, with volunteers sharing knowledge and debating their views on articles. Besides ideological projects of this sort, an anti-elitist atmosphere may also emerge in social or ideological movements which advocate changes and action (e.g. Valentich 1984), and at times the intellectual may be a new target of resentment, replacing the wealthy (Gordon 2002). Moving away from its academic institutional roots, the transition from Nupedia to Wikipedia was characterized by the replacement of elites with “everyone”, including both elites and laymen. The relatively flat hierarchy of academic credentials has been transformed into a much taller one encompassing (though not uniformly) members from all aspects of society, now each granted the right to speak,⁶ with peer reviews replaced by voting and free-to-talk talk pages.

Wikipedia and the absence of barriers to contributing information to the Internet in general is a radically egalitarian world view of knowledge generation compared with the academic institution. However, from a human resources point of view, Wikipedia still needs experts in various fields to

⁶ Although, through the evolution of Wikipedia policies over time, an increasingly tall social hierarchy with different editing privileges has been formed.

contribute to articles in each field.⁷ A person lacking specific knowledge would only be able to contribute speculative ideas unless he/she proceeded to study, which would essentially transform him/her into something closer to expert status.

If Wikipedia needs experts, then the composition of its community is a crucial factor determining its success as an encyclopedia. This points to Wikipedia's policy and existing community as a potential attraction to newcomers from as many fields as possible to provide a wide range of encyclopedic knowledge as well as to provide an overall experience that keeps them interested in staying on. Another problem is the allocation of people to contribute to an appropriate field in which they are most knowledgeable. This is efficiently achieved in its egalitarian setting: editors choose to write topics on their hobby, while the writing is also part of the hobby, assuming a correlation between hobby interest and expertise. However, two problems may emerge.

The first regards Wikipedia's **dispute resolution process**: when there is a dispute, who should enter the discussion and what is the social process for achieving consensus? In the academic world, experts are organized into fields and subfields and the discussion takes place mainly within its own boundaries, although some fields, sociology being a prime example, do have loose boundaries. There is a strict quality control mechanism involving schooling, qualifying exams and peer reviews, before someone is able to claim to be an academic and granted the right to speak. The possibility of "outsiders" deciding the fate of Wikipedia articles, especially technical ones, might upset academics (e.g. Sherry 2007) as being unacademic. Here Wikipedia simply adopts the institution of its age: a voluntary voting process with a simple majority count.

The second problem is that when there are editors with **non-academic intentions**, article quality may degenerate. There are many examples of these, some of which have been picked up by academics as criticisms of Wikipedia, including vandalism, personal/corporate attacks, brand-building (advertisement) and propaganda. Remedies include consultation of external sources as well as software tools for detection and reversion of such edits, and automatic multiple reversion if the damage spans many articles (Adler, Alfaro & Pye 2010; O'Sullivan 2009; Tabb 2008).

Sanger's (2004) criticisms seem well-founded and the solution of more "deference to expertise" is appealing. On the other hand, Wikipedia cannot undo its egalitarianism, because it is a key factor in attracting volunteers (O'Sullivan 2009:122). It cannot return to tread the waters of Nupedia again. The failure of Citizendium illustrates this: there is no simple way of providing enough extrinsic motivation that would allow Wikipedia to support an academic institutional mode of knowledge generation. Wikipedia must adopt policies other than reinventing the elite-only academic institution.

The academic institution provides yardsticks at various levels with the supposedly increasing probability of generating quality output, a quality standard based on intellectuality. Both the wider society and the academic institution itself use the standard; for example, employers save time by only interviewing candidates with the required educational credentials while academic institutions accept students and promote staff members based on it. However, the extrinsic motivation for the pursuit of "higher yardsticks" through academic activities, not to mention the absence of salary, is absent in Wikipedia. Now that Wikipedia has adopted an egalitarian ideology, its alternative means of achieving quality output will depend on mechanisms to encourage knowledge and discourage non-knowledge. Because the traditional means of excluding non-academic "contributions" is absent, it requires the invention of a social mechanism and the encouragement of motivation that prevents, detects and corrects the consequences of non-academic intentions. The need to deal with both knowledge and non-knowledge brought Wikipedia naturally into its ensuing years of heightening social hierarchy and establishing rules of exclusion (e.g. blocked users) and promotion (elevated editing privileges).

⁷ This refers to a wider sense of "experts": anyone who knows much about a certain subject of interest, not necessarily limited to the academic setting. This is because the academic field under-represents many kinds of knowledge, in particular, by definition, pop culture.

Conclusion

Ranked sixth in *Alexa's* (2012) Top 500 Global Sites at the time of writing, Wikipedia has achieved great popularity over the years. However, popularity implies neither accuracy nor legitimacy. Legitimacy for an encyclopedia involves not only accuracy of content, but also how the public perceives its accuracy and has confidence in its knowledge generation process. The direction of institutionalization and policy setting to secure accuracy and confidence would need to take into account Wikipedia's nature as an encyclopedia and its free information ideology on the one hand, and its commercial viability and academic requirements on the other.

Nonetheless, the achievement of Wikipedia as a novel knowledge generation process should be evaluated empirically, through studies that capture certain aspects of article quality (de la Calzada & Dekhtyar 2010) and studies of its textual validity and institutional process for reaching consensus (Fallis 2008; Giles 2005; Swarts 2009; Taraborelli & Ciampaglia 2010). On the other hand, article quality in ongoing CKG projects is neither static nor a simple average. Research on CKG and software design to improve information accuracy (e.g. Chin, Street, Srinivasan & Eichmann, 2010) can contribute to this thriving field which, since the Internet revolution, is gaining importance as information is becoming ever more ubiquitous and the need for efficient access and accurate information is unavoidable.

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