Wikipedia @ 20

Rise of the underdog

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I: Once the underdog

We all love an underdog. And when Nature announced that Wikipedia's quality was almost as good as Encyclopaedia Britannica for articles about science in 2005, I celebrated. I celebrated because Wikipedia was the David to Big Media's Goliath – the little guy, the people's encyclopaedia, the underdog who had succeeded against all odds.

The underdog is a common archetype of some of the most enduring narratives – from the world of sport to politics. Studying the appeal of underdogs over a number of years, Vandello, Goldschmied, and Michniewicz[1] define underdogs as "disadvantaged parties facing advantaged opponents and unlikely to succeed". They write that there are underdog stories from cultures around the world: from the story of David and Goliath, in which the smaller David fights and kills the giant, Goliath, to the Monkey and the Turtle, a Philippine fable in which the turtle outwits the monkey when growing bananas to eat.

Underdogs are appealing because they offer an opportunity for redemption – a chance for the weaker individual or group to face up against a stronger opponent and to beat them, despite the odds leaning significantly against them. Usually, underdogs face off to better resourced competitors in a zero-sum game such as an election or sporting match, but underdogs don't need to win to be appealing. As Vandello et al state: they just have to *face up* to the bigger, more powerful, better resourced competitor in order to win the hearts of the public.

With the headline "Internet encyclopaedias go head to head" the Nature study represented such a competition when it was published in 2005[2]. The study pitted a four-year-old Wikipedia against the centuries-old Britannica by asking academic experts to compare a selection of 42 articles relating to science and counting up the factual errors. The verdict? The average science entry in Wikipedia contained around four inaccuracies to Britannica's three, leading Nature to announce that "Jimmy Wales' Wikipedia comes close to Britannica in terms of the accuracy of its science entries".

David with the Head of Goliath, circa 1635, by Andrea Vaccaro

The Nature study is now the stuff of legend. Although it was criticized for the way that articles were compared[3] and the way that the study was reported [4] the study is mostly used as evidence of the quality of Wikipedia in comparison to traditionally authored reference works. For those of us working in the free and open source software and open content movement, it confirmed what we already thought we knew: that online resources like Wikipedia could attain the same (if not greater) level of quality that traditionally published resources enjoyed because they were open for the public to improve. It gave credence to the idea that content as well as software benefited from openness because, as Eric Raymond[5] famously wrote, "with enough eyes, all bugs are shallow".

righteous indignation when hearing about underhand attempts by large software corporations to stem the tide of open source in order to protect their hold on public education in Namibia.

I celebrated Wikipedia's success because it was a signal from the establishment that openness was a force to be recognised. I celebrated because Wikipedia had become emblematic of the people of the internet's struggle against the corporate media giants like the Motion Picture Association of America and its members who were railing aggressively against Internet culture and the ideology and practice of free and open source software and open content because it was considered a significant threat to their business models. In 2005, P2P firms, Napster, Grokster and StreamCast had been successfully sued by rights holders and Lawrence Lessig had lost his case to prevent US Congress from extending US copyright terms. We all needed a hero and we needed a few wins under our righteous belts.

When the Nature study was published in 2005, Wikipedia represented "the people of the Internet" against an old (and sizeable) Big Media who railed against any change that would see them fall. Ironically, the company behind Encyclopedia Britannica was actually ailing when the Nature study drove the final nail into its coffin. But no matter: Britannica represented the old and Wikipedia the new. A year later, in 2006, Time Magazine's Person of the Year reinforced this win. Awarding the Person of the Year to "you", the editorial argued[6] that ordinary people now controlled the means of producing information and media because they dissolved the power of the gatekeepers who had previously controlled the public's access to information.

> [2006 is] a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It's about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people's network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.

It is this symbolic value that makes underdogs so powerful. Vandello, Goldschmied, and Michniewicz argue that we root for underdogs, not only because we want them to succeed but because we feel "it is right and just for them to do so". We dislike the fact that there is inequality in society – that some individuals or groups face a much more difficult task because they are under-resourced. Rooting for the underdog enables us to reconcile or face this injustice (albeit from a distance).

II: Wikipedia wars

Wikipedia is now a very different beast from 2005 when Nature conducted its study. The encyclopedia that was pitted as Wikipedia's competitor, Britannica, is now all but dead (the final print version was published in 2010). Wikipedia has moved from 37th most visited website in the world when Nature

published its study in 2005 to fifth place and enjoys about 18 billion pageviews a month. Donations to Wikipedia's host non-profit, the Wikimedia Foundation's increased dramatically – from about $1.5 million in 2006 to almost $100 million in 2018. From a tiny office in a shopping mall in Atlanta with three employees to corporate headquarters in the heart of San Francisco and a staff of almost 260, the Wikimedia Foundation's operating budget and cash reserves are so healthy that some have argued that Wikipedia doesn't need your donations and that the increased budget is turning the Foundation into a corporate behemoth that is unaccountable to its volunteers[7][8].

The biggest indicator of Wikipedia's power is neither the cash reserves of its parent organisation nor its massive visitor numbers but the strategic importance of the site in terms of global battles over the representation of dominant knowledge paradigms. If there is a political battle being fought – between politicians, policies, ideologies or identities – there will be a parallel conflict on Wikipedia. On English Wikipedia, for example, Donald Trump's page is in a constate state of war. In 2018, an edit war ensued about whether to include information about Trump's performance at the 2018 US-Russia summit in Helsinki[9]. On the Brexit article, editors have received death threats and doxx attempts when editing information about the impact of Brexit on the UK and Europe[10]. After Time Magazine published a story by Aatish Tasser critical of Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, Tasser's English Wikipedia page was vandalised and screenshots of the vandalised page distributed over social media as evidence[11].

The above examples relate to obviously political subjects, but Wikipedia wars are being fought beyond the bounds of politicians' biographies. Representation of current events on Wikipedia is almost always hotly contested. For every terrorist attack, natural disaster, or political protest, there will be attempts by competing groups to wrest control over the event narrative on Wikipedia in order to reflect their version of what happened, to whom it happened and why it happened. Unexpected events have consequences – for victims, perpetrators and the governments who distribute resources as a result of such classifications. Wikipedia is therefore regularly the site of battles over what becomes recognised as the neutral point of view, the objective fact, the common sense perspectives that affect the decisions that ultimately determine who the winners and losers are in the aftermath of an event.

Governments regularly block Wikipedia because of its potential for distributing what they deem to be subversive ideas. Wikipedia is currently blocked in China and Turkey, but countries including France, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Thailand, Tunisia, the United Kingdom and Venezuela have blocked specific content from a period of a few days to many years. In 2013, it was found that Iran's censorship of Persian Wikipedia targeted a wide breadth of political, social, religious and sexual themes including information related to the Iranian government's human rights record and individuals who have challenged authorities[12]. In the UK, the Wikipedia article about "Virgin Killer", an album by the German rock band, Scorpions, was blacklisted for three days by the Internet Watch Foundation when

the album cover image was classified as child pornography. In early 2019, all language editions of Wikipedia were blocked in Venezuela probably because of a Wikipedia article that listed newly-appointed National Assembly president Juan Guaidó as "president number 51 of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela", thus challenging Nicolás Maduro's presidency[13].

It could be argued that Wikipedia's rise was never really due to the quality of its articles but to its accessibility, discoverability, format and, importantly, its early alliance with Google. Not only was Wikipedia always radically open for anyone to access, copy and redistribute, it was accessible because it could be easily discovered. Wikipedia articles was prioritised by Google in search results because Wikipedia articles follow a (predictable) standard format, because of the scope of its remit ("the sum of all human knowledge") and because of the authority of crowd-sourced knowledge ("the wisdom of crowds").

Now, changes to the ways in which platforms structure and serve information via search engines and digital assistants has given Wikipedia's authority an added boost. Ask Google who the President of Uganda is who won MasterChef Australia last year and the results will probably be sourced from (English) Wikipedia in a special "knowledge panel" featured in the search results. Ask Siri the same questions, and she will probably provide you with an answer that was originally extracted as data from Wikipedia. Information in Wikipedia articles is being increasingly datafied and extracted by third parties in order to feed a new generation of question answer machines driving search engines (such as Google's Knowledge Graph panels) and virtual assistants (including Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa) in ways that fundamentally boost Wikipedia's authority.

III: This top dog needs oversight

Wikipedia has become an unquestioned source of authority. It holds such a dominating position that non-participation is not an option if an organisation, individual or group seeks any kind of recognition online. The problem is that Wikipedia excludes much of the world's knowledge and the costs of being excluded is high.

Wikipedia's critics demonstrate how vast swathes of knowledge (however true for its bearers) will never be represented on the encyclopaedia because the system constrains what can and cannot be included. That system (comprised of rules, tools and the ways they are used by people working in communities of practice) restricts what counts as knowledge. In some ways, this has to do with the limits to the encyclopaedic form as a vehicle for knowledge, but in other ways Wikipedia's bias is a result of the peculiar makeup of Wikipedia: its demographics, its geographic origins , its ideological alignment. Wikipedia may be a battleground for control over what is recognised as common knowledge, but it is by no means an even one.

Despite Wikipedia's powerful new role as authoritative source of knowledge and the problems with its systemic bias, it has yet to command the attention and oversight that other dominant platforms have. Although there is much to contrast Wikipedia with for-profit platforms, Wikipedia is increasingly central to the representation of knowledge in ways that even Google cannot replicate (hence its use of Wikipedia data).

When Wikipedians comment on problems from within, they are vilified or ignored. How dare anyone complain when they could be using that time to fix the problem! When journalists and commentators talk about Wikipedia, they still frame Wikipedia as a single (usually English language) project in which volunteers and Foundation officers share a single view of how knowledge should be represented.

Perhaps this is because we continue to see Wikipedia as Nature categorised it in 2005 when it has evolved from an encyclopaedia to a platform in which battles over resources, language, gender and ideology play out and where facts that are produced have very real implications for the communities they represent.

It is a mistake to see Wikipedia as a single project. Within the Wikimedia domain, there exist a number of groups (not necessarily divided by language or Wikimedia project), each with a distinct culture, different understandings of Wikipedia's principles and goals and vastly different resources. Their cultures are defined by the types of contributors, the norms used to make decisions, the policies and rules that are applied, the tools used to construct knowledge, and the identities of contributors.

There is sometimes competition between these groups for funding resources but, most importantly, competition for who acts as the ground truth for factual statements about the world… a competition for authority. Battles are fought by competing projects in order to influence chains of facts that extend into and embed themselves into other platforms and therefore influence what is accepted as common knowledge and global consensus about everyday phenomena that have a significant impact on the general rules about who gets what, where and how.

No longer is the fight between Wikipedia and traditional media but within Wikipedia: between volunteers and paid PR agents, within countries where Wikipedia is the war zone where ideological battles play out – between conservatives and democrats, between supporters of undemocratic regimes in-country and opposition to the regime outside, between feminists and anti-feminists. There are struggles between the WMF and the community – the group of paid employees, some of whom were once volunteers, and the volunteers who continue to do the work without pay. And there are battles between projects like Wikidata and Wikipedia as the former starts to encroach on Wikipedians' territory in control over informational elements of Wikipedia articles.

When we recognise how instrumental Wikimedia has become for the ways in which dominant views about the world are produced and how there is not necessarily a single view from within Wikimedia about how to progress the project, we will recognise the need for greater accountability and oversight. Rather than focusing on Wikipedia as a single (usually English language) encyclopaedia, we need investigations that recognise how Wikimedia is both a source for networked knowledge and filters sources from the broader Web according to local norms and rules of reliability (intersected by issues of gender, race and ethnicity). These include questions about the political economy of the Wikimedia federation (questions around transparency, funding inequalities and accountability of *all* the projects and the ways in which they intersect with the wider Web) and debates from within Wikimedia such as those regarding new projects like Wikidata which some argue are set to fundamentally change who edits Wikipedia.

These need to be a public conversation which doesn't require an understanding of a very particular culture in order to participate. Requiring every critique of Wikipedia to happen "on wiki" denies the stake that everyone (notably those outside the Wikimedia community) has in Wikimedia's governance. Refusing to listen to critiques because commentators should have rather fixed the wiki denies how Wikipedia can have very real effects in the world now. Thinking that we might be able to solve some of these problems in the future denies the very real harm that can result from what happens on Wikipedia in the present. For that, we need more criticism and oversight – not because we want to denigrate Wikipedia but because we care about its continued (but improved) existence.

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