Wikipedia

A Field Report by Lennart Guldbrandsson

Introduction

Above my desk is a quote by Albert Einstein: "Do not worry about your difficulties in mathematics; I can assure you that mine are still greater." One of Einstein's problems, of course, was that since he was a pioneer, there were not many who could give him the correct answers.

Wikipedia is in some ways in the same position. It is presently the 6th most visited website in the world (Alexa 2014), it is the only donor-supported website in the top 50 list, and *Mozilla* is the only other non-profit in the top 25 list (Gardner 2013). Few other very large websites use only copyright-free material, written and maintained by anyone, with a decision system that has been described as consensus-driven. Even the five-year strategic plan for the *Wikimedia Foundation* was crowd-sourced (Wikimedia 2011b).

It is in this light, the challenges and plans for the future of *Wikipedia* should be viewed. Very few other web site owners, or even encyclopaedias, are in the same situation, with the same business model, or government system. For sure, there are some similarities with for instance traditional encyclopaedias or with social media. In common with the former is the tone of the language and overall goal. With social media, *Wikipedia* shares an increase in use on mobile and tablets. However, this means very little when it comes to *Wikipedia's* challenges and plans for the future.

I will exemplify this with one challenge and one plan for the future.

The Gendergap Challenge

During my nine years as a contributor to *Wikipedia*, there has been an increase in almost all possible measures of quality. When I started in 2005, the Swedish-language *Wikipedia*, where I am mostly active, had around 60 000 articles, while the English-language *Wikipedia* had about 450 000 articles. Reference sections as well as images were not plentiful, to say the least. There were no schools that used *Wikipedia* as a teaching tool, and no museums put their images on *Wikipedia*. Media reports were few and often negative.

Through diligent work of several thousands of volunteers, all this changed: the number of articles is more than 20 times they were in 2005 for the Swedish-language *Wikipedia*, and 10 times more for the English-language *Wikipedia*. References to scholarly works as well as other reputable sources have become a standard. Images of increasingly higher quality are inserted into more and more articles. Partly this is due to collaborations with galleries, libraries, archives and museums around the world (Wikimedia 2014a). Many universities and places of higher education use *Wikipedia*, either as an examination form, or as a way to work with outreach to the lay community (Wikimedia 2013). Media reporting have also begun to change, albeit more slowly.

There have, naturally, also come up new measures of quality that were not on the map in 2005. The largest, by far, is the result of a series of surveys carried out around 2008-2010, most famously one by UNU-MERIT, which showed that only 13% of the editors of *Wikipedia* were female (Glott et al. 2009).[1] This has led to a series of discussions on and near *Wikipedia* as well in the media, mainly about what the consequences and remedies might be. Wikipedians, including me, have started to focus on recruiting more female editors, through several initiatives. So-called "edit-a-thons" with a focus on female participants or what is generally considered to be female-oriented topics, are probably the most

common initiative. Another good example is the on-*Wikipedia* initiative, *The Teahouse* (English-Language Wikipedia 2014). Since 2013, interest in using statistics to determine the best methods for recruiting female editors has increased, not least with a view to getting women to continue contributing to *Wikipedia*. Recruiting people from all-female or predominantly female groups have also meant that common discussion topics and solutions to their problems enter the *Wikipedia* community.

However, this has also meant getting veteran Wikipedians to question themselves on how and why they started contributing to *Wikipedia*. The answers have been varied, but true altruism and an unwillingness to let one of the internet's most used sources for information contain errors, are two of the most common answers.

The challenge is far from over. Admittedly somewhat anecdotally, topics that are generally considered to be more interesting for women, still have worse articles than comparable subjects for men.[2] Both *The Teahouse* project and the Education Program have been drawing more interest from females than from males, which point to a small but gradual increase in female editors (Wikimedia 2014b; El-Sharbaty 2013). As long as the majority of the most active Wikipedians are male, the gendergap issue is difficult to resolve (Hale 2014).

However, there are still no major surveys to tell whether the numbers are changing or not. Even if there were, there may still be problems detecting any changes in surveying the *Wikipedia* community. First, the UNU-MERIT survey was shown to have been skewed (Hill & Shaw 2013). Secondly, many female editors prefer to stay anonymous, in fear of sexual harassments, degrading comments about women, and other repercussions (Gardner 2011). The discussions on *Wikipedia* are torn between positive and indifferent, but information about the gendergap and prominent Wikipedians speaking out about it, has

in my experience made at least made some more volunteers support the issue.

My own estimation of this issue is that it may take some time to reverse the common misconceptions that experts are male, that contributing to *Wikipedia* is hard, and that you need to be an expert to contribute to *Wikipedia*. This is part of a cultural shift that not only exists on Wikipedia. A further examination of this topic can be found, in Swedish, on *Wikimedia Sverige's* blog: http://wikimediasverige.wordpress.com/kvinnor-pa-wikipedia/).

The Redesign Plans

I have in other forums compared governing *Wikipedia* to steering an oil tanker. Every turn needs to be done in small steps. One of the most long-standing (if not well-known) examples is a series of proposals to re-design *Wikipedia*. Today, most of *Wikipedia* is white and grey, with thin blue lines as dividers between sections. The present look of *Wikipedia* was created around 2003-2004, when there were very few mobile phone users, and the internet in general looked quite different. Since then, only incremental changes have been made. (To be clear, I am not discussing the function here, with WYSIWYG-editing capabilities and so on, but the look and feel of the website.)

There have been some suggestions to totally redesign *Wikipedia*. Perhaps the most serious attempt began as a series of user interface tests circa 2010 (Wikimedia 2011a). It was discovered that most test subjects, who had never edited *Wikipedia* before, found the layout confusing and the workflow unintuitive. Compared with other websites, such as *Facebook*, the design appears antiquated and cluttered. A change to attract new users seemed inevitable.

However, with the consensus model, all large changes need to be discussed before implementation.[3] In the case of the redesigns, the results of the surveys were largely ignored by the veteran Wikipedians, who had already learned to

navigate through the maze. Since it was mostly veteran Wikipedians discussing the issue, it became the consensus to keep the existing design.

New designs continue to be discussed. *Wikimedia Foundation's* senior designer, Brandon Harris, has shown many interesting-looking tests and cases (Mediawiki 2014). The plans are there, and they would in some cases seriously help newcomers to understand and to be active on *Wikipedia*. While some of them have been implemented, there are some difficulties trying to lead the *Wikipedia* community through fiat or even by showing a good case. The results are not always what you would expect.

Why is this important? *Wikipedia* still mainly reaches countries in the US and Western Europe. In the rest of the world, mobile users and newcomers are the default. For them, a redesign is a necessary step in the on-ramp to editing. Here the consensus of the veterans stands in the way of an easy experience.

The changes are happening, as the veteran Wikipedians become more and more intermixed with newcomers in the discussions. In my experience, it takes a few years of lobbying inside the *Wikipedia* community to change attitudes, but there are exceptions, as we are beginning to see with the gendergap issue.

Conclusion

Many Wikipedians describe the experience of contributing to *Wikipedia* as a fulfilling hobby. However, the majority of Wikipedians tend to focus only on the articles they work on, and care very little for the large trends and challenges ahead. This is not only a weakness, though. The Wikipedians interested in the gendergap issue and the Wikipedians interested in redesigning the website are often more invested in their respective fields, and have more patience in proposing and re-proposing the necessary changes. This is especially true as more interested people from outside *Wikipedia* engage with the veteran Wikipedians.

So while Einstein's quote may be fitting, it is not entirely true. Some solutions come from within the community, and some from without (newcomers and experts), but some come from the meeting of the two.

Notes

[1] The survey website seems to have been shut down, but I have endeavoured to link to as much of the results as I could find in the list of references.

[2] This is indeed the topic of many media reports on the gendergap, including by *Digital Trends*, *The Huffington Post* and *The New York Times*. See reference list.

[3] There have been a very small number of incidents through the years, where the *Wikimedia Foundation* has acted before/without community input. The policy has almost always been that it is up to the respective language version communities. The most famous example is the Anti-SOPA protest, which included an open discussion between more than a thousand volunteers and the *Wikimedia Foundation* legal team.

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