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10 YEARS OF WIKIPEDIA: TRANSCRIPT

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BROOKE GLADSTONE: Saturday, January 15th, marks the tenth anniversary of Wikipedia, the free web-based, crowd-sourced, multilingual encyclopedia. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported this week that 42 percent of all American adults use Wikipedia and that it's especially popular with people under 30 and/or those with a college degree. Actually, some of those traits describe viewers of Comedy Central's Colbert Report with Stephen Colbert, who makes jokes about Wikipedia's open-door editing.

[CLIP]:

STEPHEN COLBERT: I'm no fan of encyclopedias. I've said it before.

[LAUGHTER] Who is Britannica to tell me that George Washington had slaves? If I want to say he didn't, that's my right. And now, thanks to Wikipedia - it's also a fact.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] [END CLIP]

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Wikipedia's susceptibility to online vandalism made headlines in 2006 when journalist John Seigenthaler checked his own Wikipedia page and read that he was a suspect in both Kennedy assassinations. Not true. Wikipedia has since altered its policy regarding editing the biographies of living people. More recently, it was slammed by Fox News after it found what it called child pornography on the site. The fact is Wikipedia's greatest weakness is the byproduct of what Sue Gardner, executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation, calls its greatest strength, roughly 20,000 hardcore volunteer editors and 100,000 occasional ones who correct, update and patrol its 17 million or so articles. She offers this description of the hardcore Wikipedian:

SUE GARDNER: The quintessential Wikipedia editor is a 25-year-old guy, normally a graduate student and typically kind of overrepresented in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Does it worry you that the lack of diversity could affect the editing? I mean, really, it has to.

SUE GARDNER: Absolutely yeah, 87 percent of Wikipedia editors are male, and so topics that would associate or correlate with being female are certainly less well covered than topics that correlate with being interesting to men, right? We have 100,000 core editors in our core editing community, so there is a lot of diversity in that pool but there's no question that our quintessential editor is that young male person.

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BROOKE GLADSTONE: Would you say that 80 percent of the work is done by, you know, a relatively small group that makes changes every day or a couple of times a day?

SUE GARDNER: Yeah, I would say the majority of the work is done by those very, very committed editors. But you need the infrequent editors who just happen to know something about a particular topic area and they do ten edits and then they don't do anything else for six months. You need those people because that's really where you get your breadth, but you also need that core community to keep the machinery in motion, to be patrolling for vandalism, to be systematically fixing errors where they exist, to be doing dispute resolutions and protecting pages and all that. So you really need both kinds.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: That core has plateaued in recent years, has it not? Does that worry you?

SUE GARDNER: Yeah. I mean, the number of active editors has been flat since 2007. We don't know what to make of that because there's never been anything like Wikipedia before. There's a school of thought that says, of course, activity is going to be highest when you're building something out of nothing, and then once it's built, this school of thought argues, it goes into kind of a maintenance mode. And at that point you need fewer editors to maintain a mature Wikipedia as opposed to building one.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Do you subscribe to that [LAUGHS] school?

SUE GARDNER: I can't afford to subscribe to that school.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So how do you stop the plateau from becoming a decline?

SUE GARDNER: The first thing that you need to do is figure out what are the impediments to people's editing that have no benefit and you just want to get rid of them. Wikipedia was started in 2001. At that time, everything you did on the Internet was difficult. Now, ten years later, it's really easy, right? Flickr is easy. Twitter is easy. Facebook is easy. Editing Wikipedia is not as easy. So the first thing that we did was kick off a project to increase the user friendliness of Wikipedia. And then the second thing that we're doing is trying to create invitations and persuasive messages to people about why we think they should edit.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Who are these people you're reaching out to?

SUE GARDNER: We have a big initiative called the Public Policy Project, which is a project designed to increase the quality of articles in Wikipedia on public policy topics. So we're working with, I think it's 16 American universities. And what's happening is the professors are assigning Wikipedia article writing as coursework in their classes.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Sue, it's such a 180 from the classic professorial position. They don't trust it enough for their students to cite, but some of them want their students to participate.

SUE GARDNER: Yeah. I mean, my understanding is that you shouldn't cite any encyclopedia. Encyclopedias are jumping off points. But, having said that, I think there's been a shift in academics towards Wikipedia. I was in Berlin a

couple of years ago at a Wikipedia Academy event, which are these outreach to schools events, and I was talking to a mathematics professor who came to the academy to learn how to incorporate Wikipedia into his classroom. And I asked him why, and he told me that he felt like if people are going to Wikipedia to get information, then he had a moral obligation to make sure that the information on Wikipedia was as good as it possibly could be.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Fair enough, but it's kind of like saying kids are going to have sex anyway, so you should teach them to use condoms.

SUE GARDNER: Yeah.

[LAUGHTER] Yeah, but I'll take that.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So Wikipedia is offered in many languages and there are different editors, each with their own rules and practices. Can you talk about how different Wikipedias are different, like German Wikipedia or Arabic Wikipedia?

SUE GARDNER: I think it's fair to say [LAUGHS] the German Wikipedia is the best language version. It's accurate, it's comprehensive, it's well maintained, the articles are longer, the articles are well referenced, and so forth. Germany is a wealthy country. People are well educated. People have good broadband access. So the conditions for editing Wikipedia are there. And the fact that German people were able to meet face to face and talk about policies and talk about procedures and so forth because they're geographically located in a relatively small area, for the most part.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Mm-hmm.

SUE GARDNER: And they may also have to do with the German national character.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: [LAUGHS]

SUE GARDNER: I wouldn't speculate, but they might.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: [LAUGHS] Careful.

[LAUGHTER]

SUE GARDNER: Yeah.

[LAUGHTER] We know, for example, that the folks from the French Wikipedia have told me that in their early days they allowed recipes in the French Wikipedia. As far as I know, that's the only language version that actually allowed recipes.

[BROOKE LAUGHS] Eventually they did not allow them. But it's interesting, right? It may mean something, it may [LAUGHS] not mean something, but it's interesting.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Talk to me a little bit about the occasional power struggles that arise between the hardcore editors and the administrators of Wikipedia. Craigslist had some scandal with sexual material on the site and Craig Newmark just took it down. Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales, in response

to the Fox charge of child porn being on the site, unilaterally stepped in and deleted content, and in the wake of that he got slammed by the hardcore that charged him with enforcing a kind of editing superpower that wasn't fair. Doesn't having so much power spread out among an editorial hardcore hobble Wikipedia from being able to respond quickly to a crisis?

SUE GARDNER: No, they respond very quickly. Let me give you a tiny example. One of the first things that happened after I joined Wikimedia was I got a phone call from an old friend of mine who said, this guy I know is being maligned in Wikipedia as a polygamist, I think. And so, I left my office and I said to one of our staff, I said, what do we do in those instances? And they said, I'll just go on IRC and tell somebody. And in seven minutes, that piece of the article was gone. In a newsroom it would still take some time, right? Like you'd want to talk to your lawyer, you'd want to check your sources. You'd want to have a couple of meetings.

[OVERTALK]

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Right, but your friend had an inside track. She got to call you.

SUE GARDNER: She did, but there are lots of ways to communicate within Wikipedia. There's an email queue that you can write to, right? There's always somebody awake and there's always somebody looking to see how they can help. Consensus decision making can take time, but they also have a really terrific bedrock of policies and procedures that guide them and enable them to make quick decisions.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales was just on The Daily Show saying that the essential nature of the enterprise will stay the same. But I'm still wondering can you balance this kind of anarcho-democracy with order and accuracy?

SUE GARDNER: See, I don't see those two things as in conflict. When you allow people to contribute information freely, they will - we couldn't have predicted it but now we know - they will come together and create an encyclopedia, 17 million articles, a thing that's useful enough that 410 million people every month use it. Like, it works. There's a famous sort of joke on Wikipedia which some editor made in the early days, which was Wikipedia cannot work in theory. It can only work in practice.

[BROOKE LAUGHS] Yes, there are tiny errors. Yes, there are typos. Yes, sometimes the writing is not fabulously smooth and engaging. But it gets better all the time. And the proof is that people use it.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Sue, thank you very much.

SUE GARDNER: Oh, you're very welcome. This was a pleasure.

[MUSIC UP AND UNDER]

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Sue Gardner is the executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation.

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