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A decade of Wikipedia, the poster child for collaboration

By Olivia Solon (/search/author/Olivia+Solon) | 10 January 11 (Mon, 10 Jan 2011 18:46:00 +00:00)

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As Wikipedia celebrates its 10th anniversary, Wired.co.uk speaks to Sue Gardner, Executive Director of the Wikimedia Foundation about the collaborative encyclopaedia's role in the web and its plan for world domination.

Wikipedia. To many it is still considered a dirty little secret. A site surreptitiously consulted when an office conversation veers out of your comfort zone. When directly referenced, it is often accompanied by a hasty acknowledgement of its shortcomings. We are all familiar with the sarcastic undertones that lace the mantra "it must be right, because Wikipedia (/tags/Wikipedia) says so". But those undertones are slowly fading as the system improves and the site becomes less dirty, less little and less of a secret every day.

Exactly 10 years after its launch and 17 million articles later, the poster child for collaboration is an accepted part of daily life in the developed world, with serious inroads being made to the rest of the world.

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The person tasked with steering Wikipedia's growth is Sue Gardner, Executive Director of the Wikimedia Foundation (http://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Home). A feisty former journalist and senior director of CBC.ca (http://www.cbc.ca/), Gardner was brought in to develop a clear strategy for the non-profit organisation in 2007. The main challenge was to ensure that the enormous, disparate community of contributors from around the world were aligned in a common cause. According to Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales, hiring Gardner was "one of the best things we ever did".

Testament to that is the fact that since joining, the bright Canadian has more than tripled revenues (http://meta.wikimedia.org /wiki/User:Sue_Gardner) and supported an 85 percent increase in global readership. Following intense scrutiny of the Foundation's revenue streams and two years of experimentation, she realised that the best strategy was to focus on small, private donations.

"In non-profit land you are normally operating in two businesses -- the service provision and the revenue generation. These things don't usually naturally align. The biggest surprise for me has been the realisation that we could align those two things so that the money came from the people we were providing services for."

As the fifth most visited website in the world, server space doesn't come cheap. The non-profit organisation runs annual fundraising campaigns to support the next year's activities. It has just completed its latest round (http://news.yahoo.com/s/zd/20110102/tc_zd /258614), which saw $16m donated by 500,000 people.

To many people, Wikipedia is a shining beacon of the original promise of the web. Gardner goes as far to say that it's the "embodiment of the best aspects of the web".

"It's a promise that people are going to work together, it's a demonstration of people working together in good faith and the democratisation of information and freedom of access to information and all of that is continually under threat."

Joseph Reagle, author of the book *The Good Faith Collaboration (http://reagle.org/joseph/2010/gfc/)* and Harvard Fellow (http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/people/jreagle) adds: "The default disposition of online interaction is for those who disagree to see the worst of each other -- even as Nazis, as Godwin's Law states. Wikipedia, instead, encourages and is dependent upon people collaborating in good faith."

Where does it fall short? Gardner doesn't hold back: "It's a work in progress so we are always going to need to do better. All aspects need to be improved."

As Wikipedia focuses on improving and expanding, the site is under constant fire from those who accuse it of being biased, unreliable and favouring of consensus over credentials in its editorial processes.

Robert McHenry, author and former Editor-in-Chief of *Encyclopaedia Britannica (http://www.britannica.com/)*, summarises what he describes as the "fatal fallacy" in the Wikipedia model:

"*The fatal fallacy in the Wikipedia theory is that a Wikipedia article can be thought of as an 'open source' project like those that produce software and that, like those, it will undergo steady improvement toward some ideal state. But the software is clearly identified as*

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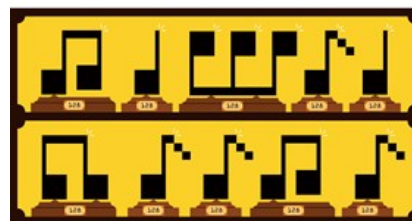
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This reactor withstands temperatures up to 20

developmental while in this process, and it is constantly tested against objective criteria: it performs as intended, or it does not. The article is published to the world in whatever state it may be, changes for the better or for worse at random times, and is held to no standard that the user can rely upon."

He certainly has a point -- there are plenty of examples of false, and sometimes defamatory, information being posted to biographical profiles. In 2005 John Seigenthaler Sr, assistant to Attorney General Robert Kennedy in the early 1960s, respected journalist and later a founding editor of *USA Today* became the target of Wikipedia vandalism. A fake Wikipedia biography of him accused him of being a suspect in Kennedy's assassination (http://www.usatoday.com /news/opinion/editorials/2005-11-29-wikipedia-edit_x.htm). It went unedited for 132 days. There is also a systemic bias (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Systemic_bias) that often sees current events attract more attention than older ones and pop culture get a disproportionate amount of coverage, as well as perspective bias when reporting global events.

That is not to say that traditional encyclopaedias are error-free. There have been a series of studies comparing the reliability of Wikipedia with traditional encyclopaedias (such as one comparing Wikipedia and Britannica by *Nature* (http://blogs.nature.com/wp/nascent /2005/12/comparing_wikipedia_and_britan_1.html) in 2006), which have shown that Wikipedia's reliability is improving. The aforementioned *Nature* study revealed that Wikipedia's scientific articles came close to the level of accuracy in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and had a similar rate of "serious errors".

Gardner admits: "In 2001, Wikipedia was not a rich and complete information resource -- it was very partial. But every year and every day it gets better and better."

She describes a shift in attitudes and behaviour from the academic and cultural communities. The GLAM initiative (http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/cpov/lang/de/2010/05 /19/wikipedia-glam/) (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums) brings together Wikipedians and members of cultural institutes including the British Museum to find ways to improve the cultural content of Wikipedia, which in return offers a platform to showcase their cultural wares.

An event in London in November saw representatives from cultural bodies coming to find out about how they could contribute more to Wikipedia.

Gardner says: "It was really affirming to see the guardians of culture and knowledge taking Wikipedia increasingly seriously. That wouldn't have happened five years ago."

Likewise an academic outreach programme has helped to further improve the resource. The Wikipedia Ambassador Programme (http://outreach.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_Ambassador_Program), launched in 2010, involves working with professors who want to incorporate Wikipedia editing into their courses. The idea is to increase the editing community and help tutors to be more comfortable with Wikipedia.

When asked if Wikipedia could ever be considered a credible academic source, Gardner says: "We don't recommend that people use Wikipedia as a citation for papers any more than using

Encyclopaedia Britannica. The purpose of an encyclopaedia is to be a starting point for research. You can learn the basics and then go further and deeper into the article references to find the original sources."

The reliability argument, according to Gardner, misses the "real story": that there has been a flourishing of availability of information. "For the information consumer, the world is radically better than it was 10 years ago, 20 years ago."

Anyone over the age of 20 will remember a time when if they wanted to find out about an obscure politician, an up-and-coming artist or particular country's latest military action, they had to either consult one of the thirty-odd encyclopaedia volumes, go the library or hope that an adult would know.

Having exhausted these options, you would have to get used to the fact that you would probably never know. Or at least not until the next edition of the encyclopaedia came out and even then there was no guarantee your topic of interest would be featured.

These days anyone can have instant, free access to the collective knowledge of hundreds of thousands of people, updated daily -- in many cases in almost real-time. In this context, the reliability debate loses some of its lustre.

The organisation is more concerned with addressing the systemic bias by making it easier for people to contribute to Wikipedia so that other "geeks that aren't necessarily computer geeks" (as Jimmy Wales puts it) can share their expertise, wherever they are in the world, in a bid to ensure that the community of editors is more representative of the global population.

Read more about Wikipedia in our Wikipedia Week 2011 Topic Hub (/topics/wikipedia-week)!

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