

Tell us how you got involved with Wikimedia

I got involved back in 2003 or 2004

I was aware of Wikipedia; I thought it was really interesting, but didn't have the sense it would become as important as it has become

It's the next chapter in open source. Distributed collaborative/cooperative work had its first successes in writing code, but it's easier to describe how it works with Wikipedia. Wikipedia is more of a pure case.

Wikipedia is a cultural miracle. Everyone should be taught about how it works.

At that time, there were more articles about middle earth than about Africa; Wikipedia needed a more diverse set of contributors

I became an informal advisor to Jimmy – I went to 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Wikimánias – I needed to see what ties this community together

I thought about going on the board, but I couldn't b/c I was seen as too much of an outsider, even though I edit

Joined the board of advisors when it was constituted; I went to meetings and hosted some stuff here I'm not involved in the politics of the community

What I know about and what is relevant: I've been involved in several major waves of disruptive innovation in technology, PCs, internet, streaming media, virtual worlds

The issue of sustainability is critical – movements, communities, organizations need to make different transitions, those that don't get stuck, they lose their cutting edge, and become less important; shifting from ideological to pragmatic in order to get to global adoption

Early adopters can stand in the way of achieving the full potential of something like Wikipedia

Where is Wikimedia today?

It's in transition. There is actual governance, resources, but editors are burning out, new editors are not coming in.

It's absurdly difficult to edit, but I think some people like that. This will kill it if editing does not become more democratic. Wikipedia needs on-ramps and training, otherwise there will be a tiny priesthood of people who can edit.

Procedures, arbitration and infrastructure – need to be more accessible and transparent – not only for insiders

How you go from here (closed community) to there (more open, democratic community), is not simple, but it needs to happen.

What is in Wikipedia now is consequential for the world – that is success; but not everyone in the community likes that or wants [the responsibility] that comes with that.

Wikipedia has responsibilities. The methodologies [used to build it] have to be looked at against the fact that this is the fifth most popular website in the world, it's a mainstay for every student.

Wikipedia has an obligation to measure quality carefully. Mean time to fix errors would be a good measure

Things Wikipedia should be thinking about: Who edits the thing, what's the coverage, what's the quality?

What are your thoughts on the Wikimedia Foundation itself – what it should be doing relative to the community?

An analogy is the Mozilla Foundation – structure where there is Mozilla Corporation with 300 employees, the foundation does the governance and the community does the work – the foundation wrestles with how to set priority; the Mozilla community is healthy and contributory; this is a good example; it is a hybrid model, some changes come from the top, but nothing is imposed; it is sold, introduced. Management can't demand. There is a burden on management compared to how the rest of the corporate world works, but there is a major benefit. The nimbleness is a challenge for Mozilla/Firefox because of competitors; Wikimedia is in a different situation [doesn't have the same pressure to be nimble] because there are not many competitors

Wikimedia Foundation is understaffed

A decision that was made at the beginning – not to take ad revenue - means that there isn't a stable source of funding; that decision was made, I don't think it could be revisited, but I think they should have taken ads on search page to get a stable source of revenue

For a community driven thing – the project is so big, the Wikimedia Foundation could be 5 or 10 times the size it is now and it wouldn't be too much – not to replace the community but to help mobilize and organize the community you need that many people

Right now, there is a serious underinvestment in technology and development; although volunteers can halve the cost of development, in typical open source projects, people pay for the developers. (E.g., Apache – hundreds of people from IBM and HP are dedicated to work within the apache ecosystem, within business interest.) WMF needs ~50-100 developers; but where is the money going to come from?

Talk a bit about culture change in communities like this.

Opening up the community is a tools question

I think wiki mark-up is the problem, the original sin, not possible to have friendly tools and more open community without that

Wiki mark-up is too hard and too obscure

Analogy to this is Microsoft – DOS – prior to Windows; by the time they got a useable version of Windows 95, it had already been working on Windows for a decade and they screwed it up. Putting Windows on top of DOS – things kept breaking; with windows XP, rewrote fully compatible DOS emulator within XP

Wikimedia could do the same: use same back end so that wiki mark up is useable then build something new; this would be a 5-10 year project, \$50-100M by the time you are done. This needs to happen, but most certainly won't happen.

What's the threat of not making this change?

Same as what happened with use of personal computers, we've had tremendous lost productivity

The threat for Wikimedia is that we would have a suboptimal Wikipedia that would suck compared to what it could be

You'd need some disruptive element to get people to start over

If Wikipedia doesn't do what it needs to do, something else will come along and supplant it. This will happen, but this may be 20 years off

I don't see anything on the horizon that would displace it. It would be like the Microsoft hegemony.

There would be sore spots, people aggravated about it; you'd see counter movements, detractors; you'd see a failure to progress, it'd be the same way it is this year same as next. Stagnation

What are your thoughts on the scope of content contained in Wikimedia projects?

How many other reference books will it eat besides the encyclopedia? May move into other content – it is partially eating journalism; but it is unlikely going to be a source for or treatment plans (for health care) or policy analysis

I believe the Community has its hands full working on its (expanded notion of an) encyclopedia

Global reach

One challenge will be figuring out what needs to be standard across all languages and what doesn't

How that gets decided is unclear; there is not a lot of precedent

The affect of the more mature on the less mature is also important. There are analogues in international treaties; i.e. should everyone play by the same rules or different? Seems like you need different rules for the developing Wikipedias (to protect the nascent communities)

Governance

Inside every anarchy there is an old boys' network

There is an opportunity to have multiple levels of structured participation in governance so that it is less important who is on the board of trustees

Concerned that Board of Trustees has to come from the community. Wikimedia should be thoughtful about when you have to have people on the inside and when you have people who are passionate about the mission.

The mark of a self-enclosed community – how much effort it takes to find out what's going on. It is fairly difficult to find out what's really going on with Wikimedia.