

Chapter 3.17

Twin Wiki Wonders?

Wikipedia and Wikibooks as Powerful Tools for Online Collaborative Writing

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ABSTRACT

Web 2.0 technologies empower individuals to contribute thoughts and ideas rather than passively survey online content and resources. Such participatory environments foster opportunities for community building and knowledge sharing, while encouraging the creation of artifacts beyond what any single person could accomplish alone. In this chapter, we investigate the emergence and growth of two of such environments: the highly popular Wikipedia site and its sister project, Wikibooks. Wikipedia has grown out of trends for free and open access to Web tools and resources. While Wikipedians edit, contribute, and monitor distinct pieces of information or pages of documents, Wikibookians must focus on larger chunks

of knowledge, including book modules or chapters as well as entire books. Several key differences between these two types of wiki environments are explored. In addition, surveys and interviews, conducted with Wikibookians, shed light on their challenges, frustrations, and successes.

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Friedman, in his 2005 book, *The World is Flat*, talks about 10 forces that have flattened the world in terms of economic globalization. The word “flat” acts as a metaphor to symbolize the “leveled” playing field on a global scale. In Friedman’s (2005) view, when the playing field is leveled, everyone can take part. And he means

everyone! Talking from a business perspective, Friedman charts the progress of globalization from what he describes as 1.0 to 3.0. Globalization 1.0 focused on country to country relationships, such as treaties and trade. In Globalization 2.0, such relationships moved down to a company-to-company level. We are now entering an age of Globalization 3.0, where the rise of the individual comes into focus. It is in this third phase of globalization, wherein individuals obtain new powers and freedoms to participate socially, economically, politically, and educationally with others around the world. *Time Magazine* recognized this trend, and in 2006 named “You” as the person of the year (*Time Magazine*, 2006/2007). In effect, the Year 2006 signified the trend toward empowering technology users with what was called Web 2.0 technologies, which allowed individuals to generate ideas online instead of just reading and browsing through someone else’s Web pages (Grossman, 2006/2007a, 2006/2007b).

Lessig (2005) called this phenomenon the “read-write Web,” to contrast the read-only Web, where users were merely passive consumers of information. Most fundamentally, the read-write Web dramatically enhances the power of individuals, and fosters a participatory culture of building, tinkering, learning, and sharing (Brown, 2006). Typically included in Web 2.0 technology lists are wikis, podcasts, blogs, online photo albums, and virtual worlds such as Second Life. In particular, wikis offer an innovative mechanism of computer-supported collaboration. This highly unique social phenomenon utilizes armies of volunteers who work without pay, recognition, or much acclaim to continually contribute, update, or edit resources online (Lin, 2006).

In this chapter, we primarily offer insights into the recent emergence of two wiki developments; namely, Wikipedia and Wikibooks. First, we detail what a wiki is. Subsequently, we briefly review existing wiki-related research, and then document the emergence and growth of what is the most popular wiki today; Wikipedia. After

presenting our research findings in Wikibooks, we compare and contrast some of the underlying principles and features of Wikipedia to those found in Wikibooks.

BACKGROUND

Brandon Hall (2006) defines a wiki as “a collection of Web pages that can be easily viewed and modified by anyone, providing a means for sharing and collaboration.” These are open-ended, generative, and unstructured environments (Honegger, 2005; Leuf & Cunningham, 2001; Lio, Fraboni, Leo, 2005). Pioneered by Ward Cunningham in 1995, wikis are online spaces for recording information, sharing knowledge, typically in collaboration with others. Each modification is recorded as the history of a document. The history page records the time of change, the person who made the change, and the changes that were made. Such a mechanism not only permits page retraction by anyone, it also behaves as a podium for reputation management. In addition, the history page permits open examinations of each revision, allowing each version to be compared and contrasted by anyone.

Many universities have picked up the wiki fever and started using its functions for information sharing. For example, Stanford has an institutionalized wiki wherein students can contribute information on places to eat, workout, study, socialize, and so forth. (Campus Technology, 2006b). As this Web site indicates, there is now a wave of student-contributed wiki resources. Similarly, MIT has created the Center for Collective Intelligence, where people from around the planet could come and solve huge scientific, social, and business problems (Campus Technology, 2006a). The underlying belief of these wiki projects indicates that, collectively, the human race can act more powerfully than it can at an individual level. As a prime example of this principle, in early February, 2007, Penguin books announced

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