

Lecture 05 - Open Ecosystems and Governance

Open Ecosystems and Governance

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Agenda

- The story of **Wikipedia** and the **Wikimedia** movement
 - Governance in **open ecosystems**
 - Challenges & opportunities in **global digital platform ecosystems**
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Course Learning Goals

- Analyze and evaluate **digital ecosystems**
 - Reflect critically on **socially relevant challenges** with global platforms
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The Birth of Wikipedia

From Books to Wikis

- Encyclopedic knowledge used to be confined to books
- Challenges:
 - Accessibility
 - Bias: Who decides what's "encyclopedic"?

Key Innovators

- **Ward Cunningham**: Invented wiki tech (collaborative editing)
 - **Jimmy Wales & Larry Sanger**: Combined wiki with idea of open encyclopedia → *Wikipedia (2001)*
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Wikipedia & the Wikimedia Ecosystem

Wikipedia

- The **encyclopedia**
- Exists in **independent language versions**, each with its own **community** and **governance**

Wikimedia

- The **ecosystem**
 - Includes 13 sibling platforms (e.g., **Wikidata**, **Commons**)
 - Managed by the **Wikimedia Foundation (WMF)**
 - Supported by:
 - Donations
 - Endowment fund
 - Wikimedia Enterprise
 - **Value creation**: Done by **volunteers** (280,000+)
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What is an Open Ecosystem?

- **Open**: Anyone can participate

- Relies on volunteers
 - **Governed** by interactions and architecture, not hierarchy
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Governance in Open Ecosystems

What is Governance?

| A complex framework of rules, functions, and power dynamics that shapes behavior, decision-making, and resource allocation in groups.

Wikipedia's Governance Challenge:

- How to coordinate **280,000 volunteers**?
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Governance in Online Social Production

(Aaltonen & Lanzara, 2001–2009)

Research Question:

| How does **collective governance capability** emerge and evolve?

Method:

- Descriptive stats from 350 M edits (2001–2010)
 - Narrative based on 3 development phases
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Three Governance Phases

1. **Quantity over Quality** (Early stage)
 - “Ignore all rules”
 - Focus on contribution
 - Routines: writing, reverting, discussion
 2. **Sharpening Routines** (Rapid growth)
 - Avoid editing wars
 - Featured articles to boost quality
 3. **Maintenance & Quality Control** (Stabilization)
 - **Flagged revisions**
 - **Bots** for automation
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Governance Through Interaction

- Rules and norms emerged from **user interaction**
 - Governance is:
 - Embedded in **platform architecture**
 - Driven by **volunteer routines**
 - Dependent on sustained community effort
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What's Missing on Wikipedia?

- **Only ~20%** of biographies are about **women**
 - **Geographic imbalance** (e.g., more articles on Paris than Africa)
 - **Colonial bias** in descriptions of Indigenous cultures
 - **Oral knowledge** not easily integrated
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? Who Decides What's Encyclopedic?

- How to encourage contributions in **missing languages and topics**?
 - How to support **knowledge equity**?
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Governance as Gardening (Poetic Analogy)

Like a garden, an ecosystem requires **nurturing, patience, and respect**
We can till, water, remove weeds—but we can't force it to grow

Two Types of Governance

1. Content Governance

- Happens **on-platform**
- Rules for creating and moderating content
- May vary across language communities

2. Contributor Governance

- Happens **off-platform**
 - Includes:
 - Events
 - Courses
 - Tech development
 - Supporting new communities
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Inclusive Participation

What **enables or limits** participation of underrepresented groups?

Example:

- **Wayuu & Dagbani Wikimedians**
 - Adapting practices to **local culture** can encourage inclusion
 - Some embedded routines **inhibit** new contributors unnecessarily
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Transnational Communities of Practice

Research Question:

How do global digital communities scale and address grand challenges?

Example:

- Three gender gap initiatives:
 - Same goal, different governance strategies
 - All succeeded in **different ways**

Insight:

- Different communities need **different approaches**
 - No “one-size-fits-all” governance model
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Reflection Questions

- What is Wikipedia to **new generations** who never used physical encyclopedias?
- How will Wikipedia evolve with the **global expansion** of its communities?
- What is the role of Wikipedia in the **age of AI**?

✓ Key Takeaways

- An ecosystem = network of platforms, contributors, and governance
- Open ecosystems evolve **organically** through practice and need
- **Governance** is both relational and collaborative
- The structure must **adapt** to support diversity and inclusion

17 Coming Up:

Seminar on Friday – to be continued!

Thank you!