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Media Studies 255 New Technologies

Internet Technology Profile: Wikis

February 13, 2018

Deriving from the Hawaiian word, *wiki*, meaning “quick,” wikis are, “more formally, a digital forum for collaborative authorship in which any member granted access can add or change content and are typically organized by topic, which makes them more dynamic and easier for readers to browse” (Edmondson). Wikis make collaborative editing amongst users possible, setting them a part form other websites (LeBar). For this reason, since their emergence in 1994, wikis have played a massive role across many field, including education, business and politics.

Most wikis have a somewhat similar set up and operation. As wikis are websites that allow “collaborative editing of its content and structure by its users,” users first have to create an account and register in order to contribute to and edit the content (Knobel and Lankshear, 632). Registration is usually free, as it is for Wikepedia, and only once registered, users can then edit the pages available for editing, and can do so anonymously if they choose. While editing, the writing space is similar to that of a word processing software and users in this space can directly type in text or copy in preselected texts, images, videos, links, and adjust the layout of the wiki page (Knobel and Lankshear, 632). All of these functions and additional guidelines for certain wiki are usually provided on wikis’ website for users to utilize and get familiar with (Knobel and Lankshear, 632).

Wikis being created today and the more known ones that were created in the beginning of the 21st century, were first made possible by earlier works from the 1990’s. Specifically, Ward Cunningham, the inventor of Wikis, and at the time an Oregon-based programmer who worked at a company called Tektronix, realized he could use HyperCard, an early Apple programming tool, more efficiently by creating links without first checking to see if the destination page existed (Rothman). With this new system, it allowed a user to tell HyperCard that they wanted to create a page if it didn’t already exist. To test his new system, Cunningham invited colleagues to make pages about themselves, “so that the pages could be linked together to show how ideas moved through the company” (Rothman). Cunningham recalls that his colleagues were quite intrigued with how it worked because they saw how it would be able to add or amend new information.

As Cunningham’s project continued to develop, its quick link creation, collaborative ethos, and the distinctive “write-publish-review” process characteristics became more known, it turned the “publish last norm on its head” (Rothman). Soon, he developed a way to use this system on the Web. In 1995, he launched a Web version of what he had been doing on HyperCard, calling it WikiWikiWeb, from the Hawaiian term “wiki wiki” meaning quick (Rothman). However, the technology also needed a short name, hence, “wiki” was coined. Soon, the WikiWikiWeb site grew to around 36,00 pages and up to today, consists of useful and well known pages many people around the world use or are aware of, such as, Wikipedia, WikiLeaks, WikiQuote, WikiHow, and even online classroom, GitHub, also features wiki-like functions (Rothman.)

Most famously, Wikipedia is a widely used and depended upon wiki, especially for students (Crovitz and Smoot, 91). Started in 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, Wikipedia, being a combination of the words wiki and encyclopedia, “represents a radical step in information access and availability” (Crovitz and Smoot, 91). Not only does Wikipedia give people access to information and allow them to edit entries of others on the site, it also encourages contributions by allowing anyone to create a page and connect it to other pages, creating an almost endless stream of knowledge (Rothman). The topics of articles and entries featured on Wikipedia widely range over a vast amount of subjects, including, history, biographies, popular culture, geography, music, art, mathematics, and poplar theories. Wikipedia’s implications are regarded as being, “nothing less than collecting the sum of human knowledge in a vast, constantly growing digital repository” (Crovitz and Smoot, 91).

These contributions have additionally been viewed as being extremely beneficial to the “overall pool of knowledge” in the world, as Wikipedia currently features 5,571, 211 entries with 934, 810,501 contributions and offers various entries in more than 90 languages (Account Creation, Wikipedia). However, despite Wikipedia’s many positive attributes and contribution to society, it has its flaws. Specifically, it is scrutinized for its growing lack of reliability, accuracy, and credibility (Crovitz and Smoot, 92). Despite Wikipedia administrators’ claim that there are ongoing improvements to regulating the cite for “verifiable knowledge,” there is still nothing stopping someone from publishing complete bogus material (Crovitz and Smoot, 92). Critics claim Wikipedia, “represents the worst of how the internet has dumbed down the research process with its easily accessible but unsubstantiated information on almost any topic,” and why many educators take issue with students citing Wikipedia as a primary source in their essays (Crovitz and Smoot, 91). Similarly, this criticism many wikis faces brings up a larger aspect regarding how readers should approach Wikipedia and further wikis differently than other typical reference work; readers should be heavily critical and aware. This is especially seen with another notoriously known wiki, WikiLeaks.

Founded in 2006 by Julian Assange, WikiLeaks “specializes in the analysis and publication of large datasets of censored or otherwise restricted official materials involving war, spying and corruption” (What is WikiLeaks). Since its development, it has published more than 10 million documents and analyses and has won many awards over the years including, The Economist New Media Award, The Brazillian Press Association Human Rights Award, The Voltaire Award for Free Speech, and TIME Magazine Person of the Year, People’s Choice (What is WikiLeaks). However, despite its renowned attributes towards freedom of speech and transparency, it has also received a tremendous amount of backlash as well for endangering certain individuals and, at many times, lacking morality and credibility (Ellis).

Treading away from controversy and criticism, another known wiki is wikiHow. wikiHow is an online community consisting of “thousands of people focused on one goal: teaching anyone in the world how to do anything” (About WikiHow). Founded in 2005 by Jack Herrick, wikiHow is fueled by an educational mission consisting of a substantial database of how-to-guides. According to wikiHow’s website, its services are offered in 17 different languages and its pages are simply written by people who want to help someone else. Their content is licensed by Creative Commons, “a non-profit organization devoted to expanding the range of creative works available for others to build upon legally and share,” and is freely shared on an open source software (Creative Commons. Wikipedia). Lastly, the topics of the many guides wikiHow offers includes, but is not limited to, health, arts and crafts, relationships, food, and finance.

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