Making More Wikipedians

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Original link

Wikimedia 2006 Elections

If you translate this essay, please contact me.

Vote for me in the election for the Wikimedia Foundation's Board of Directors.

Wikipedia, the Vice President of the *World Book* told us, is now recognized by ten percent of Americans. He presented this in a tone of congratulation: with no marketing budget or formal organization, a free online-only encyclopedia written by volunteers had achieved a vast amount of attention. But I took it a different way. "Only ten percent?" I thought. "That means we have ninety percent to go!"

Wikipedia is one of the few things that pretty much everyone finds useful. So how do we get all of them to use it? The first task, it appears, is telling them it exists. An ad campaign or PR blitz doesn't quite seem appropriate for the job, though. Instead, our promotion should work the same way way the rest of Wikipedia works: let the community do it.

Wikipedia's users come from all over society: different cultures, different countries, different places, different fields of study. The physics grad students who contribute heavily to physics articles are in a much better position to promote it to physicists than a promotional flack from the head office. The Pokemon fan maintaining the Pokemon articles probably knows how to reach other Pokemaniacs than any marketing expert.

Sure, you might say, but isn't the whole question of marketing Wikipedia somewhat silly? After all, you obviously know about Wikipedia, and your friends probably all seem to as well. But things are a lot thinner than you might expect: as noted above, only one in ten Americans even knows what Wikipedia is, and most of those don't truly understand it.

It's shocking to discover how even smart, technically-minded people can't figure out how to actually edit Wikipedia. Dave Winer wrote some of the first software to have an "Edit This Page" button (indeed, he operated editthispage.com for many years) and yet he at first complained that he couldn't figure out how

to edit a page on Wikipedia. Michael Arrington reviews advanced Web 2.0 websites daily, yet he noted that "Many people don't realize how easy it is for anyone to add content to wikipedia (I've done it several times)". If prominent technologists have trouble, imagine the rest of the world.

Obviously, this has implications for the software side: we need to work hard on making Wikipedia's interface clearer and more usable. But there's also a task here for the community: giving talks and tutorials to groups that you know about, explaining the core ideas behind Wikipedia, and giving demonstrations of how to get involved in it. The best interface in the world is no substitute for real instruction and even the clearest document explaining our principles will be ignored in a way that a personal presentation won't.

But beyond simply giving people the ability to contribute, we need to work to make contributing more rewarding. As I previously noted, many people decide to dive into writing for Wikipedia, only to watch their contributions be summarily reverted. Many people create a new article, only to see it get deleted after an AfD discussion where random Wikipedians try to think up negative things to say about it. For someone who thought they were donating their time to help the project, neither response is particularly encouraging.

I'm not saying that we should change our policies or automatically keep everything a newcomer decides to add so we don't hurt their feelings. But we do need to think more about how to enforce policies without turning valuable newcomers away, how we can educate them instead of alienating them.

At Wikimania, no less an authority than Richard Stallman (who himself long ago suggested the idea of a free online encyclopedia) wandered around the conference complaining about a problem he'd discovered with a particular Wikipedia article. He could try to fix it himself, he noted, but it would take an enormous amount of his time and the word would probably just get reverted. He's not the only one — I constantly hear tales from experts about problems they encounter on Wikipedia, but are too complicated for them to fix alone. What if we could collect these complaints on the site, instead of having these people make them at parties?

One way to do that would be to have some sort of complaint-tracking system for articles, like the discussion system of talk pages. Instead of simply complaining about an article in public, Stallman could follow a link from it to file a complaint. The complaint would be tracked and stored with the article. More dedicated Wikipedians would go through the list of complaints, trying to address them and letting the submitter know when they were done. Things like POV allegations could be handled in a similar way: a notice saying neutrality was disputed could appear on the top of the page until the complaint was properly closed.

This is just one idea, of course, but it's an example of the kinds of things we need to think about. Wikipedia is visited by millions each day; how do get them to contribute back their thoughts on the article instead of muttering them under their breath or airing them to their friends?