Wikimedia at the Crossroads

August 31, 2006

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.

A couple weeks ago I had the great privilege of attending Wikimania, the international Wikimedia conference. Hundreds from all over the world gathered there to discuss the magic that is Wikipedia, thinking hard about what it means and why it works. It was an amazing intellectual and emotional experience.

The main attraction was seeing the vibrant Wikipedia community. There were the hardcore Wikipedians, who spend their days reviewing changes and fixing pages. And there were the elder statesmen, like Larry Lessig and Brewster Kahle, who came to meet the first group and tell them how their work fits into a bigger picture. Spending time with all these people was amazing fun — they're all incredibly bright, enthusiastic and, most shockingly, completely dedicated to a cause greater than themselves.

At most "technology" conferences I've been to, the participants generally talk about technology for its own sake. If *use* ever gets discussed, it's only about using it to make vast sums of money. But at Wikimania, the primary concern was doing the most good for the world, with technology as the tool to help us get there. It was an incredible gust of fresh air, one that knocked me off my feet.

There was another group attending, however: the people holding up the platform on which this whole community stands. I spent the first few days with the mostly-volunteer crew of hackers who keep the websites up and running. In later days, I talked to the site administrators who exercise the power that the software gives them. And I heard much about the Wikimedia Foundation, the not-for-profit that controls and runs the sites.

Much to my surprise, this second group was almost the opposite of the first. With a few notable exceptions, when they were off-stage they talked gossip and details: how do we make the code stop doing this, how do we get people to

stop complaining about that, how can we get this other group to like us more. Larger goals or grander visions didn't come up in their private conversations; instead they seemed absorbed by the issues of the present.

Of course, they have plenty to be absorbed by. Since January, Wikipedia's traffic has more than doubled and this group is beginning to strain under the load. At the technical level, the software development and server systems are both managed by just one person, Brion Vibber, who appears to have his hands more-than-full just keeping everything running. The entire system has been cobbled together as the site has grown, a messy mix of different kinds of computers and code, and keeping it all running sounds like a daily nightmare. As a result, actual software development goes rather slowly, which cannot help but affect the development of the larger project.

The small coterie of site administrators, meanwhile, are busy dealing with the ever-increasing stream of complaints from the public. The recent Seigenthaler affair, in which the founding editor of *USA Today* noisily attacked Wikipedia for containing an grievous error in its article on him, has made people very cautious about how Wikipedia treats living people. (Although to judge just from the traffic numbers, one might think more such affairs might be a good idea…) One administrator told me how he spends his time scrubbing Wikipedia clean of unflattering facts about people who call the head office to complain.

Finally, the Wikimedia Foundation Board seems to have devolved into inaction and infighting. Just four people have been actually hired by the Foundation, and even they seem unsure of their role in a largely-volunteer community. Little about this group — which, quite literally, controls Wikipedia — is known by the public. Even when they were talking to dedicated Wikipedians at the conference, they put a public face on things, saying little more than "don't you folks worry, we'll straighten everything out".

The plain fact is that Wikipedia's gotten too big to be run by just a couple of people. One way or another, it's going to have to become an organization; the question is what kind. Organizational structures are far from neutral: whose input gets included decides what actions get taken, the positions that get filled decide what things get focused on, the vision at the top sets the path that will be followed.

I worry that Wikipedia, as we know it, might not last. That its feisty democracy might ossify into staid bureaucracy, that its innovation might stagnate into conservatism, that its growth might slow to stasis. Were such things to happen, I know I could not just stand by and watch the tragedy. Wikipedia is just too important — both as a resource and as a model — to see fail.

That is why, after much consideration, I've decided to run for a seat on the Wikimedia Foundation's Board. I've been a fairly dedicated Wikipedian since

2003, adding and editing pages whenever I came across them. I've gone to a handful of Wikipedia meetups and even got my photo on the front page of the *Boston Globe* as an example Wikipedian. But I've never gotten particularly involved in Wikipedia politics — I'm not an administrator, I don't get involved in policy debates, I hardly even argue on the "talk pages". Mostly, I just edit.

And, to be honest, I wish I could stay that way. When people at Wikimania suggested I run for a Board seat, I shrugged off the idea. But since then, I've become increasingly convinced that I should run, if only to bring attention to these issues. Nobody else seems to be seriously discussing this challenge.

The election begins today and lasts three weeks. As it rolls on, I plan to regularly publish essays like this one, examining the questions that face Wikipedia in depth. Whether I win or not, I hope we can use this opportunity for a grand discussion about where we should be heading and what we can do to get there. That said, if you're an eligible Wikipedian, I hope that you'll please vote for me.