INTERVIEW WITH VICTOR GRIGAS

FILMMAKER, PHOTOGRAPHER, STORYTELLER FOR THE WIKIMEDIA FOUNDATION, CHICAGO, IL, USA

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Victor discusses how he uses photography, video, and storytelling to put a human face on Wikipedia — a task he considers to be of extreme importance in helping people to understand the role they can (and should) play in the world's largest and most popular encyclopedia. As a veteran Wikipedian who's been contributing to the encyclopedia since 2005, Victor compares the project to the invention of the printing press and likens it to a potluck dinner - celebrating the manner in which it presents universal opportunity for participation and challenges the commercially oriented fabric that has begun weaving itself into the Internet. He describes his creative process and strategies for interviewing volunteers alongside discussion of the utility of Wikipedia for sharing his own photographs, revealing the manner in which the Wikimedia Commons can function as an altruistic

alternative to a gallery: increasing exposure to one's art work and contributing to the enterprise of free knowledge.

I.C.D.
A.B.

Ok, so the first question: what do you think about the title "I can do anything badly"?

Victor Grigas

I think it's awesome, I think it's a fantastic title. I think it sounds like: that's the entry level for everybody. Everybody can start with that, you can always get a zero percent on a test, whether you get a one percent or a two percent or a ninety five percent, one hundred percent, that's all up to you.

I.C.D.
A.B.

Can you describe the work that you do for the Wikimedia Foundation?

Victor Grigas

Sure. I'm a storyteller and video producer. Basically, I try, as best I can, to put a human face on Wikipedia and tell the human side of Wikipedia.

For most people it's a… it's black text on a white screen, they don't really necessarily understand where it comes from and they certainly don't see the human side of it. And my role is to kind of to give it context so that when people think about Wikipedia they realize that there is — there are people behind this thing — that it doesn't just come from the Internet, you know?

I.C.D.
A.B.

Totally. The Internet is just the delivery system. But it's also the production space — you could call it a stage, or a whole theatre really because the backstage is just as important. Anyway — So how did you get involved with Wikimedia?

Victor Grigas

When I was in film school in 2005 I was always in the computer lab, and I started to see this website come up on all Google searches and I thought it was kind of interesting and at that time every result that came up was maybe a sentence or two and it was filled with red links and I thought it was kind of weird, and kind

of dumb and kind of annoying because there is this website that keeps showing up with kind of — very short and often bad information. And then I realized that it was a website and that anybody can add it. So I added something to it — I was trying to test it so I wrote some garbage. And then ten minutes later, it notified me that my…ah…message had been, that what I wrote had been deleted and I thought that was really, you know, kind of weird and so I vandalized it again and that was deleted again and after I realized that this thing was real — it wasn't just robots doing this thing, there were actual people, dilligent people, who were making this thing happen. After that I started getting hooked so I was like "wait a second — anyone can write this and anyone can delete or edit the bad information" and I just got hooked from there. Then fast forward to 2011, when I applied to this position at the Wikimedia Foundation and I've been there ever since.

I.C.D.
A.B.

Do you relate your work to this idea of "I can do anything badly" or

"Do it Yourself"? And how do you see Wikipedia itself related to the idea of Do it Yourself?

Victor Grigas

Well, my being a volunteer is one thing, and being a professional, being an employee of the Wikimedia Foundation is another. When you do professional work you want it to look as good and polished as possible. Although I intentionally try to leave my professional work slightly unpolished for few reasons. One reason is because we're a non-profit so I want to try to communicate that. It doesn't have all these bells and whistles and I don't want people to think that we're taking all the money that is donated and spending it to make like amazing computer graphics and all kind of stuff like this. But also, I want to kind of advertise the DIY bar that "you can do this too". For example, I made a series of videos in 2012 where we interviewed Wikipedia editors, and I wanted to shoot it on DSLR cameras and for people to be able to see the cameras in the footage. That way they can see "WOW this is what it takes to do this. I can do this too."

I wanted to use the camera with the highest quality image but with the lowest barrier to entry, so that people can match the footage if they want to because this is the all part of the idea of the remix culture that Wikipedia is a part of. And remix culture works in similar ways as DIY culture – like, I should be able to take this piece of media and do what I want with it for my purposes regardless of what someone else's intent might have been.

I.C.D.
A.B.

Do you see the work that you do for Wikipedia as responding to a need in society? And is it contesting something?

Victor Grigas

Those are two separate questions… Responding to a need: well there's a definite need for people to understand how Wikipedia works.
Most people don't understand how it works. In more developed nations they do – for example if you go to Germany you can ask an average cab driver and they'll have an understanding that this is all made by volunteers, it's all open

source, they understand that. But this is sort of an exception; most places in the world people don't understand it. So it's really important to have that kind of fundamental understanding that it is all built by volunteers, and that it is open to everyone. But it's also important to kind of get the…you know… let me quick rephrase it this way: most people think that somebody else should be doing this. For example, when you're driving on the street and the street is bumpy you think "they should fix this thing" and with Wikipedia: you are the "they"! You are the person. Rather than "they should fix this," well, you can fix this. And that's what needs to be communicated. That's part of my job to show that the person who is interested in XYZ changing is you! That you're the person who could make this thing better. So what was the other question?

I.C.D.
A.B.

Is it contesting something?

Victor Grigas

Contesting something.

I.C.D.
A.B.

You sort of already answered that in the sense of contesting the idea that, you know, we don't have a role.

Victor Grigas

Ah, correct. Yeah, it definitely does. That's one of the messages that I have to try to encourage is that, you know, the Internet is largely commercial at this point in time, and Wikipedia is really one of the few big websites out there that isn't commercial. And it's really not even a website, it's an encyclopedia that happens to be in a form of a website and because it's run by a non-profit and because it's open source, it's really something more for someone who wants to think, who wants to be a citizen, who wants to participate in the knowledge of the world. So it kind of clears the way for all the, pardon my French, bullshit that can get in the way of that.

I.C.D.
A.B.

Two questions: could you summarize what you think motivates the types of volunteers

who you work with, especially the people in less developed countries? And how do you feel about your work documenting them and how does it compare to the other types of documentarian film work you have done?

Victor Grigas

Well, the interesting thing is that everyone has their own motivation for getting involved. People typically start by falling into the categories of things they like to do and things that they enjoy doing. Using myself as an example: I like uploading photographs, I like pictures. So when I pass by something and I take a nice picture, and I see that it's not on Wikipedia and think that it could be used to illustrate something, I really enjoy uploading it to the Wikimedia Commons. I'm like "Hey! Look! I can help this!" And it's also beneficial to me, because it's my photo that's on that article — so many people get to see it, and will see my name if they dig a little deeper. Now that's just me. Lots of different people have lots of different motivations. Some people

just can't stand to see typos, some
people just can't stand to see vandalism,
or they want to see things in nice neat
order. There are all kind of motivations.
And you mentioned specifically for less
developed countries? That's hard to
respond to like that, because once you
start getting involved in Wikipedia you
really realize that things are global
and this information gets around. So you
can make an edit and then somebody from
India will correct you or somebody from
Argentina will correct you and you
really don't have any control over that.
And, although you might be educated for
particular perspectives, you have to
maintain neutrality as much as possible
because if you don't somebody else will
impose it on you. And so people have
a huge variety of motivations, and
I don't think it's different from one
country to the next. I think it really
depends on the type of person who's
involved and whatever their particular
situation is. I hope that answers your
question.

I.C.D.
A.B.

It certainly does
— and the second part of
the question was: what
is it like interviewing
volunteers in this context,
since I imagine that many of
them aren't accustomed to being
interviewed? You know what
I mean?

**Victor
Grigas**

I think I can answer it, I mean,
it's the same for everybody,
I mean it's ordinary people
for the most part.
Sometimes when people are a little more
introverted it's a bit harder to make
them comfortable on camera, but because
I'm also a Wikipedian myself, I just
express that I understand where they're
coming from, like: "I'm into the exact
same thing that you're into." You know.
An interview is a conversation, so
typically I'll ask about who you are, tell
me where you're from, tell me something
about you, what you like to write about
on Wikipedia and go from there. And
usually people would start to loosen up
once they start talking about something
they are enthusiastic about.

I.C.D. A.B.   Do you relate Wikipedia's method of transmission, organization and gathering of knowledges to any sort of economic, political, scientific or artistic drive? If so, could you describe that drive?

Victor Grigas   I don't understand the question.

I.C.D. A.B.   I'll try again — so, in thinking about how Wikipedia is free and open such that anyone can write anything and that can also be modified by anyone. In terms of what we're used to on the Internet — these are somewhat radical ideas. Do you relate these ideas to any sort of economic, political, scientific or artistic drive? Or do you see them relating to any particular art movement or scientific period or anything like that, or any kind of philosophical or spiritual motivation? In other

words, from where or what do you see Wikipedia's methodology and principles emerging from? Any particular like school of thought?

Victor Grigas   Ah ok, this is philosophical! I definitely think that this is a… sort of a Renaissance idea. Think about it in relation to when the printing press was invented. Why on earth, at the time and place that it came from, why would you think that you should be able to give anyone the ability to multiply the things that can be written and read. That sounds crazy. People could incite riots with this, they could, you know, get people killed with this. You won't be able to control this, right? I mean that's probably what the standard thinking was at the time, so why on earth would you create something that would allow people to print whatever they want all the time, in any place and distribute it all around the world? For really really cheap. Because that's what Wikipedia enables now. And I think its means of communication are analogous to the printing press because it involves

everybody being able to collectively organize their thinking about a particular topic and I think that is one of the most amazing parts of the era we're in now — because we're living right through it, because when anybody looks something up the first thing that we turn to is Wikipedia to get an understanding of it. So I think definitely the Renaissance would be something that would remind me of… That the first thing that comes to mind, I have to think about it a little bit more.

I.C.D. A.B.   Ok, that's a great answer. Do you see Wikipedia as autonomous?

Victor Grigas   Yes. YES! I mean you could kill the Wikimedia Foundation (that's the non-profit that runs Wikipedia), but people would just take the content. And somebody else will start Wikimedia Foundation 2. Because the content is totally free. You could try to stamp it out completely, but people have offline copies of Wikipedia, and they'll just

regenerate it. You could destroy all of Wikipedia in all the hard-drives and all the books and all the pdf files and all the e-readers and everything that holds it and people would just rebuild it again because they know it can exist, that it should exist. So I think that at this point it has completely, totally saturated the world and there is no way it's not going to exist without a very major shift in either economics or thinking in the world today.

I.C.D. A.B.   Could you describe your creative methodology and process for the videos that you make for Wikipedia?

Victor Grigas   Sure. Basically I try to zero in on a story, I try to find a story that is worth covering and part of that process is to cast a wide net and then zero in on something. In the past, in terms of finding people, I would try to focus on a region, try to find as many people from that region as possible. In terms of research method, sometimes it's a matter of going to conventions, sometimes

it's a matter of just kind of sending a mass email to as many people that I can find from a particular region and getting in touch with them, and sometimes you never know what's going to come up. So sometimes it involves a lot of research. And without good research, without a good background to build the story, it's not really worth the effort to press record at all. And so in terms of the actual film making process, when I started at Wikipedia, I just brought all my own physical equipment in and as time has gone on I've convinced the foundation to spend more money on things. I'm like "wow if I had this light or if I had this microphone we could make this even better" and so it kind of built up from there. So I'm pretty content with the equipment that's available to me in terms of filmmaking, and having good equipment generally lowers the cost for making productions in the future.

I.C.D.
A.B.

How do you define creativity in the context of both the work that you do as the Wikipedia story-teller and how

do you see creativity taking place among the volunteers that you work with?

Victor Grigas

My creative process is oriented around observation and always being ready to get inspired in a productive way. When I get inspired or see something that is awesome, I just start brainstorming about it. I'll write a lot of things on post-it notes and move those post-it notes around and then I try to take a step back and try to find themes that have traction, ideas that can go on. Like you can think of something in terms of history or culture, language… any of those things. And then I try to brainstorm anything that might coincide. And then I put those post-it notes all around the place and see what flows the right way. In my role I don't have much room to be super artistic in that round or maybe I'm just trepidatious about it but I feel there's a lot more room to be artistic in terms of photography, rather than in the planning stage. And I try to make the best compositions I can in that way because you have to keep in mind that

I'm communicating not just to an audience who is familiar with Wikipedia, but also to audiences who are not. So I try to make something that the widest demographic of people can understand, and I try to be as clear as possible, so that limits a lot of creativity to it. I see the process as being very similar to the process of editing Wikipedia. Because as an editor it's so fascinating to see how people write all kinds of things in all kinds of ways. People might have a certain style of writing and then you'll watch another person do a whole other section with a very different style, and then you ask: how do these styles merge, how do you smooth that over and make it look like one person wrote it? That comes down to the editing. And a lot of the creativity, both in Wikipedia and in the interviews I do with the volunteer editors, comes from what people are enthusiastic about.

I.C.D.
A.B.
Ok, that leads us to the next question. What are your thoughts on the relationship between individuality and

community in the context of Wikipedia and what motivates people to use and co-produce it and what makes it succeed?

Victor Grigas
Well I think the individuality, part of it is that it's totally open, so you're free to do what you want with it. You can write it, you can copy it and that makes it really really fun and so the fun part is what gets people motivated a lot. They find something that they can do with this thing and they go for it. In terms of community: it's collaborative. When you get started you have to be totally ok with this. You have to learn this really fast, you have to be ok with other people changing what you did. And you might have to fight to maintain what you did. That kind of collaboration or conflict or whatever you want to call it is pretty engaging. It can be really interesting to see what comes up.

I.C.D.
A.B.
What strategies do you use to create modes of circulation of knowledge that do not depend on a general order of mass

production or mass distribution of objects? Do you consider your practice to be independent from an existing order that you are refusing, protesting or objecting to?

Victor Grigas   I don't understand the question.

I.C.D. A.B.   Ok how about: think about Wikipedia and think about a conventional… This will be an extreme example, compare something like Wikipedia to a concept like the iPhone which many many people have. It's designed in California, and then it's mass produced in China under terrible working conditions. It's made in China because it's cheaper so it can be mass produced and then sold by enormous companies that have a lot of power and a lot of control. And compare that kind of model, and also the conventional factory model and all that stuff Marx talks about in terms of the worker

being alienated from the product of his/her labor, that sort of thing, compare that to the structure of Wikipedia and how that functions.

Victor Grigas   Well, give me a second to think about it. I heard a lot of different analogies and I don't want to recycle somebody else's commentary on that idea – I want to try to think on my own. So, give me a second. You're talking about in means of production?

I.C.D. A.B.   Yes exactly!

Victor Grigas   I would describe it as a potluck dinner. You never know what somebody's gonna show up with, or if they're going to show up with anything at all. But at the end of the day everyone gets to eat.

I.C.D. A.B.   Okay, next question: What is your relationship to hierarchy in this project and what types of hierarchies do you feel either

most constrainted or most motivated by? This is both in terms of what you do working on Wikipedia, and also yourself as an artist.

Victor Grigas   Okay so your question is twofold. Because I'm a professional and then I'm a volunteer on the side. And as a professional I work in an organization, and there's a definite hierarchy: I have a manager, I have to follow the rules that way but the Wikimedia Foundation sort of operates as an inverted pyramid, so the executive director really does not have very much control. She has control over what's going on at the Wikimedia Foundation and she can kind of push her perspective in a lot of ways but she does not have direct control like a CEO (chief executive officer) of Ford Motor Company or something like that. So, like everyone working at the Wikimedia Foundation, I'm a public servant in a way because I don't just have a manager who I answer to and all that, but rather I'm a public servant to the people who use and write Wikipedia

and the other projects. So in terms of my professional capacity, I would say I'm a public servant. As a volunteer, I'm an anarchist. I edit what I like and whatever happens happens. In terms of other art that I make — you know, I suppose I'm an individual! I don't know how to say it, I don't know how to describe it… in terms of other arts… Yeah, an individualist — something like that — I like to share the art that I make, most of it, and I really like when people get the chance to interpret it and re-interpret it and you know, remake things. I mean I'm a huge fan of House music. You know House music's from Chicago, and that's where I live, that's where I'm from.

I.C.D. A.B.   Could you say more about that — about the relation between House music and remake culture?

Victor Grigas   Sure — it's really important to me. I grew up listening to House and techno music and those are some of the core elements of that type of music.

In addition to being danceable music, which makes it more participatory, the core of what defines it as House music, and part of what defines the whole culture, is the ability to remake things and reinterpret them to make something new. And you know when you've got so much music and so much talent that gets caught up in Copyright it does not allow for interpretation, it doesn't allow for people to enjoy themselves, it doesn't allow for people to share their work. I mean I grew up going to Gramophone Records and I would buy White Label vinyl. And usually they had illegal samples in them, but it was a fuctional method of distribution and you could hear familiar things in a new way. Like the techno version of Ave Maria or something, you could hear what someone else's interpretation of this was. And this is very inspiring and that's part of what, to me, makes Creative Commons and Wikipedia so fantastic, because they really give people the tools to interpret the world around them for whatever purpose they have, I mean in terms of art it's fantastic that you have so much stuff you can root through and use legally.

I.C.D. A.B. Totally. So we have to start wrapping this up, and this next question might seem a bit unrelated, but really it's not in terms of the idea of giving people tools to help them interpret and reinterpret their rules. So, can you tell me more about Wikipedia Zero? I understand it has something to do with helping people to access Wikipedia through mobile phones, but in a way that incurs no cost, in terms of data plans and that kind of thing?

Victor Grigas Yes, that's the main project I'm working right now, and have been for about a year now. So I've been covering — shooting a documentary — about a high school class in South Africa that heard about Wikipedia Zero and wrote an open letter on Facebook asking their cellphone providers for free access to Wikipedia so that they can study. So they're very poor, and they don't have textbooks at their homes etc… and they really want free access to Wikipedia so that they

can do their homework, and so I've been producing this documentary and we're close to the end of it right now and we'll distribute that soon.

I.C.D. A.B.   Will this be a theatrical distribution?

Victor Grigas   No, but it will be released online, and showcased on the top of Wikipedia in a banner.

I.C.D. A.B.   Awesome, that's very exciting. Can you say more about it?

Victor Grigas   Sure, I'll try to be as open as I can be. So, basically it's a short film. We wanted to cover what Wikipedia Zero is all about, we wanted to tell a human story that would articulate: why would you have free access to Wikipedia on your cell phone, why does that even matter? I mean, everybody pays for their cell phone right? So I needed a story to articulate why this is important, and the fact that this came directly from them, the fact that this came from the bottom up, directly from this high

school class… I had a story here, I had something I could zero in on. And once I got there to start shooting — it was like, they barely even have to say why they need this. Just in photographing them and where they're living you see it: they're in a slum and they're doing their best to study, as best they can but they don't have access to the learning tools that they'd like to have, that they need to have — because they don't even have textbooks. So giving them that access would help the entire community enormously.

I.C.D. A.B.   I think that's something those of us living in more economically prosperous countries can easily take for granted.

Victor Grigas   Yes. So we're basically trying to show the world the power that this thing, Wikipedia, has and the utility it has and why making it accessible to people without Internet access is not trivial. For a lot of people it's the difference between: do I want to study and do

homework / do I want to have dinner tonight. Because they can pay to access it on their cell phones, but it costs a lot of money and so it's like a choice between bread or homework: what do I do?

I.C.D. A.B.   Yeah, I'm really excited to see that. So when is it going to be released?

Victor Grigas   We don't have an exact date yet, we're still on the process of ironing out all the details but I can't imagine it won't be somewhere in 2014.

3 pixels.