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Debating Information Control in Web 2.0: The Case of Wikipedia vs. Citizendium

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Abstract

Wikipedia is continually being scrutinised for the quality of its content. The question addressed in this paper concerns which notions of information, of collaborative knowledge creation, of authority and of the role of the expert are drawn on when information control in WP is discussed. This is done by focusing on the arguments made in the debates surrounding the launch of Citizendium, a proposed new collaborative online encyclopaedia. While Wikipedia claims not to attribute special status to any of its contributors, Citizendium intends to assign a decision-making role to subject experts. The empirical material for the present study consists of two online threads available from Slashdot. One, "A Look inside Citizendium", dates from September, the second one "Co-Founder Forks Wikipedia" from October 2006. The textual analysis of these documents was carried out through close interpretative reading. Five themes, related to different aspects of information control emerged: 1. information types, 2. information responsibility, 3. information perspectives, 4. information organisation, 5. information provenance & creation. Each theme contains a number of different positions. It was found that these positions not necessarily correspond with the different sides of the argument. Instead, at times the fault lines run through the two camps.

Introduction

Wikipedia (WP) [1], arguably one of the best known Web 2.0 projects, is continually being scrutinised for the quality of its content. In particular, its reliability is being questioned repeatedly. This has to be seen in the contemporary context of source criticism on the web that occurs in relation to various kinds of information practices which dominate current debates in a variety of fields, not least education, libraries, and the information professions more generally. These debates commonly refer to a clutch of different concepts, such as expertise, authority, trustworthiness, or reliability. Interest in different aspects of authority, quality and production in

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Wikipedia, closely related to information control, has been growing and the issue has already found some attention in the research literature (e.g. Duguid, 2006; Emigh & Herring, 2005; Lih, 2004; Viégas, Wattenberg & Dave, 2004).

The question addressed in this paper concerns which notions of information, of collaborative knowledge creation, of authority and of the role of the expert are drawn on when information control in WP is discussed. This is considered from a perspective which takes account of the fact that individuals in contemporary society have to be reflexive in their judgements in relation to expert knowledge (Giddens, 1991), in terms of how to seek, critically evaluate, and use information taken from abstract systems, such as WP. The outcomes have bearing on how information practices are perceived and carried out, for example in relation to information literacy and source criticism.

One way of approaching this is by focusing on those who challenge WP's approach and specifically on the arguments and counter-arguments made in the debates. When in September 2006 Larry Sanger, co-creator of WP, announced the launch of Citizendium (CZ) [2] as a fork of WP, the discussion surrounding the free online encyclopaedia's authoritativeness gained new momentum. According to the press release CZ "is an experimental new wiki project /.../ that combines public participation with *gentle expert guidance*" (CZ 2007, italics the authors'), thus addressing what is often considered to be the major weakness of WP, that is its lack of vetted reliability.

While WP claims not to attribute special status to any of its contributors, CZ, according to the introductory text on its website, intends to assign a decision-making role to subject *experts*. It is not CZ's intention to change the collaborative approach, yet here contributors have to register and write under their real name. Also, there are meant to be different categories of users which differ in terms of their expert status. In contrast, in WP anyone can add a subject entry or edit an existing one anonymously. This way, an entry develops over time and it can change significantly from one moment to the next. In a certain way, knowledge is supposed to "grow" from the masses. Disputes are ideally resolved through discussions leading to consensus, whereas records of these discussions are equally openly accessible on WP's so-called talk pages.

Empirical Material & Method

The empirical material consists of two online debates available from Slashdot [3]. Slashdot, a well known news forum, is one of the earliest online fora where, according to its own description, users

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post and comment on “news for nerds” or stories on mostly, but not exclusively, technology related new developments. The two discussion threads were posted one month apart; one called 'A Look inside Citizendium' in September 2006 (153 postings), the day CZ was announced, and the other one called 'Co-Founder Forks Wikipedia' in October (382 postings).

The textual analysis of these documents was carried out through a close interpretative reading. The analysis is contextualised by considering a number of policy documents, available from WP's and CZ's websites, including the FAQ pages, mission statements, and press releases. The results are presented in the form of analytical summaries of the themes together with short quotations, primarily from the Slashdot threads.

Results & Discussion

Five content themes were established and related to different positions towards information control in WP and CZ. These can be related to contemporary discourses surrounding Web 2.0 and similar phenomena.

Information types

One constantly re-emerging theme is based upon a distinction between different types of information, each requiring a different degree of reliability, thus implicitly introducing a hierarchy of information and of needs for reliability. Not infrequently this is discussed by comparing the virtues of WP and CZ, or by debating possibilities for tighter editorial control in WP, depending on the type of information sought. The following quote captures this quite neatly: “We’ve got the traditional encyclopaedias on one end, and the Wikipedia on the other. Now we can go a bit in the middle and see what comes of it.” WP is related to concepts such as “common-knowledge”, “pop-culture”, “subcultural phenomena”, but also “trivial bits”, and it is praised for its coverage of issues “that would be excluded from a paper encyclopaedia”. This stands in contrast to CZ, and also possible controlled versions of WP, which are talked about in terms of their relevance as a “stable source of information” and for “critical subjects”. Frequently this is illustrated with reference to the natural sciences, and most commonly physics.

Information responsibility

The question of whether the responsibility for the reliability of information in WP lies with the user or the producer is another recurring theme. One line of thought firmly locates the responsibility for checking the correctness of information with the author of a particular

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entry. This is for example expressed followingly: “/.../ Wikipedia would be useless if everyone needed to check every single entry they consulted against other sources”. The *ordinary* user, who treats information “as absolute fact”, has to be able to trust in the reliability of the information, not having to question each statement. In contrast, others shift the responsibility of verifying the reliability of information from the producer to the user. One way of facilitating the user’s responsibility is by allowing “transparency in contrast to authority”. Here reference is made to the way in which WP allows users to follow the changes made to an entry and to take part in the discussion surrounding the creation of an entry. By underlining the “opinionated” nature of information, the responsibility is transferred to the individual, who, in order to take on this duty, has to be able to see the multiple voices at play.

Information perspectives

One central theme is the question of neutrality of information. The 'Neutral Point of View' principle (NPOV), regarded as a fundamental principle for all editing in WP, states that the contributors “should *fairly represent* all sides of a dispute” (WP 2007). The suggested CZ policy of not allowing anonymous authors is often, yet not always, applauded with the argument for a need for accountability. Another line of reasoning refers to the difficulties of representing certain topics in a way that considers all perspectives and that this issue will not be easier just because, as in CZ, experts are given a higher status than in WP. The power/knowledge link in relation to (academic) expertise is here emphasised and at one point hegemonic practices are even referred to as “academic colonization”. It is argued that, in contrast to “monolithic article[s]” of experts, a “contentious issue requires that you give each of the different view points a *separate space* in which to express their argument, and then read them each in context.” Another, yet similar, argument is present in expressing the need for an alternative to WP.

Information organisation

Another, less prominent, yet still recurring theme relates to the wider problems of bibliographic control, taxonomy, and issues of categorisation. Frequently the discussion evolves around software properties and features which are not only seen as limited, but also as limiting. Complaining about WP’s policy to prefer common over scientific terms for its entry labels, one person posts: “It makes it all that much more difficult to organize. The usual complaint is that the average visitor would be confused, but I don't see this has to be a problem if redirects are made for the common names [...] Instead their's [sic] no reasoning

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with them. Would they listen to a taxonomist? No way! At Wikipedia everybody seems to be an expert on this subject". Here, the question of expertise and the need for quality assurance and information control is expanded to include issues of information organisation in addition to those of content.

Information provenance & creation

Closely interlinked are issues relating to the provenance of information and those of information creation. Three sub-themes can be distinguished:

(1) Collaborative knowledge creation, the masses, organic growth of knowledge, and "hive-mind consensus": This is either portrayed as an ideal of democratic and egalitarian cooperation, as a "swamp", or also, in a pragmatic way, as something that, in the case of WP, simply works.

(2) The figure of the expert is central to the second sub-theme. Here images of authority, academia, strict hierarchical control, but also of reliability and trustworthiness abound. The following quotation, taken from the CZ FAQ (2007) pages, illustrates the ambiguity with which figure and position of the expert is burdened in the context of Web 2.0 debates: "Think of editors as the village elders wandering the bazaar and occasionally dispensing advice and reining in the wayward".

(3) Finally, a strong tendency to transfer authority from the (individual) expert, i.e. from the person, to sources and references can be made out. The question of provenance is here not treated as "a case of 'It's true because I am an Expert', but 'Here is a reliable source which says that'". While here sometimes a strong element of distrust in expertise and thus the authority of people exists, these doubts are not extended to include materials with an approved stamp of reliability.

Concluding remarks

It is obvious that Web 2.0 environments in general and the Wiki platform in particular open up an important discussion on information control and its bearing on the blurred distinction between consumers, mediators and producers of information. Analysing the debates surrounding the launch of CZ enabled us to discern five themes of information control in this environment, each containing a number of different positions. Interestingly, it emerged that these different positions not

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necessarily correspond with the different sides of the argument, that is those favouring WP and those favouring CZ. Instead, at times, the fault lines, delineating the positions, run through the two *camp*s; with Wikipedians, for instance, not necessarily less prone to hierarchical structures than Citizendians. Furthermore, by bringing out the multi-faceted nature of information control in Web 2.0, or more specifically of its perception, the present analysis also highlights some of the challenges individuals are faced with in their different roles in contemporary online environments; challenges arising from the unstable nature of abstract knowledge systems and a consequent need for increased reflexivity. Inevitably, it seems to us, this also has bearings on how we understand the ways in which people in current and future online environments create trust and reflect upon authority, an issue that requires further deliberation in future research.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.wikipedia.org>

[2] <http://www.citizendium.org>

[3] <http://www.slashdot.org>

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