

Background and introduction

I am a big fan of Wikipedia as you can see from our committing money to them (Wikimedia). We were one of the few people who stepped forward and gave. When Sue came to San Francisco, we starting meeting regularly and had real interesting conversations about Wikipedia. And that really got me thinking more about Wikipedia.

For me, Wikipedia is a very useful tool. It's a common platform, it's free, and there are no artificial barriers such as cost. One can go in and go out with what you need. Of course whatever I am saying is nothing new. It's collaborative and community-owned, a place for people to express their own knowledge. Just because one is not a PhD doesn't mean that one doesn't have knowledge. That's the spirit, and that's an admirable spirit. That kind of philosophy when it started (and still to some extent) is rare for the rest of the world. "Expertise" is still seen as one-sided--peer-reviewed material. This kind of ideology forces us not to fall for the not having credentials as barriers to entry. Somebody who has a BA/MA can't be your peer if you are a PhD.

We know that this is not true today. We know (and I am going to give the usual examples) - if you think about Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, they're dropouts! And yet.....There are many people who are brilliant, and may even know as much or more as a person with PhD. How can we use the work of these people? There are mechanisms in place that allow for passion-based as well as informal learning so why not contribution from all? We all know now that Wikipedia was the answer to leveling these barriers. As long as you can contribute and your contribution is deemed correct and contextual you can participate.

What are the big issues facing Wikipedia today?

1. Believe it or not the issue of quality control is still a big one. To be honest, many other web-based sites are facing that one issue. For example the Wikipedia Advisory Board recently had a long discussion about that when the issues with biographies of live people came up. These people can actually tell you what is right or wrong about their information on Wikipedia! So how do you ensure that Wikipedia does not get it wrong?
2. Credibility The quality control issue—was easy to control when Wikipedia was smaller. But when we have so many users and contributors, how do we control the perception that the people involved have credibility?
3. Differences in opinions "Bush compromised USA," says one post. "Bush is great," says another. It's just opinions and differing viewpoints. Who is correct? Under what conditions does this apply? I know that Wikipedia provides a discussion tab to have conversation about these opinions but could there be another place that differences in opinions are collected in an academic as well as a neutral manner? Could you provide two versions of the same issue together – is there climate warming or not?

What will Wikipedia need to focus on in the future?

1. How to keep contributors interested:
 - a. The plateau in contributions makes me think about reasons for that? Is it because people have reached the limit of what they want to write about? Or have more users taken over the contributors? And so on.
 - b. Does the user interface make contributions and eventually usage difficult?
 - c. Does Wikipedia have consistency of development/code? I don't know what kind of effects many people contributing to the code create. Is the code too fragmented to be cohesive?
2. It is not easy to work with the interface; there is too much information and notices. Need new features to keep up with the changing times: embedding multimedia, developing tools for working with multimedia.
3. Then the next question is - Is there a limit to free? Who is going to pay for the upkeep of the website, the use cost and so on.

Why does Wikipedia need money?

The reality is they've reached the point where they need money for managing the day-to-day activities and other things like data management cost.

How does Wikipedia become a "paid resource" without a negative impact on volunteers?

That's the question right now. I have had a number of experts and business people tell me for my own foundation that the solution is a parallel for-profit initiative that makes money. So what is it that Wikipedia could do to keep the initial mission in place? Can they create a for-profit entity that does not clash with the mission of Wikipedia yet pays into the maintenance as well as innovation at Wikipedia? Would this impact the mission of the organization? I would hate for Wikipedia to compromise their mission like many non-profits that drop some of the mission they started to keep costs in place. My impression is that these changes can be costly as this mission drift and changes in value propositions cause fading away.

So how do you sustain one of the top 5 sites? The only thing that comes to mind at this point is donations or parallel money-earning initiative. In a parallel initiative you can maintain the main goals of Wikipedia but give people a subscription model where they can get a more modified version with advanced features and subscription models to deliver information to their computers that they ask for. Almost like a magazine.

Is there a limit to growth?

I believe that there's always a cap to a market size and then you have to change something. Are we approaching that market size?

What do you think about China, India, and other places where there is under-penetration?

With these countries there is an issue with different languages. People say we should convert into different languages. Let's talk about, say, African languages. There isn't a word for a lot of scientific terms in those languages. How do you translate those terms and have context for the people? There isn't a word for bus for Hindi, for example. We just adopted the word "bus." But first we had to understand what the word bus meant and put it into context. That's a practical barrier.

What challenges would Wikimedia have in entering the OER space?

In a sense Wikipedia is already an OER. Wikipedia should already be used by higher ed students. K-12 is a very different story. You need to penetrate a market that is very regulated. No matter how I feel about my kid's education, it's shaped by context. You need special technical features for OER for K-12 – grade-alignment, standards-alignment for example.

The problem with Wikimedia is that it might need to standardize its formatting. The Wiki is a particular syntax, and teachers are not particularly savvy about that so you might need to make it even simpler.

To what extent is the platform a barrier?

1. I'll tell you something—when I realized that I need to know Wiki syntax, I just lost interest. I ask myself, why do I need to do this? When the PCs first became available you had to park the drive before you shut the computer down. It was very irritating. Now things have evolved and PCs are easier to use. Wikipedia needs to keep developing to make it easier to use.
2. Search is a huge issue when it comes to easy of use. When I don't find things I need, I get disinterested and leave. Of course I am talking from the perspective of a novice user.

How fast enough can the platform evolve?

Murugan and I always argue, if you need development done, open the source code. I am not completely convinced. When there are so many issues, you have to wait and are at the mercy of many people. When there is need, someone will fix it. I don't think that that way of working will bring on fast development.

Can Wikipedia keep going on like this? Wikipedia didn't have a printing capability until recently. It works, and it's Erik's pride and joy. I think somehow, you should have a strategic development of the platform. Maybe that's the next evolution for development – a timeline – or a strategic plan. Perhaps that way people who contribute can know how important something is.

How could Wikipedia raise money?

I've advised Sue on some of this. You continually have to come up with gimmicks, it seems. So here are three models that I can think about

1. Raising money from friends and family of Wikipedia.
2. When you become so big as Wikipedia has, can/should the government take over some or most of the funding?
3. Could we follow public broadcasting model? We could let each little "Wikination" raise their funds and it can happen on the same day such that there is "Wikifest" for raising money.

Any last thoughts?

K-12 is another market that Wikipedia needs to penetrate. But has to be done thoughtfully – maybe the teachers can be encouraged to have their students find mistakes and change them as a first step!