

Wikis: Not Always a Good Idea

Online applications and websites are slowly replacing traditional methods of newsgathering with crowdsourced information and citizen journalism. One of the most popular forms of this “Web 2.0” evolution is the wiki. By using this software, a newspaper, for example, can rely on online visitors to contribute a wider variety and greater volume of information than a reporter ever could. This usually gives continuous updates and very detailed accounts of almost any story or topic. However, the inception of the wiki has caused many issues ranging from privacy infringements to falsifiable and disorderly information. While many people are embracing this new option for their Web sites, wikis are often overused and uninhibited so much that they can actually become detrimental to the site and lose valuable visitors and customers for business.

According to ComScore.com, Wikipedia sites have recently entered the top 10 most visited Web sites in terms of unique visitors, ranking above the *New York Times* Digital website and Ask.com (ComScore 2007). In addition, the Pew Internet and American Life Project shows that 36% of all adult online users have consulted Wikipedia.org at some point in their internet endeavors (Pew 2007). More and more people are turning to user-generated sites above some traditional news sources to find their information, and many Web sites are beginning to include wiki-based blogs and articles within their customary methods. As wikis continue to populate the Internet, it is easy to see why users are attracted to the software.

Besides its unmatched volume and depth of information created by countless users, wiki sites are versatile and extremely diverse. While Wikipedia.org is the most

popular wiki site for almost any topic, others cater to niche-oriented material. For example, ArmchairGM welcomes sports fans to edit articles on recent games, while Lostpedia hosts over 1300 pages all dedicated to the TV show Lost with almost 6000 contributors. Sites like these give users specific topic-oriented information that many sites do not have the time or resources to gather. The detailed accounts of specific topics that wikis generate usually make entries more complete and whole.

In addition, when users are able to mold and edit information on a site, they create a tool for collective learning (Wired, 2006). When using wikis in a cyberlaw class, Jonathan Zittrain of Harvard and Oxford said that “when students realize that they're in it together, wiki-style collaboration enables them to work toward a consensus or craft a solution” (Wired, 2006). Users can feel more motivated to enter useful data when they know that they are the authors and that their input is a reflection of their persona – especially when wiki sites require usernames for entries. According to Andrew McAfee, associate professor of technology and operations management at the Harvard Business School, “In almost every big corporation, some group is already using a wiki” (Internetnews.com, 2007). Wikis in the business world stimulate a greater level of innovation in workers for work on group projects and company documents. Wikis also give readers a stronger connection to the data, as some entries may result from personal experiences or case studies that they can use in their own lives.

Most wiki sites want to be considered a trusted and reliable source for user-generated content; therefore they often incorporate editors that upkeep their neutrality and etiquette. For example, sites like Citizendium.com enforce bans on anonymous contributions. Also, wikiHow.com deleted some “blatantly inappropriate” articles

dealing with firearms in 2005, and its editors will not publish articles providing instructions on building bombs or cooking up homemade drugs (Wired, 2005). Wikipedia.org also provides cautionary messages on pages that deal with political figures, warning users that its content is liable to be subject to “biased editing, talk-page trolling, and simple vandalism” for which Wikipedia.org is not responsible (Wikipedia.org). While providing as much truthful information as possible, most wiki-integrated sites preserve a good balance between interactivity and control.

However, not every Web site benefits from the use of wikis. Wikis are such a powerful tool for supplying information that they can sometimes turn Web sites into war zones between people disputing minute details. Since almost anyone can publish data, disagreements about the phrasing or actual content of certain topics can create contradictions in the information. For example, in 2005, Wikipedia.org decided to tighten its rules when John Seigenthaler, Sr. was falsely accused of possibly being directly involved in the Kennedy assassinations. This single incident raised questions about the reliability of Wikipedia.org and similar wiki sites that do not usually have editors verifying data (Wikipedia.org). After this content was deleted, Seigenthaler wrote an op-ed for *USA Today* where he wrote "Wikipedia is a flawed and irresponsible research tool" (Wired, 2006). While Wikipedia.org continues to be considered a reliable source, these types of cases would not bode well for any traditional news sites even if it incorporated wiki software.

Wikis also enable users to not only edit the content but also the structure of information. What an original author may have intended can easily be replaced with dry explanations or choppy information (Wired 2006). Narrative devices can often become

convoluted and difficult to understand due to an overload of irrelevant facts. For example, when Wired writer Ryan Singel posted one of his articles to a SocialText-hosted wiki to test its effects, his article doubled in size with almost 350 edits to his original story. He stated that “there's still a place for a mediator who knows when to subsume a detail for the sake of the story, and is accustomed to balancing the competing claims and interests of companies and people represented in a story” (Wired, 2006). In addition, citizen editors can easily link stories to plug their businesses or create biased stories to promote their opinion. Obviously, narrative articles and prose stories are not a good venue for wikis.

The freedom that wikis provide for article editing by nearly anyone can also prove to be dangerous. Web sites like Wikileaks has collected over 1.2 million government and corporate documents on its Web site which could be seen by anyone with an internet connection (Wikipedia.org). For example, on November 7th of this year, a 2003 Guantanamo Bay detention camp handbook was posted anonymously, providing details of the layout of the building and instructions for officials on how to handle prisoners. Although this information is not classified, users are more able to discover even the most confidential information than ever before. Other wiki sites allow users to publish the ingredients of homemade explosives and destructive ploys. If such information is available to terrorists, anarchists, or any crazed layperson, the world could become in great danger.

As wikis continue to grow in popularity and size, their sheer numbers currently on the Web are causing poorer quality entries. Since there are so many to choose from, entries can get lost in the mix, often leaving outdated and patchy information online for

years before discovered and updated. For the hundreds of thousands of smaller wiki sites and average developers, editors (if they exist) fail to moderate, clean up, and fix old articles.

Users usually overlook these flaws in wiki software for the interactivity and “reliable enough” information they get through its sites. Similarly, Web editors and publishers usually get more traffic on sites with wiki-generated content and often tolerate problems for increased popularity. While for the most part, wikis enhance online information, users and editors alike must realize that there is a time and place for such software. When Web sites replace quality authoring with crowdsourced articles to see more traffic or gain readership, they devalue their own work. Readers go to newspaper websites to get “official” information, not freely editable content. Loyal fans of columnists read articles written by their favorite authors to find personality and prose, not choppy fact-filled stories. Future Web hosts will have to think twice before using wiki software or their site could easily become just another victim of user-generated overload. Two heads are not always better than one.