On Homo Wikipedius

A review of *Jemielniak, D. (2014) Common Knowledge? An Ethnography of Wikipedia.*

- Stanford `University Press.

I have been waiting for this book for a long time. The Wikipedia community which is one of the largest online collaboration projects in history has survived to the point of rigorous academic study. This book shows a comprehensive picture how the project and its community comes about in day-to-day social interactions using contradictory organisational structures. The main body of the book describes Wikipedia organisational culture, its structures, explicit rules, control and governance mechanisms, leadership, role of trust and conflict resolution models. Jemielniak, as a scholar and a Wikipedia native insider, has the credibility to tell us their story.

The bloodbath or election?

While most people have some knowledge about Wikipedia, either as a user or creator, it may still be a surprise to find out how the project is actually managed. The structure of community roles is highly hierarchical and their responsibilities clearly defined, while the selection of people depends on elections results. Elections however, are influenced by several important factors that surprisingly contradict its meritocratic character. For instance, it's the volume of edits, not their size, significance or expertise that decide who will be given certain rights. The election process itself does not seem friendly,

often referred to as a 'bloodbath'. Jemielniak rightly contests this system, but

unfortunately does not analyse further of what it means for the Wikipedia

project and its ideology, especially with regard to reputation and recognition of

a newcomers work.

C for consensus, C for conflict or C for control?

One of the Wikipedia's rule says that Wikipedia is NOT a democracy, in the

sense that polls or voting cannot substitute substantive discussion.

Consensus is valued more that majority vote. While 'consensus' seems to be

a Wikipedia buzz word, a lot of their rules are about mitigating and resolving

conflicts. This is one of the most interesting chapters illustrated by the

extreme example of battle over the Polish/German name of the city

Gdansk/Dazing, which allows the reader to understand how personal and

vicious the Wiki arguments can get and how, regardless of their good

intentions, consensus may not be possible to achieve. In fact the daily life of

Wikipedians is full of edit battles. The overall impression Jemielniak gives is

that Wikipedia is built on conflict ('community of dissensus', p.84) and that the

quality of most articles is weaved by thin thread around ideological battles.

Wikipedia, which is globally advertised as a participative and creative

environment, is actually tightly controlled. It resembles some of the old

bureaucracies with a range of written rules and procedures. There is almost a

panopticon-like control of everything that is done on Wikipedia, changes are

tracked either through a nickname or an IP address if a user is not logged in.

This works as a safety mechanism, putting new or hidden editors under

scrutiny, especially to detect low-quality contributions or vandalism. It is also

argued that Wikipedia community seems to prefer precise rules of conduct

than developing interpersonal relationships. Trust in Wikipedia is twofold; trust

in a person is built with their participation (carefully tracked) in the project;

while procedures are institutionally trusted to work in favour of all participants.

Bureaucracy or anarchy?

Wikipedia is not only a community, but also incorporated as the Wikimedia

Foundation. With its love of rules of conduct, Wikipedia may seem like a

bureaucratic organisation, but in fact it deliberately uses elements of

bureaucracy and anarchy to create a new organisational form. Despite some

rigid structures, it allows for meritocratic structures to arise. Jemielniak

interestingly discusses the balance between those modes of governance

emphasising that there is a clear rivalry over the modes of governance, while

the activists build ideologically-driven groups and professional structures in

parallel limiting the scope of formal Wikimedia Foundation power. Leadership

of such an organisation is a complicated process. Jemielniak argues that

Wikipedia relies on dispersed and shared leadership, which becomes a

community phenomenon.

Whose knowledge?

Above all Jemielniak poses more fundamental questions of whether Wikipedia

is an exemplification of a new knowledge revolution. A revolution yet to be

acknowledged and accepted by academia. As academics it is crucial for us to

start debating whether Wikipedia might be a successful model for us to mimic.

We should remember that it was academia that first inspired development of open source and other free and open collaboration movements. Now that real community spirit could be beneficial for institutionalised academia, because it would allow for not only engaging researchers but also practitioners and wider society. However Wikipedia is widely criticised by academics, doubting whether it is capable of producing legitimised knowledge. If anyone can edit Wikipedia, can it be a credible source of information? Jemielniak seems to be open to that possibility and acts accordingly. When publicly criticised over accuracy of one of the accounts in this very book, he bravely took the glove and responded in kind. The link to full online discussion is available here: https://twitter.com/jemielniakd/status/569089350635540480. Jemielinak is aware that this is a non standard behaviour in academia, and that the openness of the discussion and authorship may be perceived as threatening.

In conclusion

Overall this book provides us with a robust discussion of Wikipedia's features, processes involved and structures of power. It also points out how a mixture of consensus, control and conflict are entangled in a new form of governance and how difficult it is to provide leadership for such a varied, geographically and ideologically dispersed organisation. Jemielniak does his due diligence in discussing those matters and offers a comprehensive introduction for anyone interested in the Wikipedia project, its rules and problems. It also gives a good start to think whether this type of community can be a successful new model for knowledge creation and dissemination.