IMAGINING ACCESS FOR ALL: THE FAILED INTRODUCTION OF A NEW EDITING INTERFACE FOR WIKIPEDIA

Kim Osman
Queensland University of Technology

Wikipedia, the free online encyclopaedia, is built on shared ideals and values about access to knowledge. However active participation in the platform is declining and new editors are decreasingly likely to be retained as committed volunteers to the vision of making "the sum of all knowledge" freely available (Halfaker, Geiger, Morgan, & Riedl, 2012; Wikipedia, 2014). In response to this and issues around usability, the Wikimedia Foundation developed VisualEditor – a "what you see is what you get" (WYSIWYG) editor for Wikipedia – to replace the existing wiki markup editor. VisualEditor was rolled out as the default editing interface for all users on English Wikipedia on July 1, 2013. It was turned off as the default interface on September 23, 2013.

This research follows the events that lead to a sanctioned community hack disabling the default editor for English Wikipedia users three months after its introduction to examine how editors in Wikipedia enact shared values and ideals around knowledge and knowledge creation. Through a qualitative thematic analysis of discussion on archived Wikipedia talk pages, the paper reveals the tensions that exist in Wikipedia between the ideals of an encyclopaedia *anyone* can edit and an encyclopaedia that *everyone* can edit.

The paper maps the controversy regarding VisualEditor and draws specifically on the idea of inventories (Callon, Lascoumes, & Barthe, 2009) and boundaries (Gieryn, 1983; Star & Griesemer, 1989) to identify actors and user groups in the debate. The discussion analysed ranged from December 2012 to August 2014 and includes both members of the user community and representatives from the Wikimedia Foundation. This discussion is contextualised by situating VisualEditor's introduction in a history of reactions to new user interfaces from Engelbart's "mother of all demos" in 1968, to Blogger's "push- button publishing for the people" (Streeter, 2011; Walker Rettberg, 2014). Mainstream media discourses are also considered in light of how Wikipedia is constructed by those outside the editorial community. The analysis found the introduction of VisualEditor was positioned by the media as "opening" up Wikipedia to new contributors, and its demotion to opt-in beta status was positioned as a result of the editing community's resistance to change.

The analysis also finds "openness" is a contested concept in Wikipedia and how it is contested problematises the concept of a singular collaborative Wikipedian community that is often associated with conflated free and open ideals. Indeed, users employ rhetoric associated with these open ideals to perform boundary work and establish different editing identities. Tensions among these different users, and between the imagined editing community and the Wikimedia Foundation in relation to the introduction of VisualEditor, underline how the usability of the encyclopaedia for its content creators is tied to assumptions about knowledge, and those who create – or should be creating – encyclopaedic knowledge.

The research revealed that while the debates do play out as tropes about user ability and platform culture, it also highlighted the importance of keeping a handmade aesthetic style that is tied not only to the platform's roots in the DIY culture, but its future ability to remain open to contributions from *anyone* by appearing to be hackable and crafted. These debates about the wiki aesthetic style become more complex as VisualEditor, an interface that is technically more closed, becomes important for the platform remaining open to a wider range of potential users.

Indeed some existing users viewed the change to a WYSIWYG editor as diminishing the control and creativity afforded to users via the markup editor. And in preferencing one interface over another by making it the default, these users interpreted the default setting as preferencing one type of participation over another. This shift in power, affording new users more agency with the VisualEditor as default clearly unsettled sections of the existing community who also view wiki markup, and the text editor as not only a method of quality control for contributions but as an object that holds a "community of professional editors together." The editing interface in Wikipedia is therefore integral not only to a sense of community for some users, but to who is able to join that community. "The architecture of cyberspace *is* power in this sense; how it could be different. Politics is about how we decide. Politics is how that power is exercised, and by whom" (Lessig, 1999, p. 78). These decisions on the interface – and how they are decided – are important in light of the governance relationship between users and the Wikimedia Foundation, technical decisions on the platform, Wikipedia's significant gender gap (roughly 85- 90% of editors identify as men) and the popular perception of a systemic bias in the encyclopaedia.

The analysis did however reveal another group of existing editors, one not often represented in media discourses and not agreeing with the sanctioned hack – those who sought to speak on behalf of the new users who very rarely have a voice in the governance spaces on Wikipedia. These users undertake boundary work to differentiate themselves from other groups of existing editors. They advocated for an interface that increased accessibility, and pointed to the irony of experienced editors debating the future of a technology designed to increase access for new users.

The failed introduction of VisualEditor therefore demonstrates that any change to the default editing interface in Wikipedia is not only a technical change to the site, it is also a profoundly cultural shift that reflects wider ideologies about accessibility and

knowledge creation in an open project and embodies many of the anxieties felt around change in sociotechnical structures.

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