

Researchers confirm the power of altruism in Wikipedia

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The beauty of open-source applications is that they are continually improved and updated by those who use them and care about them. Dartmouth researchers looked at the online encyclopedia Wikipedia to determine if the anonymous, infrequent contributors, the Good Samaritans, are as reliable as the people who update constantly and have a reputation to maintain.

The answer is, surprisingly, yes. The researchers discovered that Good Samaritans contribute high-quality content, as do the active, registered users. They examined Wikipedia authors and the quality of Wikipedia content as measured by how long and how much of it persisted before being changed or corrected.

“This finding was both novel and unexpected,” says Denise Anthony, associate professor of sociology. “In traditional laboratory studies of collective goods, we don’t include Good Samaritans, those people who just happen to pass by and contribute, because those carefully designed studies don’t allow for outside actors. It took a real-life situation for us to recognize and appreciate the contributions of Good Samaritans to web content.”

Anthony worked with co-authors Sean Smith, associate professor of computer science, and Tim Williamson, a member of the Dartmouth Class of 2005 who worked on the project as an undergraduate. They set out to examine the reputation and reliability of contributors to Wikipedia. Wikipedia has an archive of the history of changes and edits

to its entries, which allowed the researchers access to analyze the perceived quality of content.

By subdividing their analysis by registered versus anonymous contributors, the researchers found that among those who contribute often, registered users are more reliable. And they discovered that among those who contribute only a little, the anonymous users are more reliable. The researchers were most surprised to find that the reliability of Good Samaritans' contributions were at least as high as that of the more reputable registered users' contributions.

“Wikipedia is a great example of how open-source contributions work for the greater good,” says co-author Smith. “And because it welcomes input from anyone, not just programmers and geeks, it is a great research tool. We can mine information from Wikipedia that helps us understand human behavior.”

According to Anthony, Wikipedia now requires that anonymous contributors who make numerous edits must register.

“This will probably limit the number of low-quality contributions we find among high-use anonymous contributors, because in exposing their identity, they will have their reputation to consider,” says Anthony. “I don't foresee this new policy affecting the quality of those Good Samaritans, though. Their presence should continue to be valuable.”

Their study has been presented at academic conferences, and it is available online at:

<http://www.cs.dartmouth.edu/reports/abstracts/TR2007-606/>

Source: Dartmouth College

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