Results of Wikipedia study reveal highest influencing contributors

November 7 2017, by Jim Bush

Wikipedia logo.

The mysterious world of Wikipedia isn't such a mystery anymore to a pair of researchers who conducted a 10-year study on the free online encyclopedia.

Sorin Adam Matei, a professor in Purdue University's Brian Lamb School of Communication, and Brian Britt, assistant professor in the South Dakota State University Department of Journalism and Mass Communication and a Purdue graduate, sought to define just who is providing the massive amount of content. They had access to every edit made to every article from Wikipedia's first 10 years, 2001-2010.

Their findings? It's the 1 percenters. No, not financially speaking.

"What we saw is that a clear leadership has emerged," Matei says, "but it's a leadership that cycles. We have a group of individuals who shape the content by working the hardest and clocking the most hours. The agenda is shaped by these people, and they're driven by a sense of mission, much like political or religious movements."

Matei says the top 1 percent of writers/editors on Wikipedia create about 80 percent of the content. That ratio, he says, was shown in their study to be consistent. The writers/editors are not; the main creators change over time.

"It's like the Tour de France," he says. "At any particular time, there is a group that leads." Then, they fall back and another pack emerges."

What is in it for the creators?

"This idea that they are shaping what the world knows gives them a sense of individual accomplishment," he says. "That is a thing."

Matei, director of the Purdue Data Storytelling Network, and Britt have co-authored a new book on their work. The book, titled "Structural Differentiation in Social Media: Adhocracy, Entropy and the '1% Effect,'" reinterprets the idea that Wikipedia is a commons-based peer production site "It is built by peers, but some peers are more equal than others, at least in terms of effort," said Matei.

The book also found that Wikipedia is not unlike any other human organization, following a clear evolutionary path, from a simple entrepreneurial, to a bureaucratic, and finally to an "adhocractic" formula. Some key contributor attributes, such as propensity to work with others or not, moderate the evolution of the organization. "In this volume, we use thse attributes to recognize revolutionary changes as well as the gradual, evolutionary drifts that often occur in organizations," Britt said.

"The book presents some interesting findings about the way in which a new elite has emerged in the world of communication and about the way in which social media groups evolve," Matei says. "Adhocracy – the idea that crowdsourcing projects like Wikipedia aren't these decentralized and spontaneous ventures – is orchestrated by an organizational system that combines a stable power hierarchy with individual mobility."

Provided by Purdue University

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