Wikipedia and e-Collaboration Research: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Wikipedia’s precursor started in the year 2000 as a traditional online encyclopedia with content controlled by a small group of experts. In 2013 Wikipedia’s current user-controlled incarnation was such a successful enterprise that an asteroid was named after it. The authors briefly discuss key opportunities and challenges in e-collaboration research on Wikipedia. The opportunities refer to studies on the impact of Wikipedia on individuals and organizations, as well as on the spontaneous formation of online communities. The main challenges discussed refer to the consensus-building nature of content creation in Wikipedia, making practical applications of findings somewhat limited, as well as data compilation difficulties.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

One can think of Wikipedia as a collection of “wikis”, of which the most abundant are articles on topics of general public interest. Wikis are user-readable data repositories (e.g., articles) that can be collaboratively created, modified and deleted by a group of individuals. The first wiki software, WikiWikiWeb, was developed by Ward Cunningham (see Figure 1).

Wikipedia started as a traditional online encyclopedia called Nupedia, with content controlled by a small group of experts (Giles, 2011). Nupedia was founded in early 2000 by Jimmy Wales (see Figure 1) and Larry Sanger, and was not initially very successful. Its user-controlled incarnation, Wikipedia, was established in early 2001. In 2013 it was such a successful enterprise that an asteroid was named after it; the asteroid “274301 Wikipedia” (Workman, 2013).

E-collaboration is defined as “collaboration using electronic technologies among different individuals to accomplish a common task” (Kock, 2005, p. i). In Wikipedia, editors collaboratively write articles, or wikis, using a markup language (often referred to as “wiki markup”, see Figures 2 and 3) that bears some similarities to the HyperText Markup Language (HTML; the standard markup language used to create Web pages). The main common task accomplished by Wikipedia editors is to create and maintain Wikipedia articles. Generally speaking, anyone can be an editor in Wikipedia.

In this article we briefly discuss key opportunities and challenges in e-collaboration research on Wikipedia. The opportunities refer to studies on the impact of Wikipedia on individuals and organizations, as well as on the spontaneous formation of online communities. The main challenges discussed refer to the consensus-building nature of content creation in Wikipedia, making practical applications of findings somewhat limited, as well as data compilation difficulties.
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