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What is the Critical Point of View project?

Critical Point of View (or CPOV) is a project that brings together researchers with a focus on Wikipedia. CPOV is first and foremost a research network, maintained in part through a discussion list. Our outputs have included three conferences (in Bangalore, Amsterdam and Leipzig), two websites and most recently an edited anthology, *CPOV: A Wikipedia Reader*.

Why is it important to have a critical understanding of Wikipedia?

The term “critical” works on several levels for us. First, it speaks to larger, say, philosophical and theoretical concerns. What is the role of criticism in society today? From what theoretical position can one justify being critical? But these more abstract questions sit alongside more practical ones. Wikipedia has moved from novelty to part of the everyday routines of a large portion of internet users and yet we don’t really understand much about it. To be sure, there is already a lot of commentary about Wikipedia, both in the academic world and the popular press, but one of the reasons that formed CPOV was a shared discontent for “what has been said” so far. From a critical perspective, there is a lot more to think about than questions of accuracy, reliability and anonymity, or worrying that amateurs are taking over the world.

What is the history and structure of the foundation that oversees Wikipedia and how does it related to the “community” of contributors (see Chen 2011; Morell 2011)? What is the nature of authority in this knowledge space (O’Neil 2011)? How to position Wikipedia in relation to the history of encyclopaedias (O’Sullivan 2011)? These are some of the more practical issues that we’ve tried to explore.

We also wanted to create a sustained dialogue outside the concerns of the Wikipedia Foundation. That is, we wanted to create a space for dialogue that had some distance from the object of study. Of course, some of our researchers cross back and forth and that isn’t an issue. The main aim was not to create an antagonistic space, but one to explore questions and issues that are beyond the concerns of the Foundation and the community. That said, some of our contributions (Carr 2011; Kildall & Stern 2011; Shapiro 2011) do have an antagonistic element to them! Finally, and this is something that we explore more in the introduction to the Reader, the “Critical” in “Critical Point of View” is a word play on Wikipedia’s core policy, the Neutral Point of View (or NPOV). Part of being critical is not taking policies at face value, especially ones that claim to be neutral.

What does Wikipedia suggest for the future of collaboration?

Wikipedia is just one instance of the new ways of working together brought about by network technologies. I am not so sure what it suggests for the future, but I can say something on what it suggests for the present. One of the most obvious things is that economic incentives are not the only motivating factor for making things and working together online. There is a lot of “hobby” or “amateur” work online, but Wikipedia is different in that it has out-competed commercial alternatives. It is an instance where non-commodity and non-wage production has proven competitively superior to

traditional modes of production. This is one reason why activists love Wikipedia, especially ones who want to bring about a new economic model for society.

Wikipedia also shows us that mass online collaboration is possible. To be more specific, it is possible to create platforms that enable millions (or at least thousands) of contributors to create complicated and yet coherent digital artifacts outside more typical forms of organization, such as a government, firm or other institution. This feat of organization – of organization without organizations, as Clay Shirky puts it - has been addressed by a host of people (Benkler 2006; Bruns 2008; Shirky 2008; Elliott 2006; Reagle 2011), but I don't think any has quite captured what makes such complex forms of organization possible.

For the future, then, we need to continue exploring the *how* of collaboration. There's a famous saying within the Wikipedia community, that "Wikipedia works in practice, not in theory", but I just think we just need better theories! On top of that, there is a massive question about literacy, especially if organizational forms like Wikipedia become more common. What kinds of skills are needed to work in collaborative projects and how might they be acquired?

What are the important questions for Wikipedia in relation to education?

This relationship, between pedagogy and Wikipedia, is perhaps the most interesting and most important. It's something that the CPOV initiative has tried to push but so far we have made only moderate inroads. As we see it, there are three dimensions to this relationship. The first approaches Wikipedia as a teaching tool. How best to integrate Wikipedia into the classroom? What kinds of literacies – for both students and teachers - are required to do so? This dimension focuses more on the actual content of the encyclopaedia. The other two dimensions have already been gestured to and relate more to Wikipedia as a whole, instead of just its output. Resonating with your question about collaboration, we need to look at what Wikipedia tells us about other transformations in other areas, the most obvious is of course knowledge production, but there are many others. This second dimension asks, what can we learn from Wikipedia? One example would be R. Stuart Geiger's (2011) contribution to the CPOV reader, where he looks at the role of automated programmes ("bots") in the maintenance of content. Wikipedia can tell us much about the role of such bots on social media platforms. Finally, as noted above, what skills are needed to participate in networked projects like Wikipedia? Interestingly, Wikipedia has its own guidelines and "how to" sections for new participants, and a related set of guidelines for how to treat newcomers. The most important of these is "don't bite the noobs". Literacy-building in regards to this dimension would need to situate itself in relation to already-existing set of practices.

How does the Critical Point of View project extend beyond Wikipedia?

A remark by Nishant Shah has become a catchcry within the initiative: "CPOV is about Wikipedia and it is not about Wikipedia". And indeed, this is another way that we are differentiated by the research activities of the Wikimedia Foundation. Nishant's remark can be further refined: CPOV extends beyond Wikipedia *through* Wikipedia. It is, in a sense, directly related to the second dimension of education mentioned above. What can Wikipedia tell us about things that aren't Wikipedia? My own contribution to the reader, for example, looks at Wikipedia in relation to the process of software forking—of splitting a software project in two to create two unique but functionally identical programmes. In particular, I consider an early attempt to fork Wikipedia in relation to ongoing political investments in forking, which position it as a kind of leave-oriented

political activity not unlike related notions of exit, exodus or even revolution, with the important difference that virtually nothing is lost to either party in the act of forking (Tkacz, 2011: p. 96). In the introduction to the reader we write, “CPOV is about more than Wikipedia: it approaches Wikipedia as an access point, symptom, vector, sign, or prototype” (Lovink & Tkacz, 2011: p. 13). I should finish by noting that the reader is licensed under a Creative Commons license and can be freely downloaded via the CPOV website (<http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/cpov/>). Enjoy!

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Biographical Statement

Nathaniel Tkacz is currently completing a PhD at The University of Melbourne. He is co-editor (with Geert Lovink) of *Critical Point of View: A Wikipedia Reader* (2011). Details of his research interests and other writings can be found at nathanieltkacz.net.