Wikimania: Wikipedia In Real Life

This year's annual gathering of Wikipedians celebrates the collaborative encyclopedia's first 10 years and the increasing need to look to 'real life'. A design report from Haifa by Iolanda Pensa

Wikimania is Wikipedia's annual meeting dedicated to exploring the possible directions that the most frequently consulted, written and discussed online encyclopedia on the planet could or should go. That direction seems to be IRL—in real life.

If you're a Wikipedian, at this point you will already be grumbling about the number of inaccuracies contained in this first sentence. Otherwise, perhaps you're probably wondering what a Wikipedian is. We will proceed in sequence.

An astounding number of people use Wikipedia to find information, but far fewer exploit the opportunity to themselves become authors or editors of that information. As Wikipedia is written by users, anyone can be a Wikipedian. Wikipedia has few rules (five) but it is a community within which the user must negotiate his/her position.
The primary aspect that users stress is that Wikipedia is not an organization. Wikipedia is "just" an Internet site, with more than 270 language versions, more than 3.5 million articles in English (and about 800,000 in Italian), thematic portals, service pages (with instructions and help) and project pages (coordinated by the community to develop specific sections of the encyclopaedia). What matters most in becoming "part of Wikipedia" is one's involvement in improving the encyclopedia. The ways that this can be done are very different.

Wikipedians write, translate, remove vandalism, report errors, correct typos, organize events or create small programs that perform automated tasks. Others donate (last year donations totalled more than 12.31 € million), promote or contribute to Wikipedia through Wikimedia or contribute to other Wikimedia projects.
Wikimedia is the organization that administers Wikipedia and manages servers, upgrades, security, budget and the Wikipedia® trademark. Local chapters are also connected to the Wikimedia Foundation based in San Francisco. In addition to Wikipedia, Wikimedia manages and promotes sister projects focusing on specific types of documentation. To name a few, the best-known Wikimedia Commons contains images and multimedia files; but there are also Wikiquote, Wikibooks, Wikisource and Wikinews. All Wikimedia projects make content available under a free license, which is, perhaps, the most important feature. You might ask “Why write a new encyclopedia when there is already the Britannica?” The answer is simple: the Britannica is not free. Without explicit permission, no one can copy, publish, print, distribute, modify, update or correct the Encyclopedia Britannica. But with Wikipedia you can. The Wikipedia copyright is not “all rights reserved” (©), but “some rights reserved” (CC—Creative Commons attribution is shared in the same way). Anyone is allowed to use Wikipedia content provided that the source is cited and at the same time the license is adopted.

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Wikimedia is an international conference of users of Wikimedia projects (not just Wikipedia). Wikipedians, Wikimedians (and people who are both) participate to discuss projects and all the issues that form the backbone of the project: free licenses, collaborative work, access to knowledge, participation, statistics and more specific technical aspects. About 500 people meet at Wikimania, a paltry number considering the size of Wikipedia and the heterogeneity of the community, but paradoxically it is a significant number.

The truth is that Wikipedia is animated by a rather small number of people—a feature common to many collaborative projects. A small group carries most of the weight and the larger community lines up around this small group. However, a study has recently shown that the growth of the community has suffered a significant slowdown and that it is aging. Wikipedia not only celebrated its 10th birthday this year, but also the prototype of the Wikipedian—a white male in his thirties with a scientific background—is about to celebrate his fortieth birthday. This revelation has so upset the Wikimedia Foundation that the catchword has become outreach. Reaching a wider audience has become the center of attention and the Wikimania program seems to be enjoying a flurry of new partnerships and attention to what happens IRL.
Increasing public participation is a common requirement to many endeavors, as success is measured in the search for new customers, partners and visitors, but Wikipedia's case is unique. Wikipedia does not sell toothbrushes, but seeks editors and writers of its knowledge database.

The GLAM project—Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museum—involves cultural institutions by making their images accessible on Wikimedia Commons and inviting their staff and public to enrich Wikipedia. Among the institutions that have already joined are the British Museum, British Library, MOMA, Versailles. GLAM is enjoying more and more international success, because it responds to Wikipedians' need for access to more content and at the same time meets the need of cultural institutions to introduce their collections to the public and support access to knowledge.
The audience of last year's Wikimania held in Gdansk, Poland in July 2010.

The second direction is the organization of events that seek to coordinate and concentrate the community's efforts. Wiki Loves Monuments is the event of the moment (and it's embarrassing that Italy can't attend because of its copyright and heritage legislation), but there are also Wiki Takes a City (days dedicated to photographing and documenting a specific city), marathons and WikiAcademy (training days at universities). Global Melt was the first event held in Berlin in 2011 that focused on formats, collaborative work tools and ways to facilitate discussions and productivity.

The third approach aims at geographic "flooding" and the involvement of new regions. In particular, Global South is the object of particular attention with India in the lead and Africa following suit. Finally, user types are studied, among whom academics are almost a protected species. Even the Wikimedia Foundation has directly supported a study to try to understand why they do not contribute, why they always complain and how, maybe, they might start to lend a hand.

The curious thing about all of these approaches is the reference to what happens IRL—"in real life;" stated in these terms, in real life, as if there was a doubt about the fact that what happens online is really true. A digital project like Wikipedia expands and seeks membership in the analogical world as opposed to how the analogical world brings its
content online offering many new insights into how a digital community (and many studies are wondering whether we can really talk about "community" given its diversity) can grow and expand analogically. The Wikimedia Foundation is facilitating the emergence of Wikimedia associations in new countries and is granting increasing support to existing local chapters (which benefit directly from last year’s fundraising campaign). GLAM fills pages and pages of help to explain to Wikipedians how to make contact with the institutions and to explain to institutions how to contact people on Wikipedia. The events combine digital and analogical components, setting dates and places and creating opportunities for interaction and socializing. "I'll send someone," seems to be the most effective way to get new online collaborators. Universities were manned by Wikipedia ambassadors (in fact the choice of the word "ambassador" is a bit controversial and is currently under discussion) and in 2010 GLAM sent (and invented) the first Wikipedian-in-residence at the British Museum (an exceptional Wikipedian, considering that it was GLAM promoter and Wikimedia Australia vice-president). Even Wikimania, in conclusion, seems to want to see Wikipedia in real life.

Iolanda Pensa
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