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WHITE PAPER

User Control of Content in the Context of Political Parties & Platforms

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When Everyone Has a Printing Press: A Background

Easy self-publication has been crucial to many of the World Wide Web's "killer applications." Craigslist has "killed" much of the classified ad business once enjoyed by newspapers, and eBay has captured a significant chunk of the flea market and secondhand store market. Both of these cases were early examples of web sites that enabled individuals with no technical expertise to publish advertisements globally at little or no cost and in a manner that would actually reach readers.

Blogs evolved as a natural next step in the self-publication trend. Here, instead of limiting users to the creation of ads, the blog turns everyone into a journalist, indeed, a columnist, with free rein to discuss almost any and every topic. No longer must an aspiring writer seek to work for a magazine or other publisher; in fact, some writers have come to view traditional publishing models as limitations, not opportunities.

Wikis, like Wikipedia, have gone yet another step. A wiki makes users not only writers of their own content but also editors of content created by others. This collaborative model, by leveraging the collective intelligence of many users in producing a single document, further enhances the potency of user self-publication vis-a-vis prior content generation models.

In traditional media, such as newspapers, editorial discretion has another connotation, that of deciding what stories to run and what stories to leave out. Sites such as a Digg.com allow Internet users to serve in this editorial capacity as well, bypassing the traditional editorial hierarchy altogether.

The overall effect of the trend toward user control over content can be likened to giving everyone a free printing press and an almost unlimited supply of paper. The benefits of such empowerment have been widely discussed elsewhere and need not be recited here.

Some Drawbacks of User Control

While the net effect has certainly been positive, easy self-publication is not without its drawbacks. One common complaint is that of information overload. The quantity of content being published on the Internet today is seemingly incomprehensible to mere mortals; it is overwhelming. Because of this information glut, even a good search engine may list hundreds of documents that are similar to one another in relevance, and finding the right piece of information among all these documents may feel like trying to listen to one person while thousands of others are talking at the same time.

Another undesirable effect of easy self-publication is that the threshold for what constitutes “publishable quality” has fallen dramatically. Once upon a time, before the dawn of electronic publishing and before widespread access to physical printing presses, only works of enduring literary quality merited publication. Now, however, there is no gate-keeping mechanism. Anyone who wishes to publish a blog, a MySpace.com site, or other content may do so at no cost and subject to no quality constraints.

In the case of wikis, the mechanism for progress is also the mechanism for defeat. Specifically, in granting editorial control to all, the wiki model leaves content susceptible to editing by those who are misinformed, careless or even malicious. Thus, the credibility of a wiki document is often limited to that of the least credible participant.

User-Generated Authority and Credibility

In each of the aforementioned drawbacks, what a user-created and user-edited document lacks is a sense of authority and credibility.

To offset information glut, we need to know who is the “expert” with respect to a piece of information, who is the ultimate authority in whom we can trust. To overcome the lack of a physical or financial gate-keeper with respect to publishable quality, we need to know what publications have met certain standards of credibility. To avoid producing content that is “only as strong as the weakest link,” again we need an authority whereby good editorial decisions can be separated from bad ones.

So as to serve each of these goals, a user-driven authority rating system (“Lexary”) was created during the period of 1999 through 2003. The system combines the benefits of user control over content with measures designed to counteract the drawbacks of this approach.

Specifically, the Lexary system allows a user to submit an entry, such as a dictionary definition, and then other users to “ratify” that entry. An entry only becomes officially authorized (e.g., as part of an official dictionary) only if and after a series of predetermined thresholds pertaining to such ratifications have been met.

Modifications to the original entry can also be submitted, and these modifications must also be ratified by other users in order to be applied to the underlying entry.

This procedure therefore creates the authority – as gatekeeper, as expert – that is lacking in prior models of user control, namely, through the accumulation of the combined authority of many separate users. In so doing, the credibility of certain entries is established, and the potential for destructive editing by a single individual is negated.

The Wicracy.org Embodiment

Wicracy.org applies the Lexary system in the context of political party platforms. Such an application is particularly promising, because it awakens a number of heretofore dormant powers of democracy.

Through Wicracy.org, political party members create and develop a political platform for their party. As per the Lexary system, a user proposes an entry – called a “plank” – that conforms to a predetermined set of requirements (a single complete sentence, syntactically adequate, not duplicative of another plank, etc.). Such a plank states a particular stance on a political issue; an example plank might read, “Congress should immediately enact legislation that prohibits drilling for oil in national forests.”

Once a new plank becomes publicly available on the Wicracy.org site, it enters “pending” status. Other party members can then ratify or oppose the inclusion of the new plank in their party’s platform. Members’ positions on the plank are compared to overall membership numbers and predetermined thresholds so as to determine the current status of the plank. If all thresholds are met, the plank enters “adopted” status, i.e., becoming an authorized part of that party’s platform on Wicracy.org. In this way, the authority rating benefits of the Lexary system are brought to politics.

Vigorous debate of the advisability of each plank is made possible through a blog-like function that allows users to submit arguments for and against the adoption of a particular plank, enabling the Wicracy.org site to serve not only as a mechanism for establishing a credible, user-controlled platform but also as a vehicle for political discussion.

User participation is further enhanced through the use of user coalitions, which serve as voting blocs. In particular, a coalition forms around an identified issue or common value and then elects a leader. The leader can then commit, with a single click, the entire voting power of all members of the coalition to positions on planks. Coalition leaders can in turn bargain with one another such that the voting power of each coalition is leveraged as a negotiating chip. Users can freely leave a coalition at any time.

One of the most powerful, unprecedented features made possible by the Wicracy.org model is called a “representativeness indicator.” The representativeness indicator is a numerical value that results from comparing the positions a particular individual takes on planks versus the party’s authorized platform. The higher the representativeness indicator, the more in-line with prevailing party views the given individual is. The representativeness calculation makes use of a “weight” variable and a “strength” variable that are themselves products of party members’ positions on planks so that an individual’s degree of representativeness can be quantified as never before.

Application of the Lexary model to politics also enables an unprecedented means of financial contribution to parties. In particular, Wicracy.org provides a “fund plank” function whereby a user can donate by electronic funds transfer or credit card a monetary sum that is earmarked for use in furtherance of the party’s prevailing position on a given issue. Through this function, the user-created and edited content model gains the power of the purse.

Looking Ahead

User control of content, especially when coupled with user-driven authority, enjoys a bright future. We can expect that even the Lexary system and the Wicracy.org embodiment will advance by leaps and bounds over the coming years. As such systems continue to drive participation in virtual communities, the old drawbacks will sometimes rear their heads, and new stumbling blocks will

emerge.

At least one stumbling block already looms large: as virtual communities become even more compelling, our everyday, “real world” communities – families, neighborhoods, churches and schools – could be negatively affected. Real life is disorderly and imperfect in comparison to a web site, and Internet usage, even for connecting with others, is isolating in that all interactions are through an electronic medium.

Thus, in our view, the major challenge facing builders of virtual communities today is that of integrating virtual and physical communities so that these phenomena do not compete with or undermine each other but rather function collaboratively to enhance the happiness and fulfillment of individuals.

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