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Collaborative projects (social media application): About Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

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Abstract   Collaborative projects—defined herein as social media applications that enable the joint and simultaneous creation of knowledge-related content by many end-users—have only recently received interest among a larger group of academics. This is surprising since applications such as wikis, social bookmarking sites, online forums, and review sites are probably the most democratic form of social media and reflect well the idea of user-generated content. The purpose of this article is to provide insight regarding collaborative projects; the concept of wisdom of crowds, an essential condition for their functioning; and the motivation of readers and contributors. Specifically, we provide advice on how firms can leverage collaborative projects as an essential element of their online presence to communicate both externally with stakeholders and internally among employees. We also discuss how to address situations in which negative information posted on collaborative projects can become a threat and PR crisis for firms.

1. Contents

In 1439, a German goldsmith had the idea of selling polished metal mirrors to pilgrims in order to capture the holy light emitted from religious relics. His plan was to piggyback on a major exhibition of the relics collection of Charlemagne that the city of Aachen had planned for the same year. However, due to bad weather conditions, the exhibition was cancelled and the goldsmith was confronted by a group of angry investors. To satisfy their financial demands, he came up with a fallback plan: he developed the printing press, with which he subsequently produced several copies of the bible. Few of his contemporaries—including the pope at the time, Eugene IV—would have thought that this invention of Johannes Gutenberg would usher in the beginning of a period when books and knowledge would become rapidly and widely available, but it did. Among

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others, the Gutenberg Bible became a main contributing factor toward the creation of Protestantism by Martin Luther about 70 years later.

In the 550+ years since, printed books have become the main instrument via which to transmit knowledge and have revolutionized every aspect of human life. Today, however, printed books are starting to be replaced by a more popular form of transmitting 'truth'—namely, collaborative projects. The most popular representation of this is the Internet encyclopedia, Wikipedia. Founded in January 2001, Wikipedia today includes over 30 million articles written in 287 languages by 75,000 active editors, read by more than 350 million people around the world. What started with the sentence ''*Hello world. Humor me. Go there and add a little article. It will take all of five or ten minutes*'' has become the 6th most popular website on the planet. But unlike Google (#1), Yahoo (#4), and Amazon (#5), Wikipedia is a non-profit organization owned by the charitable Wikimedia Foundation; as will be explained, this specific form of organizational structure is crucial to its success.

Similar to the printing press, Wikipedia has been a catalyst for the diffusion of knowledge. Today, every high school student can use her cell phone to access the mobile version of Wikipedia (Kaplan, 2012) and read all there is to know about the Einstein—Maxwell—Dirac equations (a concept related to quantum field theory) or the latest episodes of the X-Factor. Whoever uses Google to look for information—that is, most everyone—will stumble upon Wikipedia sooner rather than later. What is true is written on Wikipedia and what is written on Wikipedia must be true—at least, most of the time. Exceptions include cases in which Wikipedia has been used to purposefully spread false information, such as that involving American journalist John Seigenthaler, who was falsely accused of being involved in the assassination of the Kennedy brothers. Readers interested in more examples of incorrect information on Wikipedia should check out the article on the reliability of the online encyclopedia, published—of course—on Wikipedia.

In addition to their general impact on society at large, collaborative projects also have an influence on the corporate world. Positively, they allow consumers to exchange product information more easily than ever before. In the long run this reduces costly call center interactions because consumers can find answers to their questions online, posted by other consumers, instead of contacting the firm directly. This concept—referred to in the literature as *customer knowledge value*—has recently garnered interest among researchers in the field of marketing (Kumar et al., 2010). Negatively, the fact that

ordinary people and journalists alike make use of and believe the information on Wikipedia creates the need for managing this platform in a conscientious way. Otherwise, firms might find themselves in the same position as clothing retailers GAP and H&M, which are listed on Wikipedia as two recent examples of child labor incidents.

Our aim in this article is to provide an introduction regarding collaborative projects and to illustrate how companies may make use of them. We first present a 4-group classification of this type of social media application (wikis, social bookmarking sites, forums, and review sites) before discussing each element's theoretical basis (wisdom of crowds) and user characteristics (readers and contributors). We then turn to the corporate use of Wikipedia and specifically present the three bases of getting your entry into Wikipedia, as well as a set of guidelines that help manage the potential Wikipedia crisis that might happen one day. Finally, we present the broader application of collaborative projects within companies, how they can help enhance employee-to-employee interactions, and whether to rely on self-developed or third-party platforms.

2. Theoretical concepts

2.1. Classification

In the most general sense, collaborative projects are a special form of social media application that enable the joint and simultaneous creation of knowledge-related content by many end-users. Whereas blog content is authored by a single person or a few editors and may later be commented on by others, collaborative projects are different in that they allow all users to equally post, add, or change content. In this sense they are probably the most democratic form of social media, which can be defined as ''a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content'' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Other forms of social media include blog/micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011a), content communities (e.g., YouTube), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009).

Within this broad group of collaborative projects, we differentiate four types. The first type is wikis, which owe their name to the Hawaiian word for fast and allow users to add, delete, or revise content on a webpage by using a simple web browser as opposed to a more advanced HTML editor. The first