The Bridgespan Group

[Disclaimer: This is an interview with me personally and the opinions or thoughts expressed here are my own. It doesn't express thoughts or opinions of the Foundation. I didn't answer these questions as a board member. The Strategic Planning Process is a very important step for the future of the Wikimedia movement. One thing that I had learned in our projects is the NPOV. The interview is not supposed to be neutral. But I do have also reflected some thoughts that I personally doesn't favor. Nonetheless they are out there and as a Trustee I have to acknowledge their existence and must keep them in mind when thinking about the future of the organization. This is the reason why I mentioned them. Ting]

We are talking to a number of people to get their perspectives on the future of Wikimedia - what they see as major opportunities and threats; I want to hear your perspective on china - what the major barriers are, what it would really take for wikipedia zh to take off; what is your vision for Wikimedia (the community) over the next 5 - 10 years; what would success look like within that timeframe?

- To be very honest, I am not sure. I think there are a few possibilities, all of them are for me a result that is ok. I cannot say if they would be good or bad

What possibilities do you see?

- One possibility is that the Foundation keeps itself to be small; Say, we will have 35, maximum 40 employees in 5 years. We will pretty do the same thing like we are doing now and we will rely very heavily on our chapters, especially in Europe. Maybe we will do some more programs, things that Frank is starting to do, but in total we are just the WMF like we are now. This is one possibility
- The other possibility is that the WMF expands. I cannot say how possible this is, but it seems that some people think that this is possible. We want to expand in our spending in the next year for 40% more. If we keep that increase, in five years we will spend five times so much money like today. Maybe we can open office in South Africa, as some people suggested. Maybe we can really grow to an organization like Green Peace or even Red Cross. That's the other possibility
- Personally I am more conservative in growth and would prefer a small WMF.

We have heard a lot of concern about growing the WMF too much - that there is a possibility with more paid staff that volunteers do less, and overall less is accomplished

- Well, it depends; being large is a danger, that's for sure, but to be small is also dangerous

What are some of the challenges that come with the current situation - relying heavily on the chapters?

- Let's think about it realistically. Wikipedia is in some languages reaching a plateau, we all know that a volunteer who comes have far less possibility to contribute as earlier, and they have far less possibility to change the projects. So what do we want to do? We can open new spaces for them. But more importantly, given the vision of the Foundation, we can do things with the content we now have. To do those things, maybe we need a big organization, like the Red Cross, so, big is not necessarily a thing that is bad. It would change the nature of WMF, yes, but the question is also, what do we really want to do?

I see your point; there is definitely an issue in established Wikipedias, with plateauing; when you think about that as an issue for the community and foundation, is that a higher or lower priority than the issue of smaller Wikipedias - those that have never really taken off and have fewer articles, fewer contributors.

- Yes, I see that as a priority. I also urge people to go to the smaller Wikipedias or other projects, if they can. Actually to be active in a smaller project is far more fun than to hang out in a big project. I am not sure why Wikiversity has so uneasy a stand. I had thought that it would be possible to fly. Maybe we have some conceptual failure here. I am not sure.

Let's do discuss that, but before moving on; one thing that i have been thinking is that it is possible that the big projects will take care of themselves—there is a community that cares and then maintains: Wikipedia en and de for example. But that the big growth and contribution over the next 5-10 years would be for the other Wikipedias (Arabic, Chinese) to gain momentum; in terms of the mission "all knowledge" to "everyone" this seems critical.

- With the big communities, I am not sure, and with the middle ones (ar, zh), I am also not sure. The big communities are losing their idealism. At the beginning, when Wikipedia was still a hype. All of us have more or less the same goal before us. We are working together, enjoying the collaboration. The big communities are now more fractured, there are many parties in them who battle against each other. This is the reason why I say smaller communities are more fun. With the ar and zh especially, I am not sure if time is ripe for them to fly. With the current situation in China, I still think it difficult. This really a political system related problem, a problem, that we don't really can solve

Tell me more about that.

- There are some problems in China. The freedom of speech is one thing. We had Wikipedians who got harassed this year in China shortly before June 4th. They were taken to police station and got "educated" (no physical violence). So, to be neutral in China is problematic; this is a big problem. The other problem is a social problem. We have in U.S. or in Europe a very strong movement against

commerce. A very strong desire to do something, to contribute. This is not yet so in China. There people are thinking more in the category what can bring me more wealth or other advantages

So, to summarize - there are still very real risks for contribution and little incentive?

- One of the proposals for what to do to encourage more people to join Wikipedia is indeed to found a Chapter, and the Chapter would issue document which attest a user who had contributed so and so much to this or that area (or unspecific) to the Wikipedia. The idea here is to encourage students, so that they can use this document for application for example. Yes, there are risks (if you edit political articles) and people have other values, so that the incentive is small for them. That's my answer to this question

Beyond the proposal you suggested, are there other things that you think could be done to spur growth in china? We have heard that the major issue in terms of why Wikipedia zh is not growing in terms of readers/contributors is not so much the censorship one, but because of the major competitor Baidu; what are your thoughts on that?

- Baidu and Hoodong; Yes, they are major competitors and they are a factor. maybe a quite big factor.

How do they compare?

- Both are paying contributors who make a lot of contribution money. I think they are more or less equal. Both claim to be the biggest Chinese online encyclopedia. Baidu is more a Google-like company though, and Baidu baike is only one of the services they offer.

In terms of how they compare with zh wp in terms of article number and quality?

- Hoodong is more like Wikia, so Hoodong-Baike is for them a more important business field. Hoodong is also more active and more aggressive in winning the market. In term of article number they may indeed bigger as zh-wp. I have often heard people say that they cannot find some article in zh-wp, but in Baidu or Hoodong. In term of quality it varies. The growth of both has a price: They do a lot of copy-and-paste and they don't care about copyright violation. This changes slowly, one notice it in the change of term-of-use, or in policies. But actually they still don't care. So, the quality of their article depends on the source they are copy-and-pasting.

Do they port content from zh wp?

- Well, Hoodong and Baidu are also community projects. So they have content copied from zh-wp, and that not few, but copy-and-pasted from their contributor, they don't do bot-copying or things like that. There are websites in China that do bot-copying. For example this one: http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/

%E7%88%B1%E7%99%BE%E7%A7%91

When you think about this situation, and you hear talk within Wikimedia about goals of growing zh wp (along with other mid-size wps), are there other thoughts on what this would take in terms of investment of resources and time? Is this something that the community and foundation should prioritize?

- I am sure I would be cursed by saying the following. If we want to invest in zh-wp on mainland China, we must invest a lot and this investment is quite risky, So my personal view is if we want to invest in middle size Wikipedia, we should invest in other places

What would that investment be in?

- Not paying for contribution, never. But maybe ads in newspaper, magazine etc

More of an advocacy and outreach focus?

- Maybe open an office in Beijing or Shanghai ;)

Do you think that an office would make a difference?

- Yes; an office can organize meetings, for example. We have no chapter at the moment on mainland China. An office can do propaganda, can issue press releases, such things

Would the risks of having an office be very high though?

- It's a risky investment; they can simply close your office; they can block the website again, after that an office has no meaning anymore. And the investment you made in the last one or two years are gone. I think for long run, maybe not in five years, maybe in 15 years, we are still on the winner side. I believe on a change in China. In the short term is there a quieter method of supporting and sustaining the community that is there so that the site does not stagnate. Yes, I think so; the Macao and Hong Kong Wikipedians are organizing a Chinese Wikimedia conference in Macao for December, WMF can help such things; Also mainland Wikipedians would go there. It is difficult for us to gain new users, but it is good for us to keep old users. The WMF can for example supply some money for scholarship so that more mainland Wikipedians can go to the conference. I think at the moment it is ok for us to keep a low profile. But in keeping a low profile we still can do things. So, WMF can even support conferences in China, maybe in the next year, or the year after next year

Beyond supporting face-to-face meetings, one suggestion that I have heard from others is that for small Wikipedias a way to start would be to try to integrate it into formal schooling (i.e. have

students contribute as part of their curriculum). This may be an ignorant question, since I don't know much about the Chinese educational system, but is this something you could imagine in china as a way to get new users engaged?

- No, not in China because you must persuade the professors to provide such curriculums, and you don't have the incentives for the professors to do that
- One thing that worries me is the situation in Taiwan, but that has nothing to do with WMF; (the situation of the chapter)

Can you explain?

- Well, the Taiwan chapter organized Wikimania 2007. Before that they are quite active. But after that the chapter exists only on the paper, there were no community or chapter activities since then

What do you think has happened?

- The people who had organized the chapter had moved on, changed their interest, that's all, no one is organizing. It's the community way: no one organizing, nothing happen

One issue that several people have mentioned is that there are a lot of projects under WMF

- There are a few projects that I hope they can grow, that I think they have potential to grow, Wikiversity and Wikibooks are among them

Why these in particular?

- For one I think they fit our mission best, and for the second I think they fit the wiki-way best. These are also projects where knowledge are collected or researches would be done. But compared to Wikipedia they need more dedication. Maybe that's the problem why the community there is so small; maybe they are more for curriculums

Others have talked about the need to "rationalize" the projects - that there are some projects that don't fit and others should grow, the criteria you've suggested is "fit with wiki-way" - which I assume means collaboration on wiki. When you say fit with mission - why wikiversity have more fit than say wikinews or wikicommons?

- Commons is another case; Commons fit our mission in that it provides a repository for all our other projects. The same is Wikiquote and Wikisource. So for me they are in a different category. Wikiversity better fit to our mission as Wikinews is that Wikiversity is supposed to provide educational content. While news has certainly its educational value, but the purpose of news is primarily not really education. Wikinews did never really fly

What is your perspective on what the WMF could/should do in terms of fostering or incubating new projects?

- I ... would say no; no, until there are really interesting proposals out there

Do you have thoughts there on what the WMF or chapters or others could do to spur change in community culture?

- Well, I think we are on a cross road; we are coming back to the two possibilities I mentioned at the beginning of our talk; I think a community like our project community is until now can achieve and had achieved great things, but it has also its limits

So you think the Red Cross or Greenpeace approach would be the one to fundamentally shift what's happening in the community?

- Yes, to a more organized, maybe experts controlled encyclopedia, that is one possibility; that's a fundamental shift, and it is quite sure not a shift that can be accomplished in five years

What about changing the technology - how people interact with Wikipedia?

- I think a technical support in the change is inevitable; technology is a tool. Tools are important. You need different tools to do different things

I wonder if a fundamentally more user friendly interface with more social networking features could lower the bar to entry for new users and change how the community interacts

- I don't know. I mean, even if you have a more user friendly interface with more social networking feature it is still difficult to improve an article like http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bird. And you still have the people who had been active in Wikipedia for say five year or even eight years and want the project to be that fashion as they think is right and thus hurt any newcomer who don't agree with that. So I don't know if that will really overcome the plateauing

I'm not sure how moving to a Greenpeace or Red Cross model would address that either

- Well, the ideal is professionalize. The community would in this case play a less and less role, while professionals would slowly take over. This is ridiculous to say, especially from a board member, and even a community elected board member, but I think this is a possibility, if we want it this way
- [Comment from Ting: As I had already mentioned at the beginning of the interview personally I am more conservative and would prefer a small Foundation, not a Red Cross or Green Peace like Foundation. I am also totally aware that the community is mostly against professionalization of our

projects. But we are on a strategic planning process. And as such it should be allowed to think about all possibilities. I had expressed this alternative as a possibility, but it doesn't mean that I wish this to happen. Indeed my personal preference is, as mentioned, another.]

We've talked about the internal challenges with the community, but what do you see as the major external threats; things that are likely happen in the environment that could jeopardize wikimedia

- The biggest threat I see is from politics. In Europe, many countries had tightened their internet regulation laws. I fear that we would get into trouble one day

For what exactly?

- For example the sex related articles, just to start with

So, do you think the WMF should focus more on advocacy?

- Yes I think so. And I think that we must be prepared that one day we would get into difficulty because minors can see the images in for example http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masturbation without any obstacles. I am very quite sure. We should take this seriously and provide technical possibility to change that. I think we should advocate more strongly, yes

It seems to me that this would be a function led by the WMF, with input and support from the community, but essentially a professional function.

- Yes

Are there other major activities that you think the WMF should be doing that they are not?

- I would like to see WMF more active in protecting our content against websites that use our content without complying with our term of use, and be more active in give legal protection to our contributors These are at the moment things that we are reluctant to do, because of capacity.