

Interview with: Eric Goldman

Interview date: September 17, 2009

Summary notes:

- Overview of Eric's background and interest in projects like Wikipedia
 - Has been working on internet/cyber law topics for 2 decades, including as the general counsel for epinions.com
 - Is now a full time law professor, and much of his research involves "digesting and parsing my epinions experience"
 - Questions that are top of mind for him include: How do user-generated content systems work? What structures (regulatory and other) and required to make them successful?
 - Next big project is around how we develop and regulate reputational systems.

- Framing the issues - much of what Wikipedia is grappling with today stems from a set of unique design/structure decisions that have come to form the basis for the project
 - Some have made the project strong
 - Others have created unique vulnerabilities

- First decision – free editability – "everyone edits everyone else's stuff"
 - Unique to the wiki model (replaces the traditional comment model)
 - It is hard to find other examples of where similar structures have worked, and therefore difficult to understand "why"
 - "Incredible outcome"
 - "Most would have said it's not possible"
 - "Wikipedia is a lightning strike, and we can't really explain why it worked and others didn't"

- The community has really embraced free editability, which is why there is so much debate about the impact of actions like the introduction of flagged protection in English Wikipedia
 - "If you close the doors to free editability, will the community be able to self-perpetuate and recharge its batteries?"
 - Has serious concerns about this – one possible outcome is that Wikipedia becomes a "brown dwarf" and just sits quietly (no longer growing or up-to-date)
 - This would not happen instantly, but as a result of a "progressively dying community"

- "Recharging the community batteries" is not purely a numbers issue – there are also some important diversity dimensions
 - Intellectual diversity – to avoid group think (very closely related to more traditional diversity measures like gender, age, etc.)
 - Diversity of functional skills – power user vs. people who "nibble off smaller projects"

- Second decision – inclusionist vs. deletionist debate

- Started off as inclusionist, but now it appears that the deletionists may be winning
- Third decision – eventualist approach to quality – “eventually every article will get good”
 - Basic logic: We don’t care if the article is not completely accurate on Day 1
 - The eventualist process actually works most times, but is not consistent with the way that people are taught to draft things in academic circles (e.g. in law school, where students are expected to always be ready to stand behind their work)
 - This open vetting process also differentiates Wikipedia from other UGC [user-generated content] communities
- Flagged revisions is a great example of the tension between credibility and free editability/ the eventualist approach to quality
 - “Sticks it to the eventualists” because it freezes pages
 - Raises the question of whether Wikipedia values credibility or free editability
 - But, is consistent with past Wikipedia decisions to curb free editability in favor of protecting credibility and improving quality
 - In these cases, he believes that the “community has been making solid decisions”
 - An interesting case study to understand the potential impact of flagged revisions is to try and understand what happened to contributions when the German Wikipedia introduced flagged revisions. It is important to note, though, that this is not a perfect benchmark, as German users are used to editorial restrictions because user generated content is much more heavily regulated in general
- So what does this mean Wikipedia’s priorities should be going forward?
 - First, “we need to do whatever it takes in order to establish and maintain credibility”
 - Second, “we need to understand why people contribute and why people are leaving”
 - Try to mitigate/protect against these fundamental tensions by understanding both what keeps people “here and happy” and what might happen when Wikipedia changes the rules
- And what about other WMF projects?
 - “No other projects have really caught fire”
 - In order to understand those projects success/failures, and to think about where new projects might be valuable, it is important to ask the question “Where is the wiki format valuable?”
 - There seems to be a small trend of contributors leaving Wikipedia and migrating to other projects, but this migration of talent doesn’t appear to be having much impact on those other projects