Presentation

Academic research into Wikipedia

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Last year saw the celebration of the 10th anniversary of Wikipedia. In 2011, 10 years after it was created, Wikipedia became the sixth most visited website on the Internet and one of the most active online communities. At present, it contains nearly 20 million articles, 3.7 million of which can be found in the English version, which is the most extensive, although there are 282 versions of Wikipedia in different languages. It has some 365 million regular readers, around 90,000 regular editors — all voluntary — and hundreds of thousands of people who contribute anonymously without remuneration.

Wikipedia is one of the numerous examples of mass online collaborative projects to follow in the footsteps of free or open source software production and its modus operandi. Some authors see this new type of collaboration as representing an innovative form of social production, given that it operates on the edges of the market and the standard rules of business management, functions successfully without the intervention of hierarchical organisational structures or command management systems, and is developed thanks to the cooperation of thousands — or, in some cases, millions — of geographically dispersed people working voluntarily and without expecting any direct remuneration.

The term *commons-based peer production* was proposed recently to conceptualise the operation of these online collaborative systems (Benkler, 2006). Indeed, since about 2005, there has been growing interest from the scientific community, and in particular from the fields of social and human sciences, in researching this historically unprecedented phenomenon. A recent review of the scientific bibliography on Wikipedia has identified more than 2,100 scientific articles and 38 doctoral theses with Wikipedia or its sister projects as their object of analysis. The motivation and type of participants, form of organisation and governance, regulatory structure, publishing dynamics, content quality and reliability, teaching uses and role of technology, are some of the most recurrent themes in the scientific literature on Wikipedia (Okoli, 2009; Geert *et al.*, 2011).

The aim of this issue of *Digithum* is to contribute to the incipient academic literature on Wikipedia. However, unlike most of this literature, which has mainly focused on the English version, this issue includes analyses of other Wikipedias and it also considers aspects little dealt with to date. Viewed as a whole, this issue provides a very clear idea of the wealth of theoretical and methodological approaches for studying Wikipedia and its sister projects.

This issue also provides an insight into the depth and multiplicity of the social and cultural impacts of Wikipedia: the focus of the texts presented range from its development and impact on the commercial world and on the public visibility of large corporations (in the article by Marcia W. DiStaso and Marcus Messner) to its role in the diffusion of culture and monumental heritage (in the article by Emilio José Rodriguez *et al.*). The article by Antoni Oliver and Salvador Climent looks at the use of Wikipedia as a corpus

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55

of structured knowledge, within the framework of cutting-edge research into natural language processing. Likewise, the article by David Gómez, who proposes the concept of the *wikimediasphere*, shows us that Wikipedia actually forms part of an entire ecosystem full of projects, which, despite having elements in common, function with great autonomy as exceptional nodes in a more extensive network. Finally, the article by Nathaniel Tkacz analyses the practical and epistemological implications of one of the basic pillars of Wikipedia's operating principles, the Neutral Point of View, and its relation to the specific concept of truth.

In summary, these five articles provide clear evidence of the versatility of Wikipedia as an object of study for contemporary academic research in many different fields of human and social sciences. Indirectly, these articles also highlight the need to develop new rigorous and systematic research into one of the most important open repositories of knowledge in history and, without doubt, one of the largest collective works of humanity.

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56

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57

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Mayo Fuster Morell specializes in network communities, commons-based peer production, social movements and public policy and network and participatory action research methods. She recently completed her PhD (*Governance of online creation communities: Provision* of *infrastructure* for the *building of digital commons*) at the European University Institute (Florence) under the supervision of Donatella della Porta. During her doctorate, Fuster Morell was a visiting researcher (under the auspices of Howard Rheingold) at the University of California Berkeley School of Information and was also an assistant in the Department of Communication at Stanford University. In 2011, she was a visiting researcher at the UOC's Internet Interdisciplinary Institute (IN3). She is currently conducting research with Yochai Benkler at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. She is a member of the Institute of Government and Public Policy at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), of the working group on Internet policy of the European Consortium for Political Research and of the Wikimedia Foundation research committee.

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