Chapter 34
Wiki Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Wiki journalism is a format of participatory journalism in which citizens are encouraged to add to, or modify, a Wiki-based news story. Although the process is relatively new and the mainstream media still seem wary to accept the concept, the public has begun to recognize the potential of Wiki journalism as a form of reporting. Wiki journalism has claimed success in the primary coverage of large news stories (for example, Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007) and in being the first source to provide images, sound, and first-hand accounts. The technology is already in place for citizen-based journalism to become a true new branch of media. However, critics of Wiki journalism point out that this type of journalism is often based more on opinion than fact. Another concern is that when it comes to journalistic ethics and the law, participatory media do not function under the same set of rules as the traditional media. The author maintains that the future of Wiki journalism depends on whether or not this novel news format can stand on its own.

INTRODUCTION

Wiki journalism is a form of participatory journalism in which online space is created that allows users to post and edit information about a specific story or opinion topic, the later known as a "wikitorial" (Strupp, 2005). As of late, the term has become more encompassing and is often used along side a wider array of citizen-based journalism, or "Cit-Jo," formats, including "crowdsourcing" (Tsai, 2007) and public insight journalism (Skoler, 2005). Each concept has a common format, relying on the public to report, and possibly edit, the news that a source provides (Fernando, 2008).

Wiki and citizen journalism is currently in practice at multiple levels of public input. This would include local media asking "stringers" to report local sports scores as well as Gannett Newspaper

Corporation "crowdsourcing" to gather more input for a story yet still editing in-house. It also includes websites allowing full Wiki capabilities so that all reporting and editing be done by the citizen journalists (Howe, 2006).

The process is relatively new and the mainstream media still seem wary to fully accept the concept of relying wholly on citizen journalists. Those that have embraced Wiki and other types of participatory journalism point to successes through larger news events from 2005 through 2007 that were covered using cell phone cameras, blogs, and Wiki sites long before the traditional media were able to create a single feed. To understand Wiki journalism, one must first understand the concept of Wiki.

BACKGROUND

A "Wiki" is a website that allows visitors to modify the content of web pages in real time under a set of parameters set by the site's moderator. A Wiki is both a website and a database for keeping track of all versions of the site as modified by the users. Depending on the parameters set up by the website moderator, the Wiki allows users the ability to add, delete, modify, or change in any way the content of the web page.

The Wiki was conceptualized and created in 1994 by Ward Cunningham (Richardson, 2005). The term "Wiki" came from a trip Cunningham took to Hawaii. Upon arriving at the Honolulu International Airport, Cunningham was told to take the WikiWiki shuttle. The name is Hawaiian vernacular for a fast shuttle. Cunningham liked the word and applied it to a database format that he was working on. Cunningham later suggested he used "WikiWiki" as a substitute for "QuickWeb," the term he was applying to the database at the time (Cunningham, 2003).

The first Wiki, then termed the "WikiWikiWeb," shortened later to "WikiWeb," and then to just "Wiki," was posted to the c2.com server on March 25, 1995. It was based on a Macintosh application HyperCard. The HyperCard idea of seeing computer programming as a series of index cards stacked upon one another, each able to be changed or altered individually without affecting the other, was integrated with the World Wide Web's Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and created the Wiki format we generally know today (Cunningham, 2007). The format allowed for each "card" to be a new alteration to the web page and to the database kept by the server.

Wikis were first adopted by businesses as collaboration software to allow a large number of people to work on a single idea in real time. The Wiki allowed for a single space where people separated geographically could all give input into a single database on to a common format. What's more, the basic idea of a Wiki is to create a database that could be altered, on the fly rather than having to get into the HTML code and re-render and repost. Furthermore, the Wiki format utilized the existing HTML and Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), and there was no need to switch from a database format to a web display (Chawner & Lewis, 2006). At the time, that was revolutionary.

Depending on how the moderator of the Wiki sets the parameters, users can edit, add or subtract information, remain anonymous or have to login to use the system. Wiki even allows for searching of the system by what are known as "bots" to look for foul language or other known unwanted material. The main selling point of Wiki was that anyone with access could add to or edit what was on the screen on the fly. The method was faster than what was used before, and the display was equal to a web page (Blake, 2001).

Although the Wiki format was popular with many businesses, most Internet users first became familiar with the term through the online encyclopedia—Wikipedia. Started in 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, Wikipedia is a true Wiki drawing its content solely through its users who need to be registered to contribute and edit content. The site attracts, by its own count, over

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