



A Preliminary Study of Collaborative News

Online:

The Case of Chinese Wikinews

Technology today is transforming citizens from passive consumers of news produced by professionals into active participants who can assemble their own journalism from disparate elements. Many collaborative news websites which largely rely on their users as information gatherers, editors, or commenters are available now for such citizen journalism practice.

Collaborative news model not only means that a lot of people collaboratively write and help edit the site but also means that the story itself is not the final product but just the beginning of the story to be followed by people's comments and discussions of the story. And eventually, a complete view of an issue is presented to the audience because many people are talking about it from different perspectives.



Chinese Wikinews is a typical example of collaborative news.

Wikinews

Wikipedia, the collaborative online encyclopedia, enables anyone to write and edit entries and records all changes, creating accountability and a remarkably accurate result. It has proved a great success. Wikinews, a new effort to encourage members of the open-source community to test their skills as citizen journalists, is operated and supported by the Wikimedia Foundation. The news site follows a similar set of rules as the encyclopedia and anyone can contribute, and articles are written collaboratively for a global audience.

According to its mission statement, Wikinews seeks to create a free source of news and allows citizen journalists to contribute reports about events large and small, either from direct experience, or summarized from elsewhere, promoting the idea of citizen journalism on the belief that citizens know what is news like no others.

Chinese Wikinews (<http://zh.wikinews.org>), set up on March 13, 2006, is a fine example of collaborative news online. Up till October 31, 2006, there were 597 articles in Chinese on the site, with a total of 12,470 edits (3.85 edits per article). Contributors, who add content to the site, may create a user account and login the system for change making and then their account names will appear at the history page of the article, or their IP addresses will be listed instead. To facilitate communication between the contributors, IRC chat is provided.

Wikinews contributors are categorized into a kind of hierarchical organizational structure for administrative convenience though basically every contributor enjoys most of the equal rights in creating and editing articles. Administrators (or sysop) are active and regular contributors who have access to technical features that help with the maintenance. They can protect or delete pages, block other editors, and undo these actions. Any contributor would like to apply for the administratorship is required to contribute for at least one month and gain trust from the whole community. The application will be open for the whole community for voting. Editors (Wikipedians) are the people who write and edit articles for Wikinews. They may also take up administrative roles as discussed above. As on October 31, 2006 in Wikinews site, there are 806 registered users where 9 of them are administrators.

Content Analysis

We randomly chose the date of May 29, 2006 and then all the 306 news articles were printed out for detailed content analysis and reached the following conclusions:

1. The Chinese Wikinews site focuses mostly on Asian countries, with special emphases on the Chinese speaking areas ?We categorized all the news articles according to their country origin. If there involves more than one country, we took the main setting as the country of origin. Mainland China, excluding Hong Kong and Macao, is the most covered country by Wikinews and Taiwan ranks the second, followed by USA and Japan.
2. Political news ranks the number one among Wikinews suggested 10 news categories ?We categorized all the news articles according to Wikinews suggested 10 categories. More than one third of the 306 news articles are in the politics category. Technology category ranks the second. The third one

day? The timeliness of the news item can be measured by the time span between the date of the Wikinews article publication and the date of the first cited reference at the end of the news article. Analysis of the time span of the 306 Wikinews articles found that it takes an average of less than 1 day for a news article to appear on the Chinese Wikinews site, which indicates that most of the news items on the Wikinews site were timely uploaded. The remaining 12.7 percent appeared two days or after, most probably because Wikinews has developed a peer review process to help insure accuracy but at the cost of timeliness: stories remain under peer review? or in development? for days after the news actually happens.

4. 98.7 per cent Wikinews articles were synthesis articles and the few claimed original reports had more or less to do with the wikinews site? There are two types of news articles on the Wikinews site: the synthesis article and original news report. Out of the 305 articles, only 4 articles were original reports while the remaining 98.7 per cent were synthesis articles, based on the sources listed at the end of each article. But the distinctions between the claimed original reports and the synthesis articles are unclear because some of the claimed original reports also cite additional resources.

5. Most of the synthesis articles couldn't provide a more rounded and detailed report as the Wikinews proclaimed because of limited references to contain all the available facts. Most news articles are also comparatively short in length, which is another indicator of the lack of in-depth of the news reports on the site? It is a little surprising for us to find out that more than one-third articles has only 1 online reference; and nearly a quarter of the articles have 2 online references. That is, more than 60 percent of the synthesis articles only have 2 references. The remaining articles (less than 40 percent) have 3 or more references. We also measured the Wikinews article length by every half screen page. A little more than half of the articles have about one page in length. More than a quarter of the articles have only half a page with just a few sentences. Only one-fifth remaining articles have one full page or more. This shows that most news articles in the Chinese Wikinews are comparatively short in length.

6. On average, there are 7.1 times of editing updates per article. The minimum number of updates is 1 while the maximum number of updates is 48? Wikinews emphasizes the incremental nature of news enrichment. The number of edits, on the one hand, reflects popularity and attractiveness of the news item and, on the other hand, it may be possible that the news article is incomplete, inaccurate and requires further revision. Analysis of the 306 news articles found that nearly one-third of the articles have one to three edits, another one-third have four to seven edits, while the remaining one-third have eight or more edits.

7. Only one third of the news reports were accompanied by photographs? Over two third of the news articles do not have any photographs while around thirty per cent of the articles have one photograph. Photographs come from a variety of sources, including photographs taken by Wikinews reporters, photographs shared by Creative Commons, photographs from non-profit organizations open to the public (e.g., NASA), etc.

This study is believed to be the first systematic study on the Chinese Wikinews through a content analysis of 306 articles published by a designated date. It documented some basic data of the early-staged collaborative news website and provided a preliminary interpretation of the data. The findings of this study will surely benefit the future research of Chinese Wikinews or the whole Wikinews project.

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