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“Two Solitudes: Wikipedia and Higher Education”

It is an institution on the verge of crisis, though not everyone is prepared to admit it. With a bloated bureaucracy that’s increasingly brought in from outside and ever-more out of touch with the rank and file that do most of the work, it seems to have lost its sense of purpose. Founded with noble goals, dedicated to the public good and enlightenment ideals of knowledge and global understanding, it now finds itself in an climate dominated by for-profit corporations that claim to be able to offer the same or similar services as it provides, but more efficiently and effectively. It doesn’t know whether to remodel itself along the lines of these commercial competitors or keep closer to its historic roots. The situation is hardly helped by periodic scandals that erupt and are seized on by adversaries in the media, who accuse it of corruption and bias. Its heavy-handed response to these scandals hardly aids its cause, and issues around civility, freedom of expression, or gender and other disparities are a flashpoint for conflict and discontent. Low morale and petty but energy-sapping disputes are just one outcome of a crisis in governance. It has tried to deal with these problems through technical fixes and better metrics, more accountability and accessibility. It is increasingly concerned about its public face and does what it can to allow its users to bypass its often arcane practices and have a smoother, more enjoyable experience. But ultimately these are short-term solutions that if anything only hide the real problems. Pushed this way and that, much misunderstood and maligned, but still performing a vital role upon which almost everyone depends, this is an organization that desperately needs to take stock and put its house in order.

And that’s just the university.

It should be clear that what I have just said could apply equally well both to the Wikimedia Movement as to the University. The challenges they face are remarkably similar. And yet so are their possibilities and potential.

Wikimedia and the university are both organizations dedicated to the accumulation and dissemination of knowledge. This has been the historic mission of higher education. University libraries and scholarly publications are testament to the task of gathering and producing knowledge, which is then disseminated both through direct teaching of enrolled students and also through the wider impact of professors as public figures who communicate in an increasingly wide variety of media from mass-market books to online blogs. Wikipedia, meanwhile, demonstrates the extraordinary power of the Internet as a knowledge repository and, more important, the ways in which hypertext (links, categories, citations) helps us manage and organize that knowledge. The difference between the two is that whereas the university is the site of the production of knowledge and critical thinking, as a tertiary source Wikipedia's aim is rather more passively to record different points of view and perspectives, where necessary assessing their relative weight and importance.

But where the Wikimedia Movement and higher education are most significantly alike is in their shared drive towards universalism, eclecticism, openness, and the common. For all the common criticism of Wikipedia that it is full of trivia on Pokemon or the US Highway system, in the end this inclusionist tendency is not so distant from the university's ambition to research and produce knowledge on every aspect of the world around us. It's not surprising, then, that the professoriat has long been ridiculed for its interest in the esoteric or the abstruse, or that, more recently, higher education is also periodically held up for critique for courses on rap music or Homer Simpson, topics regarded by those outside as trivial or useless. For the university, as for Wikipedia, in theory nothing is alien: anything, no matter how odd or out of the way, can be the object of academic enquiry. To put this another way: for both Wikipedia and the university, the pursuit of knowledge has its own logic. Neither organization is tied to external interests. They exist for the public good, to advance the common store of knowledge and wisdom.

Yet this conception of the public good has come under pressure in recent decades. In the case of the university, policy makers and students alike are now asking universities to justify their existence (and the money they receive, directly or indirectly, from the public purse) in ways that are increasingly inimical to the institution's historic mission. Politicians ask how higher education is advancing specific policy objectives. More banally, if equally understandably, students ask how their courses will help them get a job. Online, on the other hand, the early days of the Internet as a space of wonder, experimentation, and discovery have long since been replaced by a vision of quick profits, market capitalization, and the injunction to monetize, monetize, monetize. Wikipedia remains a hold-out, for some people a bizarre relic, of a time when hits didn't immediately translate into ad revenue, of when people went online because it was cool or fun, and they gave away their skills and services for free because they believed in something rather than wanting to make money out of it. Like the university, however, the Wikimedia Movement is now more vulnerable than ever to market priorities and outside bodies whose sole aim is revenue maximization.

In an uncertain and often unfavourable world, Wikipedia and Higher Education should be natural allies. Instead, their relationship is more often characterized by distrust and even outright hostility. The university would, as often as not, prefer that Wikipedia didn't exist: professors and instructors habitually (if hopelessly) forbid their students from consulting or quoting from it, for instance. On the other hand, with its innate skepticism of credentials and hierarchies, Wikipedians have traditionally given academics a hard time and led many to leave in disgust.

Much of this mutual hostility is justified and understandable. Often enough, each organization shows the other its very worst side. Wikipedia *is*, after all, often badly-written, poorly-cited, biased, and full of misinformation and even plagiarism. Wikipedians *are* a prickly (and sometimes rude) bunch who apparently hide behind strange monikers. They do not react well to newcomers unfamiliar with their particular codes and protocols, especially when those newcomers aim at wholesale transformation rather than incremental improvement of a given article. On the other side, Wikipedians see academics come to the online encyclopedia determined to burnish their own image, push their pet theories, or over-rule argument with appeals to authority. Wikipedians

note that the university has seldom lived up to its own ideals of openness and accessibility, not least in this era of star professors and rocketing tuition fees. Students, meanwhile, come to the site not out of free will but because they have been set an assignment, soon start grubbing for grades, refuse to engage in discussion, and abandon the place *en masse* once the semester is over.

What gets too easily missed is the fact that these behaviours are often only symptoms of the larger forces with which the university and Wikipedia alike should be concerned. Professors write or sanitize their own articles and push their own research because they are continually pushed to be mini-entrepreneurs rather than producers and guardians of knowledge. Students are obsessed by grades, and too little concerned with what does not count towards them, because in an uncertain job market credentials are everything. They both behave as they do not least, also, because the university itself gives out decidedly mixed messages as to what higher education is all about.

The result is that, on an everyday basis, and despite the successes that are deservedly celebrated by those who are already invested in such success, most interactions between the university and Wikipedia are negative. At times, as with the WMF's ill-fated Pune project which left a vast trail of plagiarized material for volunteers to clear up, they are disastrously so. More often, as whenever a student fails a course for plagiarizing a Wikipedia article, or whenever a professor has a good-faith edit reverted by an over-eager vandal fighter, these negative interactions go almost un-noticed. But they build up. And most efforts to ameliorate this constant undercurrent of hostility and distrust are at best too small-scale; at worst, they exacerbate the problem, as when students seem to be treated by the education program as somehow specially privileged, or when Wikipedia projects seem to be touted to professors as offering better means for surveillance of student work, or as merely a technological way out for over-stretched and under-funded instructors.

So what are the answers? The most fundamental is to note that improving relations between the Wikimedia Movement and higher education is not simply an optional extra, one more track within the vast Wikimania, a task for a small sub-group of the WMF, an interest for a few would-be trendy professors. Nor should it concern short-

term goals such as (on the Wikimedia side) editor recruitment and retention or (on the university's) flashier assignments that lead to a self-congratulatory press release. What is at stake is the soul of both institutions. Is the Wikimedia Foundation to position itself as a tech company--and not a particularly distinguished one, at that--or as an organization whose basic commitment is to the accumulation and dissemination of knowledge in new, more democratic ways? In turn, is the university to position itself as a place to confer skills and credential future employees, as a site of novelty whose value is proven by its marketability or its utility to industry and public policy? Or will it by contrast return to its historic mission as a place whose primary value is *critique*: the critique of prevailing assumptions in order to construct a world that would be different from any that we can now imagine.

If each institution chooses the former of these options, they are doomed to mediocrity. If they choose the latter, then we have the basis of a productive alliance by which Wikipedia and the university each encourages the other to be the very best that it can be. This will never be a friction-free relationship, and it should not be so: many of their mutual criticisms are well-founded. But an agreement that the two organizations have common goals as well as common problems might enable them together to advance towards their utopian ideals of free and common access to the store of human knowledge. Moreover, we might be a step further towards a world in which everyone has the opportunity and ability to think and engage critically with that resource and in turn produce new knowledge, un beholden to outside interests.