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BOOK REVIEW

Towards a Political Theory of Openness

Nathaniel Tkacz. 2015, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ISBN 9780226192307. RRP US\$25.00 (pb)

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The encomiums of Wikipedia just keep rolling in. In my Twitter feed this week alone, Wikipedia was described as ‘the biggest digital humanities project ever created’ with ‘a huge role to play in knowledge production’, instructors were urged to ‘teach students to use Wikipedia properly rather than convince them not to use it’ in a paper at the World Library and Information Congress, and an academic explained how ‘writing for Wikipedia helped to improve my academic writing’. Wikipedia continues to rank very highly in Google search results and remains one of the most used services on the Web. If anything, the importance of Wikipedia has been increased by the emergence of Wikidata, its parallel data service, as a key component of the Linked Open Data cloud.

Wikipedia is still often held up as a model of participation and collaboration, celebrated as non-hierarchical, self-organising and leaderless, a truly open and free approach to knowledge creation without all the disavowed antagonism and politics that usually attend collective endeavours of any scale. In this book, Nathaniel Tkacz provides a much more subtle and probing assessment. Using conceptual tools derived from actor network theory and Erving Goffman’s theory of frame analysis, with a dash of Foucault and Lyotard thrown in, he examines how Wikipedia is produced and maintained in a political and organisational sense.

The foundation for his discussion is a detailed analysis of three controversies in the history of Wikipedia. ‘Wikipedia Art’ (2009) was an attempt by Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern to use a Wikipedia entry as a form of conceptual art, contrary to the rules for creating content. A second case is the entry for the Prophet Muhammad, which has been the site of continuing acrimonious debates, especially over whether images should be included or not.

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The third example, the Spanish Fork (2002), was an attempt to create a separate Spanish version of Wikipedia as the result of disagreements over the possible use of advertising to raise funds.

In discussion of all three examples, Tkacz's focus is on the mechanisms, procedures and forms of reasoning that go into the production of Wikipedia. Using frame analysis he identifies Wikipedia as a 'statement formation' in which competing statements battle for existence and where rules work as especially forceful statements—especially the rule of neutral point of view. These rule statements are performative in nature. Wikipedia exhibits practices of framing and 'statement games', sorting collaboration into desirable and non-desirable and following organising principles around hierarchies of policies, guidelines and types of users. In this setting, forking (in the sense of a community schism—derived from its use in software engineering to describe a split into two separate development paths) is a process of 'frame making', a challenge to statements which are definitive of the existing formation that sets in motion a new process of definition and legitimation.

How convincing you find this account of the way Wikipedia works will depend, to a large extent, on your assessment of the validity of the conceptual tools Tkacz deploys. His approach is to focus on the production process rather than on outcomes, which he characterises as a 'more immanent method' than using sociological or political categories as the basis for analysis. As a result, his conclusions look very different from those of other commentators who hold up Wikipedia as an exemplar of leaderless collaboration or criticise it for its gender bias. But his analysis of Wikipedia is only a starting-point for a more ambitious goal and the book becomes particularly interesting and valuable when it expands out into a more general critique of the idea of openness.

Openness is widely seen as a desirable social and political goal, with governments promoting the idea of open data and open government and businesses implementing new modes of open collaboration. But 'openness' has something in common with other responses to the perceived dangers of the 'closed society'. Neoliberalism invokes a similar rhetoric of freedom in the context of the market, which is why Wikipedia might seem to have 'a certain neoliberal tinge to it'—it promotes a kind of collaboration that resembles competition in the marketplace. The bigger issue, for Tkacz, is 'the problem of organisation' or how to understand the ways governance and organisation work within an 'open' project like Wikipedia without recourse to the simple binaries of open and closed, bureaucracy and adhococracy, hierarchical and non-hierarchical.

Tkacz's book provides a valuable set of concepts and techniques of political description which can be used 'to speak coherently back to openness' and re-examine our assumptions about it. This approach could also be deployed effectively in other areas where similar binaries are currently in use. The open access movement in scholarly publishing shares much of the prevailing fervour about the innate value of 'openness'. Free access to academic articles is promoted as unequivocally good, while closed access (behind subscription paywalls) is regarded as the binary opposite. Yet the situation is not as simple as this. Small societies, especially in the humanities, rely on journal subscriptions to keep their society going and to pay people to work on their journal. It would be worthwhile testing Tkacz's closely argued and well-grounded approach in this arena too.

About the author

Toby Burrows is an honorary research fellow in the School of Humanities at the University of Western Australia and manages the E-Research Support Unit in the UWA Library. He held a Marie Curie International Incoming Fellowship in the Department of Digital Humanities at King's College London between 2014 and 2016.