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Bait and switch: the core principle of the online community, and what we can do about it

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enetCollect WG3 & WG5 meeting, Leiden, 24-25 October 2018

Overview: three short talks

- Background: CALLector project
 - Goal: create a social network for people who build and use CALL content
 - Project started in Apr 2018, will continue until Dec 2021
- What are the ethical issues?
- Talk 1: Let's look at previous examples of online communities
- Talk 2: Where are we now with CALLector?
- Talk 3: What are our options for progressing it?

Overview: why discuss ethics?

- This is an ethics workshop. (Thank you Karën!)
- **If the CALlector project achieves its goals, then**
 - we will have a user community of at least hundreds of people,
 - spending substantial time working on CALlector-related content
 - over several years
- Nontrivial impact on many people's lives
- Ethical issues will be important

Overview of this talk

- Paradigm example 1: Wikispaces
- Paradigm example 2: Ravelry
- Paradigm example 3: Wordpress
- Some conclusions

Wikispaces: early timeline

- **2005** Wikispaces started up and promised to revolutionise teaching. The three founders offered technology for teachers and students to utilise the internet, make connections, share material and so on. It was firmly grounded in simplicity and listening to their core users.
- **2008** Wikispaces offered its services free to teachers, figuring that happy base users would sustain a market for their premium features. It was a smash hit.
- **2012** In a TESL-EJ post, which encourages the use of Wikispaces for CALL it says 'According to the company, tens of millions of users and tens of thousands of institutions, such as Georgetown University, Arizona State University, Denver Public Schools, and Starbucks, and more than 6,955,248 students and teachers use Wikispaces.'

Wikispaces: statement of principles, 2012

“Defining Success

We define success in edtech as **building a sustainable company that improves student outcomes, empowers teachers, and increases the reach and efficiency of educational institutions.**

This is our definition, and it's personal. You may have a vastly different definition of what success means for you. For example, many recent noteworthy edtech startups attempt to reach learners of all ages directly, without any institutional involvement. Permit us to pick apart our definition and highlight why we've put sustainability first and seek to benefit not just students, but teachers and institutions as well.”

Wikispaces: statement of principles, 2012

“Sustainability

When an established edtech company fails, it's a big deal. The impact on students, teachers, and administrators is far higher than for similar services outside education. Money for a replacement is tied up in an annual budgeting process. IT and technology support roles—already understaffed—need to juggle this emergency alongside their existing responsibilities. Teachers and administrators simply do not have extra hours during the school year for technology training. Students need to start over with new materials and a new product to learn.”

Wikispaces: statement of principles, 2012

“These factors mean that when an edtech company closes its doors, their customers are left bearing a heavy burden.

We believe edtech startups have a higher duty—a moral duty—to their students, teachers, and administrators. This duty should not compel startups to follow a conservative path. Instead, startup leaders must instill in their cultures the courage to balance risk with the long view of their mission.”

Wikispaces: later timeline

2014 Wikispaces sold to edtech giant TSL for an undisclosed sum.

It announced:

“We are thrilled to announce that Wikispaces has been acquired by TSL Education, makers of TES Connect, the world’s largest collection of free teaching resources. TSL is a group of outstanding people who share our commitment to serving teachers. A few things won’t change: our entire team in San Francisco will continue to work on the platform you know and love with a true commitment to serving teachers and students. One thing will change: we are now backed by TSL’s deep resources and huge education network. This means we get to build more ambitious, more revolutionary, and more delightful products for you more quickly than ever before.”

Wikispaces: later timeline

And added:

“Some of you may be skeptical, thinking that this acquisition may affect our ability to continue to serve teachers as we always have, or that it might change our focus so that we can no longer be the partners to the education community we have prided ourselves on being. To those concerns all we can say is ‘watch what happens’”

Wikispaces: later timeline

2018 Wikispaces announced that it was closing down. Non-paying users were given **twelve days** to save their data:

“It has been a very tough business decision during which all angles of the Wikispaces site were considered in great detail....Over the last twelve months we have been carrying out a complete technical review of the infrastructure and software we use to serve Wikispaces users. As part of this review, it has become very apparent that the required investment to bring the infrastructure and code in line with modern standards is very substantial. As such it is no longer financially viable to continue to run Wikispaces long term.”

Thoughts inspired by Wikispaces example

- An online community has nontrivial market value (> \$10/member).
Wikispaces had tens of millions of members
- The Wikispaces founders owned the community and could sell it.
- The content creators had no rights.
- When the network was small, the founders had an incentive to promise freedom, autonomy and long-term security, to attract content creators.
- The content creators had no way to enforce these promises.
- In particular, the content creators had no way to maintain the network.
- When the founders managed to sell the network, priorities changed.
- The changes were disastrous for the content creators.
- **Not enough to talk the talk, you gotta walk the walk**

Thoughts inspired by Wikispaces example

- Related stories from many internet communities
- Example: Goodreads reviewing site
 - introduction of censorship after site sold to Amazon in 2013
 - censorship policy (mostly) retracted after large-scale revolt from content creators
 - extremely painful and traumatic episode lasting several months
 - no official acknowledgement of fault from Goodreads or Amazon



Ravelry

- Online community for people interested in knitting, crochet, yarn spinning
- Founded in 2007 by a couple
- 7M members by 2017
- Income: knitting-related ads, small cut (1.3%) from selling patterns

Ravelry

- Transformative impact on knitting community
- Connecting people
 - who are geographically close but aren't otherwise aware of each other's existence
 - who use same pattern
 - who have similar interests
 - who need help
- Results of patterns shown on real people (not professional models)
- Ravelry users extremely positive about site
- Explanation for the positivity: initial ideals and reason for being have never changed. Ravelry users have never been faced by the situation of many social network sites of having to accept fundamental changes in ethos or ideology.



Thoughts inspired by Ravelry

- Consistency and openness by the founders/management have been key to the ongoing happiness of the community. A wall between the two has not been built.
- Maybe a success because created by a family rather than a disconnected group, meaning that it is more likely that ideals are truly shared in the first instance.
- Maybe there are no buyers, so there is no danger of a take over with fundamental change following. Compare Goodreads, where once it sold out to Amazon, became in the first instance an organisation for marketing books.
- Long-term future is unclear
- What happens when current owners retire?

Wordpress

- Online community for people who want to create blogs. Started 2007. Going on for 20M sites use wordpress and it accounts for more than half the global CMS market. In 2014 they received substantially more unique visitors per month than Amazon.
- Initial model: completely ‘free’, cared only for ‘the beauty of words’.
- Later developments
 - “Freemium” model
 - Introduction of ads on blogs, with the possibility of paying for the premium model to escape this.
 - Tech support heavily reduced, replaced by user forum
 - Emphasis on words reduced, more emphasis on pictures

Wordpress: generating business

Now ad warnings appear at the bottom of blog posts:

Advertisements

Occasionally, some of your visitors may see an advertisement here, as well as a [Privacy & Cookies banner](#) at the bottom of the page. You can hide ads completely by upgrading to one of our paid plans.

UPGRADE NOW

DISMISS MESSAGE

Wordpress: generating business

And chirpy messages like this abound:



Creating activity is a prime motivation of Wordpress now. It's making money for everybody. Words, as the primary concern are replaced by clicks.

Wordpress: generating income

Encouraging people to see traffic to their blog as a rationale for upgrading from free to premium models.

New comment on This and That 

 [sjobbins](#) commented on [Felony - Oz movie #10](#)

Felony Director Matthew Saville 2013 After a debut like Noise, it's hard not to be a rabbit in the headlights next. ...

I'm loving these reviews. I hope you get your hands on tons of Australian films.

[View Comment](#) [Trash](#) | [Mark as Spam](#)

Hooray! Your audience is listening. Now is the perfect time to upgrade your site with more great features. [Check out these enhanced plans](#) to support your growing audience.

Wordpress: the primary customer is?

- At the time WP started up people chose it, above the competition, for a reason. Their goodwill is priceless and without it, WP is nothing. The user, whether free or premium, is a valuable commodity, but surely also a customer.
- However, external support to WP users – WP itself employs a very small number of people – is a revenue generator for an unknown, but very large, number of people and they have a relationship with WP too. What are they? A commodity? A customer? Who is more important to WP?
- Can WP conduct an ethical relationship with both of these? The more complicated and feature-rich it becomes, the more necessary technical support is. Technical support providers outside the official WP fold gain from this.

... but despite this ...

- Wordpress is still investing substantial resources in keeping free version strong
- Independent board overseeing development
- Foundation philosophy that they actually follow

Wordpress Foundation Philosophy

In order to serve the public good, all of the software and projects we promote should support the following goals:

1. The software should be licensed under the GNU Public License.
2. The software should be freely available to anyone to use for any purpose, and without permission.
3. The software should be open to modifications.
4. Any modifications should be freely distributable at no cost and without permission from its creators.
5. The software should provide a framework for translation to make it globally accessible to speakers of all languages.
6. The software should provide a framework for extensions so modifications and enhancements can be made without modifying core code.

Summary

- Online communities are potentially valuable commodities
- Default model
 - Network founder has all rights
 - Content creators have no rights
- Strong invitation to unethical behaviour
- Possible countermeasures
 - Plan from the beginning to run community in an ethical way
 - Use open source philosophy wherever possible
 - Give content creators full **exclusive** rights to their content
 - Make it easy to export content to other platforms
 - Independent oversight

Thank You!

