

BE BOLD! OR PERFORMING EPICPEDIA

van der Hoek, Annemieke

van der Hoek, Marloes

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van der Hoek, Annemieke · van der Hoek, Marloes

Be bold! or Performing EpicPedia

Wikipedia [1] is one of the most widely used sources of information in the world, but also one of the most criticized. There is a paradox in the way that Wikipedia presents its articles; on the one hand Wikipedia wants its users to be aware that older articles are more comprehensive and balanced, as opposed to newer products that often contain clearly erroneous information, nonencyclopedic content and vandalism. Users should be able to distinguish truth from falsehood. But the way Wikipedia presents its articles makes it impossible to be aware of it.

EpicPedia [2]

As the name *EpicPedia* indicates, this principle of ‘epic’ is adapted from the early 20th century German political playwright Bertolt Brecht and his ‘epic theater’. Brecht wrote and directed theater plays in which dramatic illusion was constantly disrupted through ‘estrangement’ devices: narrators on stage, anti-heroes, actors calling themselves actors, all serving the aim of making the audience reflect and think critically instead of getting immersed and identifying with the drama.

EpicPedia is a web application that presents itself as a theatre script to explain the development of a Wikipedia article. The script ‘translates’ the revision/editing history and all the generated meta data of a Wikipedia article to a theatre script and hereby exposes Wikipedia’s mechanisms. Users can open a Wikipedia window on top of the theater script and switch it on and off. It gives them the opportunity to view a Wikipedia article, modify and additionally check the modifications in a live generated theater script. This offers users the ability to develop a critical attitude towards the use of Wikipedia.

The ideal of *Web 2.0* focuses on the ‘wisdom of the crowds’. In *EpicPedia II* the notion of ‘collectively formulating’ became the premise to make a performance for an occasion where we could talk and discuss the concept of *EpicPedia/Wikipedia* with a wider audience. Comments, critiques, modifications, elements that make a text grow or change also became the core of the evening. The intention was to shift from judgments and statements to how ideas take shape.

Performing EpicPedia: articulating the conflict

The question in the case of *EpicPediaII* was: how to ‘space’ and ‘perform’ a conversation about *EpicPedia*. Since *EpicPedia* presents itself as a theatre script, it was an obvious step to try and act out the script for a theatrical purpose. This way we could present some of the findings of *EpicPediaI* as a case study for discussion and then talk about how communication is organized, what the effects are, what codes there are, and what ‘wisdom of the crowds’ means there?

To make the discourse clearer and more concrete we took one Wikipedia entrance, that is to say the term: ‘knowledge’, and used the *EpicPedia* script of the *discussion* around that topic as a performance for one actor. Since the original Wikipedia conversation on the *talk pages* lasted for about eight years, quite a few things were cut out to focus on the main revisions in the article and the conflicts that struck us most as useful for the performance. The actor played the role of a Wikipediaian (editor of Wikipedia) who guides the audience through the world of the Wikipedia talk pages while getting entangled in a Wikipedia chat debate.

In the discussion afterwards, people from the audience were asking understandably to what extent this image of a Wikipedia group debate was exaggerated. Someone argued: “I think there’s two naturals here; there’s the natural of Wikipedia, and there’s the natural of the human, wanting to say something, not being able to get it through, and these things mix. It moved back and forth from trying to make a topic and a conversation about a topic natural but also estranged us from a traditional conversation.” These things indeed came across in the developing of the script. The revisions of the articles seemed attached to personality dramas of the contributors of the editing discussion. Wikipedia works with the concept that all common knowledge should be gathered at any moment by any possible contributor no matter which cultural or social background he or she has. Wikipedias’ design shows the opposite: the encyclopedia articles do not reveal that they have a history and they are presented as a single article without an author, as if it is the ultimate outcome of the concept. It is enormously complex to get a grip on the structures behind the articles. Besides the edits there are more factors that influence the construction of the article which are also not visible when you view the article. Factors like the discussion platform, protection policies, bots and the recent changes patrol to name a few.

Apart from the discussion on how to turn the proposal into a well-made performance, there were other reactions that brought up the question about the legitimacy of this kind of critique on Wikipedia, in the end it really is the most advanced collaborative-hypertext project. Wikipedia displays articles as smoothly formatted pages with no visible traces of their different writers. But while the NPOV–‘neutral point of view’ [3] of the standard Wikipedia seeks to smooth out and hide conflicts, *EpicPediaII* on the contrary emphasizes them.

It is true that *EpicPedia* underlines Wikipedia as subject to and product of cultural conflict, although in the end *EpicPedia* wants to go beyond emphasizing this. It wants to defend flexibility and nuance and practice to show the co-existence of a multiplicity of views regarding people and events as organization of internal democracy. That’s for example what *EpicPedia* tries in presenting the articles and scripts in the way they were constructed; as single edits and their authors above them, all in chronological order. The idea that there is no such thing as one reality is certainly not new, but examples where this is actually converted into a fruitful practice of any kind, remain rare...

EpicPedia: www.epicpedia.org, Annemieke van der Hoek, 2008

EpicPediaII, performing EpicPedia, Annemieke van der Hoek and Marloes van der Hoek, 2009

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Be_bold

[2] www.epicpedia.org

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view