

From Open Encyclopædia to Distributed Library Project

Harry Potter

Harry Potter leads us through a worm hole into the wiki-based world of collaborative knowledge production and resource sharing

The scale of the development of the Wikipedia Open Encyclopædia is such that it has already established itself as one of the most significant information resources on the web. With over 10,000 contributors served by a tiny staff and using wiki (a web-based collaborative work tool), it allows enthusiasts to share their knowledge of their pet subjects with the world at large. The system is simple: click on 'Edit this page' and you can alter the encyclopædia entry of your choice. However, it may well be someone else's choice, someone whose views are radically different from yours. The idea is that problems get resolved through consensus around what is naively called a 'Neutral Point Of View'. There are the wiki equivalent of blackboard monitors (BMs) who patrol the wikipedia searching for what they consider to be inappropriate. Wikipedia functions on an open publishing basis, so no copyright material should be posted.

The BMs quickly put any page which has been copy-and-pasted with copyright material on the 'Votes for Deletion' page along with items they feel lie outside what they consider appropriate – bad jokes, attempts at self publicity or anything they consider spurious. You too can, of course, adopt the role of a BM, but you'll probably only do this if you enjoy feeling self-righteous. Many of these BMs seem too wedded to some sort of fixed idea structure.

However their engagement with the practicalities of dealing with an Open Encyclopædia exposes them to the slippery world of semiotics and certain non-Aristotelian ways of thinking expounded by such folk as Umberto Eco. This clash of attitudes is really no bad thing, since the issues which arise are in fact best dealt with through the process of seeking practical solutions.

Wikipedia has blossomed to contain over 170,000 pages in English and a further 150,000 pages in other languages. Linked 'Talk Pages' are also available for participants to discuss the developments within a specific page, and can be the arena for edit wars. Other projects are already developing as offshoots, inspired by wikipedia. Wikiquote is a collaborative project to develop an online source for quotes. Wikibooks is where contributors are setting up a whole range of free textbooks.

A little more involved is the Distributed Library Project. Originally devised as a book sharing resource in California, it is now being developed with a much broader and deeper remit by the University of Openness. At a recent meeting at the London Action Resource Centre, librarians from Denmark, Norway, Papua New Guinea and Slovenia discussed how an online collaborative resource could be developed to serve as a multiple library catalogue. Participants can sign up as a node and enter all the books they have in their collections. Of course as the project develops many book titles will already be entered, and it will merely be necessary for users to add that another copy is available at their 'location'. Automatic input of ISBN details has already been organised to save a lot of typing.

However the catalogue will not function like the Aristotelian library catalogues which have bedevilled the world for far too long. Rather than creating a hierarchical system which rigidly structures categories within other categories, the online facilities will eventually allow participants to develop their own knowledge paths. These will basically be open-access bibliographies which can be amended and developed by other participants. It will then be easy to create knowledge paths linking off from wikipedia pages into the broader mass of relevant books. Of course individuals as well as libraries will be encouraged to place their material on-line. It has been estimated that within 18 years this will be the most significant library catalogue in the world, just as wikipedia has already outstripped the attempted development of other commercial encyclopaedias.

Wikipedi [<http://en.wikipedia.org/>]

Distributed Library Project [<http://dlpdev.theops.net/DlpUk>]

University of Openness [<http://twentiethcentury.com/uo/>]

Harry Potter: I was involved in some experimentation with a Quantum Computer at the Edzell National Security Agency, when an unfortunate accident sent me into a parallel universe where the intimate details of my childhood have become the subject of some bizarre consumerist cult. I have been informed that any attempts to assert my identity may result in me being prosecuted under intellectual property rights. If you can help me return to my own universe please contact me at <harrypotter@cyber-rights.net>

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