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CS 498 KK
Critique Week 2

The dynamics of mass interaction

The dynamics of mass interaction by Whittaker, Terveen, Hill, and Cherny contains an analysis of community and interaction between users of Usenet. The authors used the common ground principle to evaluate the community. Common ground is a principle used in evaluation real life conversations between small groups of people. The paper tries to see how well it can be used when it comes to forms of mass communication. According to the common ground model, FAQ production, decreased cross-posting, and greater message length should lead to increased interactivity.

The authors selected newsgroups containing textual messages and conversation. They excluded new, biz and jobs, based on the assumption that these are places for general announcements and advertisements. I believe that an analysis of these could lead to a lot of information about the nature of mass communication on line. People often use news as a catalyst for discussion. Also, the very nature of announcements are a form of communication that is used both on line and in real life. However, it could be that the common ground theory does not extend into multiple forms of communication. If this is the case, then further papers should explore the newsgroups that are intended for general announcements to see whether that is all the interaction that takes place, and how it is received in the Usenet community.

One of the theories based on common ground was that “Newsgroups that are larger in size will have more difficulty establishing common ground, we would therefore expect them to have a) fewer FAQs [...]” This seems counter intuitive FAQs are used to instruct new users on protocol and what questions are usually asked. In a large newsgroup, this would be more necessary in order to prevent many repeat postings. I do not feel that the original assumptions on FAQs are correct, and that the use of FAQs do not translate well to real life conversations. As there is no parallel for FAQs in real life, it should not be included in the common ground analysis. Since the FAQ assumptions are one of the statistically incorrect ones, it seems to suggest that the common ground theory does not apply to on line. I believe the FAQ analysis should be disregarded as it does not necessarily have the connotations that are assumed in the article.

The paper also states “H5 predicted that newsgroups with less cross-posting will have greater interactivity, but in fact the less cross-posting there was in the group, the less the threading.” This could potentially be because a thread that is cross-posted has a wider audience. If you adjust the amount of threading for the amount of users in both threads I wonder if this could be accounted for. I believe that more detail is needed in some of the results found.

The most interesting statistic from the article in my opinion was that 40% of posts are initiating messages. These initiating messages do not have replies. I wonder if the 40% is averaged, or if it is fairly consistent across both personal and public boards. If it is consistent, why is this not affected by boards with greater interactivity? If it is different, this is another interesting statistic. Also, how often do users with many postings on a board get ignored? Is it more often than newcomers? If so, is this a form of social censure on Usenet?

Becoming Wikipedian

The paper *Becoming Wikipedian: Transformation of Participation in a Collaborative Online Encyclopedia* by Bryant, Forte, and Bruckman is an analysis of the publicly editable encyclopedia, Wikipedia. In order to analyze the community and environment of Wikipedia, the authors used site complexity, site growth, and qualities of the individual articles. The articles were evaluated based on qualities including rigor and diversity of the article's authors.

I particularly enjoyed the discussions on why people edit wikipedia. The main reason that the interviewees stated was for the greater good, or the benefit of many people. The article also states that altruism is unlikely to be the ultimate cause of the work, stating expected reciprocal results and sustaining a reputation as more probable reasons. I found the analysis of the “featured article” to be fascinating. The article states that the featured article is reinforcement for the editors and is one way that good work is recognized. Although the authors are not obviously identified with their work, Wikipedians were found to keep track of their edits and still feel a sense of pride or accomplishment with recognition of the article.

The interviews with Wikipedians contained interesting information, especially where their stories were similar, which was often. However, I do not consider 9 people to be a good sample size, especially with such a large population. At one point 2 users are quoted as “several of the participants”. If two people agree on something, it could be significant, or it could be coincidence. Without a larger sample size, it is not scientifically rigorous.

The method of obtaining participants in the interviews was also subject to skewing the data, since they only posted on the talk pages asking for people. This will return users who are active on the talk pages, and may not get users who edit, but do not participate in the community. This can confirm their ideas of the time line of Wikipedians and how they interact, without actually being accurate. Without data from others, they are only getting the time line of users who also interact on the talk pages.

I disagree with the assumption that rigor (the total number of edits) makes for higher quality. A high number is probably just as indicative of an edit war as it is of quality. An edit war will increase the number of edits drastically without creating content. The content that results may even be inaccurate, as with the example of the chocolate that was given in class. Controversial topics are also more likely to have more edits than a corresponding article of the same quality.

Similar to this line of thinking is the idea that diverse authorship increases quality. Although both number of edits and diverse authorship can correspond with quality, I do not believe that they are indicative of it. As quoted from the article “Diverse authorship can be used as a measure of article quality; diversity increases after an article is cited in the media.” This reminds me of the specific, but contradictory example of “The Colbert Report” where Stephen Colbert suggests editing Wikipedia articles to his viewers. Edit wars are subsequently held between viewers and Wikipedians to assert their edits as priority. Diversity is increased after media attention, though certainly not as an improvement to quality.

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Studying Cooperation and Conflict between Authors with history flow Visualizations

The paper *Studying Cooperation and Conflict between Authors with history flow Visualizations* by Viegas, Wattenberg, and Dave discusses the evolution of articles in Wikipedia. In order to facilitate information gathering on the changing landscapes of the articles, the authors developed and used a program they call History Flow. History Flow is a graphical way of visualizing additions, deletions, and changes to Wikipedia articles.

History Flow shows the changes users make to an article either spaced by time elapsed, or evenly spaced between the edits made. Having the revisions spaced by time can show trends based on time, but the view with revisions equally spaced can show better the size of changes made. When time is introduced it can make a small change look large or a large change look small because there is less screen space devoted to it. To compromise between the two views since both show and emphasize different points, it is beneficial to be able to alternate between the two, so as to gain the positive qualities of each.

I think that it would be interesting and valuable information if history flow had a way of showing who made a deletion. This could show if there was one person or group of people who deleted and did not add, or if most deletions were merely a predecessor for adding the content back in a different place.

Five common types of vandalism are listed. The fifth type is Idiosyncratic copy, which is described as “adding text that is related to the topic of the page but which is clearly one-sided, not of general interest, or inflammatory.” While this may detract from the general usability of Wikipedia, it could often be attributed to a user being unfamiliar with Wikipedia etiquette, rather than malicious vandalism.

It had not occurred to me that there may be types of pages that anonymous users are more likely to edit. A further investigation of this idea would be interesting.

Another point that interested me was that the first content that is added is less likely to be changed and lasts longer. The suggested reason is that the first person suggests the tone. Another option may be that a person usually would feel proficient in a topic to start a page. People who are less sure are more likely to edit it, and therefore are more likely to be corrected. This follows with the idea suggested in the previous paper, that when people first start using Wikipedia, they edit pages, and as they begin to feel more comfortable and more used to the standards of Wikipedia, they will create pages and do more advanced things.

This paper states that pages tend to not settle into a specific size. However, people eventually do break content off into new pages. I wonder what the average size of a page is when people divide it into multiple subjects.

Also, I did enjoy the humor, whether intentional or not, that was interspersed in this paper. Citing as an example “This particular obscene word was chosen based on its disproportionately frequent use in acts of vandalism. An explanation of vandals’ attraction to this specific obscenity is beyond the scope of this paper.”