Re: The dynamics of mass interaction

Communities of ages past utilized a myriad of different organizational structures to make the decisions that governed everyday life. From the majority rule of democratic communities to monarchies under sovereign authority, the weight of an individual voice differs greatly. The United States operates as a republic due to the difficulty of maintaining democracy on such a scale, and citizens' opinions are heard only by proxy. Usenet allows for every voice to be heard due to the granularity of messages implicit in the medium, but still suffers from the problem of maintaining interaction on such a scale.

Each newsgroup is theoretically focused on a single topic by its title, and one might assume that this forms a basis for common ground. Still, interaction and topicality are not guaranteed as one-off (initiating) postings and posts with only tangential relevance are widespread. This suggests that simple grouping is not sufficient to establish common ground.

While not sufficient in itself, grouping does ensure a certain level of mutual knowledge necessary to form common ground. Familiarity is also necessary to form common ground, and this requires continued topical interaction between participants. The affect group size has on common ground is arguably related to its affect on familiarity; the larger the group the more difficult it is for members to be familiar with each other. Moderation likewise affects common ground by proxy, as it keeps conversations focused by removing the noise generated by irrelevant posts.

Off-topic postings impede interaction as they require participants to spend time searching for content. This means that less time is available to compose responses to individual postings or respond to multiple postings of interest. Time also impacts the quantity of interaction observed with respect to the length of each post. The authors note that, contrary to their expectation, shorter messages promote interactivity. This may be due to the nature of conversations having longer posts.

Technical descriptions and walkthroughs tend to be longer than socially oriented posts, as there is more information to be conveyed. Unless the content of the description in dispute, participants have little motivation to reply. Threads that more closely follow the type of interaction found in face-to-face conversations naturally contain shorter and more deeply nested posts. In such exchanges, normally concise back channels are used for repair and maintenance of the conversation. When many people contribute information to a topic they each tend to do so incrementally with a relatively smaller turn size.

Perhaps the most telling statistic in the study is that a disproportionately small number (2.9%) of posters account for a quarter of total posts. Complementing this is the finding that over 40% of posts do not receive replies. This highlights a defining feature of individual behavior in mass interaction; given the volume of information available, participants use popularity as a means to sort the chaff from the wheat. An interesting follow-up to this study might consider the effect of age (measured by time since initial post) and likelihood of garnering a response in initiating posts. Intuition suggests a negative correlation; the longer an initiating post goes without reply, the less likely that it will be replied to.

Intuitively, the presence of FAQ posts should correspond to the degree of moderation of a group. A participant explicitly designated as a moderator would create or facilitate the creation of
such a document as a natural extension of his or her duties. That said, FAQs seem largely irrelevant given the mode of interaction prevalent in newsgroups. If someone is willing to contribute beneficially to a group, odds are they have the required background or will obtain it by reading other posts. Such documents are a better fit for an application (how do I perform this action) or web site lacking the constant demonstrative interaction characterizing newsgroups.

Frequent cross-posting is another aspect of the medium, differentiating Usenet interaction from that found in face-to-face or video communication. This is perhaps due to the time-lag possible between posts and responses. In face-to-face or video there is more instant and direct engagement. It is not as likely that a newsgroup post will receive replies as quickly, and this may lead to uncertainty about the interest of other participants in the initiating post. Due to the nature of the medium, posting multiple times increases the chance of catching another's interest and initiating a conversation. If hooks are cheap, leaving one in many holes is more likely to yield a full pot.

**Re: Becoming Wikipedian**

Thinking about the process behind publishing conjures up a cigar-chomping loudmouth in suspenders, perhaps with three Js for initials. Whether a traditional print newspaper or its online counterpart, an editor is present to ensure the quality of its publications. Everything must pass through this person or persons before it can be published. Wikipedia does away with this model, opting instead to allow anyone to edit articles at any time.

As the authors note, opening up the publishing process allows much more rapid development of new content. One would imagine that the quality of Wikipedia articles suffers from this greatly, however this does not seem to be the case. While there is indeed a greater occurrence of factual errors, the study finds that Wikipedia articles are quite close in general. The immense number of people who can potentially edit articles proves to solve the same problem it creates. While some users may take part in vandalizing or even innocuously detrimental behavior, the vast majority act as a counterweight in making corrections. Statistics offers a plausible explanation: as the sample size (number of authors) increases, the quality of articles overall should approach a normal distribution. That is, some very low and some very high quality articles will exist but the majority will be of acceptable quality.

Difficulty regulating behavior online and fewer inhibitions as a result of the medium would seem to adversely impact the quality of Wikipedia articles. This is, perhaps, much more of an issue with new or anonymous users. Given that the articles themselves are anonymous, it seems counter-intuitive for individuals to feel a sense of ownership for there work. According to the interviews conducted by the authors, however, this is precisely what has occurred. The reputation seems to include, but not find its basis in, the opinions of readers of the articles ('lurkers'). Although some Wikipedians interviewed mentioned having their article sourced by popular media, they seemed to derive satisfaction from the resulting contributions this attention solicited. Expert users did not mention any awareness of reputation establishing tools such as the Discussion or History pages as novices. Only the more advanced users that typically read these pages would be able to express appreciation for the signed contributions of others. This implies
that the pride Wikipedians feel stems from their standing within their community; recognition from others provides a basis for the feeling of ownership. The frequent use of pages like the "Village Pump" or the userpage further the idea that authors come out of interest but stay because of the social interaction membership in a community offers. The authors draw particularly insightful distinction between novice and expert users: "to novice participants, the Wikipedia seems more like a collection of articles ... [and to expert participants] like a collection of people".

Watchlists provide further evidence for the importance of community to expert users. Anonymous additions are immediately suspect, while etiquette suggests that edits from established users be treated with restraint. This suggests a community boundary defined by registration. Take the communities formed by grouping users of different operating systems together as another example. There is a perceived aloofness of members of the "Mac" community towards those running Windows, and resulting animosity in response. Wikipedians, like the Mac users, take pride in their community and defend its integrity. Long live Jobs, and maintain a Neutral Point of View.

Re: history flow

A canyon is an excellent metaphor for a social visualization in the vein of history flow. Different layers of rock are visible, with changes in type (and time) as one moves scans vertically. Different thicknesses of these bands indicate different amounts of time having passed. With history flow, time uses the horizontal axis instead. The size of various contributions is represented by the vertical length of each band at a point in time.

Unlike canyons, the bands representing edited content can change size corresponding to individual insertions or deletions. Perhaps the most interesting result of the visualization is the ease with which it elucidates patterns of change. By visualizing specifically the differences between revisions, drastic changes are noticed more immediately.

One such change is termed a mass deletion, which occurs when a significant proportion of the article text is removed. If this type of visualization were used with source control as the authors suggest, it could potentially detect features developed then discarded. Mass deletions of project code might also identify less productive
developers. Whether one programmer in particular has code that is frequently deleted or trimmed by others is useful when considering raises. Alternatively it may identify ‘idea people’, who do mainly proof of concept work further revised by others.

That some contributors choose to remain anonymous while others desire recognition is actually quite intuitive. Articles mostly comprised of anonymous edits seem to be of interest to most users of Wikipedia (Sex, Music, etc). It is also possible the subject matter tends to attract more privacy-conscious editors (Libertarianism, for example). Articles that mainly named contributors may be more contentious in nature. For example, articles about Evolution and Design likely attract big egos on both sides. Articles about countries such as Brazil may involve editors with some degree of national pride. These editors may desire recognition on history pages at the very least.

Articles drawing bouts of contentious editing between authors (known as edit wars) seem to transcend the notion of identity. The zig-zag pattern in the history flow visualization of such confrontations suggests that these authors are more interested in the subject matter contained in the article than personal status. The instability the authors find in Wikipedia articles overall is likely derived from the attention to detail paid by many of its editors. Knowing this, it is more likely that initial contributions remain because they contain mostly basic information - not simply because they set the tone as the authors suggest.

Why is Wikipedia successful? Loosely, statistics suggests that a greater sample size increases accuracy. While helpful, this does not completely explain the phenomenon. The diversity of contributors and the care given by a large number of active contributors are also important to Wikipedia’s success. After all, if you get enough monkeys and enough typewriters you will eventually have Shakespeare.