Paper #1 Critique

This paper analyzed mass communication between users on the USENET system. These user interactions are classified using the common ground model. The goal of the paper is to analyze the community as a whole and try to see if the theories from the common ground model will also apply to the internet community. The common ground model previously applied only to real life situations and says that people need to have some common knowledge or some sort of background between themselves when conducting a conversation. Also, it claims that decreased cross-posting, and longer messages should lead to a greater sense of community and better conversations on the online message boards.

A major problem with establishing common ground in the online community is that people are free to join, start or leave conversations at any time and therefore have little to know idea about what the previous history of the board might be. Three things that the study tested was how the three demographic variables affect conversational strategy, how demographic variables affect interactivity, and how conversational strategy affects interactivity. These were tested by taking samples from over 2 million messages from 500 message boards over a 6 month period. Certain groups, like the alt groups, or the jobs groups were excluded because they lacked the proper amount of communication, but certain other groups might not have needed to be excluded, such as the news group, because if news stories were posted, it seems to me like people would like to comment on the posted stories, and this could be useful to the study. However, this may not have been possible on the USENET groups, and I have never used them so I wouldn’t really know.

The results of the survey are pretty much exactly what we see in news groups today, and I’m not sure if this was always the case back when this study was conducted, but it certainly seems to be the case commonly today. A quarter of the posts were from one time users, and the majority of the rest of the posts were from a very small group of posters who posted a lot compared to everyone else. This phenomenon results in a graph that displays the 80-20 rule, or the long tail rule, where a few people post often and lots of people post a few times. As in most business models, the USENET was fitting the curve, and becoming job-like for a select few members and a passing hobby for most other users. As is expected today, mass communication is not the case on USENET, and instead, the population is much more varied.
Paper #2 Critique

This paper talks about the emergence of Wikipedia as a modern source of knowledge. I first heard about wikis when I came down during my senior year of high school and attended Engineering Open house and heard about a project some students were doing using a wiki. Later that year, I learned about Wikipedia and began using it occasionally, but only for entertainment, and never even considered that it would become a major part of the internet. Once I got to college, I found it increasingly more useful, for example, whether I wanted to know my favorite quarterback’s age, or hometown, or where orangutans are most frequently found, Wikipedia was always waiting with the answers.

The history flow visualization was invented to show the history of a wikipedia page, and display which parts of the article were new, deleted, or added onto. This visualization is interesting, not only to look at, but also because of its naturalistic background. I like visualizations that have to do with nature because I find that often, these types of images not only represent data well, but are also familiar to the user’s eye. This particular visualization looks like a cut-out of a section of rock, where you can view the different layers of sediment and see what happened at which time in history and where different ideas came and went from the article.

I personally have never posted to Wikipedia, because it seems pretty intimidating to me. There is not much in the world that I am all that experienced about and to think that I know a topic better than anyone else in the world seems pretty unlikely, so I rarely even consider changing topics. Some topics I might consider modifying would probably related to m hometown, since it is relatively small and I graduated from school there pretty recently. I find it hard to imagine that I would ever become a full member and worry about changing as many items as I could, going through posts and articles and looking for mistake that I could change. This goes along with most of the things that the study found, the researchers reported most people beginning only editing very small parts of articles, but moving on and up through the times, as they became more confident with their amount of knowledge on topics.

Another important part of Wikipedia is the interface. Many wikipedians said that they might not have contributed at all if it hadn’t been so very easy to edit any page. Without ever logging in, people could change anything, and changes were immediately apparent, which appeals to people’s egos and also their sense of accomplishment. Discussion pages and watchlists help people keep up on changing articles and let people know if their articles that they put their hard work into are being changed or modified in any way. This is crucial to the site, as it gives ownership to the authors for any individual article and will be more willing to go in an correct mistakes and make sure their material does not get construed in the wrong way.
Paper #3 Critique

This paper continues the discussion from the previous paper about Wikipedia and how data is shown and how users interact with it. One of the most interesting topics of discussion in this paper is the section about edit wars. An edit war happens when one user wants to change an article and another user wants to keep it the way it was before. This results in an interesting zigzag pattern in the visualization and really made me think about how much I use Wikipedia. During the edit wars, the battle is only decided when one user gives up, no matter what anyone else thinks, or no matter if the other person is obviously right. This means that a particularly zealous user could potentially be modifying data and presenting false facts, and tons of people could be referencing this as fact, even though it is easily proven wrong. Until there is a sort of government, or at the very least stricter regulations, this remains a very real danger to the Wikipedia community as a whole. A single group of trolls, or people who want to take the site down, could potentially cripple Wikipedia, and cause massive amount of damage.

Another thing that I found interesting is the graph showing the relationship between version number and article size. This shows that over time, almost all articles grow and get more information added to them. This may not be something that is necessarily desirable, since, some things are quite simple and might be better off being redirected somewhere else. It seems that instead of looking for the right place to put information, some users will simply add information to any small article, in order to make it seem more substantial and worthy of remaining an article, whether or not this is necessary.

Stability is another worry of the Wikipedia community since articles are always changing. In 2003, there were over 270 articles that had over 100 versions, and you can imagine that since then, that number must have increased exponentially. It is bothersome then, that information people depend on one day may be gone the next, and something that could have been referred to can be modified or deleted at any one person’s whim. The lack of distinction between innocent writer, malicious editor, and naïve reader is the thing that separates Wikipedia from most other sites, yet may be its downfall in the end. It remains to be seen if a site like Wikipedia, with no moderators can prevail against all its detractors where all others, such as USENET have failed. Sites with limited stability and no ability or even attempt to punish those who lie and attempt to falsify information have a long and hard road to permanent acceptance into modern culture and perhaps more importantly, as reference material to be used in a scholastic setting.