The Whittaker paper on Usenet, *The Dynamics of Mass Interaction*, is a thorough and scientific text documenting patterns of large group conversations. The authors begin by outlining their methods, which seem well founded and logical. By surveying large data sets they glean a broad understanding of the interactions on Usenet as a whole. They do admit that they did not include narrowly focused groups in their information gathering, and that focus may have led to different styles of interaction, but on the whole, the study seems well executed.

The study’s findings seem consistent with my own observations of forum and newsgroup behavior: a small group of contributors account for a large portion of the overall interaction; many threads fail to garner interest, resulting in single message threads (though in forums, “bumping” one’s own posts (replying with a content-free post to keep a thread active/visible) is a regular occurrence that is not witnessed, or at least not documented by Whittaker; a significant number of posts do attract interest and spark conversations; many contributors cross-post (post the same content in multiple locations) either to get more responses or just to hear themselves talk, so to speak.

What this paper does well is describe the behavior of large groups – how they communicate, what factors lead to increased and decreased communication, etc. What it lacks is practical application, or even the suggestion of it. While it may be interesting to know that an FAQ has little effect on the average thread depth of a conversation, how does that help me as an administrator, conversant, or advertiser get more from the group than I previously could have? Whittaker’s paper is a well executed study, but lacks practicality.

*History Flow*, on the other hand brings a fairly practical view to a very different style of mass interaction – the Wiki. The visualization makes several patterns plain, and can
identify trends in popularity of topics, famous people, historical events, etc. This information could be hugely useful to, for example, marketers in deciding what themes would play well in advertisements.

The visualization itself is quite impressive. With only a cursory explanation of what it represents, a reader can glean a good deal of information from it very rapidly – from the relative growth of the article to its popularity to the number of contributors over time, as well as which contributors consistently update a page. History flow represents the community of a wiki, including its blemishes (vandalism, deletions) in a cogent and understandable manner.

The authors expressed surprise at the overall instability of Wikipedia, even among pages that are not overtly controversial, but that over time, articles with large amounts of edits tend to grow larger (thus far without bound). The untrusting nature of the wiki-community leading to a great common good suggests possible models for society – with input from many and accountability for all, with additional privileges for some who prove themselves.

The Bruckman paper, *Becoming Wikipedian*, further supports the idea that a wiki could be a model for society. The general thread of Wikipedia participation flows from use to occasional small edits to major, well-researched contribution to overseeing large bodies of contribution. Each contributor builds up their level of attachment and level of commitment through contribution, through investing their own time, energy and creativity into a project that does not benefit them directly, but benefits many. Those who are dedicated and become attached then continue to work for the larger good of the Wikipedian community and seek its improvement, not just as a resource, but as a community.

The authors make an interesting observation – that the same tools are available to both novice and experienced users, but they are used in very different ways. This indicates
both an accessible and a robust set of tools, something that again, would contribute to a robust and healthy society.