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CS 498  
Critique 2

*Dynamics of Mass Interaction* - Whittaker, Terveen, Hill, Cherney

After having finished this article, I have to first comment that these findings generally hold true for newer forms of "newgroup"-like communication fora from the various thriving phpbb to the boisterous, esoteric x-chan boards. In this regard, the research still holds true and relevant - one could make the observation that despite the differences in access and technology, the basic behavioral patterns behind this form of electronic communication remain constant.

More essential to this critique is the continued development of my idea of an 'information economy'. What stood out in the article is an application of the Pareto Principle, in that a disproportionately small number of posters create a disproportionately large percentage of total posts. This is a phenomena that manifests itself in a lot of social environments, most notably from its origin describing the inequal distribution of wealth among various populations.

That it is observed in Usenet usage patterns is not surprising, although it seems to have taken the authors aback as it countered their notion of the internet as a "egalitarian forum." It would seem that the ability to post is not enough to counter other factors in a collaborative space such as Usenet in creating something resembling "egalitarian." For one thing, one must accept the existance of a hierarchy in newsgroups based on a poster's prolificy (I realize this word is not in the Oxford English dictionary) and percieved authority - the authors brush upon this, recognizing the "[domination] by cliques of verbose contributors." This situation almost seems like a barrier to posting if one does not posess a certain amount of reputation or recognition as a someone worthy of being read.

One could argue that this occurrence would be reduced and that mass interaction would be realized if posters were not self-identified and all messages anonymous, as if every participant were addressed "comrade" and considered equal under the eyes of some inter-meta-net-god. It would be interesting to see if literature exists for this kind of interaction.
What is described in the article is a logical extension to Usenet as described in *Dynamics of Mass Interaction* in regards to participation, but at the same time offers a relatively novel medium with its own challenges and paradigms.

This article treats the subject of participation in the 'information economy' with the concept of information consumers and producers and the shifts encountered when one becomes another, answering qualitatively what *Dynamics* attempts to do quantitatively. For one thing, it is interesting to read about the impetus that spurs readers into editors, mostly centering around the desire to correct articles or impart their own knowledge to the wiki. I would imagine, however, that the vast number of users do not do any edits, significant or otherwise. If this holds true, it can be said that Usenet usage patterns are similarly cast upon Wikipedia, with the few doing the work for the benefit of many.

This inequality, however, is less egregious in that Wikipedia entries are arguably more persistant than Usenet posts, in that what is posted will remain posted, become consumed more readily and not become lost in some semi-emphemeral state. There is no need for information producers to produce as rapidly if the knowledge imparted remains in some concrete form and because the vast number of users are consuming and not producing the data, and as any cynical observer of democracy can tell you, the masses are not necessarily well-informed or -intentioned and should probably not be conducting page edits.

On a more positive note, Wikipedia has a mission that is absent from Usenet, and that mission, in my opinion, is in the best interests of promulgating the wealth of human knowledge. As such, the community that springs forth in support of this mission generally understands its spirit and, as is pointed out in the article, is willing to assist novice users in peripheral participation. As such, Wikipedia represents the most novel shifts in the 'information economy' in that it manifests a cause with universal impact rather than the more self-serving ones found in newsgroups.
Now that a fora for the purpose of encapsulating the entirety of human knowledge exists and continues to thrive in a successful form, it is rather expected that it gets passed under the lens of scrutinizing analysis, and such is the intent of *history flow*. It definitely pleases me know that such a tool exists to study what ostensibly has supplemented a lengthy educational tenure.

The metaphor for understanding entry histories is easy to understand and lends itself to recognizing latent patterns in the text. For example, it was stated that transposing parts of text around in an article is uncommon, something that would not be gleaned easily from simple examination of the edit history, and yet the visualization of crossed lines facilitates this observation.

A surprising observation is the fact that the initial edit is the most persistent and that it more or less sets the tone for the rest of the article. This is not surprising given the cumulative nature of the wiki, seems to support the idea that the initial stub for an entry is descriptive to a bare minimum and almost always neutral and lacking in controversy.