Wikitribune: can crowd-sourced journalism solve the crisis of trust in news?

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Surely what the world needs right now is more paid journalists working with the public to improve the quality of news? So welcome to Jimmy Wales' new venture *Wikitribune* which will use crowd-funding to support a (small) team of professional journalists working collaboratively with expert citizens to find stories, create content and fact-check its own work.

It sounds positive. Especially for someone like me who has championed involving the citizen in the production of 'networked journalism' since my 2008 book *SuperMedia*. Jimmy Wales is an entrepreneurial, public-spirited media innovator. His *Wikipedia* has flaws and sometimes included fake news itself, but it is a great resource that has similar levels of accuracy to more orthodox sources such as traditional journalism and arguably even encyclopaedias.

Here's the 'but'. Firstly, I don't quite get the basic mission: where is the need and demand for this particular project? Secondly, will it work: is this the most efficient way to deliver an antidote to misinformation? The LSE's think-tanks, the Media Policy Project and Polis are both working on these issues, so I'm fascinated to hear what other people think, too.

Wikipedia founder to fight fake news with new Wikitribune site

Crowdfunded online publication from Jimmy Wales will pair paid journalists with army of volunteer contributors

Jimmy Wales making the news

There is plenty of 'fake news' around on a spectrum from deliberate commercial clickbait to distorted hyper-partisan propaganda. There is also an over-abundance of information out there that leaves the citizen confused about the relative merits of different sources. There's also a problem of 'trust' in mainstream media. This matters. As we've seen in recent elections, voters need good information to make good choices.

But there are already hundreds of independent and media-owned fact checking websites. There are hundreds of good newsrooms across the political spectrum churning out quality reportage and analysis. The problem is not one of production, it's of discoverability, prominence on platforms such as Facebook, and the human desire for partisan narratives that please our prejudices.

Wales says that his site will be 'neutral'. But there's no such thing. If you want journalism that is regulated for balance with a fact-based culture we already have the BBC, for example. And there are a range of newsrooms in the US from the *Wall Street Journal* to the *New York Times* that offer credible coverage. They might have cultural biases but they are pretty transparent about their positions.

The wiki principle has a vulnerability to capture by special interests and can be gamed. However, generally it tends towards a consensual narrative where moderators agree on a 'stable' version of an event or issue. That might be 'democratic' but 'truth' in journalism often requires a minority view or one that challenges, not confirms consensus.

Wales has also said that *Wikitribune* will maintain a gatekeeper role, albeit one that allows for greater input and accountability via the public who will contribute to the production process as 'equals'. That will be interesting.

I look forward to seeing how different that is to what many newsrooms are already doing. There isn't a journalist out there who doesn't now tap into audience data and reader responses to guide their work. Some brands such as *the Guardian* in the UK try hard to incorporate the public into setting its news agenda and researching stories.

The trouble is that only a small (and usually unrepresentative) part of the audience gets involved. This can be a great resource in gathering UGC around incidents such as terror attacks. It can provide authentic grass-roots input (see *Guardian Witness*). It can also help on special investigations or research projects.

The Washington Post's David Fahrenthold won a Pulitzer Prize this year for an investigation into Donald Trump's 'philanthropy' that couldn't have been done without reader contribution to the research.

Brands from *Mother Jones* to the *FT* now routinely tap into audience data and the expertise of their readers through moderation, community and membership. It all builds healthy relationships and adds value to the journalism.

But as a way of making routine news I am less convinced that it offers much more and I am sure it carries high transaction costs. Genuine crowd-sourced journalism start-ups that I've looked at have struggled with the editorial management involved in producing content efficiently and of quality and interest to enough people to have an impact.

The excellent Dutch crowd-funded and crowd-sourced *De Correspondent* sounds similar to Wikitribune. It is a success but by its own admission it is very niche and the journalism it creates is 'slow', analytical, specialist, and liberal.

In the end, will the journalism from *Wikitribune* be so different to that already produced?

We are going through a phase of great innovation in the creation of new journalism brands from (in the US) *ProPublica* to *Axios* to the Intercept. Legacy news media is still relatively strong. The real gap is at a local level. The real problem is making sure that people can recognise, access and trust 'quality' news.

I wish *Wikitribune* well and hope that it can address those issues as well as providing another interesting news experiment.

[More detail here on *Wikitribune*]

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