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Much of what I believed about human nature, and the nature of knowledge, has been upended by the Wikipedia. I knew that the human propensity for mischief among the young and bored — of which there were many online — would make an encyclopedia editable by anyone an impossibility. I also knew that even among the responsible contributors, the temptation to exaggerate and misremember what we think we know was inescapable, adding to the impossibility of a reliable text. I knew from my own 20-year experience online that you could not rely on what you read in a random posting, and believed that an aggregation of random contributions would be a total mess. Even unedited web pages created by experts failed to impress me, so an entire encyclopedia written by unedited amateurs, not to mention ignoramuses, seemed destined to be junk.

Everything I knew about the structure of information convinced me that knowledge would not spontaneously emerge from data, without a lot of energy and intelligence deliberately directed to transforming it. All the attempts at headless collective writing I had been involved with in the past only generated forgettable trash. Why would anything online be any different?

So when the first incarnation of the Wikipedia launched in 2000 (then called Nupedia) I gave it a look, and was not surprised that it never took off. There was a laborious process of top-down editing and re-writing that discouraged a would-be random contributor. When the back-office wiki created to facilitate the administration of the Nupedia text became the main event and anyone could edit as well as post an article, I expected even less from the effort, now re-named Wikipedia.

How wrong I was. The success of the Wikipedia keeps surpassing my expectations. Despite the flaws of human nature, it keeps getting better. Both the weakness and virtues of individuals are transformed into common wealth, with a minimum of rules and elites. It turns out that with the right tools it is easier to restore damage text (the revert function on Wikipedia) than to create damage text (vandalism) in the first place, and so the good enough article prospers and continues. With the right tools, it turns out the collaborative community can outpace the same number of ambitious individuals competing.

It has always been clear that collectives amplify power — that is what cities and civilizations are — but what's been the big surprise for me is how minimal the tools and oversight are needed. The bureaucracy of Wikipedia is relatively so small as to be invisible. It's the Wiki's embedded code-based governance, versus manager-based governance that is the real news. Yet the greatest surprise brought by the Wikipedia is that we still don't know how far this power can go. We haven't seen the limits of wiki-ized intelligence. Can it make textbooks, music and movies? What about law and political governance?

Before we say, "Impossible!" I say, let's see. I know all the reasons why law can never be written by know-nothing amateurs. But having already changed my mind once on this, I am slow to jump to conclusions again. The Wikipedia is impossible, but here it is. It is one of those things impossible in theory, but possible in practice. Once you confront the fact that it works, you have to shift your expectation of what else that is impossible in theory might work in practice.

I am not the only one who has had his mind changed about this. The reality of a working Wikipedia has made a type of communitarian socialism not only thinkable, but desirable. Along with other tools such as open-source software and open-source everything, this communitarian bias runs deep in the online world.

In other words it runs deep in this young next generation. It may take several decades for this shifting world perspective to show its full colors. When you grow up *knowing* rather than *admitting* that such a thing as the Wikipedia works; when it is *obvious* to you that open source software is better; when you are certain that sharing your photos and other data yields more than safeguarding them — then these assumptions will become a platform for a yet more radical embrace of the commonwealth. I hate to say it but there is a new type of communism or socialism loose in the world, although neither of these outdated and tinged terms can accurately capture what is new about it.

The Wikipedia has changed my mind, a fairly steady individualist, and lead me toward this new social sphere. I am now much more interested in both the new power of the collective, and the new obligations stemming from individuals toward the collective. In addition to expanding civil rights, I want to expand civil duties. I am convinced that the full impact of the Wikipedia is still subterranean, and that its mind-changing power is working subconsciously on the global millennial generation, providing them with an existence proof of a beneficial hive mind, and an appreciation for believing in the impossible.

That's what it's done for me.