

### Collective Consciousness Supported by the Web: Part Three

**David Sloan Wilson:** Well let's talk about Wikipedia. Wikipedia is always held up as an example of some great thing, an example of the Noosphere which is in some ways self-organizing. And yet when you look at it, and I think both of you probably know quite a lot about Wikipedia. You see that a lot of regulation has to take place in order for it to function. And so I'm eager to know, or basically to have your own interpretations of Wikipedia in particular as something which, on the one hand, is distributed and self-organizing, and yet on the other hand needs a lot of oversight for it to be the storehouse of knowledge, relatively reliable knowledge, that it is. Can you comment on that blend of system level oversight and bottom-up generativity?

**Shima Beigi:** I think for me Wikipedia is... I mean, I read a book, when I was doing my Ph.D. From, I think Clay Shirky, I hope that I pronounce his name correctly. It was about Wikipedia and the name of the book was Here Comes Everybody. So everybody could become someone in this book, but well, actually exactly what you mentioned, that there are rules to follow on how actually the digital revolution that we are experiencing and decentralization that is happening. It's not about creating disconnection, it's about creating better connections. So decentralization means... It doesn't mean disconnection, it means better connection, if I can summarize it that way. So I think Wikipedia is maybe a good example of a self-organizing system that organizes on a set of agreements that are being put into place that might lead as a good example.

Of course, not all pages on Wikipedia or of high quality, but pages that are highly visited and highly edited, I think could be a form of, I think, agents, or maybe I can call that people becoming or accepting responsibility of being a part of a greater system and wanting that system to work better for themselves and for everyone. So it's an act of... I think, also at the same time saying that in order to create a, not perfect, but an adaptive system, it doesn't need to get rid of the central control mechanism. It's a perfect balance or kind of balance between a degree of decentralization and bottom up movement, and informal links in your system. At the same time, a general regulation and control mechanism that can create an environment that creates rich and meaningful connection. This is my thinking on Wikipedia.

**DSW:** And I call that bottom-up and enlightened top-down. So, Francis tell us about Wikipedia and especially the regulatory aspect of it, but the incentive to cheat. We're talking about false information. Well, I mean, there's so much incentive to add false information to Wikipedia. What prevents that to the degree that it does?

**Francis Heylighen:** Wikipedia actually is I think more bottom-up than centralized, but it has a beautiful solution to this stability-plasticity dilemma. So the stability is that you want to keep the good knowledge in Wikipedia. The plasticity is that you would want anybody who has some idea, that is relevant to Wikipedia to be able to add that easily. The good thing about Wikipedia is that it is kind of a memory that everybody can write on, which means you can erase things that people have done before. But you can always restore what was done earlier. So it's because of the versioning system that nothing gets lost in Wikipedia. Whatever anybody has written, at any stage, on any page on Wikipedia can in principle be recovered.

So what is the normal dynamics? Somebody writes something about the topic. Somebody else reads it and thinks that, in some way, whatever he read is not perfect. So either something needs to be added, that's a more common view or something that you wrote he considers incorrect or not well-formulated, so he corrects that. And then somebody else does the same, somebody else does the same, and somebody else does the same. So it's a kind of a process of variation, selection. Everybody adds a little bit of variation, but will to some degree maybe remove things that others have done before, which is selection. But the variation selection here is completely distributed, which means it's actually the largest

group that does it. And what you will typically find is that those things that are obviously false, they get eliminated sooner or later.

Now, when you speak about centralized control, there is some degree of centralization now that wasn't there in the beginning of Wikipedia. Because I've seen Wikipedia start from the very beginning, I was among the first who was writing articles, is that now you have a kind of a class of people who call themselves editors and who know the workings of Wikipedia better, who know the etiquette, who know the rules and who will be more careful in making sure that people don't add false news, et cetera.

But even before these people were there, Wikipedia functioned pretty well. If, let's say on the page on the landing of the moon, somebody would write it's all fake, they have never landed on the moon. Then somebody else would either immediately eliminate it or put a reference, XYZ has claimed that the landing was all fake, but here are the following arguments to show that this a fake story cannot work. So Wikipedia just accumulates good things and occasionally eliminates bad things. But it is a memory on which you can build. You build further on what's there and that means occasionally destroying something. But most of the time, it's an accumulation of memory.

**DSW:** I think that account, which was a great account Francis, I think it underestimates the forces of false information. I mean, sometimes the false information is just false, that gets weeded out because nobody has a vested interest. But when vested interests are at stake, now there's going to be real pressure to insert biased information into something like that. And that pressure has to be opposed in some way. Just take a polarized situation and just imagine them all trying to pump in their information into Wikipedia. There has to be some process that pumps it out, or that prevents that from... In other words, there has to be a stronger immune system. It's not just a matter of bad versus good information. It's a matter of the equivalent of disease organisms that are actively trying to invade and so we have to pay more attention to the concept of an immune system that protects against very smart, very effective, enemy strategies of some kind or another. That's what I think needs to be an important part of everything that we talk about. It's not just a matter of good versus bad information. It's a matter of managing this, these really strong, strong, oppositional forces. And now Wikipedia presumably has something like that.

**FH:** But these oppositional forces are much more limited than you make it look. Most pages on Wikipedia are about pretty neutral topics, about a particular record and who played on that record; about a particular scientific theory and what are the different equations of it; they are about a particular geographical location, which views are in a particular city. Most of these things that are not controversial. So there is no opposition. When you have something like, let's say a typical example is the Armenian genocide. In the Armenian genocide, the Turks will claim in all possible ways that it didn't happen. The Armenians will, in all possible ways, claim that it did happen. So you typically will have what is called an edit war. So I'm sure that the first page on the Armenian genocide, that a Turk immediately erased it, and then an Armenian immediately restored it, and a Turk immediately repeated it. And then, what you get is that, after a while, it settles down like that in the Armenian genocide; there will be an Armenian version of the story and there will be a Turkish version of the story. And that's the way that Wikipedia makes compromise. It's like, if there are two versions, that really we cannot be synthesized then, Wikipedia just says Person A believes this and Person B believes that, and that is one way to solve the problem.

**DSW:** So that would be true for American history? Take patriotic versions of American history. So there's a patriotic version and a more scholarly version. I mean, there's so many.

**FH:** In the days of the Gulf war, George W. Bush was quite controversial, and there were people who loved him, and there were people who hated him. And so there was quite an edit war about George W. Bush. But in the end, the Wikipedia policies just keep up objective facts or facts that can be traced to a particular source. And then you can say, this journalist has claimed that George W. Bush was lying when

he said this. Well, this spokesman of the White House said that George W. Bush said this because of this. That's how these things got resolved.

**DSW:** So basically there are scholarly standards or there are journalistic standards that are applied. Shima, do you have anything to add to this?

**SB:** I think something just to add, very shortly, I think the example of Wikipedia cannot be generalized because it's Wikipedia. Wikipedia is limited to the format and the setting that it has. So it's easy to have a set of rules and objectives on Wikipedia. But if we want to take it like be inspired and apply some of those to the Noosphere, well, having narratives that would bring mass consciousness, that certain ideas indeed are toxic for the global community, certain ideas are actually leading us to more segregation and also polarization. If you want to live in a planet or in a global community, that's more sustainable, more inclusive, basically, I think we need to search for common ground. We need to look for common ground. Even though that we might have different points of view or ideas, you're still sharing the same kind of Noosphere. And I think bringing the conversation and narrative in that direction would contribute to what you mentioned about the immune system of the noosphere. How can we make it strong by actually bringing awareness that certain ideas indeed harm all of us? Even some of us might not believe them, but we are being exposed to them by virtue of being a part of this whole.

**DSW:** Well, I'd like to finish up by the need, of course, to improve our situation. Because there's so much that is not working, basically. So much that's not adaptive. How do we make it more adaptive? And one point I want to make is that this is work that's required at all scales. It's not just that we need to increase the scale of cooperation and all of that. If you look at any scale, you'll find, actually what you'll find is variation. Look at the city scale, which Shima I know is your special interest. Cities vary in how well they function as adaptive units. Some do well, others do very poorly, most are in between.

I work at the scale of small groups, any group of people that are trying to get things done, any team, anything, no matter how small. Every couple, two people are a group. And if you look at that scale, you find variation, some do spectacularly, some meltdown, and most are muddling along in between. And so at all scales, we have improvements that can be made. And then especially at the global scale, as we go up in scale, then we increasingly enter a zone where lots of improvements need to be made.

And so at any scale: cities, small groups, the global village, what's the process whereby we make things better? And I want to maybe have each of you answer that broad question, and then I'll wrap it up with my own answer to that question. At any scale we choose to operate on, what's required to improve? There's always room for improvement. So what's required for improvement at any scale in a real-world setting? Shima, why don't you go first?

**SB:** A quote came to my mind is that change begins by a local process. So you are the change in the world. I think it's just, I see it like that. Basically if I want to change the world, my manifesto for myself is to actually, I need to change myself. Because I am the one that is observing this experience of life. And I am experiencing things that I don't like. So I ask myself, can I be a solution? So instead of just, I think the previous paradigm that we were living, has a lot of problems, so how can we create solution oriented systems? How I can be a solution to any kind of relationship that I'm entering, whether it's a relationship with a partner or whether it's a relationship with a cat or with a dog, or with a tree. So looking at myself as a relational being, something that is connected to multiple layers of this experience of life, and then how I can become a solution, how I can become change myself. This is how I see it.

**FH:** Okay, I think this is maybe the occasion to summarize another idea in our paper that is, how do we deal with all these problems that we have identified on the Internet? The conspiracy theories, the false news, et cetera, all the confusion. And there we thought of two strategies.

The first strategy is to better understand the dynamics of all these things. The dynamics that depend on a wide range of factors. Personal psychology, for example. People tend to be much more close-minded

whenever they feel afraid of something, whenever there's something negative. Memetics, we already spoke about how memes propagate and which memes are more likely to propagate than others. The different algorithms that sites like Facebook use to determine what news you get. All of these, have an effect on how memes spread. Various social norms. What you need to have a design for the Noosphere is to look at all these factors that influence these dynamics.

Why is it important? Not only scientifically to understand what's happening, but once you see what is happening, then you potentially can intervene in it. If you see that, for example, certain dynamics, consistently lead to bad results. Famous example are the echo chambers that lead to polarization, then you can start developing norms to prevent that. Norms that could take the form of some kind of a netiquette, that could take the form if necessary of a law that for example, would forbid Facebook to use certain types of algorithms, or that maybe could be formulated as kind of general ethical norms that we try to educate people into— don't behave like this on the Internet, because it's not good for you or for anybody.

So that's one approach is understanding the dynamics of what's going on and using that to formulate new norms and rules to make it work better.

But the other thing we thought about was that, if you want people to get a more healthy view, they need to have this overview, this narrative, this famous Third Story. They need to have a kind of a broad world view that allows them to make sense of what's going on in the world. The problem now is we are bombarded with information, most of which is pretty negative. Most of which is highly fragmented. Most of which is completely changing from one moment to another. Shima likes to use the VUCA acronym, which means volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. So we are in a VUCA world. Everything changes all the time. It's uncertain, it's ambiguous, it's complex. That means that people just lose the sense that they understand what's going on.

So you need to again, give them a sense of what's happening, is not random. It's not just the world coming to an end. It is part of an evolutionary process that may be complex, but that has some kind of a soul. There is some kind of driving direction and this driving direction—that is the Third Story. And I think that part of what we need to do in this project, is to formulate this Third Story in a form that can stretch across the Internet and the Noosphere, that is something that is sufficiently concrete, that let's say non-scientists would be inspired by it.

So if you ask me what to do about all the pathologies, I would say first understanding what are the factors that accelerate these pathologies. Second, provide an alternative in the form of a Third Story that gives people again a sense of belonging to some larger whole that is evolving in a positive way.

**DSW:** That's great, both of you. I'm so happy that you brought the narrative up, Francis, and what I'll add to that is the need for constant experimentation. Because even with that narrative, when we decide to do something to make that better, we don't really know if it's going to work, because the world is so complex. And so that means we have to experiment with the welfare of the whole earth in mind, basically. We're part of something larger than ourselves. That thing is the whole earth, the whole earth system. And as to what we do at any scale, large or small, we have to experiment. And what is experimentation but a conscious form of evolution? That's all it is. Experimentation is a form of conscious evolution. And I think the word conscious there comes in, in such a straightforward way. When we talk about consciousness, it can get so very complex and mechanistic and so on.

But when we talk about it this way, that basically we need to experiment. We need to be mindful about what we're working towards. We need to try stuff out with the best of our knowledge and then we select what works with prosocial goals in mind. That's an everyday meaning of consciousness, which is the most important meaning, because it's just so simple and what we need to do.

So, this is awesome. And so happy to talk with both of you together and I'll be having separate conversations with you both. As well, but thank you so much for taking the time.

**SB:** Thank you very much for invitation. And also it was great to talk with you and be with you. Thank you.

**FH:** The same for me.