

Anatomy of the Noosphere: Segment 6

David Sloan Wilson: Okay, so there's motivational part of this and a governance part of this. Let's begin with motivation, why is it so meaningful? That makes this so worthwhile? It's not financial capital it's something else, but it's really sustaining for some people such as yourself. So what is it that gives it such a meaning for you that keeps you doing it?

Riskier/Anne Clin: I think the knowledge that we do make a difference in sharing information across the world is very important to a lot of people. For some people it's important to share a very limited section of information. They may focus completely on trains or they may focus on politicians or they may focus on some other aspect. For some people it's being able to share information about their native country or their local region. And I have sometimes worked with an editor who writes extensively about the history of early Quebec, for example, and the families that were involved, the towns that existed at the time, and how it has impacted Quebec as it has developed over the years. And I've worked with people who are starting to bring out more information about African countries and figuring out how to fit that information in, to an English Wikipedia that is primarily written by Westerners. So we want to make sure that we integrate that information.

DSW: I think of this as a very democratic form of scholarship. And let me just say you a little bit on scholarship, because I'm a scholar and a scientist. And I have a reverential attitude towards scholarship, this community of people that are just really assiduous about getting the facts right. And I attribute almost like a sacredness to knowledge and scholarship, but of course, so much of it takes place in universities, inside the proverbial ivory tower. And is therefore very biased in its own way and very restricted and so on. And so Wikipedia, it seems, offers an opportunity for people from anywhere, any walk of life to contribute to scholarly knowledge like the early history of Quebec, you don't necessarily have to be a professor to do that. Is that part of the motivation here? I mean, people want to talk about trains or their nation in Africa or the early history of Quebec is that they're basically eager to function as scholars, no matter what their day job?

R/AC: I think that's definitely part of it. And there are a lot of people who enjoy reading and researching and having hobbies outside of Wikipedia, that they are then able to share on Wikipedia. Share that knowledge that they've gained about their various hobbies or their various personal interests. I think that's really important because it does have some effect. You'd also be surprised at how many universities participate in Wikipedia.

DSW: Oh, yeah. I'm not surprised at that.

R/AC: Literally...

DSW: Yeah, yeah.

R/AC: There are literally hundreds of professors who create Wikipedia classes and bring their students and require them to participate on Wikipedia. And they'll often contribute in areas where scholarly expertise is really important. I will use the example of something that we ran into during the last United States election, where some Internet meme decided that Benford's Law, which is a very esoteric mathematical theorem would show that, the results of the US election were false and they started editing this article. And I can assure you that 99.98% of Wikipedians don't understand math at that level to be able to edit the article. However, we do have a whole core group of mathematicians and we just sort of said, come and check this out, figure out whether not this makes sense. And they, cleaned up the article made sense of it and got rid of all of the nonsense from the Internet memes.