

Mayo Fuster Morell:

The Unethics of Sharing: Wikiwashing

Abstract:

In order for online communities to assemble and grow, some basic infrastructure is necessary that makes possible the aggregation of the collective action. There is a very intimate and complex relationship between the technological infrastructure and the social character of the community which uses it. Today, most infrastructure is provided by corporations and the contrast between community and corporate dynamics is becoming increasingly pronounced. But rather than address the issues, the corporations are actively obfuscating it. Wikiwashing refers to a strategy of corporate infrastructure providers where practices associated to their role of profit seeking corporations (such as abusive terms of use, privacy violation, censorship, and use of voluntary work for profit purposes, among others) that would be seen as unethical by the communities they enable are concealed by promoting a misleading image of themselves associated with the general values of wikis and Wikipedia (such as sharing and collaboration, openness and transparency). The empirical analysis is based on case studies (Facebook, Yahoo! and Google) and triangulation of several methods.

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Author:

Dr. Mayo Fuster Morell:

- Institute of Government and Public Policies - Autonomous University of Barcelona. Mòdul de Recerca A. Primera planta. Parc de la Recerca UAB 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain +34 93 586 88 14
- ☎ + 34-648877748, ✉ mayo.fuster@eui.eu, 🌐 www.onlinecreation.info
- Relevant publications:
 - Fuster Morell, M. (2011). The Wikimedia Foundation and the Governance of Wikipedia's Infrastructure: Historical Trajectories and its Hybrid Character. In Lovink, G., Tkacz, N. & Roberts, I. (eds). *Critical Point of View Reader*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011. (pp. 325-341).
 - Fuster Morell, M. (2010). La partecipazione nella comunità di creazione online. Partecipazione come eco-sistema. I casi di Openesf.net i Wikipedia. *Politica del diritto. Il Molino* n°: 2, September 2010 (Italy). (pp. 515-544).

Wikinomics: The New economy of information access and sharing

The new technologies of information (NTIs), together with other processes such as the increase in education levels, have greatly extended the potential for access and sharing information, which is resulting in several forms of online collective action. Online creation communities (OCCs) refer to individuals that communicate, interact and collaborate, aiming at knowledge-making and sharing. In order for OCCs to take place, it is necessary to have some basic infrastructure that allows the aggregation of the collective action online. The infrastructure is made up of a number of components: servers, domain names, online platforms (with communication and collaborative authoring tools), among others. Infrastructure providers solve those aspects for the communities. For example, the Wikimedia Foundation is the provider of the infrastructure within which the community of participants who build up Wikipedia can interact. There are several models of infrastructure provision, which offer creators different conditions. When OCCs started to emerge, infrastructure providers were closely linked to the community of users and were mission based, instead of profit based (Fuster Morell, 2010). The entrepreneurial culture and business ideals of raising money through innovation with NTI informational products also emerged. Over years, infrastructure provision by corporations has increased, constituting the new economy of information access and sharing.

The new economy of information access and sharing, also known as Web 2.0 or Wikinomics, is based on the commercialization of information flows and services provided by media corporations (O'Reilly, 2005; Tapscott & Williams, 2007).¹ Some of the platforms provided by corporate hosts bring together very large communities of participants and domi-

nate their markets (Tapscott & Williams, 2007). Example of corporations are Facebook (providing social networking platform), Google (providing search services and YouTube a video-archive), Skype (providing communication services), Twitter (providing micro-blogging services), or Yahoo! (providing, among other things, Flickr, an image repository).

This new economy results in a shift of the business model following the 2001 "dot-com" crisis of the technological industry (O'Reilly, 2005). In the economic model of Wikinomics, the relationship between media corporations and their "clients" possesses certain peculiarities: Individuals become "users" of the services provided by the media corporations, rather than the latter selling fixed products to "consumers". In this relationship, media corporations depend on the content created by their users to increase the value of their services. However, users contribute with content depending on their own views and motivations, and the lack of control over these important factors (the availability of volunteers to create content) indicates a weakness in these types of business models. Additionally, it renders the reputation of the corporation somewhat vulnerable. If a community of users sharing content becomes the product of the corporation, then the corporation is in many ways at the mercy of its users. One consequence is that the community of users sharing content is more empowered in the face of the corporation. This creates a stimuli encouraging ethical practices by the corporations. Corporations therefore make extra effort to maintain their reputation and image and to "gain" the trust of their communities of users and the general public. However, as the actual practices of the commercial providers do not always conform to this, there is the incentive of creating "fake" images of the commercial providers in order to gain a reputation, while at the same time developing unethical practices. This is where 'wikiwashing' comes into play.

Wikiwashing

Wikiwashing refers to a set of actions developed by corporations that first and foremost offer services for information sharing and collaboration online in order to build, promote or direct attention towards an image of themselves connoted with the positive values associated with sharing and collaboration among peers (their users) or to associate its image with that of non-corporate entities such as Wikipedia or wiki technology in general; secondly, it refers to concealing or limiting access to its role as a com-

¹ ICTs have gone through several technological generations. The latest ICT tendency is found in the concept of the Web 2.0. The Web 2.0 is generally used to refer to a second generation of ICT-based services, such as social networking sites, wikis, and communication tools that emphasize online collaboration and sharing amongst "users" to build up the site content. It also differs from early web development (retrospectively labelled Web 1.0) in that it moves away from static websites, the use of search engines, and surfing from one website to the next, and towards a more dynamic and interactive World Wide Web. However, the term Web 2.0 was originally used to represent a shift in the business model, "a new way of doing business", after the dot-com crisis (O'Reilly 2005).

mercial service and infrastructure provider—such as conditions of use, sharing data with governments, profit-making—in order to perform unethical and abusive practices in these areas.

The term **'wikiwashing'** is proposed for several reasons in order to frame this set of activities.² Firstly it includes a reference to wiki. On many occasions, Wikipedia or wiki technologies in general, and the positive values associated with them, have explicitly been used by corporations to "wash" (i.e. clean up), and thus make attractive, their image. Secondly, the term wiki equates with speed. The reactions of corporations to "wash" their image tend to be very fast and aggressive, in order to stop negative images of themselves spreading virally. Thirdly, wiki is also used to refer to the new economy as "Wikinomics" (Tapscott & Williams, 2007). Fourthly, it includes the notion of washing, referring to an act of keeping something "clean" of negative expressions or interest in the corporate image. Finally, and most importantly, wikiwashing is analogous with "whitewashing".

The term whitewashing initially (dating from 1591) referred to a cheap white painting technique used to give a clean appearance quickly. From 1800 on it began to be used in political contexts regarding the efforts made to appear beautiful on the outside without changing the inside (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2003; Wikipedia, 2011). More recently, other terms have emerged to refer to specific forms of whitewashing. The most popular, "greenwashing", is used to describe the practice of companies spinning their products and policies as environmentally friendly, or "green" (Green washing index, 2011).³

² To my knowledge, the first adoption of the term "wikiwashing" was in an article in 2008, which I then expanded as part of my doctoral thesis (Fuster Morell, 2010). In December 2010, Goldstein used the term as part of a blog post to refer to Wikileaks' use of the term wiki (Source: <https://shiftingbalance.org/?p=924> Last access 30th April 2011). The term has also been used occasionally to refer to minor editing or "cleaning" task of articles in Wikipedia (actually there is a tool called wikiwash.org which helps to identify problematic articles) or to refer to "cleaning up" the image of a company in its Wikipedia article.

³ Another such term is "bluewash", a term used to describe a partnership between the United Nations and a corporation which has agreed to abide by the United Nations Global Compact. Since there are no screening or enforcement mechanisms to ensure that the corporation adheres to those principles, the term makes reference to a public relations ploy designed to improve corporate image (Bruno & Karliner, 2000). "Pinkwashing" (from pink ribbon and whitewash) refers to the promotion of products (that increase pollution or are cancerous) by donating to a breast cancer charity (Landeman, 2008).

Wikiwashing does not specifically rely on the use of wiki or a particular type of technology, but on the assertion in their public relations and branding strategy of possessing values associated with wikis (such as sharing and collaboration, openness and transparency), whilst simultaneously concealing unethical practices and practices not in line with those values.

Infrastructure providers, regardless of whether they are for profit or not-for profit, always have some form of public relations and a branding strategy. Wikiwashing does not refer to public relations as such. Furthermore, wikiwashing should not be understood as the public relations and branding policy of media corporations in contrast with other types of infrastructure providers. Wikiwashing incorporates and is developed via corporate public relations and branding, though it does not only involve corporate public relations. Wikiwashing refers to dual aspects: i) to develop practices in their role of for-profit infrastructure provider (i.e. abusive terms of use and violation of privacy policies, censor data, replacing workers with volunteers) that would likely be regarded as unethical by the communities of users of the infrastructure – if they would know about it, ii) at the same time using their public relations and branding strategy to conceal those unethical practices and appear to be associated with a series of values connected to wikis that in fact they do not perform: In other words, the use of the public relations and branding in order to create a dishonest or manipulative public image because it does not correspond with their real practices.

The following section presents these dual aspects of wikiwashing. First, the set of unethical practices will be presented; then how, on the top of that, media corporations perform wikiwashing through the image they build up around themselves in order to conceal those abusive and unethical aspects.

The empirical analysis is based on case studies of media corporations providing infrastructure services. Facebook (as provider of Facebook social networking side), Yahoo! (as provider of Flickr) and Google (as provider of YouTube video sharing platform) were the central cases examined here. Reference is also made to other examples in order to illustrate wikiwashing practices. The methodology is based on the triangulation of several methods, including virtual ethnography, discourse analysis and a total of 25 interviews. Data collection was carried out from 2008 to 2011.

The "grey and dirty" side of Wikinomics

This section will present the areas which remain in the shadow of the corporations promoted image and that are based on abusive practices. These involve: The terms of services, Government demands for user information, and the use of voluntary work.

In the corporate model of the three cases, it is the infrastructure providers who define the **terms of services**. Users are constricted by each site's terms of service through private contracts, rather than rely on the law as written. However, users are not expected to have a chance to negotiate the contents of these private contracts. Furthermore, terms of use could be obscure for several reasons and users might easily be unaware of their existence. Terms of use can be changed by the providers at any time, particularly in the case of Facebook where the terms of use changed six times over the course of two months,⁴ making it difficult to follow the exact terms of use at any given moment. Additionally, the terms of use are defined in legal terms and in long and small text that tend to be difficult for the general user to understand and read through. To simplify the reading of such terms of service, Flickr provides a shorter version in the form of "community guidelines". However, Flickr community guidelines are very broad, with greater potential for subjective interpretation, in the manner of "soft laws". Additionally, the overall conditions (which include term of use, but also other policies such as privacy, ads, and intellectual property) are spread across several pages.

Furthermore, corporations might not be transparent and consistent when it comes to the application of user policies. For example, Facebook requests that users log in with their real name and surname. Facebook's suspicion that the name of an account does not correspond to the real name of the person is reason enough to deactivate the account (without notification), but at the same time many "fake" accounts, with names that obviously do not correspond to a person, can be identified on Facebook (York, 2010).

Governments of any country from which a platform is accessed may request information from corporations about their users, or request that

corporations remove certain information from their platforms. Corporations are forced by law to respond to governmental requests. However, the process is opaque: Corporations could inform their users that a government has requested their information, though this does happen rarely (York, 2010). This opens up a grey area of censorship or surveillance which could be both within or without the perimeters of legal regulation. It was along these lines, and aided by Facebook, that Israel prevented scores of pro-Palestinian activists in July 2011 from boarding Tel Aviv-bound flights in Europe.⁵ Similarly, researchers reported the scanning of Skype chats for sensitive keywords in China: If present, they were reported and stored on government servers (Villeneuve, 2008).

The use of these sharing platforms may be conceptually framed in various ways, from a mere use of a service provided by a corporation, to providing free labour (Terranova, 2000). This is in the base of another challenging area that has to do with the use of voluntary contributions to benefit commercial companies. There are permeable boundaries between active and engaged community members and employees of the companies and on certain occasions employees and volunteers act very similarly. According to Moulier-Boutang, it questions the crisis of the wage system of employment (2009). From critical theory perspectives, Wikinomics contributes to the concentration of wealth as participants' activities have a tangible value for the providers (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Fuchs, 2008; Moulier-Boutang, 2007). Several authors argue that commercial platforms constitute a source of exploitation by the companies of volunteer work or free work, because the corporation benefits from the value generated by collective interaction (Terranova, 2000). In the view of Moulier-Boutang, it is part of a "shift to a third capitalism, what we call cognitive capitalism relying upon capture of positive externalities more and more produced, located, and acting outside the historical boundaries of the firm, for continuous innovation and production of different publics (audience) more than market of commodities" (Moulier-Boutang, 2007, p.1). A salient characteristic of the corporations is the gap between the very small number of employees and the massive number of volunteer participants involved. In line with this, Flickr's working team has 48 employees while the platform involves millions of participants.⁶

⁴ From the 25th April until 7th July 2011. Source: The terms of service tracker <http://www.tosback.org/timeline.php> (Last consultation 6 August 2011).

⁵ Source: Associated Press. Israel blocks airborne protest, questions dozens, 9th July 2011.

⁶ Source: www.flickr.com (Last consultation: December 2008).

This large gap is also present in Google and Facebook. Some authors claim that community members generating value should be compensated (Weigend, 2009). However, when crowdsourcing is paid for it is not necessarily based on good working conditions. Fuchs points out that, "the reward (of Amazon crowdsourcing) is four cents for an estimated task time of 10 minutes, which results in a total hourly compensation of 24 cents if you repeatedly carry out similar tasks" (2010). Furthermore, it is legally unclear as to whether a volunteer can carry out a prescribed set of tasks in a prescribed time frame for a commercial organization (B, Johnson, Interview, December 9, 2008). In the USA, there was a large lawsuit in the late 1990s against AOL, the first corporation to use voluntary work, which established that AOL was substituting workers' positions with volunteer positions.

Abusive terms of use, violation of privacy and sharing of data with third parties such as governments, censorship of content, and substitution of workers' positions with volunteers, among others, are a set of unethical practices of media corporations in their role of infrastructure providers. In the following section, the other component of wikiwashing will be described; The use of their public relations and branding strategy to conceal those unethical practices and instead 'clean up' their image by appearing to be associated to a series of wiki-connected values.

The 'washing' of unethical practices by media corporations promoting a "wiki" image

Wikiwashing involves the promotion of a particular type of public relations and branding, which favour the invisibility of the above presented unethical practices and instead brings to attention an image associated with the positive values of wikis. There is a set of characteristics on how the corporations frame their image in this regard. Media corporations tend to: i) promote an image of themselves as **technological tools** (not as corporations) and which also result in a lack of perception regarding the corporate profit-seeking character; ii) promote a **neutral conception of technology** while playing a major role in defining the platform agenda and dynamics; iii) promote a discourse and a vision of themselves as **equal to other tools or platforms that are based on a non-profit model of provision** and feature more empowering user conditions; iv) present themselves as **being community-**

friendly, that is by being with and for the community; v) present themselves as being associated to values linked to wikis; vi) adopt the **aesthetics of the playground** and create a platform environment framed by the optimistic ideology of growth without highlighting risks.

i) Corporations present an image of themselves as **technological tools**, rather than as a corporation. In this way, there is often not much distinction made between a corporation and the technological service it offers (for example in the trade mark or logo) - Google the search engine has the same name and logo as Google Inc, and the same could be said of Facebook and Twitter. However, this is not the case of Flickr provided by Yahoo!. Additionally, there is limited and fairly discreet information on the corporation on its service website. Here the inaccessibility of the various terms of use presented above can be recalled, or the lack of references in the three cases to their business models. Whilst the platform prominently displays references to technology for online sociability, sharing, or access, among other values, certain types of purpose (i.e., commercial ones) are systematically misrepresented (Werry, 1999).

ii) In addition to reinforcing the image of a technological tool, these corporations promote a **neutral concept of technology**. From this perspective, the technology is easy to use, and users adopt and use it according to and governed by their needs without agency or intervention of others. However, the results of a large-N statistical analysis showed that corporations, as any other form of infrastructure providers, have a significant role in defining the type of activity and interaction between individuals on the platform (Fuster Morell, 2010). In other words, even if the corporate model of provision promotes a format of "non-presence" by the platforms, providers (and technology) are not neutral.

Corporations' commodity participants' behaviour towards the profit goals: The profit goal of the corporations is highlighted by its emphasis on flow and new activity. Along these lines, and according to Danlberg, (2005), the case of Flickr, provided by Yahoo!, highlights the last photos uploaded more than it does the organization of the photos. Yahoo! aims to maximize the number of people using its services, rather than design interaction in a way that would increase an integration of the content. The demands of advertisers and the requirement to increase paid subscriptions limit the type of content, number of participants, demographics of partici-

pants and the overall design of the platform as well as increasing growth and flow.

iii) There are different models of platform provision as to the type of provider and the conditions of use (Fuster Morell, 2010). The corporate model is one variety, but non-profit or other types of profit-making models also exist. Nevertheless, corporations promote a discourse and a vision of themselves as **equal to other tools or platforms that are based on a non-profit model of provision and feature more empowering user conditions**. In particular, Wikinomics corporations tend to situate themselves as being equal to Wikipedia. For example, Telefonica presents itself thus: *"Wikipedia democratizes the creation of knowledge, as we [Telefonica] democratize the access to Internet"*⁷. However, the above-mentioned large-N statistical comparison showed that Wikipedia's conditions of use are more empowering for its community of users (in terms of decision making and the level of freedom and autonomy of the users - Fuster Morell, 2010).

iv) A platform which appears to actively listen to and have a fair relationship with its community is more valuable and attractive to participants. It is part of the more general discourse and approach of the infrastructure providers towards the users and the community of users to present themselves as **being community-friendly**, that is by being with and for the community. In Flickr's words, *"Flickr works on getting things up and serving you"*⁸. However, in the words of Bill Johnson, an expert on community managing: *They may have been giving lip service to this concept of: "we want to embrace the community and we're all about community for the community's sake". In reality, that's often not the case.* (B. Johnson, Interview, December 9, 2008). Corporations also "fake" their friendly image via several mechanisms, for example, when "false" users created by employees participate in the community act as regular participants without revealing the fact that they are corporate employees (B. Johnson, Interview, December 9, 2008) or when a community manager uses feedback to legitimize decisions, such as *Tell[ing] people [to look] at new products, asking for suggestions (look or don't look at it), then when re-launching saying "This is what you wanted"*. (C.

Watson, Community manager, intervention at Online Community Report Unconference).

v) Corporations frame their actions as being associated to wiki-connected values. In this regard, and in the manner of the three case studies, the value of sharing is present. Facebook - *"Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life"*; Flickr - *"Share your life in photos"*; and YouTube - *"Join the largest worldwide video-sharing community!"*⁹.

vi) In addition, corporations promote the **aesthetics of the playground**, in contrast to the aesthetics of "professionalism" of corporations previous to the Web 2.0 boom, such as Microsoft; this recalls the values of youth, innocence, being carefree, and enjoyment: A space of play free from "real" consequences.

In line with the game imagery, corporations create a platform environment framed by the optimistic ideology of growth in "consumption" and the enthusiasm around values such as sharing without assumptions of risks by users, and looking to create legal conditions which reduce responsibilities for corporations.

In this regard, wikiwashing is in tune with other contemporary processes, thinking and ideology - positive thinking as a way of ignoring consequences and risks. Wikiwashing emerges in a context of diminished or non-existent responsibility regarding different types of risk. The recent nuclear disaster in Japan is an example of the lack of properly measuring the risks associated with technology. The 2008 financial crisis is another one.

According to Ehrenreich (2010), positive thinking has been a key component of corporate culture since the 1980s. Business men contracted motivational speakers and distributed books on positive thinking as a way to cope with white workers anxiety, and accept the reduction of their working conditions without thinking critically about how and why they were out of work, indicating that their mental state was the key resource in explaining whether they had a job. Positive thinking is based on an individualistic approach, because when faced with a problem it suggests that the mind provides the key resource without mentioning the responsibilities of corporations or states, or it suggests solutions based on solidarity or mutual responsibility amongst people

⁷ Source: Intervention of a representative from Telefonica Argentina at the inaugural press conference of Wikimania 2009 (Buenos Aires, 25 August 2009).

⁸ Source: Flickr.com (Retrieved May 15, 2010).

⁹ Source: Each case website retrieved 5th August 2011.

(Ehrenreich, 2010). A new wave of positive thinking was also applied to the financial crisis. Reich links the capacity to get to very high levels of debts, and nevertheless keep up expenditure, to the optimism of positive thinking (Reich, 2010). The idea is not to assume the risks of one's actions, but to keep buying because one has to look to the future with optimism. Similarly, Wikinomics is based on a constant flow and increase of information, and an optimistic approach towards NTIs without assuming its risks.

The points above are **illustrated** by the style and design of corporate platforms. Furthermore, they are also present in the message that the corporation displays outwith its own online spaces, such as via press, public representation, online marketing (like cleaning their image on a Wikipedia article), viral campaigns, sponsorship, and publications among other things. The spreading of this image also involves the figure of technological "guru" or evangelist, who as an independent figure can promote the corporation, even if they are directly paid by the corporation to "spread the word" in several places or are associated with the company though other indirect mechanisms.

Conclusions

In every case, and particularly since 2004, online infrastructure provision by corporations is increasing in contrast to previous type of infrastructure providers. Corporate-operated platforms play an important role in global communication and in hosting (and regulating) public debate. This suggests the importance of the role of such corporations, and proves just how delicate the ethics by which they perform such a role are.

Wikitwashing refers to a strategy of corporate infrastructure providers where unethical practices associated with their role of infrastructure providers (such as abusive terms of use, privacy violation, censorship, and use of voluntary work for profit purposes, among others) are concealed by promoting a misleading image of themselves associated with the general values of wikis and Wikipedia (such as sharing and collaboration, openness and transparency). Wikitwashing is used to lie about, or hide, abusive actions that are clearly in contradiction to the values of the communities which the corporations serve and on whom they depend for their businesses models to work.

From the user's perspective, the perception of wikitwashing unethical practices seems to be very low despite several campaigns¹⁰ or interventions from governmental institutions (such as the sanctions imposed upon Google by the European Commission). The possibility of improving the situation and stimulating ethical practices for business via market competition also seems limited. The new economy is characterized by the tendency towards a dominant position. For example Google, controls from 75% to 90% of the online search market (Vaidhyanathan, 2009). Furthermore, on an individual user level, if a user feels they are being abused, as in some cases with Twitter or Flickr, he or she has the possibility of leaving the platform and using an alternative one (such as Identica or Picasa, respectively). There are other cases in which an alternative or the possibility to leave the platform with your data 'in hand' is more complex or obstructed by corporations. This is the case with Facebook. Researchers reported that Facebook users experienced difficulties in permanently quitting their Facebook membership (Trerè, 2008).

The "novelty" character of the new economy (which in some instances has poor regulation of certain areas, lacks it altogether, or does not acknowledge some of its consequences) might explain the level of unethical business practices. Furthermore, the recent increase of lobbying activities, and particularly government lobbying might also explain the lack of regulation or regulation in favour of corporate interests (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2011). However, more comprehensive empirical research is required in order to define and gauge wikitwashing practices so as to bring the ethical judgement of wikitwashing practices into the public debate.

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¹⁰ For example, the campaign on corporate transparency concerning government demands for user information developed by the Electronic Frontier Foundation <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2011/04/who-has-your-back-in-depth-corporate-transparency>

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