

PLANET OF THE APES

OR

HOW THE WIKIPEDIA MONKEYS OUTPERFORM KEEN'S EXPERTS

ABSTRACT – This paper discusses Keen's and Lessig's arguments concerning collaborative intelligence in general, and on Wikipedia in specific. It is found that Keen's distinction between expert and amateur is highly exaggerated, and that Wikipedia is indeed a valuable and mostly trustworthy information source.

Keywords:

collective intelligence, collaborative intelligence, Keen, Lessig, typing monkeys, Wikipedia

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MEET THE MONKEYS

When a large but finite number of monkeys type in random letters for a large but finite amount of time, the chances of at least one of them reproducing any or all of Shakespeare's plays increases with every added monkey and minute, reaching a probability of 100% when one of the parameters is infinite. At least, that's the mathematical argument as stated in the now world-famous *infinite monkey theorem*, devised in 1913 by Émile Borel and Arthur Eddington to 'illustrate the timescales implicit in the foundations of statistical mechanics' (Wikipedia Contributors-II 2008).

Today, when Andrew Keen calls you a 'typing monkey', he is not referring to the fact that there is a small but distinct mathematical probability that you will someday write something as praiseworthy as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. He is referring to the fact that with the exception of maybe a few monkeys, everyone who has ever written something on the Internet who is not, in his eyes, an 'expert', has done nothing more than pollute its contents with truth-obscuring garbage. According to Keen,

instead of creating masterpieces, these millions and millions of exuberant monkeys—many with no more talent in the creative arts than our primate cousins—are creating an endless digital forest of mediocrity. For today's amateur monkeys can use their networked computers to publish everything from uninformed political commentary, to unseemly home videos, to embarrassingly amateurish music, to unreadable poems, reviews, essays, and novels. (Keen 2008: 3)

Keen especially dislikes the way these 'amateurs' work together to form Wikipedia, a free online encyclopaedia, as they are in his eyes not 'expert' enough to fulfil the roles of writer and editor at the same time. Keen likes his internet clean and professional, and with more and more people actively engaging in the production of content on blogs and sites like Wikipedia, he is getting pretty upset and he is not hiding it.

This paper aims to show that although Keen does have some points in his anti-amateur rhetoric, collaborative intelligence is still a very valuable addition to the predominantly *read-only* internet he advocates. By placing his claims on the subject of collaborative intelligence in general and Wikipedia in particular next to those of Lawrence Lessig, a fervent supporter of user-contributed content, it should become apparent that Wikipedia in fact *does* provide its users with accurate information, even without the help of Keen's 'experts'. This will further be made clear by comparing information from Wikipedia with reports by traditional news services Fox News and CNN on a recent news item: the subject of Barack Obama's alleged Islamic background.

COLLECTIVE OR COLLABORATIVE INTELLIGENCE?

Paraphrasing Henry Jenkins, according to Terry Flew '*collective intelligence* refers to the power of networked communities in developing knowledge systems that are not only greater than the sum of their individual parts, but that grow, evolve, and collectively learn through ongoing interaction' (2008: 64). Although this term is commonly understood to cover everything from tagging YouTube movies to editing Wikipedia entries, this paper will use the derivative *collaborative intelligence* as described by Ross Mayfield (as cited in Flew, 2008: 32). As Mayfield sees it, there is a 'power law of participation', separating collective intelligence from collaborative intelligence (Figure 1). A low threshold ensures a collective intelligence that is created mostly through activities such as reading, tagging, commenting and sharing, while high engagement through activities such as writing, refactoring and moderating

adds up to the more goal-oriented form of collaborative intelligence. Seeing as how Mayfield's collaborative intelligence perfectly describes the activities that form Wikipedia, this paper will use the term *collaborative intelligence* in favour of the more general *collective intelligence*.

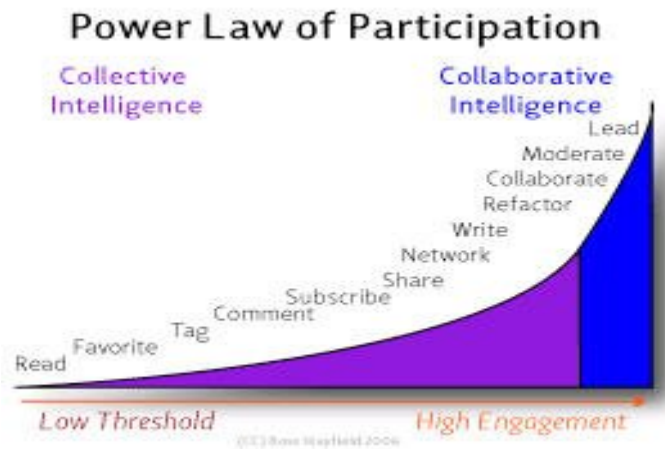


Figure 1 – Mayfield's Power Law of Participation

KEEN VERSUS LESSIG

In his book *The Cult of the Amateur*, Keen (2007) warns against the negative effects of online collaborative intelligence not only on our economy, but also on democracy and ultimately on truth itself. In reply to this rather elitist standpoint, Lessig has written an extensive post called 'The Keen Reader' (2008) on his blog, where he identified four main arguments in Keen's book concerning collaborative intelligence, which he cheekily termed the efficiency fallacy, the wiki fallacy, the expert fallacy and the amateur fallacy.

First off, there is the efficiency fallacy. As Keen puts it, 'every visit to Wikipedia's free information hive means one less customer for a professionally researched and edited encyclopedia such as Britannica' (2007: 29), and also that 'every defunct record label and round of newspaper downsizing are a consequence of "free" user-generated Internet content—from Craigslist's free advertising, to free music videos, to free encyclopedias, to free weblogs' (2007: 27). Lessig rightly remarks that the 'substitution between "free" and "paid"' is nowhere even remotely near 1 to 1, especially in the case of Wikipedia (Lessig 2008). Considering how most people do not even own an encyclopaedia, a service like Wikipedia being freely accessible to everyone will not impact the encyclopaedia market in the same way that, say, giving away free cars would impact the car market. Lessig summarizes that 'while Keen writes as if there is an economic loss when people get to do things more efficiently ... [there is no] reason for a policy maker to be concerned when, for example, the costs of some activity drop because society has found a way to do the same activity more efficiently' (Lessig 2008).

Second, there is the wiki fallacy. According to Keen, 'Wikipedia ... is almost single-handedly killing the traditional information business' (2007: 127-8). As noted above, this is just plain incorrect. More importantly, the fact that anyone can edit Wikipedia articles leads Keen to believe that when people are posting their specific view of on a subject there is an 'undermining of truth' taking place, that 'is threatening the quality of civil public discourse' (2007: 17). His trust in and affection for traditional media as bringers of truth are heart-warming, but severely misplaced, as will be made clear in the next chapter. Keen also notes that 'since Wikipedia's birth, more than fifteen thousand contributors have created nearly three million entries in over a hundred different languages—none of them edited or vetted for accuracy' (2007: 4). Of course, Wikipedia is *constantly* edited and its articles are constantly

vetted for accuracy, some even more so than any article published in any encyclopedia ever, Lessig argues. What Keen means to say here is that none of the articles are edited or vetted for accuracy by *experts*. Or rather, as Lessig points out, not 'exclusively by experts (for again, experts certainly participate in Wikipedia)' (Lessig 2008). Throughout his book, Keen places much emphasis on the role of these 'experts' in traditional media, and it is in his distinction between the *expert* and the *amateur* that his elitist ideology truly shines.

This brings us to the third fallacy, that of the expert. Claims like 'while there may be infinite typewriters, there is a scarcity of talent, expertise, experience and mastery in any given field' (2007: 29-30), and that 'you won't find the talented, trained individual shipwrecked in his pajamas behind a computer, churning out inane blog postings or anonymous movie reviews' (2007: 30) make perfectly clear just how obsessed Keen is with the fact that 'amateurs' are doing an 'experts' job. Yes, experience and training make for good qualities in an 'expert', but they are not always so clear. If I know all of Albert Einstein's works by heart and have a thorough understanding of its contents, but have never studied physics, does that make me less of an 'expert' on relativity theory than someone with a BA in physics? Apparently, in the eyes of Keen, it does. This makes it very hard not to see Keen's arguments on the importance of experts as a desperate attempt at making himself, an expert by his own description, seem more important and believable. He continues to emphasise this importance in bringing down the archenemy of the expert, the amateur. This brings us to the amateur fallacy.

Keen starts out his attack on the amateur on the not-so-stable basis of misinterpreting the very meaning of the very 'amateur'. According to Keen 'the traditional meaning of the word "amateur" is very clear. An amateur is a hobbyist, knowledgeable or otherwise, someone who does not make a living from his or her field of interest, a layperson, lacking credentials, a dabbler' (2007: 36). Also, the amateurs have apparently conspired on Wikipedia to adulate themselves, as on the time of his writing Wikipedia stated that

In the areas of computer programming and open source, as well as astronomy and ornithology, many amateurs make very meaningful contributions equivalent to or exceeding those of the professionals. To many, description as an amateur is losing its negative meaning, and actually carries a badge of honor. (Keen 2007: 39)

As Lessig points out, the meaning of 'amateur' that Keen's book thrives on, that of the dabbler, is hardly the most common meaning of the word (Lessig 2008). In fact, the *real* difference between an amateur and an expert is handsomely described on the *current* amateur page on Wikipedia:

An amateur is generally considered a person attached to a particular pursuit, study, or science, without formal training or pay. Conversely, an expert is generally considered a person with extensive knowledge, ability, and/or training in a particular area of study, while a professional is someone who also makes a living from it. Translated from its French origin to the English "lover of", the term "amateur" reflects a voluntary motivation to work as a result of personal passion for a particular activity (Wikipedia Contributors-I 2008).

Not only is this a very clear and unbiased description of the concepts of both the expert and the amateur, it also points out that what Keen sees as Wikipedia's weak point is actually its strongest: self-regulation. This will be further clarified with a case study on the reports on both Wikipedia and Fox News and CNN on a specific subject, namely that of Barack Obama's alleged Islamic background.

AMATEUR VERSUS EXPERT – THE CASE OF WIKIPEDIA

On Januari 17 2007, Insight Magazine (2007), a conservative internet magazine, published a story that said the campaign staff of presidential candidate Senator Hillary Clinton had leaked a report to *Insight* implying that Senator Barack Obama had attended an Islamic school during his childhood in Indonesia. Note that the story was posted without *any* references. This case study will compare the way the news was handled by Fox News, CNN and Wikipedia.

First, let's take a look at what Fox News had to say. Fox News took the story and ran with it. In *Fox and Friends*, E.D. Hill said that Obama attended a madrassa, which according to Fox is a 'muslim seminary', for four years, and that Senator Clinton's campaign 'is making this, now, a major issue'. Also, morning host Steve Doocy can be heard to say that 'this is HUGE' ('BHO (Barack Hussein Obama): the Closet Muslim ?' 2007). As it turns out, it's not.

Several days after the report appeared on Insight Magazine, CNN debunked the whole thing. The report did *not* come from Clinton's campaign staff, they were *not* going to make it 'a major issue', and the correct translation of the Arabic 'madrassa' is not 'muslim seminary', as Fox News would have us believe, but simply 'school'. CNN (2007) even went so far as to send a reporter to the school in Jakarta, where they were told that the school 'is a public school. We don't focus on religion'. So far, Keen's experts only scored 1 out of a possible 2 points. Not a very good score for a group of people who are supposed to bring us the 'truth', in order to ensure the 'quality of civil public discourse'.

On Barack Obama's Wikipedia page, there is no mention of the word 'madrassa'. There are also no allegations of any Islamic background, other than the fact that his father was raised as a Muslim. So what happened to the story? The answer lies in the discussion page that lies behind every Wikipedia article (Wikipedia Contributors-III 2008). On this page, users discuss what to add and, perhaps more importantly, what *not* to add. Here, users decided not to include the allegations in the main article just yet, saying that 'perhaps we should wait to see how all this plays out, though, as all the evidence is not in, surely', and 'let the dust settle. A separate article can be created later, but we wouldn't even know what to title it, right now'. Later, a consensus is reached not to include the article at all, since 'supposing the story's been put to rest with the CNN investigation, it was rather short-lived. It lasted maybe two days after it came out in Insight, and I don't think that merits a separate article'.

THE PRIMATE VICTORY

Now, what does this all mean in terms of the problems Keen recognizes in collaborative intelligence? Since the efficiency fallacy is hard to test, focus will be on the remaining three fallacies. As noted above, of Keen's precious experts only CNN got it right, and Fox News dropped the ball harder and faster than any amateur could have. Wikipedia users on the other hand, reached a consensus on the subject before altering the article, and only permanently decided on not including it when all the information was available. In this sense, the 'noble amateurs' of wikipedia, the 'typing monkeys', handled this situation just as expertly as any professional news site without the funds to send a reporter to Jakarta could have. In the end, they were also more 'truthful' than the 'experts' of Fox News.

In conclusion then, I think it's safe to say that when it comes to Wikipedia and collaborative intelligence in general, there is no such thing as a strict division between the expert who knows all and the amateur who knows only common things. The users of Wikipedia act according to strict policies on when and how to edit its articles, and the large

user-base ensures that there is always someone expert *enough* on a given subject to act as a responsible editor. With respect to Wikipedia, Keen is wrong.

DISCUSSION

This paper has been relatively anti-Keen in its standpoints, if only because his arguments are so wildly over the top it becomes very hard not to respond in the same manner, especially if you are even a mild supporter of collaborative intelligence projects. It should be noted that Keen *does* pose a few important questions regarding the impact of piracy on our society, and the losses, however small, some companies suffer as a result of collective intelligence efforts. Additional research into his other claims could prove invaluable to the collective intelligence discourse.

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ANNEX 1

Retrieved on May 22, 2008

Obama Madrassa Media Scandal

I really think there needs to be a "Controversies" section on the main page, a place to deal with the Madrassa hoax, the 'he's really a Muslim' bigotry, etc. Sort of a one-stop-info-shop for dealing quickly with the Swiftboating (and perhaps the real issues) the may come up. [TJ aka Teej](#) 02:54, 13 February 2007 (UTC)

Has anyone thought of starting an article on the right wing media's attempted 'swift boating' of Obama with the phony 'madrassa' claims? (which are now coming back to bite them) >

[Moonie press and collaborators smear Obama](#). There are similar Wiki articles : [Jamil Hussein controversy](#). - [Fairness And Accuracy For John Titor](#) 01:57, 23 January 2007 (UTC)

Some people might say the lady doth protest too much. :-) [Steve Dufour](#) 15:05, 23 January 2007 (UTC)

CNN supposedly [completely debunked](#) the report. Perhaps we should wait to see how all this plays out, though, as all the evidence is not in, surely. · [jersyko talk](#) · 02:03, 23 January 2007 (UTC)

The point is this is a single source story that several media outlets have run with. It is however based on a single anonymous source. I would say that it might be a good idea to employ [WP:DUST](#) in this case. --[Rtrev](#) 03:25, 23 January 2007 (UTC)

The question must also be raised, does Wikipedia's policy on biographies of living persons apply to mentioning the false story in his article? I agree with Jersysko for now, let the dust settle. A seperate article can be created later, but we wouldn't even know what to title it, right now. [Italiavivi](#) 18:01, 23 January 2007 (UTC)

Supposing the story's been put to rest with the CNN investigation, it was rather short-lived. It lasted maybe two days after it came out in Insight, and I don't think that merits a separate article. - [PoliticalJunkie](#) 01:10, 24 January 2007 (UTC)

I agree no seperate article. I personally doubt it even merits a mention here. Perhaps it should be mentioned in the Fox News article but perhaps not since from what I can tell it hasn't caused much controversy, probably because it's not unusual for Fox News to completely fail to investigate a story. [203.109.240.93](#) 11:26, 25 January 2007 (UTC)

Well actually I found out it is mentioned in the [Fox News controversies](#) article [203.109.240.93](#) 12:54, 25 January 2007 (UTC)

This is a stupid argument to suggest that because he went to an ordinary Muslim school in Indonesia that he was attending some "Islamist madrassa"?! I can't even say how stupid and bigoted this is. Schools in Muslim countries are not officially "Muslim" schools, since they are ordinary public schools. But in some Muslim countries (like Iran) the public schools also teach Qur'an and Arabic. The other alternatives in those cases would be going to schools for a religious minority, like a Jewish or Christian school which are usually restricted (by the government or those communities) to Jews and Christians only. There is alot of times no "secular" school. But the public schools in Iran and Indonesia, for example, are **not** "Islamist madrassas" or any nonsense like that. **The term "madrassa" itself only means "school"**

and is the generic name for "school" in many languages. I really wish people would stop this ignorance and go learn something. If I am not wrong, Obama also went to a Christian school. I also went to school in Iran and had to study Qur'an like everyone else. So this makes a person like me an "Islamist" or whatever [neologism](#) people can come up with?! This nonsense is not a scandal, it is a non-issue being made into something by bigoted, ignorant, and intolerant people with no proper education. [Khorshid](#) 20:17, 25 January 2007 (UTC)

Here's another article that covers the false allegations, and how they have been covered by the media: [Obama gets taste of campaign coverage](#) By DAVID BAUDER, AP Television Writer. [BlankVerse](#) 05:40, 29 January 2007 (UTC)

Trying [this](#). --[HailFire](#) 13:39, 29 January 2007 (UTC)

While some of the the Clinton campaign's whispers have gotten ridiculous it is undeniable that his father and stepfather were both born Muslim and Osama himself attended an Indonesian madarass for 2 years. He talks about this in his own books. For better or worse these are facts. It is also true he has been a United Church of Christ member for 20 years. — The preceding [unsigned](#) comment was added by [68.9.171.151](#) ([talk](#) • [contribs](#)).

There is no evidence whatsoever that Hillary Clinton was the source of Insight's false article. [Italiavivi](#) 18:28, 10 February 2007 (UTC)

Let's be clear here. Madrassa means simply "school." The school Obama attended for two years in Indonesia was investigated by CNN, which found the school to be a secular, public school. Thanks. · [j e r s y k o](#) [talk](#) · 01:33, 30 January 2007 (UTC)

A public school yes-but in 90% Muslim Indonesia where he lived with his Muslim born step-father. He then was transfered to a Catholic school for 2 years. —The preceding [unsigned](#) comment was added by [68.9.171.151](#) ([talk](#)) 00:14, 31 January 2007 (UTC). According to the [American Religious Identification Survey](#) approximately 79.8% of Americans in 2001 identified themselves as Christians and in 1990 88.3% of Americans identified themselves as Christians. No one claims that the word "school" in English somehow implies that it is a Christian school or say "A public school yes-but in 88% Christian America where he lived with his Christian born step-father." That he attended a public school in 90% Muslim Indonesia does not mean anything anymore than attending a public school in 80% Christian America means anything. [Edward Lalone](#) | ([Talk](#)) 01:55, 15 February 2007 (UTC)