

Starting Online Communities: Motivations and Goals of Wiki Founders

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ABSTRACT

Why do people start new online communities? Previous research has studied what helps communities to grow and what motivates contributors, but the reasons that people create new communities in the first place remain unclear. We present the results of a survey of over 300 founders of new communities on the online wiki hosting site Wikia.com. We analyze the motivations and goals of wiki creators, finding that founders have diverse reasons for starting wikis and diverse ways of defining their success. Many founders see their communities as occupying narrow topics, and neither seek nor expect a large group of contributors. We also find that founders with differing goals approach community building differently. We argue that community platform designers can create interfaces that support the diverse goals of founders more effectively.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 Information Interfaces and Presentation (e.g. HCI): Group and Organization Interfaces—Computer-supported cooperative work

Author Keywords

Online communities; motivation; wikis; survey; peer production

INTRODUCTION

The people who found new organizations are in a unique position to exert influence on the way that the organization develops. For example, research on firms has shown that the attributes of a company's founder, such as their education, industry experience, and position in a social network, can influence the firm's growth and survival [3, 12]. Founders can also influence the fate of online communities. Communities which have active, well-connected, experienced founders are more likely to experience continued activity [8].

Prior research on firm and community founders makes an implicit assumption: that all founders are hoping for their organizations to grow and survive. This may be a reasonable assumption for entrepreneurs, but online community founders

are likely to have more varied motivations and project goals. Learning more about founders' motivations and perspectives on community success is important for understanding how this new form of organizing works.

To learn more about why founders start communities, we surveyed users of the online community hosting site Wikia.com immediately after they founded a new wiki. We focus on founders' *motivations* for founding new wikis and their *project goals*. Motivations encompass more immediate incentives in comparison to project goals, which are more forward-looking and relate to how founders will evaluate the success of their community.

While some founders seek to build large, productive online communities, only 18% of our respondents rank content growth as the top goal. The most common primary goal is the creation of high-quality information. Overall, motivations and goals are very diverse, but many point to the creation of communities which are modest in scope and in aim. Wikis are often created on a whim, with nearly half of respondents reporting that they had considered starting their wiki for only a few hours or less before founding it. The primary goal that a founder has for a project is related to how and whether they engage in community building activities, suggesting a path whereby community outcomes may relate to founder goals.

Our results suggest that online community researchers and community platform designers can do more to understand and support attempts to build smaller and shorter-term communities, and that focusing on growth or longevity creates a limited view of success in online communities.

BACKGROUND

Prior research on motivations in online communities has focused primarily on *contributors*, finding that online community participants have heterogeneous motivations. For example, Wikipedia editors have motivations like enjoyment, learning, and ideology [11, 13]. Similarly diverse motivations have been found for contributors to open source software [6] and other online communities (e.g., [10]). We expect that community founders also have diverse motivations, but lack empirical evidence of what those motivations are.

Existing research also suggests diversity in how community members assess whether an existing community is successful. For example, open source programmers use many different measures to determine success, such as user satisfaction, developer satisfaction, code quality, and popularity [4, 14]. Just as

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contributors see current success differently, we anticipate that founders will have different understandings of future success.

We might also expect to see diversity in founder goals due to different levels of experience on a specific platform. As users become more familiar with a tool or ecosystem of projects (e.g., Wikipedia, Wikia, GitHub), they may recognize opportunities for community and interaction that are not visible at first [2]. As users gain experience and their perspective of the existing projects in a particular domain changes, their goals for new communities may also change.

Differences in the motivations and goals of founders may also lead to different community outcomes. For example, the way participants in a community understand a project helps explain their subsequent levels of participation [1, 15], and greater founder activity is associated with community survival [8].

Founders' approach to community building presents one mechanism that could produce divergent outcomes. The people in charge of a community can take practical steps to help the community grow and be productive, such as attracting newcomers, encouraging contributions, and regulating bad behavior [9]. The way that founders apply these tactics (or whether they apply them at all) may depend on the goals they have for the community. For example, founders who create a community as a place to communicate with a small group of friends will be unlikely to take steps to attract newcomers, but may have plans for encouraging contributions.

METHOD

To better understand community founder motivations, we conducted a survey of founders on the Wikia platform. We chose Wikia as it is a widely used platform for the creation of topic-based wikis. Users on Wikia can start new wikis about any topic they choose, and users are free to edit any wikis on the site. Wikis represent a distinct type of online community, based on the creation and maintenance of a shared knowledge artifact. There are, of course, many other types of online communities, whose founders may have a different set of motivations and goals.

We used an online survey to gather data from founders because it facilitated the collection of a broad range and large number of responses. We worked with representatives at Wikia to distribute the survey to founders of new communities. After users initiate and complete the new wiki creation process, an automated message is posted on the user's "Message Wall" (a threaded discussion interface for user-to-user interactions). By default, messages posted on a user's Message Wall are also emailed to them. During our study, an invitation to participate in our online survey was included at the bottom of this automated message. The data included in this paper is from surveys taken between 5 April and 31 August 2016. By surveying founders immediately after they created a new wiki, we capture the motivations and goals they had at the time of founding, before any community outcomes could distort their memory of events.

The survey consisted of 70 items, including items about demographic background, Internet use skills¹, and past experience on Wikia and other online communities. Our items about motivations included an open-ended question ("What made you want to start this wiki?") and a set of thirteen Likert-scale items based on the contributor motivation literature². To discover goals, we asked participants to think about how they would determine whether their wiki is successful, and to rank the importance of seven success metrics. These included both instrumental and terminal goals, which were drawn from prior literature (e.g., [4, 14]) and expanded to incorporate additional community-oriented and interaction-oriented goals³. For both motivations and goals, we allowed respondents to enter free text "Other" responses. The first author reviewed the text responses and selected characteristic examples that we report below. Finally, to determine a founder's plans for community building, we asked them whether they would implement community building strategies suggested by [9].

RESULTS

During the period of data collection, 46,828 total new wikis were created by 35,749 users. A total of 720 respondents started the survey. We removed 91 respondents who failed our attentiveness check, were obviously fraudulent⁴, or who reported being minors. This left us with 629 respondents. Respondents were allowed to skip items they did not want to answer. For example, 312 founders filled out the motivation section and 254 ranked their goals. In order to maximize the number of participants included in each analysis, we used responses that were complete for that portion, even if the respondent skipped other portions. We report the *N* for each analysis in the table captions.

Founding Motivations

To simplify the analysis of motivations, we reduced the dimensionality of our thirteen motivation items. Factor analysis suggested that there were five dimensions⁵: spreading information and building community, problems with existing wikis, fun and learning, creating and publicizing personal content, and the "Other" item. We summarize the distribution of responses in Table 2. The factor representing the desire to build a community and to spread information about a topic has the highest overall popularity, although each of the motivations was identified as a primary motivation by a number of respondents.

¹We used a modified version of the 10 item instrument developed by [5].

²Items were ranked from 1 ("Not a motivation") to 5 ("A primary motivation"). If a respondent rated more than half of the motivation items then we imputed "Not a motivation" for any missing items.

³We started with seven project goals (see Table 1), and collapsed two items representing facets of community and two measures representing facets of growth into one measure each.

⁴For example, those who reported having been born before 1915.

⁵A KMO test [7] showed that exploratory factor analysis was appropriate (MSA=.69), and a scree plot suggested four factors was optimal. All of the items loaded onto at least one factor with a cut-off of .3, with the exception of the "Other" item, which we treat as its own factor. For cross-loaded items, we included the item in the primary factor, all of which loaded at .4 or higher. Combined, the factors explained 34% of the variance.

Topic	Survey Items
Motivation	“What made you want to start this wiki?” “On a scale of 1-5, how much did each of these motivations contribute to your decision to start the wiki? ‘Playing around / Learning how the software works,’ ‘As a joke,’ ‘A place to organize personal material,’ ‘To communicate with friends,’ ‘To provide publicity for myself or my company,’ ‘A new product was released that I was interested in,’ ‘There wasn’t an existing wiki about the topic,’ ‘Existing wikis about the topic were of poor quality,’ ‘I wanted to spread information about the topic,’ ‘I disagreed with how existing wikis were being run,’ ‘I wanted to build a community,’ ‘I wanted to be more involved in governing the conversation around this topic,’ ‘Other (please explain)’”
Project Goals	“Think about how you will assess whether or not your wiki is successful, and rank which of the following are the most important measures of success for you: ‘A large number of contributors’, ‘A large amount of information about the topic,’ ‘High quality information about the topic,’ ‘A community that remains active for a long time,’ ‘A highly active community,’ ‘Meeting new people,’ ‘Other (please explain)’”

Table 1. Key survey topics and abbreviated questions

	Mean	SD	Primary Motivation
Info and Community	3.12	1.04	70
Bad Existing Wikis	1.89	1.28	28
Fun and Learning	2.32	0.96	15
Personal Material	2.71	1.26	43
Other	1.84	1.59	60

Table 2. Distribution of motivations. The final column shows how many respondents chose that as a primary motivation (mean rating > 4), N=312.

While some additional motivations appeared in the free-text responses, none of these was reported by more than a few users. This suggests that our original items represent typical motivations of respondents. That said, some of the new motivations identified are interesting. A few respondents wrote about teaching others about a topic. For example, one wrote, “I am a huge fan of the books and I wanted to create a wiki where other fans can read about and learn about the series.” Another expressed an interest in gathering feedback: “I run a gaming community that is currently in development, I want users to be [...] able to contribute and add information about [...] our game.” Another reported using the wiki to organize and store content: “[I] wanted a place to organize content as [my] web serial was written.” Many examples are inconsistent with the goal of building a large and active community with many contributors.

Motivations need not be particularly strong because the barrier to founding a new community is so low within a platform like Wikia. Among our respondents, only 32% had planned to start a wiki for a few weeks or longer, while 46% of respondents reported that they had only thought about it for “a few hours” or “a few minutes” beforehand. Founding new communities appears to often be impulsive and not the result of deliberation or careful planning.

Project Goals

Next, we look at the goals that founders have for their projects. Each of the project goals was ranked as the top goal by a substantial proportion of respondents. The creation of high-quality information was the most prevalent top goal, with 47% of respondents selecting that option. The next two most popular goals, “community” and “growth”, were nominated as the top goal by 20% and 18% of respondents, respectively.

While many studies focus on the longevity and activity of a community as markers of success, this finding suggests that many wiki founders care most about creating a high-quality

repository of information rather than community growth or other outcomes.

Indeed, most founders do not expect that their projects will become large and popular. When we asked founders about the potential audience for their projects, 50% chose the response that “only a handful of people” would be interested in the topic of their wiki. When we asked how many contributors they expected in the first 30 days, the median response was 4.

One additional goal emerged from the “Other” free text responses. Multiple respondents expressed the desire for external usefulness and popularity, independent of community-building. For example, one respondent’s goal was, “Seeing the material actually used by [...] groups and individuals.” Another’s was, “People that actually benefit from my information.” Various other goals were expressed by one or two respondents, such as strengthening relationships.

Comparing Founders with Different Goals

We next explore whether there are differences between founders with different project goals. We group respondents based on their top-ranked goal and compare those who selected each of the two most common top goals (“Information Quality” and “Community”).

Figure 1 compares how motivations differ between those who chose each of the two top goals. t-tests at $\alpha < .05$ indicate that those whose top goal was community-based (“a community that remains active for a long time” or “a highly active community”) were more likely to be motivated by fun and learning motivations and “other” motivations than those whose top goal was “high quality information about the topic.”⁶

These differences in goals may result from pre-existing differences between founders, such as demographic attributes or experiences. For example, perhaps long-term users value community more since they are more likely to perceive the role of community on a site [2]. However, we performed χ^2 tests and found that community-oriented founders do not differ from quality-oriented founders by gender ($p = 0.36$), employment status ($p = 0.56$), how often they visit Wikia ($p = 0.21$), or how long they have been active on the site ($p = 0.5$). A t-test of founders’ self-reported technical knowledge also showed no significant difference between the groups ($p = 0.1$). Based

⁶The differences in the “Other” motivation in Figure 1 and the “Recruit Members” strategy in Figure 2 were only marginally significant after applying a Holm-Bonferroni correction and should be interpreted with caution.

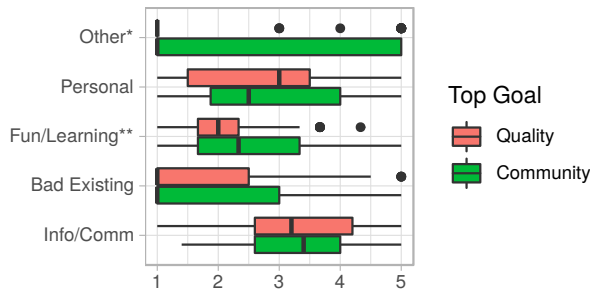


Figure 1. Differences in the motivations for respondents on a scale of 1 (“Not a motivation”) to 5 (“A primary motivation”), based on their top goal for the wiki, N=248. * p < .05, ** p < .01

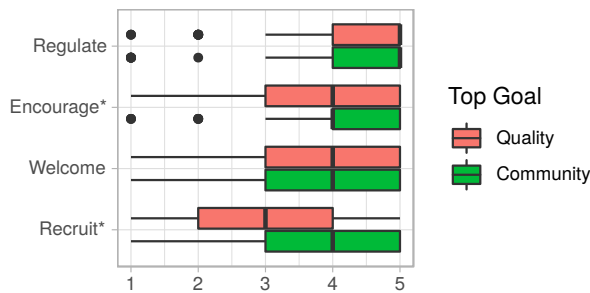


Figure 2. Differences in whether a respondent plans to implement each community building strategy, on a scale of 1 (“Definitely not”) to 5 (“Definitely yes”), based on their primary goal for the wiki, N=251. * p < .05

on these basic measures, we find no relationship between a founder’s attributes or experience and her project goals.

We also investigate whether having different goals changes the way that founders approach managing their community, finding mixed results. Prior research has shown that groups whose founders add content to the site and who are engaged and active are more likely to survive [8]. We asked founders about the time they were planning to devote to their wiki, but a χ^2 test shows no difference between community-oriented and quality-oriented founders in the ratio of those planning to dedicate at least 3 hours per week ($p = 1$).

However, we do find differences in the specific plans founders have for community building, encouragement, and regulation [9]. As with motivations, we use t-tests to compare the responses based on whether a founder’s top goal is community or information quality. The results appear in Figure 2.

Those who rate community their top priority are more likely to have plans to recruit members and to encourage contributions. Both groups are equally likely to plan to welcome new members and regulate behavior.

DISCUSSION

The results of our survey provide evidence that wiki founders have varied motivations for starting their communities and varied goals for what those communities will eventually become. Even along dimensions that many founders care about

(e.g., information quality and community activity), founders differ in how they prioritize these goals. While some respondents sought to build large, popular communities, we learn that most founded their wikis with very little foresight or planning and with modest goals. Instead of aspiring to lead and influence the masses, many founders seek to collect or distribute information about niche topics among a small group.

We suggest that the prevailing focus on community growth and longevity obscures the importance of small, niche communities. Small communities are not necessarily failures or cautionary tales. They may be meeting their founders’ goals and deserve to be studied on their own terms. On Wikia, where communities are built around a shared, public artifact, many founders see creating that artifact as more important than building a community. Other community platforms like reddit or Facebook Groups have their own affordances and their founders likely have a different distribution of motivations and goals. However, growth-based measures of success are unlikely to fully represent founders’ objectives in any of these venues.

By learning more about the founders of communities, platform designers gain insight into how people aspire to use a system and can better support those goals. For example, designers could add dashboards to measure and display the metrics of success that founders care most about. They could also build tools to support those goals. In the case of Wikia, we find a number of founders use wikis to create and distribute personal material. Wikia might enhance the user page interface or develop templates to facilitate this behavior.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future studies can assess the generalizability of these findings on Wikia and other platforms. Running a similar study across a set of different online community platforms would allow us to learn whether founders on other platforms have similar motivations and goals. Also, as with any survey, non-response may bias our results. However, we anticipate that a more representative sample would strengthen our key findings about the modest goals of Wikia founders, since the least dedicated founders would presumably be less likely to take the survey.

This study indicates that researchers and designers can do more to attend to founders. We examined how founders’ motivations and goals relate to their plans for community building, but future research should also analyze how motivations and goals relate to the actions founders take. In this way, different motivations and goals may explain variations in community outcomes. On the other hand, future research may find that founders have limited influence and communities can transcend their founders’ intentions as well as their actions.

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