

WHAT WORKING FOR WIKIPEDIA TAUGHT ME ABOUT COLLABORATION

LE 15 JUILLET 2010 SANDRA ORDONEZ

Collaboration is "messy" but you should trust the crowd because "it's smarter than you". Sandra Ordoñez worked at Wikipedia as PR officer. She shared her experience in this post. It's all about collaboration.

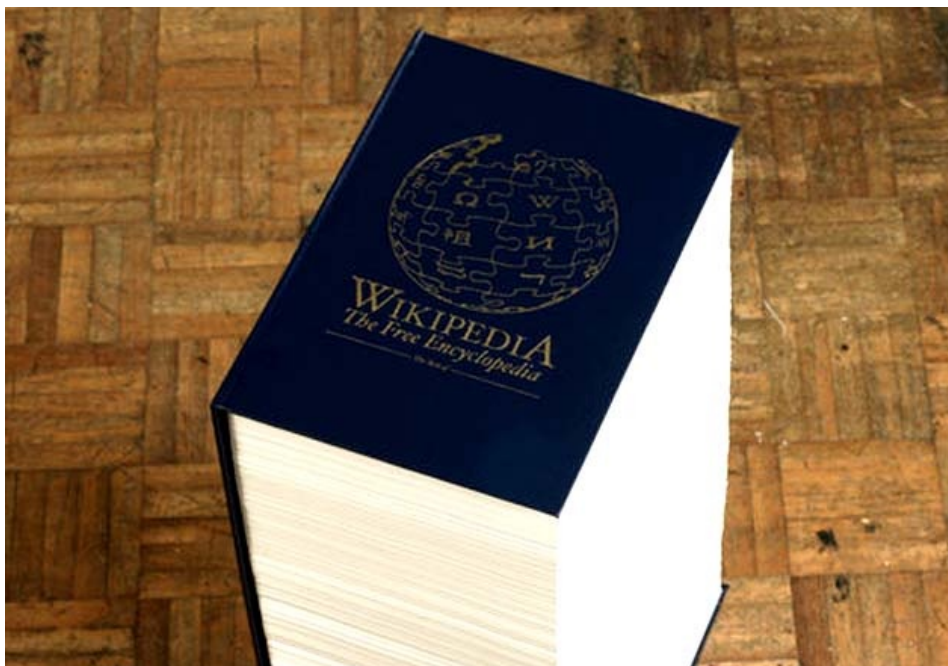
A little over three years ago, I started working as the communications manager for **Wikipedia**. I had just moved to St. Petersburg, Florida, and was ecstatic to hear that this quirky website, which had begun to pop up in many of my web searches, was based there. Having grown up in New York, my culture radar detected that this was a one-of-a-kind project that attracted eccentric individuals. Needless to say, my radar never fails me.

At that time, **Wikipedia's internal structure did not match the widespread success and attention** it was beginning to enjoy. I found myself working in a thrifty "rent-by-the-month" office building with three other employees: An administrative assistant, a fundraiser/hardcore Wikipedian, and a CFO. I was told that most tasks, including the communication projects, were carried out by a large network of international volunteers.

I immediately began to review the public relations materials available to me, and almost immediately went into panic mode. **There was no polished press kit, press list or, dare I say, communication strategy.** In fact, the majority of individuals on the communications committee had little to no public relations training, and were more intellectual and techie than the average PR practitioner at that time.

Crisis Mode at Wikipedia

A few weeks into the job, with little training and a very primitive understanding of the wiki ethos, I encountered my first PR crisis. A hardcore and well known Wikipedian, Essjay, had lied to the New Yorker about his credentials. Not surprisingly, the years of crisis communication training I received was useless in the context I found myself in. **For a brief moment, I honestly thought that my career as a PR specialist had come to an end.** The New Yorker, in my mind, was the bible of the media world; there was no way that our online encyclopedia was going to survive the PR damage.



In the midst of my concerns, I soon became a believer in the power of collaboration. That crisis was the moment when the new media landscape unfolded before my eyes.

The volunteers took charge. They created a Wikipedia entry that **documented** the event in

gruesome detail. It was honest, direct and, amazingly, had no PR spin. In fact, for most Wikipedia members, the biggest concern was that Essjay had used his false credentials in content disputes. It was apparent to me that there was never any malice or hidden agenda. Essjay himself had revealed his real credentials on his user profile when he was hired by Wikia, a company owned by Wikipedia founder, Jimmy Wales. In fact, **in the months that followed, I found the community became self-correcting by encouraging the use of real names and identities.** It found a way to help prevent this type of issue from happening again.

At the time, some critics argued that the incident ruined Wikipedia's reputation. Of course, this was the farthest thing from the truth. Since then, the site has grown both in content and in language versions. (My husband is a philosophy professor, which means I regularly meet academics who are quick to point out how "surprisingly accurate" the site is, and how fascinated they are with how it has impacted how our society views information.)

Learning From Collaboration

As someone who identifies herself as a bicultural New Yorker who specialized in cross-cultural communication in college, I was not a stranger to collaboration. In fact, that was my biggest criticism of American culture — we were too individualistic and not group focused enough. But nothing prepared me for the wiki world. **I learned some valuable lessons about collaboration and how to make it work.** Below are some of the key learnings.

Trust the Crowd; It's Smarter than You — The sooner you trust the group and empower it, the sooner it can produce high quality results. The group can make up for any weaknesses you may have as an individual. The idea is to bring out the strongest skills and downplay the weakest in each person.

Diversity and Creativity Are Intrinsicly Connected — Creative brainstorming is significantly improved by diversity. Individuals not only challenge each others' ideas, but they also inspire each other as well.

Collaboration is Messy — When Jimmy Wales said "[Wikipedia is] like a sausage: you might like the taste of it, but you don't necessarily want to see how it's made," he wasn't kidding. Chaos, in many ways, seems to be the spark of great collaborative endeavors.

Be Open to Receiving and Giving Criticism — When working collaboratively, it is important to let go of your ego. Learn to not take things personally and be honest about what you think without being disrespectful.

Wikipedia still receives a lot of flack — it's an easy target for institutions and individuals who are desperately trying to survive in a digital world. However, I feel grateful for having worked for a short time with the "free culture" trailblazers behind the project who are responsible for making the world a bit more open, democratic, smarter, and much more collaborative.

*Sandra Ordoñez calls herself a web astronaut who has been helping organizations navigate the internet since 1997. Currently, she helps run **OurBlook.com**, a collaborative online forum that gathers interviews from today's top leaders in the hopes of finding tomorrow's solutions. Since December 2008, the site has been conducting a **Future of Journalism interview series**. Sandra also heads up the Facebook page, "Bicultural and Multicultural People Rule." Previously, she was the Communications Manager for Wikipedia. She graduated from American University with a double degree in International Relations and Public Relations.*

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