

# communiqué

tech talk by angelo fernando

## The wisdom of Wikipedians

Anyone charged with managing a product or person's image should tread cautiously in the open source world



### harry potter: the brand of fans

The Harry Potter franchise may be in 200 countries and the books translated into 63 languages, but the brand is not author J.K. Rowling's any longer. It's been open-sourced in more ways than you might imagine. For starters, take a look at Scholastic's Harry Potter page—[www.scholastic.com/harrypotter](http://www.scholastic.com/harrypotter)—as well as the following:

- The MuggleCast podcast, run by high school students, has some 50,000 listeners a week, and features Elton John and Bono. [www.mugglenet.com/mugglecast](http://www.mugglenet.com/mugglecast)
- The Leaky Cauldron leaks news about the books and discloses that it is in “no way affiliated with J.K. Rowling.” [www.the-leaky-cauldron.org](http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org)
- There are several Potter blogs, including one that suggests a Bollywood storyline for an Indian audience. [www.blogtoplist.com/rss/harry-potter.html](http://www.blogtoplist.com/rss/harry-potter.html)
- There's even the Academy of Virtual Wizardry, at Caledon Highlands in—you guessed it—Second Life! <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Caledon%20Highlands/101/198>

On the night of Saturday, 20 July, while TV crews in many countries were training their lenses on pre-teens dressed in black capes camping outside bookstores, another group was fidgeting at their keyboards, waiting to rush into the labyrinth of Wikipedia.

At 11 p.m. PDT, an hour before *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* was to be released, the discussion of the book on the “comments” tab of a Wikipedia entry was getting tense. The comments page is where Wikipedians conduct a

sort of text chat about the entry they are working on and the decisions they make. For days, Wikipedia editors had been debating how to handle updates, since pages of J.K. Rowling's book had already been scanned and posted on the Net. “Just wait until the official release time. Then we can put everything up in 5 minutes or so, considering the number of Wikipedians interested in this,” said one editor at 11:03 p.m. “Most people, me included, will be too busy reading the book on Saturday to check the article.” Others were unhappy that some Wikipedians had moved to freeze the pages until a week after the launch.

Reading through their back-channel discussion (the debate on using the word *snog* versus *French kiss* numbers 900 words!) gives you a glimpse of how passionate “prosumers”—producers and consumers of content—operate late at night, taking ownership of a brand. To them, this wasn't Rowling's book so much as it was theirs. One editor known as Titanium Dragon was already writing a plot summary, but was warned by others that he might not have a legitimate copy of the book. Dragon

protested, but the other editors held their ground. “The wishes of J.K. Rowling are completely, totally and utterly irrelevant and immaterial to this discussion,” Dragon lashed back. “Wikipedia is not censored.”

In a twisted way, Dragon may be right. The uncensored wisdom-of-crowds phenomenon is part of what made Rowling such a huge success. Her book and film franchise has been licensed to marketing machines such as Time Warner and Scholastic, but the Potter brand has been “managed” even more pervasively by her readers. Since the first book came out 10 years ago, fans have been creating unauthorized spin-offs such as MuggleNet, with contributors in 183 countries; Potter-based podcasts; a Harry Potter presence in the virtual world Second Life; scores of blogs; and fan literature offshoots. On 19 July, one audacious person was even auctioning off an illegally obtained copy of the book on eBay for US\$499.

### Brands out of control

What does this have to do with you, as you go about managing your next project, writing brand guidelines and talking points for

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## what's npov?

The people who run Wikipedia have a policy about objectivity. It's called the "neutral point of view," commonly referred to as NPOV. Founder Jimmy Wales is quoted on Wikipedia as saying NPOV is "absolute and nonnegotiable," and "is a point of view, not the absence or elimination of viewpoints." (NPOV does not mean "no points of view.") It is a policy that strives to eliminate bias, be it political, scientific, religious or commercial. NPOV is "a means of dealing with conflicting verifiable perspectives on a topic as evidenced by reliable sources," according to Wikipedia.

## wikipedia resources

Wikipedia's conflict of interest behavioral guideline  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WP:COI>

Wikipedia Business' FAQ  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Business%27\\_FAQ](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Business%27_FAQ)

WikiScanner  
<http://wikiscanner.virgil.gr>

## about the author

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a PR junket, or editing the letter from the CEO for next month's newsletter? Your organization may not have a page on Wikipedia, but like it or not, the open source, prosumer movement will come knocking.

Corporate communication and brand management in a Web 2.0 world is not a skill set that has been taught in schools. In fact, many believe that those who have come into senior brand management roles are being completely blindsided by user-generated content, fan blogs, podcasts and private wikis. "The people formerly known as the audience," warned Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University, are more capable than we give them credit for. The audience for brand communication will not be locked down.

## Risk being shamed

If you don't believe me, swing by the Wikipedia entry on Sun Microsystems. The third sentence states: "Sun is known as the developer of technologies such as the Java platform and NFS, and as a key promoter of open systems in general and UNIX in particular; it has recently emerged as one of the leading proponents and contributors of open source software." Pull back the curtain on the discussion pages and you'll see a debate over the word *the*. One editor questions, "*THE leading contributor of [sic] open source software* (emphasis mine)? This is rubbish, and reads as though it was written by somebody from Sun marketing."

Likewise, the Wikipedia entry for Dove soap had one person

complaining that "this article seems to end as an advert for the product. Should someone clean this up?" Later, an editor writes, "That last paragraph had to go. Unilever can post it in [www.marketingpedia.com](http://www.marketingpedia.com)."

Are there rules of engagement for using Wikipedia in PR or marketing for a client? Constantin Basturea, a PR practitioner and director of social media strategies at Converseon, reminds us that although Wikipedia is "the encyclopedia anyone can edit," this applies to anyone except PR practitioners. Why? "Because Wikipedia considers creating or editing an entry for a client a conflict of interest," he says. In fact, it is detailed in the site's conflict of interest behavioral guideline (see "What's NPOV?" at left). That means a lot of people inside and outside an organization are not allowed to edit an entry about that organization.

How do you get around that? The common practice until now has been to be devious, and risk getting caught. In August, a student at the California Institute of Technology set up a web site called WikiScanner that could trace Wikipedia edits back to the editor's IP address and therefore identify who was editing pages in spite of a conflict of interest. Among them were Walmart, the BBC and the CIA. But that's not necessary. "One could engage in discussions with Wikipedians in the talk pages, and rely on them for editing the articles. A time-consuming process, but it could be successful," says Basturea. Using marketing-speak in Wikipedia pages is a recipe for failure, he notes.

How true. An entry for India's Tata Motors prompted this comment: "The whole article reads like [something] out of a company brochure. Naming a section 'Journey Towards Leadership in Commercial Vehicle Manufacturing' is shameless."

## Tread carefully

Anyone assigned to manage a product or person's image is advised to tread cautiously in this open source world. In January 2007, Microsoft was ordered off Wikipedia when it was discovered that the company had paid a blogger to tweak an entry for Microsoft Office Open XML format. As a form of punishment, Wikipedia published part of an e-mail from a Microsoft employee to the Australian blogger, asking him to edit the article. Policing the pages gets more complicated. What if it's not a company or a PR agency? It depends on the bias of the editing.

Bias on Wikipedia is not tolerated. Last year, the site banned for one week edits coming from the IP addresses belonging to U.S. congressional staffers when it was revealed that some had been editing and censoring articles about elected officials. In the old days, governments used to ban the publication of literature. In the Web 2.0 world, publishers are banning—or at least censoring—the government.

But don't despair. If you need to make an edit, just stick to the facts that can be verified and supported by a reliable source. "Remember," observes Basturea, "that the threshold for inclusion in Wikipedia is verifiability, not truth." •