

# Online Publishing Through User Generated Media

Essay by Christian Isberg

## ONLINE PUBLISHING

In the context of publishing, the web environment has become a fully equipped independent platform/environment for publishing, in difference from the big commercial publishing houses; the web provides a cheap, immediate, open, distributed and interactive real time publishing platform.

It provides a fully controlled process, e.g. you can publish work from chosen area at a specific time without any other parties involved except for the web-host.

‘A body of information can move from one location to the next, just like the physical body, but even more so, it wants to be free. It wants to drift, float, and be vaporous. Information is hard to shut up. It can be present at multiple locations at once. The network routes around obstacles/identities and infinitely distributes.’ (Kleerebezem: 20)

The process of publishing can whenever at any moment be updated and ported in any direction over a network. It becomes an ever-growing process – publishing as an ongoing process. Online platforms are constantly filled with information, information that together creates a publishing process. While an online publication is a ‘locked publication’, a finished act – something we can’t affect anymore. The finished act occurs when the one behind the publishing process decides to make it static. This means that other people except for the ones with access to the platform and its source are locked out. The possibilities for the public mass to alter and comment the content are not there anymore. The publication is still online, and we can access it, but we can’t be engaged on a higher level than just being a reader, let it so be a news article, personal text or a Wikipedia article.

For instance, one can argue that an online publication is very similar to a printed publication e.g. a book. A book is a process of publishing, until it gets published. When it’s being published it becomes locked, a static object. It becomes impossible to alter, comment or contribute to the publication. To be able to do this one

need to open up the publishing process and produce a new publication as an extension of the previous one.

The most common format of online publishing is the weblog (blog). A blog, is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order. Typically, blogs are published by individuals and their style is personal and informal.

Since the mid-1990s the blog has become the most popular and simple way of publishing. Since anybody with an internet connection can publish their own blog, there is great variety in the quality, content, and ambition of blogs. The online publishing environment, especially blogs, gives ordinary people the possibility to become their own experts in certain fields. With the help of hypertext links, it opens up for easy as well as complex cross-referencing. This allows readers to follow conversations between entries on related topics. One might start reading in the beginning of the blog and by cross-referencing end up reading about a different subject in a different blog.

Online publishing is not simply a tool; it's an engine providing read/ write experiences. Indifference to old traditional publishing, this engine allows one to be more engaged with the content. The fact that online publishing platforms are dynamic makes the position of the reader different. When browsing printed matter, the reader is in the situation where s/he only can consume.

One can argue that the blog as a platform for publishing gives readers the possibility to act as participator, author and editor.

Today there are several different already made blog platforms, which are very popular within the public mass. Most of them already have several functions built in, functions that provide the possibility to participate in the process of publishing. I can act as an author, comment various posts, relink the original post to my own web-platform, let it so be a dynamic blog or a 'locked publication'. I also become the editor by organizing the content so it appears in the way I want to consume it.

The most usual functions for organization is by: chronologi-

cally, thematically, following links between entries or by keywords. But do these functions really let us become authors and editors? I'd like to say; yes to a certain extent. When commenting a blog post, I could call my self an author, but I only create an extension of the original post. I can't affect or alter what's already been posted. The function gives me the opportunity to reflect upon the original post. Of course, one could call this authoring, but it doesn't mean that it gives the possibility to alter the original post. It becomes a reflection in forms of an extension.

The function for organization lets you change the structure of the blog. The content can be structured in the way you want to consume it, this helps the consumer to more easily find content that s/he finds relevant or content which shares a higher relationship with each other then only the time it was posted. The act of restructuring content doesn't mean that it will affect the process of the publishing. It only affects the way the individual consume, after you left the environment, you are located in, the structure will be reset to it's original structure, which is either predetermined by the environment itself or by the admin.

What might happen is that a blog environment, containing these functions, implies that the visitor becomes more then just a consumer, which only happen during the moment when s/he were visiting the environment, when that specific environment is present on the visitors screen.

We can call all those functions, which provide us the possibilities mentioned above, different tools. These tools give the blog visitor the possibility to be engaged in the content on a higher level. Tools like these, together with blog visitor are what shape the blog-experience for the individual user.

When speaking of online publishing as a process of publishing, I imply that it's a process that is open and ongoing. This would be with the help of the tools mentioned above. But when a blog post is published we as visitors can't alter it, we can only extend it. The post is self becomes locked. What happens is that we keep on stacking posts on top of each other. We are building higher, almost as if one were building a skyscraper, except that there's no clear goal. It becomes a process of publishing elements of top of each other.

Already made platforms are one of the main reasons that online publishing has escalated in to what it is today. They are easy to install, operate, understand and foremost, most of them are built on the same principle. This is a great way for the public mass to express them self's online, but it usually doesn't go further then that. Almost all platforms have restrictions which users are expected to follow. Of course, they often give you different options of altering the visual appearance such as changing color and type. But if one would like to dig deeper into the platform one would soon realize that these systems are complex. Not many people try to do this and most people are satisfied with the default settings. What happens is that we are being 'locked-in' in the system, we accept the restrictions and limitations, we accept that we only can write 140 characters when twittering, that the Facebook chat function is censoring certain content or that blog platforms, by default, is presented chronologically. The idea of us being locked-in relates to the idea of on-line publishing as a process, we as the visitors of a blog are in the same way as the one who create the blog forced to accept the rules and restrictions that are predetermined. We accept that we can't alter or restructure the content to create meaning regardless if the structure reflects the content or not.

Already made blog platforms are great ways of expressing oneself, but the fact that most people don't question the restrictions makes one wonder how it would be if we instead of consuming other peoples systems and tools created our own. Before blogs got its huge success you could find publishing platforms that were personal, that reflected and said something about its content not just empty shells ready to be filled up.

Although the most common way of online publishing is with the help of a blog platform, online publishing allows for different systems to be set up.

When publishing online one can gather information, information that has already been put online by someone else. By setting up systems, one allows for gathering and structuring from different sources. This is a way of altering and republishing already published content. With a system I simply mean a structure that allows one to collect content, we can call it: a number of components working

towards common goals, a set of related parameters that provide access to functionality. This functionality often consists of various parameters and can be operated manually or automatic.

Present Time is a system for continuous online publishing that is republishing already published content. This system uses images published online which it decontextualizes, then it's publishing them in a new context online where each of them is structured by the parameter time.

The content being handled by Present Time is often published in second-, third or fourth-hand by various users in complete different contexts. This allows for content to exist in several contexts at the same time.

Because the content is already published, online users might be unaware of their participation in other publishing systems. This works in both ways, the one who is publishing information online feeds the system, which in the same time feeds the one who is publishing online.

This sharing of information is an interaction that can take place between two or more entities in the information domain. Those could be humans, databases, programs, systems or frameworks. The ability to share information and/or content is the key to be able to develop a state of a 'shared awareness' (Zimprich: 178) as well as to collaborate and/or synchronize.

When two or more people are located in the same surrounding, information can, with the help of speech in a conversation, body gestures such as hand signs etc., be contextualized. Techniques like these force all parties to be at the same place at the same time, which rarely happens, therefore people make use of technology as a way to share information.

By sharing information I don't mean to contextualize it. Simply just share it. When it comes to bringing the shared information into a context, all the involved parties has to develop a 'shared awareness' which is a similar awareness about the situation. The kind of similarity asked for is depending on the type of synchronization needed. To be able to synchronize you will also ask for collaborations.

Collaboration is a process consisting out of number of people/ components that are working together towards common goals. One can compare it to a system or a structure. In other words, in collaborations one is depending on another to be able to contextualize the information, to treat information as content.

Wikipedia is an example of a system dependent of collaborations. Thousands of users, registered or unregistered, contribute to the process of publishing. As an editor of Wikipedia you have the possibility to edit and alter all articles, therefore it's crucial that everyone within the process has the same 'shared awareness'.

But must all people work consciously of each other or isn't it possible for a collaboration between people who all are working autonomously within a system? The fact that online publishing happens in real time makes it a nonlinear dialogue between the content and its providers. As mentioned before, the content provided is often republished in third- or fourth-hand; this makes it possible for collaborations between people who might be unaware of their participation in the collaboration.

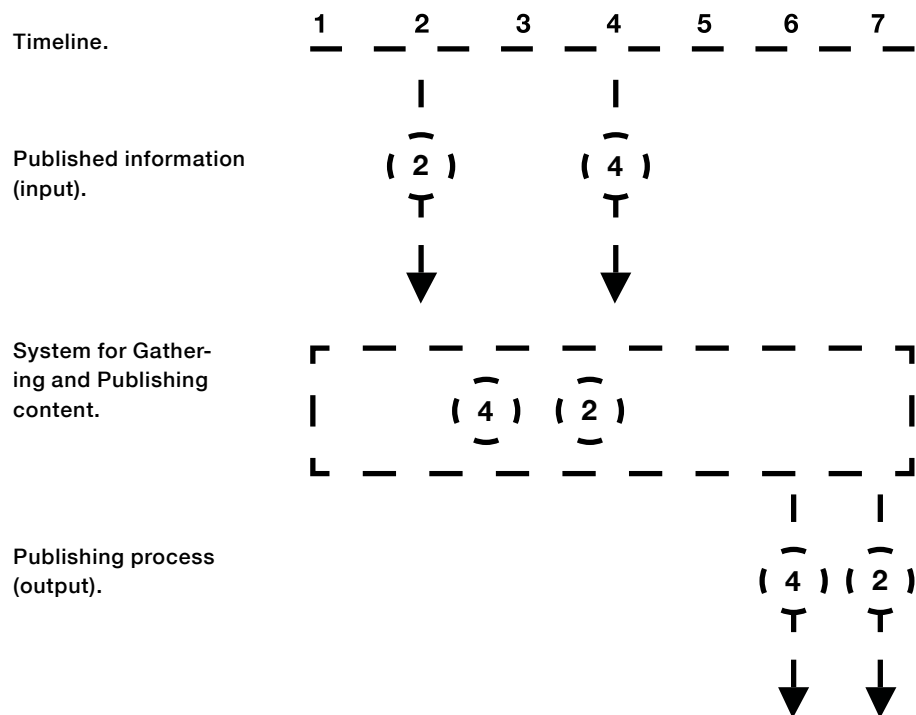
Content, which one is publishing can be, within seconds after being put online, altered and republished within the same context or not.

A system that is publishing in this way is publishing linear, but it treats the information that it's publishing nonlinear. That information is what we can call the input. The input consists out of information that has been published at different time points. The input is collected by a system that is publishing it in a nonlinear way in relation to the original time and date that the input was published.

This makes the system treat the information in a nonlinear way in relation to its original publishing source. But the system is publishing the output chronologically, in other words, linear. Although a system is publishing linear, there are tools that provide a nonlinear consumption of the content, e.g. the possibility to structure the content the way you want to consume it, by date, size, context etc.

## Example

Information is published on day 2 and on day 4. It gathers and information and re-publishing it as content. The system is publishing Information from day 4 on day 6 and information from day 2 on day 7.



The system is always looking for nonlinear dialogues, but is always publishing linear. We can say that it's looking for: related parameters that can provide access to functionality, a functionality that gathers information. They are designed to exchange information, a system of shared learning, a dialogic form of publishing that simply treat information as content that it later organizes.

One can argue that this is what make online publishing an ongoing process that won't stop until either parties (writer/reader) stop contribute or the publishing environment is being locked. But the process of publishing relies on people posting elements containing content, and that content is also what shapes the process. So in order to look at a blog as an ongoing process of publishing we would also have to look at the individual posts as a part of the process. If an individual post would be part of the process, then that post would have to be open for altering. Its content would be changeable in the same way as the blog is being updated with new posts.

The same goes for the blog as an environment for the process of publishing. If the structure of the blog would be open for restructuring and alternations it would become a process of publishing. By restructuring I mean an environment that would allow for content to be restructured in relation to the structure of the environment, so



instead of stacking post on top of each other we would be able to actually shape the structure after the content as the blog is being updated.

Content that is published online is being recorded. There are tools that are put up because of ‘content recording’; they record every move we make, let it so be video, sound, text or image. These recordings are stored in various searchable databases. This gives us the possibility to design online tools that lets us collect extracts from these databases, extracts that can be altered and placed in new contexts. Online tools like these can create guidance to a narrative creation, they provide us with limitations and restrictions.

As the scene of online publishing is relative new, it’s all the time experimenting and searching within these limitations for new designs, which can help structuring content online.

## USER GENERATED MEDIA

Tools designed for structuring and gathering content online depend on ‘Designing Participation’. In the book *Ubiscribe: Recent Changes* Sandra Fauconnier (13) describe it as:

‘Designing Participation is not only about visual and technological design, but also (in fact, especially) about sociopolitical, economical, organizational and legal forces, and about underlying assumptions and values that influence the creation of online participatory spaces.’

Tools that are created to work with the idea of ‘Designing Participation’ can rely on metadata, they review the relationships of the local situated to the global, mediated, in a topographical sense, whether actual or historical. Tools like these are there because of online publishing and ‘content recordings’; it’s a way of structuring, gathering and publishing information collaboratively in real time, either with the help of computerized (automated) or human (manual) interaction.

In difference, desktop publishing deals with the term ‘WYSI-

WYG' (what you see is what you get). The user is limited to see and create not more than the restrictions of the program or framework being used. Because tools like these often work in offline environments they minimize the space and time for other participants, authors and personal editors to be part of the process.

Offline tools that structure and gather content are locked to the time and environment they are used in. For example, Adobe Photoshop, probably one of the most famous tools for online/offline content handling, is built and designed by Adobe. It's consisting out of a set of tools that help the user to alter, gather and structure content in a simple way. The user can use several tools to come up with a certain result, but that process of developing that result will always stay within the offline framework designed by Adobe.

Of course one can argue that customized tools for online content gathering are limited to a certain degree in the same way as 'WYSIWYG'.

But the limitations of tools online are decided by the 'tool-designer'. Someone designed a specific tool in order to achieve a certain result. Rules and constraints often create the desire of breaking them; to find your own way, this is also part of the process which drives tool-designers to develop their tools. The designer will never know how the one using the tool will behave within those limitations. The structures and limitations that are provided with in online environments becomes part of the process that sped up the online society, not pure openness.

User generated media deals with environments in which everyone can in real time contribute to the online publishing environment, indifference of a printed publication, it's a process depending on the users to contribute. This makes it hard for the 'tool designer' to control the way the publishing is going. This might be similar to 'WYSIWYG'. Although, there are different parameters that can help the 'tool designer' to gain more control.

By using a structure one creates a tool that gather and structure content. Tools like these alter and decontextualizes content in a way where content becomes the structure and the structure becomes the content.

Different tools for structuring and content gathering depend on different parameters, some of parameters that can only be triggered by a manual interaction and some which relies on an automated interaction.

Either way they are built upon interest from both ‘tool designer’ and ‘contributor’. Without the contributor the tools wouldn’t exist and vice versa. It’s all a long continuous process until either party decides that a specific goal is achieved, it could be that a certain parameter is fulfilled, parameters such as time, color, context, amount or that suddenly the participators stop contributing.

Tools which are working with an automated interaction are set up to scan other publishing platforms where content already have been published, ‘content recordings’. While tools depending on human interaction are depending on people who actively make a decision to structure content with the help of tools.

### THREE EXAMPLES OF TOOLS FOR CONTENT GATHERING AND STRUCTURING.

#### PHOTOSHOP

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#### Manual structuring and content gathering

Tools for online content gathering and structuring can be compared with the tools you find in programs designed for offline desktop publishing. Photoshop has e.g. the built in color palette tool, which is a tool that helps one to structure the content of ones colors, it allows one to take one color and alter it into a new color. The color palette works as well in the same way as the ‘history action’, which is a built in function that structures and organizes actions that alters content. It’s a tool that keeps track of different actions that the ‘tool user’ is performing.

It’s a linear process structuring different actions in chronological order. This allows one to step through the process and revert to previous actions. Because it only shows one step at a time it’s similar to Present Time and Wikipedia’s history tool. They are all with

the help of time altering and showing content in the context of a specific time.

Screen shot of Photoshop tools.

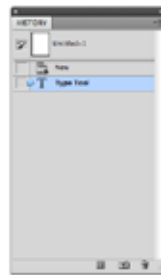
Fig. 1: Displaying gathered content.

Fig. 2: The tool for color structuring and altering.

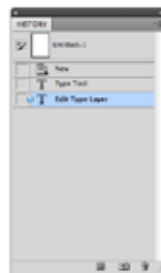
Fig. 3: Content altered with the color tool.

Fig. 4: Content reverted with the history action.

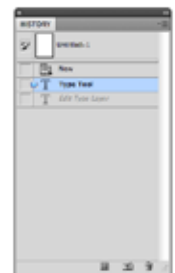
**History  
Action**



**History  
Action**



**History  
Action**



PRESENT TIME

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Automated structuring and content gathering

Present Time (<http://www.christianisberg.com/presenttime/>) works as a publishing platform showing traces of someone's behavior while surfing the Internet, it's publishing images in the context of the users time relation to the images.

It's a system that collects images from the Firefox cache, then renaming them after the current time that they were exposed in Firefox web-browser. All images are uploaded to an ftp where they are put in to a system that structures them in chronological order. After each image is put in to the system the Present Times is publishing them in a drop-menu from where they can be viewed separately.

It's a continuous automated system for online publishing, dependent of the parameters the 'tool designer' decided while building it. It's a system using meta-data as the source for structuring the content, without defining visual aspect of the picture.

Present time is depending as much on people using other online publishing tools as on the one using the Present Time tool it self.



Screen shots of Present Time

Fig. 1: Start page displaying the latest picture, present time.

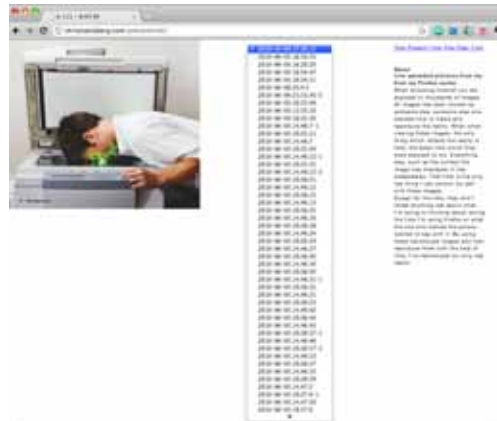
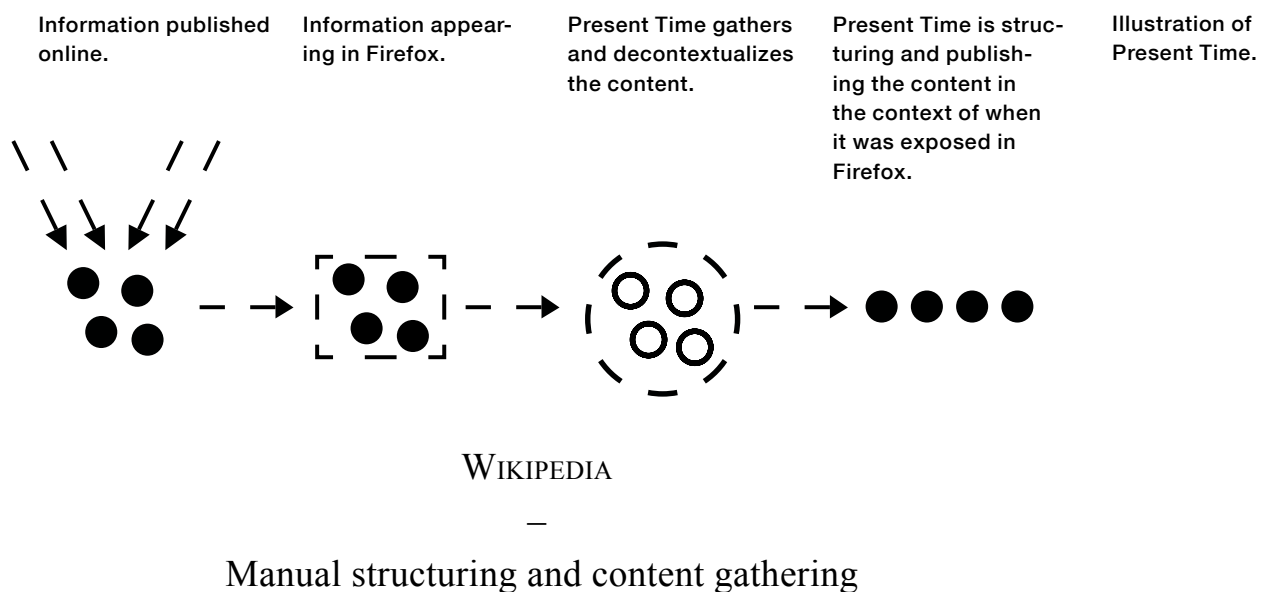


Fig. 2: Displaying the drop-menu with all images structured in chronological order, past time.

The Present Time tool is publishing content that's already been published, that makes it a big collaborative process where the participators (although they are likely not aware about their participation) can control the input of the system but the 'tool designer' controls the parameters that structures the input while publishing (the output):

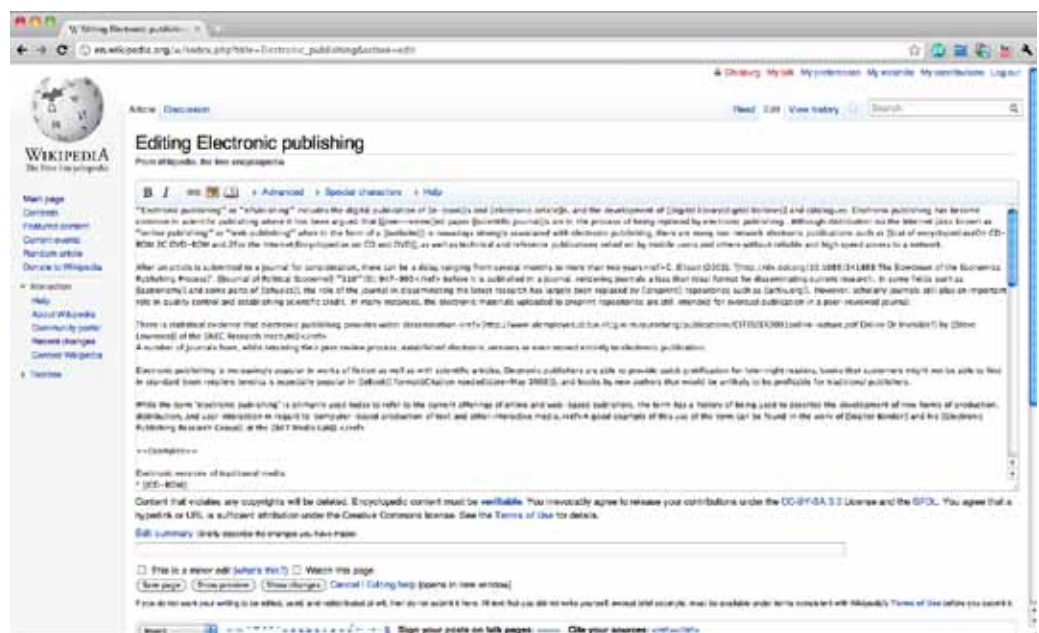


Wikipedia is an open and collaborative online publishing platform that works as a tool for gathering and structuring information where everyone participating in the process becomes an editor of Wikipedia.

‘Wikipedia is a so called wiki, a type of website that allows users to easily add, remove or edit all content, in most cases even without the need for registration. The software also keeps track of all individual changes, so that pages can be reverted to previous versions. It is a very open and unstructured system, leaving lots of freedom for contributors to ”fill in the blanks” and for imposing a structure that has emerged from social consensus.’ (Sandra Fauconnier: 56)

The freedom provided by Wikipedia has engaged many of its contributors to actively feed the system with articles, but it also open up for vandalism. It often happens that someone vandalizes an article by altering the content by overwriting it with irrelevant information. When an article is being altered it’s automatically sent to the history action ([http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Main\\_Page&action=history](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Main_Page&action=history)) from where it’s possible to revert the article.

Screen shot of Wikipedia's editing tool.



To keep track of alternation Wikipedia has a team of several people looking after the content. Brion Vibber, who was Wikipedias only fulltime employee once said:

‘it’s almost more like an online game, in that it’s a community where you hang out a bit, and do something that’s a little bit of fun: you whack some trolls, you build some material, etcetera.’ (Vibber (2008): <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/ar->

chives/2008/mar/20/the- charms-of-wikipedia/)

Nicholoson Barker, who wrote the paper called ‘The Charms of Wikipedia’ claims that:

‘Whacking trolls is, for some Wikipedia editors, a big part of why they keep coming back.’ (Barker (2008): <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/mar/20/the-charms-of-wikipedia/>)



Screen shot of Wikipedia's history tool.

When ‘whacking trolls’ one try to keep Wikipedia clean from vandalism but it also contribute to more vandalism. Without the vandalism the editors might stop editing and with out the editors Wikipedia would become a sack of nonsense and the desire to vandalize wont be tempting anymore. One can say that it’s a process where the editors are depending on the trolls vice versa.

## THE END PRODUCT

I would argue that tools described above are designed as much for the ‘tool designer’ him self as for the public mass. Even though the public mass doesn’t actively decide to contribute to the process, they contribute with the help of content which they have published before. Either way, the process of publishing becomes an act, the act of publishing through tools that structure and gather specific content.

It doesn't matter if a tool is running automatically or operated manually, it's the process of using tools for content structuring and gathering that makes online publishing.

If both 'tool provider' and 'tool user' stopped using the tools that provide content structuring and altering there would be an end, the process of publishing becomes the finished act of making an online publication, one can ask the question whom the designer of the publication is? One could argue that the one who put the system together is also the one who designed the structure of the process, and that the process is what becomes the design. But as the system is set up as a public tool it makes it also as a tool depending on the users to generate content. Looking at programs for desktop publishing, in the context of whom the designer of the end product is, I wouldn't argue that a company, such as adobe, is the designer behind most of the publications we see, although I would argue that they are the designers of a system that allows for content structuring.

User generated media is information; tools are treating information as content.

Tools and guidance are designed in the context of inviting users or recipients to actively shape the experience and/or help users to gather and/or contribute with content. With the help of online publishing, designers begin to converge into authors; a publisher who adds content to a system, a system that continuously exchanges content. Tools are environments that allows for collaborative processes.

Process generates content. Process generates automatic design through tools, which makes the 'design' invisible. Tools don't define content, they simply fill placeholders with content; they become design that generates content.



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