Viable Wikis

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Wikis are collaborative platforms enabling large-scale, collective and open-access elaboration of knowledge, the most famous and possibly the most successful thereof being the Wikipedia, a multi-lingual project of encyclopedia creation, which also attracted a substantial academic interest recently. There are currently, however, plenty of other active open-access wikis, with varying success: some recruit many users and achieve sustainability, with established role distributions, frequent updating and efficient fight against vandalism, while others have problems attracting sufficient active contributors, irrespective of the topic of the wiki. These many projects either have distinct policies but are still sustainable, or have identical policies but die. We investigate some initial clues towards explaining these various destinies: distinct policies, norms, user incentives, as well as technical and structural features. We emphasize the existence of different periods of development of a wiki-based community, from bootstrapping with a pre-established set of rules and founders, to more stable regimes where constant enrollment and training of new users balances out the occasional departure of more advanced users. We also underline the intertwining of population and content dynamics as a key driver of a wiki-based community survivability. As our focus is on the viability of communities originating from a wiki platform itself, we do not wish to consider wikis which are primarily supported by an pre-existing offline community of users — such as workgroups who decide to set up a wiki to facilitate and ease collaboration and synchronization among its members, in which case the viability of the wiki is directly linked to the viability of the offline group.

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