Georgia Institute of Technology scholar Amy S. Bruckman:

Success of Wikipedia is a continual surprise to me

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Amy S. Bruckman is a professor in the School of Interactive Computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology, and author of 'Should You Believe Wikipedia?: Online Communities and the Construction of Knowledge', published by Cambridge University Press in 2022.

I would love to start the interview with what may be a fun, cheeky question. Why should Cambridge University publish a book on Wikipedia?

Well, I think the nature of information is one of the most important issues of our time. The book is really about how to understand the reliability of information and the ways that community and collaboration reshaped the basic nature of what we know to be true.

The reason I asked that question is that academia, in general, seems to have maintained a condescending view of the information produced by the laymen, the people on the streets, and those who do not have expertise. Now, Cambridge, one of the most prestigious universities in the world, is publishing a book on the same kind of information, which was once not reliable.

That's why I wrote the book. I think we don't teach people enough epistemology in school. If you understand the way knowledge is constructed, you'll realize that some knee-jerk reactions about what to believe are wrong. You'll also realize that having a deeper understanding of the nature of knowledge, I think, helps everyone at every level of society.

So, is this a cautionary book about Wikipedia?

No, it's a book about the nature of knowledge that says that most parts of Wikipedia are surprisingly reliable and in some cases, the most reliable kind of information ever created in the world.

How were people, on a global scale, able to create something this reliable?

It turns out that how we know whether the information is reliable depends on how carefully it's reviewed. Think about peer review in science, which is the highest standard of review. I write something and then, three experts in the field review it. Those experts may not understand all of the background needed to understand the work. They review it once and then if they accept it, it's done and gets published.

Contrast that to something on Wikipedia, which is continually reviewed. If part of something is proved to be wrong, it can get updated at any minute and can be reviewed by thousands of people. A popular page can get an even higher level of review. Now, the review is very often done by laypeople and sometimes by experts. There is a surprising number of experts who review things on Wikipedia. But even for pages reviewed by laypeople, if people have strong shared citation practices relying on reliable sources to back up the things they're saying, it can be strongly reliable.

Do you think that the construction of knowledge can function as a democracy of sorts, which puts every assumption and every assertion to a popular vote?

That's why the success of Wikipedia is a continual surprise to me. No, you can't just have a bunch of people vote to decide what's true. That doesn't work. The inner workings of the socio-technical system of Wikipedia, the improvements it receives, the ability to undo anything, and the enforcement of strong citation practices help a great deal. But no, you can't just vote for what everyone thinks is true. There's more to it than that, and that's what's interesting.

What can academia learn from the experience of Wikipedia?

I think the design of Wikipedia has a lot of features that are incredibly successful. We could look at a hundred different things and learn from them. I love looking at how it actually works in practice and thinking about what the broader lessons are.

I think it's fascinating that Wikipedia policies themselves are editable by anyone. Now, if you walked in and changed a basic policy, someone would just revert it, unless you had a strong consensus from the group and a strong motivation for the change you suggested. You'd need to talk with people first. But it's kind of remarkable that even the policies are editable by anyone.

If you could have rewritten some of the policies of academia regarding the creation of knowledge, what would they be?

Well, I think we're reinventing academic publishing all the time. So, some of the features of academic public publishing are still stuck with inheriting features that came from days of paper publishing. As we move from paper publishing to electronic publishing and as the publishing cycle gets quicker, there are all kinds of things we need to rethink. It's interesting to think about the ways in which more collaborative authorship like Wikipedia could be useful in academia. I don't know. Certainly, the way we all get credit for our work certainly requires firm authorship rather than collaborative authorship, but could you use both models in a complementary fashion? I think so.

One important thing about Wikipedia is that it's free. The knowledge amassed in Wikipedia is freely available to everyone. This is not common practice. Right now, this is not the norm in academia. If you want to have access to the frontiers of knowledge, either you or your institution have to pay a huge amount of money. Maybe making knowledge available for free is one of the things that academia should learn from Wikipedia.

I agree. I think the way academic publishing works doesn't make sense anymore. Particularly, your tax dollars fund research, and then, the university employees work to do the research and write it up as findings. Then, they send it off to a publisher who charges for access to it, but that's crazy because the public paid for the work. There's no reason to let the publishers charge money for it. What we need is a public platform for shar-