Creating "the Wikipedia of pros and cons"

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ABSTRACT

Debatepedia Founder Brooks Lindsay will host a panel focusing on projects and individuals attempting to build what amounts to "the Wikipedia of debates" or "the Wikipedia of pros and cons". The panel will bring together Debatepedia founder Brooks Lindsay, Debatewise founder David Crane, Opposing Views founder Russell Fine, and ProCon.org editor Kambiz Akhavan. We will discuss our successes and failures over the past three years, and the way forward for clarifying public debates via wiki and other technologies.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.4 [Information Systems Applications]; H.5 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]; I.7 [Document and Text Processing]

General Terms

Design, Experimentation, Human Factors

Keywords

Debate, politics, encyclopedia, pros and cons, wiki, dialogue, deliberation.

1. INTRODUCTION

This workshop will cover new online efforts to fix a problem in the modern "public debate": that arguments in major public debates are scattered across hundreds of resources, making it impossible for the public as well as decision-makers to fully "weigh all the pros and cons" in debates facing them. Wiki projects attempting to address this problem include Debatepedia, Debatewise, Chains of Reason, and Wikidebate, among others. Non-wiki approaches include ProCon.org, Opposing Views, CreateDebate, Convinceme, Helium, ForAndAgainst, and many others. Certainly, enough energy surrounds this problem and solution that many have begun calling it an industry, referring to it as the "the in-depth citizen-journalism of public debates."

Certainly, the industry has reached a significant level of development, and the wiki component of it is growing quickly. It is for this reason that we have organized a panel at Wikisym.

The wiki approach has significant advantages in certain areas of the "in-depth journalism of public debates", particularly in the area of *documenting* debates and arguments in a pro/con encyclopedia fashion. That is, documenting the arguments and quotes that are already "out there" in "the public debate", and centralizing them via wiki technology into a single pro/con encyclopedia. The panel at Wikisym will discuss the work being done to build such a resource at Debatepedia and Debatewise and at similar projects ProCon.org and Opposing View (neither of which are wikis). It will discuss philosophies, successes, challenges, and the way forward for the future of the public debate – via wikis and non-wikis.

The panel will include: Brooks Lindsay, the founder of Debatepedia; David Crane, the founder of Debatewise; Russell Fine, the founder of Opposing Views; and Kambiz Akhavan, the editor of ProCon.org.

2. SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Brooks Lindsay founded Debatepedia in 2006 at Georgetown University. After graduating, he began working full-time on the project and continues to do so. In 2007, he merged Debatepedia with the International Debate Education Association (IDEA – a 501c3 non-profit) and has successfully raised funds for the project from the Open Society Institute, United Nations Foundation, and Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation. Brooks lives in Washington, DC, but travels/works-online for a good part of the year. He can be reached at brooks@debatepedia.org.

David Crane is the founder of Debatewise (www.debatewise.com). Debatewise is an advanced wiki environment for structuring pro and con arguments on any topic in the world. It is most akin to Debatepedia among the other projects on the panel, although it has developed its own wiki and community platform, as opposed to modifying MediaWiki, as Debatepedia has done. David founded one of the first web design agencies in the UK in 1995 and has worked on the Internet ever since. He spent much of the last 14 years building, participating in, or studying online communities and the dynamics between them; he has also analyzed online discussion for clients such as the British Government. He founded Debatewise to help people who go to forums and blogs seeking answers but have trouble drawing conclusions from what they find. David lives in the UK. He can be reached at dc@23.co.uk.

Kambiz "Kamy" Akhavan has served as Managing Editor of ProCon.org (www.procon.org) since December 2004. ProCon.org is a 501c3 non-profit that comprehensively researches and structures arguments and quotations in a simple pro/con format. Unlike Debatepedia and Debatewise, ProCon.org is not a wiki. Its in-house journalists structure its pro/con articles. Kamy has over 15 years of experience in making serious educational content entertaining, accessible, and affordable. His work has been published in textbooks, magazines, newspapers, and websites across the United States. He received a BA (*magna cum laude*) and MA (*summa cum laude*) in History from the University of California Los Angeles. Kamy was born in Iran, grew up in Southern Louisiana, and has lived in California for about 20 years. He loves music, politics, surfing, running, his wife, and ProCon.org.

Russell Fine is CEO and Director of Opposing Views (www.opposingviews.com). Opposing Views acts mainly as an environment for experts in specific, contentious fields to engage in structured pro/con debate. Russell Fine has been an entrepreneur, investor and senior executive at technology and media companies for the past 20 years. Fine is currently chairman of the board at Accuscore, which provides sports forecasting content to such Internet giants as Yahoo!, ESPN and CBS Sportsline. In 1995, Fine co-founded Youbet.com, which recently generated its billionth dollar in transactions. During his tenure, Youbet raised more than $100 million dollars, deployed the world's first online wagering system and forged partnerships with New York Racing Association, Station Casinos, Churchill Downs Inc. and Hollywood Park. He has also acted as a strategic advisor to a variety of companies, including General Motors and Ascent Media, a division of Liberty Media Group. He lives in Los Angeles. He can be reached at rfine@opposingviews.com.

3. A FORETASTE OF THE PANEL

The many different projects in this field reflect a clear trend in solving a critical problem in modern democracies: Public debates on any given topic are scattered across dozens and sometimes hundreds of newspapers, editorials, commentaries, speeches, books, and statements. Each of the projects included on the panel attempt to solve this problem and clarify public debates by centralizing all of the arguments being made "out there" into structured articles, where every argument is seen clearly in a pro/con splitscreen format. Yet, they each have distinctly different approaches, and discussing the advantages and disadvantages of these differences will be a focus of the panel.

Debate certainly exists regarding whether a wiki approach is appropriate for the task at hand. So far, Debatepedia and Debatewise have handled issues surrounding the wiki approach fairly well. Yet, as their communities grow, one of the questions is how well the community can self-regulate and maintain neutrality in the face of emotionally heated issues and users that may be inclined to express their personal views in flame wars. The panel will discuss these challenges, and the future moving forward for this exciting new micro-industry.