

Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness

By Nathaniel Tkacz

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Few virtues are as celebrated in contemporary culture as openness. Rooted in software culture and carrying more than a whiff of Silicon Valley technical utopianism, openness—of decision-making, data, and organizational structure—is seen as the cure for many problems in politics and business.

But what does openness mean, and what would a political theory of openness look like? With *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*, Nathaniel Tkacz uses Wikipedia, the most prominent product of open organization, to analyze the theory and politics of openness in practice—and to break its spell. Through discussions of edit wars, article deletion policies, user access levels, and more, Tkacz enables us to see how the key concepts of openness—including collaboration, ad-hocracy, and the splitting of contested projects through “forking”—play out in reality.

The resulting book is the richest critical analysis of openness to date, one that roots media theory in messy reality and thereby helps us move beyond the vaporware promises of digital utopians and take the first steps toward truly understanding what openness does, and does not, have to offer.

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Editorial Review

Review

“This book will make people sit up and think in a new way about a timely set of issues. Tkacz’s argument is not predictable or one-dimensional. Instead, it is productive of new knowledge at each step. Each new layer of argument uncovers riches of detail, new bibliographies of current research, and surprising new directions of thought. His argument balances nicely between powerful general statements and compelling concrete demonstrations.”

(Alan Liu, University of California, Santa Barbara)

“Tkacz’s book is an important reminder to be critical of any discourse that advocates technology as a one-solution-fits-all quick fix. His analysis of Wikipedia demonstrates, in fine detail, that hierarchy does not disappear when digital collaboration is added to the mix. Indeed, it is often precisely the opposite.”

(*Public Books*)

“A crucial intervention in the field of new media studies. The book thinks rigorously about participation and collaboration as few others do. It is certain to generate much excitement, debate, and even controversy.”

(Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Brown University)

“Highly original and delightfully written, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness* is one of the finest pieces of work I have read in the field of network cultures and software studies. Tkacz has undertaken a comprehensive critique of openness—or open politics—as it manifests across a range of institutional and social-technical settings. This book has all the key ingredients to make a substantial impact in debates surrounding network governance and software politics.”

(Ned Rossiter, University of Western Sydney)

“Could be used across many disciplines, such as communications, media studies, philosophy, linguistics, sociology, and cultural studies. . . . Highly recommended.”

(*Choice*)

“Tkacz’s book provides a valuable set of concepts and techniques of political description which can be used ‘to speak coherently back to openness’ and re-examine our assumptions about it.”

(*Cultural Studies Review*)

“*Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness* is an important book. . . . At one level it is a fascinating inside look at the operations of Wikipedia – from someone who clearly knows and understands it from the inside. . . . At the next level, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness* is a critique not just of Wikipedia but of the whole idea of openness – one of the sacred cows of the internet, something considered almost beyond criticism. . . . Tkacz challenges assumptions and forces you to question your own views, particularly about openness itself.”

(*Times Higher Education*)

“This text is a fine example of new work in critical digital media studies. . . . It will be of great interest to those in new/digital media studies and science and technology studies.”

(*Information, Communication, and Society*)

“*Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness* uses ideas from cultural studies and organizational theory to discuss governance in an extremely important online community. In addition to highly valuable case studies, it is also to be commended for employing ideas from various traditions of cultural studies in ways that are lucid and informative.”

(*Contemporary Sociology*)

About the Author

Nathaniel Tkacz is associate professor in the Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies at the University of Warwick.

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