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From idea to encyclopaedia

Tired of endless clashes obscuring useful information in online forums, Daniel Estill launched TradWiki, a collaborative translation encyclopaedia. Ana Iaria finds out more about this evolving project

Ana Iaria is a Brazilian former lawyer and translator living in the UK. And a geek at heart.

Daniel Estill translates fiction and non-fiction as well as technical material. He has a BA in Journalism, a Master's in Literary Theory and Comparative Literature and is working on his PhD thesis on repositioning the translation concept for the global and technological world scenario.

An episode of 'flaming' within a group of Brazilian translators on Facebook is what started it. Instead of sharing our ideas and recommendations for translators, we were disputing who was righter and brighter. Brazilian translator Daniel Estill was so frustrated by this, he came up with this idea of a translation wiki and started a vote to give it a name. That is how TradWiki was born. Now, almost two years later, TradWiki is developing into a content-rich collaborative translation encyclopaedia.

In this interview, Daniel talks about the project, how it is managed, the main issues it faces, and the future.

Ana Iaria: Daniel, can you tell us more about the inception of TradWiki?

Daniel Estill: I've been around translation groups since the early 90s. Initially in mailing lists, like Yahoo's, then on social networks like Orkut, Facebook and LinkedIn. In all of them, year in and year out, I saw some very basic questions being asked repeatedly: 'How do I start translating professionally?', 'Is it possible to make a living as a translator?', 'Which CAT tool is the best?', and so on. Sometimes the answers were helpful and polite, sometimes less so. And it was (and is) quite common to see very simple questions become the source of endless flame wars.* Also, valuable answers were constantly getting lost amid comments not related to the original post and, in general, the overall result was quite superficial, confusing and dispersed.

In the middle of one of these flame wars, where I saw old friendships being broken and people getting really hurt, I asked myself, why not create a wiki? Wikis keep the real content separate from the discussions and they also focus more on what is being said than on who is saying it. This way, we can keep the focus on what really matters. Moreover, information will always be there, available to everyone, updated and easy to find – no need to write everything, over and over again, in different forums.

> ## 'Wikis keep the real content separate from the discussions and focus more on what is being said than on who is saying it'

So now we have in-progress articles on translator training, translation project management, translation quality, translation history and theory, plus book reviews, event listings and interpreting topics. If you can't find what you are searching for, you can simply start an article and ask others to contribute to it.

AI: Is there a managing team, for want of a better word? How are the posts organised?

DE: Kind of. It started with me and a colleague, Pablo Cardellino, who took on the technical side. Later, we were joined by Roseli Dornelles, then by Carolina Alfaro and a few others. We are all volunteers, so it's quite hard to dedicate all the time to the project that it requires. We all work on organising focus groups, editing articles, developing new ideas, keeping our blog and social media up to date and so on. Only Pablo has to work more or less alone on the tech side. And this is a major issue for us. He is a tech wizard, that's for sure, at least when compared with us, but he is also learning how to handle the MediaWiki software, which is a Herculean task. We have an urgent need for help in this area; after all, we are all translators, not software engineers.

As for the organisation of articles, we started with a simple summary on the first page to guide the contributions. It is still there, as a moving framework for the project, but it is impossible to include all the pages of a translation wiki in a manageable table of contents. So we use category tags for the articles, which allow users to check the category list to see what is available. Of course you can find any article simply by doing a search, exactly the same way as with Wikipedia.

AI: What are the main technical issues in hosting such an ambitious project? Is the content protected in terms of intellectual property?

DE: The content is under Creative Commons licences, just like several wiki projects, including Wikipedia. In general, that means that you should not use copyrighted material in the wiki, and that the content is kind of author-free. Anyone can write, but no one owns any proprietary right on what is being posted there. It is a very open and successful principle, as demonstrated by Wikipedia's 15 years of continuous growth.

MediaWiki, the open source application used for Wikipedia and a number of other wikis, is a very complete piece of software. Very complex as well, depending on what you want to do with it. But its basic functions are simple and it offers an incredible level of control.

We would like to get to the next level, though. We tried to implement an extension called Visual Editor, already in place in Wikipedia and elsewhere. It makes it far simpler to

write and edit articles, avoiding any kind of code. But this requires a dedicated server and regular software maintenance. Those things cost money and a lot of time. Unless we are granted both somehow, it won't happen in the near future. But it is highly desirable. Although it is already simple for people to contribute, we really need to make it even simpler. With the Visual Editor, it would only require one click to start editing, just as in a Word document.

**AI:** How is the collaboration shaping up among contributors?

DE: To be honest, I expected more regular participation than we are getting. Initially there was a tsunami of enthusiasm and contributions. That was when the project developed its structure and it was very important. After a month, however, the novelty factor wore off. TradWiki suffers from

'Most collaborators are seasoned and generous professionals, with a lot to share'

the same curse as translators do – it needs to stay visible to be recognised. The major challenge is to instil the wiki culture into the online way of life of translators and translation researchers. But we are getting there – perhaps more slowly than expected, but the project is moving forward.

That said, I'm pretty happy with the quality of several articles, which fulfil the project's objective. Although they are few in number, our enthusiasts are always improving articles in their areas of interest. We have a major article on Wordfast, for example, but not on memoQ or Trados Studio, and that is just because Wordfast enthusiasts started writing it. The same goes for the project management article, or the ones on translation education or simultaneous interpretation. All of them are being developed by informed professionals, who have taken ownership of a subject.

We number project managers among our collaborators, as well as people starting out in the profession. I believe that everybody can participate on some level. If not by developing full articles, then at least by proofing those already there,
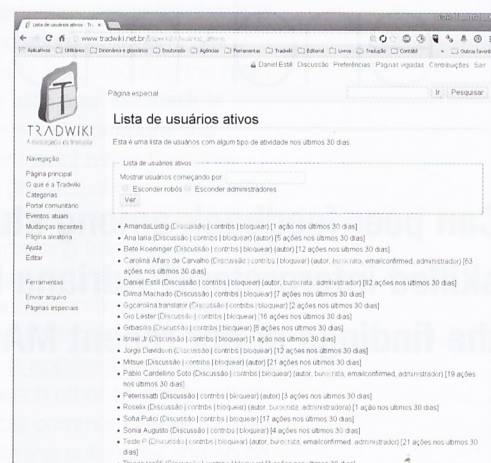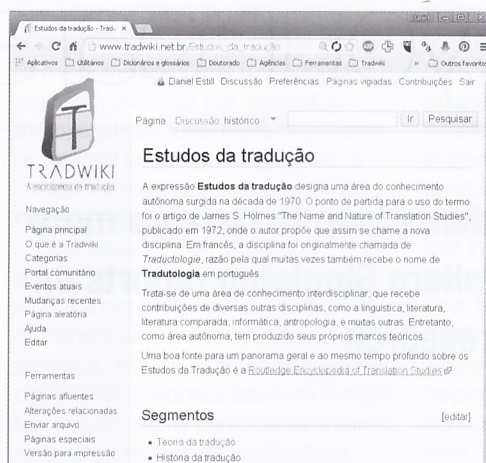
making suggestions, providing summaries, links or references, or simply spreading the word.

AI: Is it correct to say that most of the articles are written by professional translators? Are there contributions from academics?

DE: Indeed. TradWiki started in an online professional group, so it's natural for most input to come from there, at least for now. In general, most collaborators are seasoned and generous professionals, with a lot to share. But it's amazing to see the enthusiasm of youngsters too.

As for academics, I myself am following a Language Studies PhD programme focused on Translation Studies. The same goes for Pablo and Roseli. Carolina has a Master's degree in translation, and I believe this is the case for some of our regular contributors as well. So academia is in TradWiki's DNA.

This is certainly a project of great pedagogical interest. An undergraduate lecturer from a major Rio university told me that she is using TradWiki as a base for introducing translation to her students. I was amazed, as it never occurred to me that it could be used that way. It can also be used in translator training courses. Students can be encouraged to develop a joint article; the articles available can be used as discussion material, and so on.

It also offers an opportunity for academics interested in presenting their knowledge to a wide audience. It is not the place to publish academic articles, for sure, but it is certainly the place to introduce theories and theorists to people who should learn more about Translation Studies, or

who have never even heard of it. Many professional translators have no idea of the nature and complexity of their own activity, and TradWiki can be an amazing platform for research. One of my original goals was to build TradWiki as a bridge between theory and practice, and all the ingredients and tools are already there for teachers, researchers, students and professional translators to make it happen.

AI: What is the future of TradWiki?

DE: TradWiki is a lifelong project, which I hope to be working on for the next ten or 20 years at least. But it is still in its early stages. Our priorities include finding ways to attract and retain more regular contributors, improving its infrastructure and including it in the academic agenda.

Also, it exists only in Portuguese for now. But it is a translation project, so I expect this will change. It would be amazing to see an English TradWiki, to start with. But for this to happen, we must develop it first in our own language, and then create the infrastructures for an 'en.tradwiki', 'es.tradwiki', 'fr.tradwiki' and so on. Of course, this will require volunteers. The future depends on the hands that shape it, so TradWiki's future is mostly in the hands of the community. Our job is to start it up and get it ready to receive those who will really make this utopia into a reality.

Above: Pages of the ever-evolving TradWiki, founded by Daniel Estill