Wiscommunity

Phase 2 – a rethinking

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Wiscommunity has been a work in progress for the past two years. It has undergone several different stages of thinking, but has finally settled on an initial plan and mission.

I have been struck for the last several years by how much information in communities around the state is distributed by mailing lists – these are either ad-hoc lists of people that someone maintains on their desktop computer, or a slightly more technologically advanced version in a mailing list server like Mailman. I have also occasionally seen groups attempting to leverage project management systems as a means of organizing communication, with limited success. All of these have one thing in common – they depend on email as the main means of communication. Email is still more or less the least common denominator of communication on the internet, and is well-understood by people who use the internet at all. It also has the great advantage of being a push medium – it comes to you, you don't have to seek it out.

Wiscommunity is an attempt to build on-line communities that are constructed from a collection of micro-sites on the web. At the same time, Wiscommunity maintains the feel of a mailing list because discussions can still take place purely through an email mechanism.

The general goals of this project have drifted a little over time, but the plan is that this is a general web utility, that will be used for many different things:

a. **Micro-sites** for organizations, businesses, and others who would like to maintain a feature-filled, flexible web presence that will be free or low-cost. In this sense I see the advantage of maintaining a single powerful site with many silos as opposed to multiple high-overhead individual sites.

b. **Discussions.** The current design is very discussion-heavy and is built on the theory that at least initially discussions will be the main purpose of the site.

c. **Calendaring** is a very powerful feature of the site, which will allow maintaining multiple calendars, importing calendar data from other places that have ical-accessible calendars, and will (eventually) allow for building exportable calendar widgets that can be placed on other web sites easily.

d. **Document Repositories** – the current system is bult on the OpenAtrium Drupal distribution – as such it allows for sophisticated use of filing systems for documents.

Use Cases:

The site is currently up and running with a minimal set of features. I'm working on expanding to have more features, but in the meantime am also looking for organizations, groups, and individuals who might be interested in helping to shape the form of the platform. I will list a few use cases and what I think are the essential features for each:

a. **General** – the site is organized in "spaces" which are essentially mini-sites. Groups can have their own space, and will have a fair amount of control over what can be done with that space. Within the space there may be sub-spaces, and each of these may be made public or private, with a reasonable amount of control over permissions for the members – we're still working on some templates for different use cases. Spaces have some control over their look (colors, header images, etc.) and control over many other aspects of their own space. Spaces have "functional" areas called sections, and those can include things like a calendar, wiki-editable pages (editable by anyone in the space), individual pages (editable by their author), document areas, etc. We will be building more different sections as time goes on.

b. **Political discussion groups** – this is one of the first use cases I am building out, and will be useful for groups to have private or public discussions (or a combination of the two). This use case can have wiki pages, regular pages, a calendar, assignable tasks, a document repository, and soon, a blog.

c. **General topical spaces** – this will be more or less an open call for spaces based on a topic. I am in the process of rolling out a space on food, which will have several different sub-spaces.

d. **Geographical areas** – there will be spaces based on geographical areas in Wisconsin. Currently I am working on a few spaces for the Chippewa Valley and spaces within the Chippewa Valley – eventually the plan will be to roll this out to the rest of the state.

e. **Alternative Media** – I am very much interested in working with alternative media groups throughout the state, and will be developing templates for media organizations including strong video and audio features, as well as incorporating a few journalism tools. Eventually I would also like to include ties to some form of live-blogging platform.

f. **Non-profits** – I would like the site to provide a home for non-profit groups that do not have a web presence of their own – or as an adjunct to a non-profit's own web platform.

g. **Small governmental organizations** – one of the current plans for this is to move the current Town of Dunn web site into Wiscommunity – we will need to build a few new section types for this to deal with the different needs of a township.

I am sure more different use cases will come up through discussions with community organizations that I am planning to hold after some more work is completed on the base platform.

Future Plans and Features

Some things I would like to include in the future for the platform as different sections or other features, more or less in order of how I think they will roll out:

- **Full email discussion** – currently the site will send email out to people who can subscribe to a particular section or space on the site. At the moment this is one-way – email goes out, but to participate people need to come to the site. Very soon now we'll also have the abiliity to reply via email and post to the site.

- **Collaborative Editing** – currently there is a provision to be able to have editable documents on the site where the different members of a space can share editing for a page – I would like to incoporate true collaborative editing where individuals can work on a document at the same time, a la Google Docs.

- Perhaps some form of incorporation of **Google Docs** in the system (this is not likely to happen soon).

- **More sections** – different types of content will need to be developed for other use cases – I'm keenly interested in hearing ideas. The development of these will probably be dependent on what new use cases come up, and their relative importance.

- **On-line webinars, discussions** – I am working on some integration with on-line webinar platforms. It seems likely that this will end up using Big Marker, though there is also a small possibility of hosting this as an inherent part of the Wiscommunity platform. At the moment I'm inclined to use an off-site platform to save on bandwidth.

- **Revenue** – I'm working on a few ideas of how to at least partly fund this project. This could include minimal display advertising, membership fees for users who need more advanced features (or to have the advertising turned off for them), some form of Kickstarter campaign (though the initial one for this fizzled completely), attracting some foundation/government funding, etc. I'm very open to novel ideas on this – clearly advertising isn't going to cut it.