

A conversation with Dan Whaley on May 8, 2013

Participants

- Dan Whaley – Founder, Hypothes.is
- Alexander Berger – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Dan Whaley.

Summary

Dan Whaley is the founder of Hypothes.is. GiveWell spoke with him to learn about the tool that Hypothes.is is building as part of our investigation of opportunities to improve academic research. The tool has the potential to improve the quality of academic research by increasing the quantity, quality, and transparency of feedback on academic work. We learned about Hypothes.is's history and how its tool works.

History of Hypothes.is

Mr. Whaley was interested in how the web could have a much more profound influence on society. He worked on climate change research previously and saw the problems with misinformation and poor public discussion in that area. Hypothes.is is creating a tool that aims to improve conversations on the Internet by improving the way commenting on documents works online.

About Hypothes.is

Hypothes.is is adapted from Annotator, an open source platform started by the Open Knowledge Foundation.

It is a nonprofit organization. It chose to be a nonprofit organization in order to keep its work aligned with the interests of its users, though it expects to generate revenue to support its work in the future.

Hypothes.is aims to raise \$2 million to support its operations in the next year, and to grow to about \$5 million by 2015. It currently receives funding from the Sloan, Shuttleworth and Mellon Foundations, amongst others.

Hypothes.is is still under development, and many of the features described below are not yet operational.

Features of Hypothes.is

- It allows fine-grain conversation on specific sentences or words within a

document, in addition to allowing conversation on a page overall. Because these annotations use "fuzzy anchoring," minor changes to a page should not disrupt the annotation system.

- It uses an algorithm to select respected commenters and asks them to moderate conversations on similar topics to the ones they've commented on before. An effective reputation system should promote the best annotations above others, and reduce or eliminate spam and trolling.
- It provides infrastructure that can be used throughout the Internet, not just on individual sites. Websites do not have to do anything to opt in to annotation.
- It allows for searching, sorting, and filtering of annotations.
- It allows the privacy of annotations to be customized.
- Annotations and snapshots of underlying pages will be backed up at the Internet Archive so that annotations remain connected to a document even when the document changes or the host of the document no longer provides access to the document.
- Annotations will appear on various forms of a document, for example, paginated and single page versions of an article, or in the PDF version.
- Its flexible infrastructure and open source code will allow others to create front-end experiences and plug-ins that improve the experience on particular sites.

Users

PLoS and other open access journals are considering using annotation to power post-publication commentary, as are a number of newspapers and other publishers. Hypothes.is' current plan is that it would host the service for these organizations, and accounts and reputation would follow users between sites, but the software is open source, and any organization can install and host it themselves, and Hypothes.is imagines that many will opt to do so.

All GiveWell conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations>

