

3 From Utopia to Practice and Back

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Wikipedia has been a useful utopia for conceiving how people could cooperate productively without market relations and hierarchies. Despite the limitations of that vision and disappointments with recent history, Wikipedia remains a critical anchor for working alternatives to neoliberalism.

Warts and all, Wikipedia and commons-based peer production more generally continue to offer an existence proof that there can be another way. People can work together, build a shared identity in a community of practice, and make things they need without resorting to enforced market exchange. The great challenge of the next twenty years is working out how we can recombine what has worked in commons-based peer production to contribute to a genuine alternative to neoliberalism: we need to understand how to generalize commons-based peer production to society at large, cognizant of its imperfections and limitations; how to enable people to satisfy their basic material needs as they work together, without being forced into working in a competitive labor market that defines their choices and trade-offs; how to integrate commons-based practices into a system that still includes and relies on both state and market processes; how to use its lessons to improve each of these other systems; and how to protect the commons from the relentless encroachment by market and state actors as we have seen in the past decade.

I first published about Wikipedia in 2002.¹ Together with Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) and other peer-produced publications like Slashdot, I argued that Wikipedia was a core instance of what was emerging as a new mode of production—commons-based peer production. The success of these practices was radical when considered on the background of prevailing wisdom. Had you asked a room full of well-socialized policy

wonks in 1996 whether a loose networks of software developers, without property rights or formal organizational structure, could outcompete the biggest software companies in the world or whether thousands of individuals could collaborate to produce an encyclopedia that would become more important than *Britannica*, similarly without anyone asserting exclusive property rights or formal organizational authority, you would have been laughed out of the room. And yet, FLOSS and Wikipedia do exist and have thrived despite the overwhelming weight of contrary theory dominant at the time. They represented the potential, I wrote at the time, that

productivity and growth can be sustained in a pattern that differs fundamentally from the industrial information economy of the twentieth century in two crucial characteristics. First, nonmarket production ... can play a much more important role than it could in the physical economy. Second, radically decentralized production and distribution, whether market-based or not, can similarly play a much more important role.²

Two decades later, we've learned not only the wonders of Wikipedia but its limits as a model as well.

If the foundation of capitalism is the combination of private property, commodified exchange, and wage labor, Wikipedia (and FLOSS, Slashdot, etc.) were none of the above. The “commons-based” aspect of the practice inverted all three core attributes. First, FLOSS and Wikipedia eschewed property-based exclusion. The inputs and outputs of production were licensed so that anyone could take them and make what they wanted or needed out of them. An open access commons that anyone can use as they need it for either consumption of production was the basic form. Second, production was not for commodity exchange. People were producing for their own and each other's use and pleasure first and for sale, if at all, only secondarily. Third, most of the production occurred in social contributions and through social exchange rather than as wage labor in markets. At the time, this was true even for FLOSS, and it continues to be the case for Wikipedia. This is the first dimension of freedom that “commons-based” practices promised: freedom from markets. They suggested the ability to live our lives under the constraints of social relations other than those dictated by the need to buy and sell labor to obtain the basic necessities of life.

The “peer-production” part of the practice had to do with the displacement of hierarchy in favor of decentralized coordination or, as in the case of Wikipedia, self-governance around a set of shared social norms. It

was this aspect that at the time I found most distinctive about the then-eighteen-months-old encyclopedia relative to other commons-based practices online: it was fully based on social norms rather than on technical constraints that prevented “defection” by noncooperators. It was

a rich example of a medium sized collection of individuals, who collaborate to produce an information product of mid- to highbrow quality, and is reasonably successful. In particular, it suggests that even in a group of this size, social norms coupled with a simple facility to allow any participant to edit out blatant opinion written in by another in contravention of the social norms keep the group on track.³

Neither state administration nor corporate managerial hierarchy was necessary for groups to scale to large numbers and effectively produce critical information, knowledge, and cultural goods. Or so at least it seemed at the time. We can think of this as freedom from hierarchy or domination, distinct from freedom from markets.

Along both these dimensions (freedom from markets and freedom from hierarchy), Wikipedia, FLOSS, and commons-based peer production (CBPP) were both an idea and a utility (see table 3.1).

As an idea, CBPP could serve as a shining light for others, showing a very real possibility of organizing productive life differently. They were instances of a utopian project, like the Israeli Kibbutz movement and the Mondragon federation of worker cooperatives, serving as inspiring examples of the possibility of arranging production outside of market relations. Wikipedia in

Table 3.1

Wikipedia’s great success: A nonmarket basic knowledge utility.

	Freedom from markets	Freedom from hierarchy
Idea	Emerging at the height of neoliberalism, CBPP offered an existence proof that nonmarket, socially embedded mechanisms could be productive and central to innovation	Allied with the Elinor Ostrom school of the commons, CBPP offered an existence proof that people could overcome “the logic of collective action”; organization did not necessarily resolve into hierarchy or markets
Utility	Affordances developed by non-market actors—foundations and networked individuals—create work-arounds to circumvent systems designed to extract rents	Affordances produced by anarchic, flat, cooperative networks would provide alternatives to systems that enforced submission to control relationships

particular offered an example of how tens of thousands of people could cooperate through debate, persuasion, and shared social norms rather than through benevolent dictatorship, as many FLOSS projects did; through mechanism-design-informed technical affordances, like Slashdot; through voting rules that ultimately subjected the minority to the majority; or through pricing.

As a utility, CBPP could serve as a core set of basic utilities that would give their users practical freedom to work around constraints and sources of exploitation that were built by market-centric, proprietary actors. If Microsoft's Windows enforced certain constraints on how you could use software or view video, then GNU/Linux would allow you to run the software or use the video as you chose. If Internet Explorer (now Edge) featured weak privacy protection or enforced digital rights management (DRM) that constrained fair use of cultural materials, Firefox would provide these affordances. If mobile phone carriers restricted how you could use mobile internet, spectrum-commons-based community networks would let you connect without being so constrained. If repressive governments tried to spy on you, FLOSS could provide incorruptible encryption products that couldn't be bought or coerced by governments. In each case, beyond the idea of nonmarket, cooperative production, CBPP would produce a set of technical affordances that enabled anyone to circumvent the technologically embedded control system imposed by market actors or by government authorities.

The most obvious and enduring success of the past twenty years has been the sheer quality, coverage, and usage of Wikipedia. In the first few years, debates over Wikipedia were centered on the impossibility of amateur knowledge providing anything but the most confusing and irrelevant stuff. Instead, Wikipedia has become the basic knowledge utility of contemporary society. It is not the final word on any topic. But, like other encyclopedias before it, Wikipedia has become the first cut on most subjects of significance to any meaningful number of people. Repeatedly over the first few years, reports were published expressing amazement that rigorous tests of quality found that Wikipedia was, broadly speaking, as good as other encyclopedias or similarly public-oriented sources of information, without being as good as peer-reviewed literature available only to specialists in a field. In other words, Wikipedia was at least as good and imperfect as any encyclopedia. Today we see fewer of these studies because the baseline

assumptions have changed, and the reasonably high, without being perfect, quality of Wikipedia articles is accepted as a background fact.

This serves a critical role in the category of utility from nonmarket production. When we consider, on the one hand, the extensive surveillance that many commercial companies employ to fund their own offerings as knowledge utilities and, on the other hand, the reams of nonsense that commercial clickbait produces, we see quite clearly the importance of a nonmarket knowledge utility. In political debates, at least in the United States, Wikipedia has come to fulfill a rare role as a source trusted, or at least used and shared, across the partisan divide. In health, a study of the anti-vaccine movement makes quite clear that Wikipedia plays a central role in providing high quality information about the safety of vaccines while a range of commercial sites purvey clickbait to the contrary.⁴ Given the high stakes of many of these debates, the incentives and efforts to shape Wikipedia's articles to represent one viewpoint or another on politics or on conspiracy theories, Wikipedia's resilience has been nothing short of remarkable.

So too is the continued resistance of the community and the Foundation to incorporating advertising, allowing Wikipedia to be the only privacy-respecting site among the top online sites. Particularly as awareness of surveillance capitalism is becoming clearer⁵ and the risk that a handful of companies will use massive amounts of data they collect on each of us to shape both commercial demand and political outcomes, Wikipedia has more than justified the idea that having a significant source of knowledge that is free of markets and marches to the beat of a different drum having nothing to do with dollars is of critical importance.

At the level of nonmarket utility, then, Wikipedia's success has been largely vindicated. It has succeeded in becoming a critical piece of our knowledge infrastructure. Its resistance to market incentives has played a critical role in its adherence to a reasonable conception of truth as resulting from honest engagement by a community of practice, implemented as a facility that does not seek to manipulate and control its readers.

In retrospect, the miracle of Wikipedia did not consist in its nonhierarchical governance. We have seen a gradual formalization of governance,⁶ and it has been almost a decade since the first major works developed the critique of the claim that Wikipedia represented genuinely nonhierarchical production.⁷ But Wikipedia, unlike FLOSS, did retain the fundamental

attribute of nonmarket production, consistently refusing to transition to advertising or other commodification of the knowledge the community produces and insisting instead on retaining the pure nonmarket form.

The Limits of Wikipedia, FLOSS, and CBPP More Generally

And yet, there are limits.

The Open Directory Project, which when Wikipedia was born was a coeval effort to produce a search utility that would be open source, nonmarket, and nonhierarchical, has largely dissipated. Open Street Map exists but has not become to navigation utility what Wikipedia or the major FLOSS projects like Apache or Linux have been in their own domain. Even if one insists that Chrome is FLOSS (in the sense that it has the Chromium development community alongside it), Google's search utility is decidedly commercial and designed to spy on its users and deliver them up to advertisers, and using Chrome to Google offers no additional protection. No peer-produced commons-based search engine has emerged to any significant degree. The handful of privacy protecting search engines (DuckDuckGo; StartPage) are built by companies, however well-intentioned their founders were. Mastodon may have had greater success than Diaspora, but there is no genuinely successful social network whose infrastructure is FLOSS and, more importantly, whose governance is in the hands of users. However one might celebrate the ubiquitous adoption of Linux in server farms and embedded devices, it is hard to see how smart devices that run on Linux will, in the normal course of their application in homes, be more open and legible to users or more resistant to their producers in embedding data collection and reporting capabilities that will render the homes in which the devices are deployed susceptible to commercial surveillance.

In the meantime, the success of the open source branch of the FLOSS movement, with its focus on innovation rather than freedom, is reflected in the widespread embrace of open source by commercial companies. As a result, most of the major FLOSS projects are produced by contributors who contribute as employees of firms that are using FLOSS as a strategy to engage in precompetitive collaboration among firms to produce critical inputs to the products they will develop on top of these collaborative innovations. Even FLOSS projects that remain governed by a foundation and dependent on volunteer contributions are forced into compromises if they

want to retain users. Most prominent here was Firefox's implementation of DRM in order not to lose browser share due to users who wanted to use Netflix and Amazon Prime video on the Firefox platform. Firms have, as a practical matter, found ways to leverage the products of FLOSS as dynamic, innovative inputs into their processes, enjoying the functional benefits of decentralized innovation but circumventing the constraints on exploitation that the social model on which that innovation was grounded originally demanded.

The second way in which the promise of Wikipedia and CBPP fell short of the ideal was in the dimension of freedom from hierarchy. Beginning toward the end of the first decade of Wikipedia's life, an increasing number of studies began to focus on the limits of its egalitarianism. Gender imbalance and the power of admins came under increasing scrutiny. The iron law of oligarchy seemed to reassert itself.⁸ This didn't mean that Wikipedia failed as a governance structure. In fact, the community is stable; it has developed quite elaborate procedures for settling disputes and making rules; and as I started out emphasizing, Wikipedia is an unalloyed success as the leading encyclopedia of the day. It has also succeeded in avoiding formal command hierarchies of either the state or corporate form. But it has not developed as a paragon of participatory democratic self-governance.

Nonetheless, I would argue that, like so many of the commons governance models that underlie the literature that followed Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom's groundbreaking work, successful actual self-governance, however imperfect, still offers critically important lessons in how we might structure large scale cooperation efforts without falling back on formal hierarchy.⁹ We have a lot more experience with the failure modes associated with do-ocracy—governance by those who show up and do the work. But we also understand that the authenticity of governance by people who volunteer to do work has important public value, in particular by comparison with governance by people who are out to make a profit.

Where to?

By the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, democratic market societies find themselves facing a fundamental crisis of legitimacy. Economic insecurity for both present and future generations has become widespread in the broad middle class that makes up the demographic core

across these societies.¹⁰ Long-term trends of declining trust in government, media, and religion reflect broad and deep loss of faith in authority in a broad range of institutions throughout much of the most economically developed countries.¹¹ The shock of the Great Recession exacerbated these longer term trends, and one can only describe the present state in much of the world's democratic societies as an epistemic and political crisis. Swaths of the population behave as though they have lost the ability (or will) to distinguish truth from fiction that supports their biases, whether by adopting political conspiracy theories or pursuing flat earth and anti-vaccine conspiracies. Many have turned to new figures of authority peddling atavistic nationalist and racist narratives as an alternative to the hemming and hawing of neoliberalism, with its individualistic dominant frame of the past forty years, rejecting both pluralist cosmopolitan (left-spin) and globalizing market-fundamentalist (right-spin) aspects of *Homo Davosis*.

What's Wikipedia got to do with it? Remember Wikipedia the idea, and consider Wikipedia the utility.

Alongside the new ethnonationalism we see emerging as an alternative to neoliberalism, we also see two other major responses. The closest to "stay the course" we might call techno-liberalism or techno-libertarianism (both versions coexist in roughly the same class and are distinguished by how comfortable they are with redistribution; their adherents seem to have settled on universal basic income as the solution that leaves the least disagreement between them). Here, the basic understanding of neoliberalism is maintained, with a particularly strong emphasis on the failures of regulation and government and an effort to focus on private sector solutions to social problems. The main difference is the persistent belief that adding more technology will eliminate scarcity and deliver prosperity for all. A second alternative we might call "nudge progressivism." Here, the major deviation from the neoliberal settlement is a newfound confidence in the ability or government agencies to collect enough data and develop sufficiently sophisticated models to overcome the information limitations of regulation and to then translate this new confidence into "soft nudges" for people to behave in ways beneficial to their own and the public good while leaving individuals the freedom to opt out of these behaviors. Both techno-liberalism and nudge progressivism combine strong reliance on markets and a reassertion of hierarchy that depends on data to govern benevolently. The main difference is that the techno-liberals imagine the hierarchical

power to be located in the hands of private companies—Facebook, Google, and so on—while the nudge progressives emphasize data-informed rational regulation by public officials.

Wikipedia's twin ideal characteristics—as nonmarket and nonhierarchical, a good-faith collaboration among people engaged with each other socially—mark it as the ideal anchor for an alternative way out after neoliberalism has run its course. In the most immediate sense, Wikipedia's core characteristics can serve as a pointer toward how we climb out of the epistemic crisis we are experiencing. Most importantly, it will not be by emphasizing market actors or reasserting a cultural authority whose luster has long dimmed.

For journalism, for example, the nonmarket attribute means that we will need a much greater investment in models that depart from advertising as a major source of income and that are not for profit. Whether through a properly insulated model of public funding, as in the model of the BBC; an endowed philanthropy trust, as in the case of the Guardian or the Poynter Institute's acquisition of Politifact; or a nonprofit organization funded by user donations, like public radio in the United States and the Wikimedia Foundation, we need the heart of professional journalism to resolve the perennial tension between the editorial side and the business side by shifting emphasis away from market-based independence for media toward society-based independence from government. Moreover, the transparent and “show me” participatory model of governance that characterizes Wikipedia (for all its faults) suggests a transition from “trust us, we're professionals” to “show your work and engage with reasons” as the central practice of responsible journalism. Internal peer review is important, as is transparency to the outside world to the very limit of what can be done without compromising confidential sources. We need parallel recommitment to public funding for science and a reversal of long-standing trends to reduce the fiscal burden on public research by shifting investment to business research and development.

Note that I focus in these areas of journalism and science not on “citizen journalism” or “citizen science,” which are the direct correlates of Wikipedia, but on nonmarket journalism and science. Each of these plays an important role in the contemporary media and innovation ecosystems. But the past twenty years have also taught us their limitations. As long as we continue to live in a society in which the basic necessities of life—food,

shelter, health, education—need to be purchased in markets, then we will need some method of providing at least some people a way of engaging in these pursuits as a vocation, not merely an avocation. While Wikipedia itself has provided an inspiring example of a knowledge good produced purely from volunteer work, when we look at other efforts to replicate it—particularly in areas that are time sensitive like news—we have seen that some mix of professional and amateur, rather than pure amateur efforts, have worked best. Citizen science, like Zooniverse or FoldIt, offers one such quite-tightly orchestrated mix. The looser interaction among professional commercial media, nonprofits, activists, and academics has produced a good deal of effective reporting and commentary as well as collaborative discovery of emerging stories over the past twenty years. Nonetheless, the past few years have also seen how this system has become vulnerable to manipulation and disinformation as well. When we compare the susceptibility of American audiences to propaganda to the relative resilience of French or German audiences, it turns out that a trusted professional core to the media ecosystem can be an important counterbalance to some of the failures of purely decentralized, volunteer networks when it comes to news, just as these latter can keep the mainstream media from falling back on their worst habits. So the lesson is to expand the idea of Wikipedia from standing purely for citizen journalism or science, and to understand that a critical part of what Wikipedia stands for is the importance of nonmarket production as a counterweight to those producers driven and directed by commercial incentives.

More generally, as we design policy interventions or think about how to arrange our affairs as a society, we need to learn from the failures of CBPP to capture a broader range of core utilities than seemed possible when Wikipedia was five or even ten years old. We need to develop ways of integrating the nonmarket and participatory, or nonhierarchical, aspects of Wikipedia into systems that also seek to harness the more traditional models of organization—in particular the state. The literature on “democratic experimentalism” in governance has for twenty years sought to develop regulatory mechanisms that engage participants in the regulated practices—including most importantly participants who are not market actors, academic experts, or engaged members of civil society—to develop a more responsive and adaptive regulatory system. How to do so is far from a settled problem. But

the critical turning point is to recognize that solutions to the present crisis of confidence in government and governance will not come from doubling down on the strategy of privatizing provisioning of public goods or from relying on market mechanisms to solve the failures of public institutions. If we want to avoid the failures of public governance of the past forty years, we should explore the solution space that Wikipedia and CBPP has laid out—participatory, social, and not dependent on or subservient to the discipline of markets.

Notes

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