

1 Nazis and Norms

Show me an admin who has never been called a nazi and I'll show you an admin who is not doing their job.

—J. S.'s Second Law

Wikipedia is not merely an online multilingual encyclopedia; although the Web site is useful, popular, and permits nearly anyone to contribute, the site is only the most visible artifact of an active community. Unlike previous reference works that stand on library shelves distanced from the institutions, people, and discussions from which they arose, Wikipedia is both a community and an encyclopedia. And the encyclopedia, at any moment in time, is simply a snapshot of the community's continuing conversation. This conversation is frequently exasperating, often humorous, and occasionally profound. Most importantly, it sometimes reveals what I call a *good faith* collaborative culture. Wikipedia is a realization—even if flawed—of the historic pursuit of a universal encyclopedia: a technology-inspired vision seeking to wed increased access to information with greater human accord. Elements of this good faith culture can be seen in the following conversation about a possible “neo-Nazi attack” upon the English-language Wikipedia.

In early 2005 members of Stormfront, a “white pride” online forum, focused their sights on Wikipedia. In February they sought to marshal their members to vote against the deletion of the article “Jewish Ethnocentrism,” one favored by some “white nationalists” and that made use of controversial theories of a Jewish people in competition with and subjugating other ethnic groups. Stormfront's alert was surprisingly sensitive to the culture of Wikipedia by warning recipients, “you must give your reason as to why you voted to keep the article—needless to say you should do so in a cordial

manner, those wishing to delete the article will latch onto anything they can as an excuse to be hostile towards anybody criticising Jewish culture.”¹ Six months later, participants of Stormfront, perhaps dissatisfied with their earlier efforts, were considering using the software that runs Wikipedia, or even some of its content, to create their own (“forked”) version more to their liking.²

The charge of Nazism has a long and odd history in the online community realm. One of the most famous aphorisms from earlier Internet discussion groups is Godwin’s Law of Nazi Analogies: “As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one.”³ Godwin’s Law speaks to a tendency of online participants to think the worst of one another. So much so, that the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, J. S.’s Second Law, implies that if you haven’t been called a Nazi, you simply haven’t been active enough on Wikipedia.⁴ Yet, throughout the immense Wikipedia discussion threads prompted by a potential “neo-Nazi attack” no one compared anyone else to Hitler. Granted, some Stormfront members are self-identified Nazis for whom that term would not be an insult, but there was also serious disagreement among Wikipedians—and even the white racialsists reminded themselves they need be cordial on Wikipedia.

This cordiality would be commented upon in a related incident later in 2005, in August, when Wikipedia user Amelkite, the owner/operator of the white supremacist Vanguard-News-Network, had his Wikipedia account blocked. MattCrypto, a Wikipedia administrator, then unblocked him, thinking it unfair to block someone because of his or her affiliation rather than Wikipedia actions. This prompted another administrator, SlimVirgin, to reblock, pointing out Amelkite had posted a list of prominent Wikipedians thought to be Jews as well as information on how to counter Wikipedia controls of disruption. The conversation between Wikipedia administrators remained civil:

MattCrypto: Hi SlimVirgin, I don’t like getting into conflict, particularly with things like block wars and protect wars, so I’m unhappy about this. . . .

SlimVirgin: I take your point, Matt, but I feel you ought to have discussed this with the blocking admin, rather than undoing the block. . . .

This interaction prompted Jimmy “Jimbo” Wales, Wikipedia cofounder and leader, to write: “SlimVirgin, MattCrypto: this is why I love Wikipedians so much. I love this kind of discussion. Assume good faith, careful reasoning,

a discussion which doesn't involve personal attacks of any kind, a disagreement with a positive exploration of the deeper issues."⁵ Whereas Godwin's Law recognizes the tendency to think the worst of others, Wikipedia culture encourages contributors to treat and think of others well. For example, participants are supposed to abide by the norm of "Wikiquote," which includes the guidelines of "Assume Good Faith" (AGF) and "Please Do Not Bite the Newcomers."⁶ Such Wikipedia norms and their relationship to the technology, discourse, and vision of a universal encyclopedia prompt me to ask: How should we understand this community's collaborative—"good faith"—culture? In the following chapters I offer my understanding on this question, but, first, an introduction.

Wikipedia

When I speak of Wikipedia I am referring to a wiki project, which includes both the textual artifact and the community producing it. (This is a common usage, as is referring to Web sites without a definite article, that is "I searched Google and Wikipedia" not "I searched the Google and the Wikipedia.") Furthermore, there is a particular vision of access and openness at Wikipedia, as seen in its slogan as "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit." This vision, the encyclopedia, and its community and culture are introduced in the sections that follow.

The Vision

The Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit organization under which Wikipedia and its related projects operate, asks the reader to "Imagine a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge. That's our commitment."⁷ However, this commitment is not unique to the new millennium. Indeed, Wikipedia's heritage can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century. In particular, it can be traced back to Paul Otlet's Universal Repertory and H. G. Wells's proposal for a *World Brain* (included in a 1937 book of the same title). These projects were conceived as furthering increased access to information; facilitated by the (then relatively novel) technologies of the index card, loose-leaf binder, and microfilm. However, this vision exceeds the production of information. Wells proposed that reference work compilers would be joined by world scholars and international technocrats to produce a resource that every

student might easily access, in a personal, inexpensive, and portable format. Furthermore, this collection of the world's intellect was envisioned to yield a greater sense of unity: Wells hoped that such an encyclopedia could solve the "jig-saw puzzle" of global problems by bringing all the "mental wealth of our world into something like a common understanding"; this would be more than an educational resource, it would be an institution of global mediation.⁸ Wikipedia shares this concern for "the sum of all knowledge" with early visionaries. And while no one argues that Wikipedia will bring about world peace, I do argue goodwill is necessary to its production and an occasional consequence of participation.

However, while most early Wikipedians were probably unaware of these predecessors from a century ago there was a more immediate inspiration: Free and Open Source Software (FOSS). One of the earliest news articles about Nupedia, Wikipedia's non-wiki progenitor, notes: "The philosophy of the open-source movement is spreading within the industry. Now, a maker of a Web-based encyclopedia wants to apply its principles to share knowledge in general."⁹ Nupedia described itself as "the open content encyclopedia" and was available under the GNU Free Documentation License. (GNU is a seminal free software project.) FOSS is licensed to enable users to read and improve on the source of the software they use. This has proven to be a much noted alternative to proprietary software in which one's usage can be restricted (e.g., unable to backup, install multiple copies, repair, or improve). When I emailed Jimmy Wales to ask about the influence of FOSS on his thinking, he replied:

In general what I can say is that Nupedia was absolutely inspired by the free software movement. I spent a lot of time thinking about online communities and collaboration, and one of the things that I noticed is that in the humanities, a lot of people were collaborating in `_discussions_`, while in programming, something different was going on. People weren't just talking about programming, they were working together to build things of value.¹⁰

Consequently, the inspiration for a free and open source encyclopedia—in terms of access, cost, and collaboration—might be thought of as the most recent stage of a long-running pursuit.

The Encyclopedia

Wikipedia is the wiki-based successor to Nupedia and its name is a portmanteau of "wiki," an online collaborative editing tool, and "encyclopedia,"

itself a contraction of the Greek *enkyklios* and *paidei*, referring to the “circle of learning” of the classical liberal arts. This name is evidence of a geeky sort of linguistic humor and also prompts the question of whether a relatively open-to-all wiki can also be a high-quality reference work. In the following pages I return to these points but for now let’s consider the wiki and encyclopedic aspects of the thing we call Wikipedia.

Wikipedia is an online wiki-based encyclopedia. “Wiki wiki” means “super fast” in the Hawaiian language, and Ward Cunningham chose the name for his collaborative WikiWikiWeb software in 1995 to indicate the ease with which one could edit pages. (He learned of the word during his first visit to Hawaii when he was initially confused by the direction to take the “Wiki Wiki Bus,” the Honolulu airport shuttle.¹¹) In a sense, the term *wiki* captures the original conception of the World Wide Web as both a browsing and editing medium; the latter capability was largely forgotten when the Web began its precipitous growth and the most popular clients did not provide their users with the ability to edit Web pages.

The wiki changed this asymmetry by placing the editing functionality on the server. Consequently, if a page can be read, it can be edited in any browser. With a wiki, the user enters a simplified markup into a form on a Web page. Using the Wikipedia syntax one simply types “# this provides a link to [[Ward Cunningham]]” to add a numbered list item with a link to the “Ward Cunningham” article. The server-side Wikipedia software translates this into the appropriate HTML and hypertext links. To create a new page, one simply creates a link to it, which remains red until someone actually adds content to its target destination. These capabilities are central to and representative of wikis.

Wikipedia now has a number of features that not all wikis share (although Wikipedia’s open source MediaWiki platform is used by many other projects). Each wiki page includes links through which one can log in (if desired), bookmark (and “watch”) the pages one cares about, or discuss how the page is being edited on its “Talk” or “Discussion” page—and this too is wiki. A history of a page is also available, showing all changes to the page (including the author, time, and edit summary); different versions can easily be compared. Two widely used features of Wikipedia are categories and templates. Users have the ability to label pages with categories, which are then used to automatically generate indexes. For example, the “1122 births” category page lists six biographical articles for those born in 1122.¹²

A wiki template is “a page which can be inserted into another page via a process called transclusion.” These small template “pages” (usually no more than a few lines of text) “are used to add recurring messages to pages in a consistent way, to add boilerplate messages, to create navigational boxes and to provide cross-language portability of texts.”¹³ Templates are included on a page by including the template name within a pair of curly parentheses. So, with the inclusion of the “`{{pp-vandalism}}`” markup, a Wikipedia page will display a warning box that “this page is currently protected from editing to deal with vandalism.” Many templates, such as the vandalism one, also add a category, creating an index of all pages presently using that template.¹⁴

The application of the wiki platform with a few encyclopedic features enables surprisingly sophisticated content creation.¹⁵ And, as we will see throughout this book, wikis often are thought of as potent collaborative tools because they permit asynchronous, incremental, and transparent contributions from many individuals. Yet, as is often the case, the consequence of this quick and informal approach of editing the Web was not foreseen—or, rather, was pleasantly surprising. Wikipedia is the populist offshoot of Nupedia, started in March 2000 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger. Nupedia’s mission was to create a free encyclopedia via rigorous expert review under a free documentation license. Unfortunately, this process moved rather slowly and, having recently been introduced to wikis, Sanger persuaded Wales to set up a scratchpad for potential Nupedia content where anyone could contribute. However, there was “considerable resistance on the part of Nupedia’s editors and reviewers to the idea of associating Nupedia with a wiki-style website. Sanger suggested giving the new project its own name, Wikipedia, and Wikipedia was soon launched on its own domain, wikipedia.com, on 15 January 2001.”¹⁶

Wikipedia proved to be so successful that when the server hosting Nupedia crashed in September 2003 it was never restored. In August 2009 there were over “75,000 active contributors working on more than 10,000,000 articles in more than 260 languages”; the original English version includes more than three million articles, having long ago subsumed most of the original Nupedia content. Twenty-five other language editions have more than 100,000 articles.¹⁷ These editions are evidence of the international character of the universal vision. (Within two weeks of the launch of Nupedia, Sanger wrote that he had already received offers to translate articles

and that supporting this work should be a priority despite any delays it might introduce.¹⁸) The Wikimedia Foundation, incorporated in 2003, is now the steward of Wikipedia as well as a wiki-based dictionary, a compendium of quotations, a source of collaborative textbooks, a repository of free source texts, and a collection of images that can be used by other Wikimedia projects.

Given its size, it is no trivial task to understand what Wikipedia actually includes. (Claims by some to have read every word of an encyclopedia are impossible with Wikipedia.) However, recent research suggests that Wikipedia's topical coverage of general knowledge and technical issues is quite good, but it has blind spots in other specialist areas. Users seemingly are most interested in people, as articles about humans (e.g., biographies, culture, entertainment, the self, and sexuality) are the largest categories of content and the most visited by readers.¹⁹

Of course those three million articles on the English-language Wikipedia—the focus of this book—are not of equal quality. A summary from a proposal to achieve “100,000 Feature-Quality Articles,” Wikipedia’s highest quality level, reports that as of February 2009, roughly half of the English articles have been assessed for quality, and of those roughly 11,000 were considered to be of “Featured” (outstanding and thorough), “A” (very useful and fairly complete), or “Good” (useful to most readers with no obvious problems) quality.²⁰ External assessments of Wikipedia quality indicate it is at parity with general-purpose print reference works. In December 2005 the prestigious science journal *Nature* reported the findings of a commissioned study in which subject experts reviewed forty-two articles in Wikipedia and *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; it concluded “the average science entry in Wikipedia contained around four inaccuracies; Britannica, about three.”²¹ (This was widely reported, discussed, and eventually contested by *Britannica*.) In his 2007 study, George Bragues summarized preceding research by noting the balance “leans in favor of Wikipedia, though both the number of studies, and the proportion of positive to negative points, is far from enough to establish any firm conclusions.” His comparison of the biographies of seven prominent philosophers across authoritative reference works led him to conclude that while Wikipedia sometimes failed to be consistent in topical coverage, “The sins of Wikipedia are more of omission than commission.”²² Clearly, there is much work to be done to make Wikipedia a consistently high-quality reference work. On the other hand, the breadth of so many

articles means that Wikipedia has extraordinary and up-to-date coverage of even the narrowest interests. While it has yet to be assessed, and would fall short of featured article status, the article on my Brooklyn neighborhood, adjacent to Gowanus Canal, is quite handy.²³

The Community

It can be even more difficult to get a sense of the English Wikipedia community. The “Editing Frequency” page indicates that 41,393 registered (logged in) users made five or more edits in September 2008 (the most recent published figures).²⁴ Yet this doesn’t represent the hundreds of thousands of contributors who may have previously contributed, those who edit “anonymously” or without a consistent identity, and the “Wiki gnomes” who may fall short of this threshold—such as myself—but continue to quietly enact small tasks (e.g., fixing a typo) as opportunity presents itself and time permits.

Given Wikipedia’s reputation as the encyclopedia “anyone can edit,” an early research question was who did most of the work: the few who contribute a lot (i.e., the “elite”) or the many who contribute a little (i.e., the “bourgeoisie,” “long tail,” “crowd,” or “mob”). Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia cofounder, noted in December 2005 that “half the edits by logged in users belong to just 2.5% of logged in users.” This conclusion has since been challenged, and the question itself has been reconsidered given that one’s definition of “contribution” affects the results (e.g., authoring new content, editing, organizing, or discussing policy). Also, the nature of Wikipedia contribution may be changing as it matures. For example, one 2007 study showed that overall “conflict and coordination tasks” are growing faster than that of editing encyclopedic articles.²⁵ Even so, it appears there are significant differences in the amount and type of work Wikipedians do, and these proportions are changing, but that all contributions are important—if not synergistic.²⁶

For those involved in administrative functions (e.g., protecting pages from vandalism), “There are 1,675 (as of now) administrator accounts (active and otherwise), 906 of them active (as of 2009-08-11).”²⁷ There are over two hundred names on the #wikipedia chat channel and there are more than seven hundred subscribers to the community *Wikizine* bulletin.²⁸ On the relatively high-traffic wikiEN-l list I counted approximately 180 unique posters in the first half of 2009, though I am confident this is a fraction of

those subscribed. More topically, “Wikipedia Projects” (or “WikiProjects”) are wiki pages in which contributors interested in a particular topic can plan and discuss their efforts; there are hundreds of active projects spanning the range of topics at Wikipedia.²⁹ (As evidence that the English Wikipedia is stabilizing, none of these numbers have changed significantly over the past year.) Again, because of the large and often pseudonymous character of contribution, it can be difficult to make any sort of demographic claims about Wikipedians. However, in April 2009 a preliminary report of a Wikipedian survey indicates respondents were predominantly young males; almost half have achieved an undergraduate degree³⁰—but given their youth more may eventually do so.

I characterize my approach to my subject as a historically informed ethnography: observing—and occasionally participating in—the Wikipedia online community. While I make use of a broader historical context and online archives, I began to follow this community “in real time” in 2004 via a number of venues. First, there are the actual Wikipedia pages and edits to them; this includes the encyclopedic articles (e.g., “Chemistry”) as well as the “meta” pages documenting the policies and norms of Wikipedia itself (e.g., “Neutral Point of View”). Second, there is the talk/discussion page associated with each article on which conversation about the article occurs (e.g., suggestions for improvements). Third, there are mailing lists on which more abstract or particularly difficult issues are often discussed; wikiEN-l and wiki-l often include discussions of the administration and policies of Wikipedia. Also, there are the *Wikipedia Signpost* and *Wikizine* newsletters, other community forums such as the popular “Village Pump,” and various Wikipedia-related blogs, aggregators, and podcasts.³¹ Fifth, and finally, there are the physical spaces in which some community members interact. Through Wikipedia “meetups” I’ve attended in New York and annual Wikimania conferences I’ve met a couple dozen contributors. It’s quite easy to speak to a new Wikipedian acquaintance about issues of concern to the community, and many of these people I’ve spoken to more than once. These conversations were informative, but casual. I formally interviewed only a handful of sources and otherwise have relied on the public activity and discourse of the community.

In sum, there are the tens of thousands of active contributors who are familiar with the basic practices and norms of English Wikipedia. This includes smaller communities on the scale of hundreds or dozens of

members within geographical, functional, and topical boundaries. And the English Wikipedia is part of a larger community of multilingual encyclopedias and Wikimedia projects.

The Culture

The focus of this book is Wikipedia's collaborative culture. While I explain what I mean by this in chapter 3, I want to first briefly introduce my approach and Wikipedia's core collaborative principles.

In addition to millions of encyclopedic articles, Wikipedia is suffused with a coexisting web of practices, discussion, and policy pages, the latter of which populate the Wikipedia "project namespace" and "Meta-Wiki" of Wikimedia projects.³² A charming example of wiki practice is the awarding of a "barnstar," an image placed on another's user page to recognize merit. "These awards are part of the Kindness Campaign and are meant to promote civility and WikiLove. They are a form of warm fuzzy: they are free to give and they bring joy to the recipient."³³ There are different stars for dozens of virtues, including random acts of kindness, diligence, anti-vandalism, good humor, resilience, brilliance, and teamwork. As in any other community, at Wikipedia there is also a history of events, set of norms, constellation of values, and common lingo. Also, not surprisingly, there is a particular sensibility, including a love of knowledge and a geeky sense of humor. Unlike many other communities, most all of this is captured online. Even beyond the inherent textual verbosity of other online communities, Wikipedia is extraordinarily self-reflective. Most everything is put on a wiki, versioned, linked to, referenced, and discussed. And in the tradition of Godwin's Law of Nazi Analogies, an initial set of four observations by Wikipedian Raul654 in 2004 has become a collection of over two hundred laws by Wikipedians describing their own interactions. This proliferation is itself the subject of Norbert's Law: "Once the number of laws in a list exceeds a critical mass (about six), the probability of new laws being tortured, unfunny and bland rises rapidly to unity."³⁴ Furthermore, the "WikiSpeak" essay is an ironic glossary of terms that gives insight into both Wikipedia's substance and faults. For example, collaboration is defined as "One editor taking credit for someone else's work."³⁵ ("Raul's Laws of Wikipedia" and "WikiSpeak" definitions also make appearances as chapter epigraphs in this book.)

This wealth of material is a treasure given my interest in understanding how people make sense of their experiences of working together. And while

I was influenced by varied scholars in conceiving of and executing this work, sociologist Harold Garfinkel's "ethnomethodology" is particularly relevant given its focus on "practical activities, practical circumstances, and practical sociological reasoning."³⁶ By "practical sociological reasoning" Garfinkel means the discourse and reasoning of the actual participants themselves. How a community makes sense of its experience is what Garfinkel refers to as "accounting processes." As Alain Coulon writes in the introduction to *Ethnomethodology*, it is "the study of the methods that members use in their daily lives that enable them to live together and to govern their social relationships, whether conflictual or harmonious"; that is, how "the actor undertakes to understand his action as well as that of others."³⁷ The two hundred-plus laws posited by Wikipedians are a salient example of the community trying to understand itself and its circumstances.

Therefore, much of this book is an exploration of the norms guiding Wikipedia collaboration and their related "accounting processes," but there are three core policies central to understanding Wikipedia and are worthwhile addressing at the outset: "Neutral Point Of View" (NPOV), "No Original Research," and "Verifiability." While NPOV at first seems like an impossible, or even naïve, reach toward an objectively neutral knowledge, it is quite the opposite. The NPOV policy instead recognizes the multitude of viewpoints and provides an epistemic stance in which they all can be recognized as instances of human knowledge—right or wrong. The NPOV policy seeks to achieve the "fair" presentation of all sides of the dispute.³⁸ Hence, the clear goal of providing an encyclopedia of all human knowledge explicitly avoids many entanglements. Yet when disagreements do occur they often involve alleged violations of NPOV. Accusations of and discussions about bias are common within the community and any "POV pushing"—as Wikipedians say—is seen as compromising the quality of the articles and the ability for disparate people to work together. However, violations of NPOV are not necessarily purposeful, but can result from the ignorance of a new participant or the heat of an argument. In some circumstances, the debate legitimately raises substantive questions about NPOV. In any case, while some perceive NPOV as a source of conflict, it may act instead as a conduit: reducing conflict and otherwise channeling arguments in the productive context of developing an encyclopedia.

The other two policies of "No Original Research" and "Verifiability" are both about attribution, meaning, "All material in Wikipedia must be

attributable to a reliable, published source.”³⁹ The latter principle obviously is important for an encyclopedia that “anyone can edit.” Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the notion of “No Original Research” permits the community to avoid arguments about pet theories and vanity links (i.e., when a person links from Wikipedia to a site they wish to promote). If you have “a great idea that you think should become part of the corpus of knowledge that is Wikipedia, the best approach is to publish your results in a good peer-reviewed journal, and then document your work in an appropriately nonpartisan manner.”⁴⁰ Since Wikipedia does not publish original research, “Verifiability” then implies that “readers are able to check that material added to Wikipedia has already been published by a reliable source, not whether we think it is true.”⁴¹ In a sense, a Wikipedia article can be no better than its sources.

These three policies of “Neutral Point of View,” “No Original Research,” and “Verifiability” have been characterized as the “holy trinity” of Wikipedia,⁴² without one being preeminent over any other, according to Wales:

I consider all three of these to be different aspects of the same thing, ultimately. And at the moment, when I think about any examples of apparent tensions between the three, I think the right answer is to follow all three of them or else just leave it out of Wikipedia. We know, with some certainty, that all three of these will mean that Wikipedia will have less content than otherwise, and in some cases will prevent the addition of true statements. For example, a brilliant scientist conceives of a new theory which happens to be true, but so far unpublished. We will not cover it, we will not let this scientist publish it in Wikipedia. A loss, to be sure. But a much much bigger gain on average, since we are not qualified to evaluate such things, and we would otherwise be overwhelmed with abject nonsense from POV pushing lunatics. There is no simple a priori answer to every case, but good editorial judgment and the negotiation of reasonable people committed to quality is the best that humans have figured out so far.:) —Jimbo Wales 15:33, 15 August 2006 (UTC)⁴³

Such Wikipedia policies and Wikipedian discourse are central to the cultural account I present. I approached these policies and discourse as a “naturalistic inquiry,” that is, an emergent process in which I collected texts relevant to Wikipedia collaboration; these were categorized, carefully considered, and refined as I continued to engage the community.⁴⁴ As of August 2009 I’ve collected over 1,300 Wikipedia-related primary sources.⁴⁵ (I present such sources mostly verbatim—with minimal corrections or editorial caveats such as “[sic]”—and use names as provided, including idiosyncratic spellings.) I’ve also participated in the community by attending meetings

and editing a few pages. While there is a temptation to alter Wikipedia to suit one's purposes—as journalists, lobbyists, and disputing Wikipedians have discovered—I've purposively avoided policy and edit disputes. As organizational ethnographer John Van Maanen writes, "an ethnography is a written representation of a culture" and so I've attempted to "display the culture in a way that is meaningful to readers without great distortion."⁴⁶ And much as Henry Jenkins admits that his fondness for the fan cultures he studies might "color" what is said, it also implies "a high degree of responsibility and accountability to the groups being discussed."⁴⁷

This Book, in Short

A hazard in thinking about new phenomena—such as the Web, wiki, or Wikipedia—is to aggrandize novelty at the expense of the past. To minimize this inclination I remind myself of the proverb "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Therefore, I begin in chapter 2 with an argument that Wikipedia is an heir to a twentieth-century vision of universal access and goodwill; an idea advocated by H. G. Wells and Paul Otlet almost a century ago. This vision is inspired by technological innovation—microfilm and index cards then, digital networks today—and driven by the encyclopedic impulse to capture and index everything known. In some ways my argument is an extension of that made by historian Boyd Rayward who notes similarities between Paul Otlet's information "Repertory" and Project Xanadu, an early hypertext system.⁴⁸ My effort entails not only showing similarities in the aspirations and technical features of these older visions and Wikipedia, but also recovering and placing a number of Wikipedia's predecessors (e.g., Project Gutenberg, Interpedia, Nupedia) within this history.

In chapter 3, I turn to an essential feature linking Wikipedia to the pursuit of the universal encyclopedia and to Wikipedia's success: its *good faith collaborative culture*. While the relevance of "prosocial" norms has been noted by other scholars (along with notions of trust, empathy, and reciprocity), Wikipedia provides an excellent opportunity, because of its reflective documentation and discourse, to see how such norms emerge and how they are enacted and understood. I focus on the norms of "Neutral Point of View" and "Assume Good Faith" to argue that an open perspective on both *knowledge claims* and *other contributors*, respectively, makes for extraordinary

collaborative potential. However, unlike the incompletely realized potential of earlier visions, Wikipedia is very real and very messy. How the community wrestles with issues of openness, decision making, and leadership can offer insight into collaborative cultures.

A facet of the universal encyclopedic vision has been an increase in the accessibility of knowledge. Wikipedia takes this further, by increasing access to information and its production. In chapter 4 I present the Wikipedia community as an *open content community*. This notion is inspired by FOSS and the subsequent popularization of “openness,” but focuses on community rather than copyright licenses. I then consider four cases that challenge Wikipedia’s openness as “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit.” In the first case I ask: is Wikipedia really something anyone can edit? That is, when Wikipedia implemented new technical features to help limit vandalism of the site, did it make Wikipedia more or less open? In the second case I describe the way in which a maturing open content community’s requirement to interact with the sometimes “closed” world of law affects its openness. In this case, I review Wikipedia’s “office action” in which agents of Wikipedia act privately so as to mitigate potential legal problems, though this is contrary to the community values of deliberation and transparency. Third, I briefly review concerns of how bureaucratization within Wikipedia itself might threaten openness. Finally, I explore a case in which a closed (female-only) group is set up outside of, and perhaps because of, the “openness” of the larger Wikipedia community.

Beyond the more abstract question of openness, the fact that the community has a porous boundary and a continuous churn of pseudonymous and anonymous users means there are significant challenges in working together and making decisions. H. G. Wells thought his “World Encyclopedia” should be more than an information repository; it should also be a “clearinghouse of misunderstandings.”⁴⁹ By reviewing a specific “misunderstanding” about the naming of television show articles, I explore the benefits, challenges, and meaning of consensus at Wikipedia. Specifically, by contextualizing Wikipedia practice relative to other communities (e.g., Quakers and Internet standards organizations) I show how consensus is understood and practiced despite difficulties arising from the relative lack of resources other consensus communities have from the start.

And just as the complexities inherent in the understanding and practice of good faith, openness, and consensus reveal the character of Wikipedia

and prompt insights into human interaction, the question of leadership in this type of community is also revealing. In open content communities, like Wikipedia, there often is a seemingly paradoxical use of the title “benevolent dictator” for leaders. In chapter 6, I explore discourse around the use of this moniker so as to address how leadership works in open content communities and why Wikipedia collaboration looks the way it does today. To do this, I make use of the notion of “authorial” leadership: leaders must parlay merit resulting from authoring something significant into a form of authority that can also be used in an autocratic fashion, to arbitrate between those of good faith or defend against those of bad faith, with a soft touch and humor when—and only when—necessary.

Finally, in chapter 7 I focus on the cultural reception and interpretation of Wikipedia. The collaborative way in which Wikipedia is produced has caught the attention of the world. Discourse about the efficacy and legitimacy of such a work abound, from the news pages of the *New York Times* to the satire of *The Onion*. Building on the literature concerning the controversies that have surrounded other reference works, such as Harvey Einbinder’s *The Myth of the Britannica* and Herbert Morton’s *The Story of Webster’s Third*,⁵⁰ I make a broader argument that reference works can serve as a flashpoint for larger social anxieties about technological and social change. With this understanding in hand, I try to make sense of the social unease embodied in and prompted by Wikipedia by way of four themes: collaborative practice, universal vision, encyclopedic impulse, and technological inspiration.

I conclude with a reflection upon H. G. Wells’s complaint of the puzzle of wasted knowledge and global discord. Seventy years later, Wikipedia’s logo is that of a not yet complete global jigsaw puzzle. This coincidence is representative of a shared dream across the decades. The metaphor of the puzzle is useful in understanding Wikipedia collaboration: NPOV ensures that we can join the scattered pieces of what we think we know and good faith facilitates the actual practice of fitting them together.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/8051.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8051.001.0001)

Good Faith Collaboration

The Culture of Wikipedia

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Citation:

Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia

By: Joseph Reagle

DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/8051.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262289719

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2012



The MIT Press

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This book was set in Stone Sans and Stone Serif by the MIT Press. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Reagle, Joseph Michael.

Good faith collaboration : the culture of Wikipedia / Joseph Michael Reagle Jr. ; foreword by Lawrence Lessig.

p. cm. — (History and foundations of information science)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-01447-2 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Wikipedia. 2. Electronic encyclopedias—Case studies. 3. Wikis (Computer science)—Case studies. 4. Communication in learning and scholarship—Technological innovations—Case studies. 5. Authorship—Collaboration—Case studies. 6. Online social networks—Case studies. I. Title.

AE100.R43 2010

030—dc22

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