

3 Good Faith Collaboration

All rules and guidelines add up to this; Respect!

—Phoenix 15's Law

There are two complementary postures at the heart of Wikipedia collaboration: the stances of “Neutral Point of View” (NPOV) and good faith. Whereas other communities may have a culture of good faith (i.e., assume good faith on the part of others, and act with patience, civility, and humor), few are concerned with producing an encyclopedia. The dovetailing of an open perspective on knowledge claims (epistemic) and other contributors (intersubjective) makes for extraordinary collaborative potential, and harkens back to the universal vision of increased access to information *and* social accord. Furthermore, perhaps an understanding of neutrality and good faith can serve as a rejoinder to a favorite quip about Wikipedia, also known as its Zeroeth Law: that while it may very well work in practice, it can never work in theory.¹

Introduction

Before engaging with the Wikipedia’s collaborative culture, it is worthwhile to frame such an undertaking. (Again, my focus is on the English-language Wikipedia; comparative work between Wikipedias in other languages does show differences in conception of power, collectivism, and anonymity.²) I begin this introduction at the most abstract level by briefly explaining what I mean by “collaborative culture.” I also note that there is often a disconnect between written policy and actual practice within organizations; in offering a bit of history about how wikis came to be, I argue wikis help close the gap between policy and practice. I then explore the background,

theory, and practice of neutrality and good faith by way of a conflict about the English Wikipedia's "Evolution" article.

A Caveat about Collaborative Culture

Heretofore I have used the term *collaborative culture* in a commonsensical manner, but if pressed for further explanations on what collaboration or culture mean one can find many and varied answers. Indeed, authors have commented on the variety of approaches to "culture" across disciplines, including anthropology, communications, and history.³ Within the realm of organizational studies Edgar Schein posits eleven different categories of how culture is commonly conceived. In this project, I speak of culture as the "way of life of a people,"⁴ the value-laden system of "meaning making" through which a community understands and acts, including its own maintenance and reproduction. Schein writes that "culture acts as a set of basic assumptions that defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations."⁵

Similarly, *collaboration* can be an equally provocative term prompting debate, for example, about the difference between coordination or cooperation and collaboration.⁶ Additionally, collaboration stands among other related concepts such as dispute resolution, conflict management, and interdependent decision making. Each of these notions, and their literatures, are useful but, alone, insufficient. For example, the notion of "dispute resolution" is surprisingly optimistic, as if agreement and harmony are the natural state from which disputes sometimes errantly arise and must be swiftly corrected. Yet to characterize social relations as inherently conflicted—as when Wikipedia is humorously characterized as an "argument engine"⁷—is also mistaken. Nor is conflict necessarily a bad thing: legal scholar Cass Sunstein convincingly argues that dissent is a critical and generative contribution to society.⁸ For this reason, recent textbooks on the topic prefer conflict "management" to "resolution" and recognize that consensus and dissensus each have an important, and unavoidable, role in community. In this way Wikipedia is like the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) communities as characterized by Steven Weber:

The open source software process is not a chaotic free-for-all in which everyone has equal power and influence. And is certainly not an idyllic community of like-minded friends in which consensus reigns and agreement is easy. In fact, conflict is not unusual in this community; it's endemic and inherent to the open source process.⁹

Recognizing this, we may instead wish to refer to “interdependent decision making,”¹⁰ which appropriately shifts the connotation away from “conflict-is-bad.” However, much more is involved in Wikipedia production than decision making. Consequently, I use the term *collaboration* in Michael Schrage’s sense, which arose from his study of collaborative technologies: “collaboration is the process of shared creation: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own. Collaboration creates a shared meaning about a process, a product, or an event.”¹¹

Therefore, my use of the term *collaborative culture* refers to a set of assumptions, values, meanings, and actions pertaining to working together within a community. And, in many ways my use is like that of media scholar Henry Jenkins’s notion of “participatory culture” in which consumer-only fans of commercial genres (e.g., sci-fi) are now creators within their own “fandom” communities. Jenkins defines participatory culture as one in which there are low barriers of engagement, support for creation and sharing, and some form of mentorship or socialization, and members believe that their contributions matter and they “feel some degree of social connection with one another.”¹² By these criteria, Wikipedia would qualify.

Wiki, Practice, and Policy

Douglas Engelbart, a father of the modern computer interface, wrote in his essay “Augmenting Human Intellect” that computers would permit researchers themselves to benefit from the product of their work through a regenerative “feeding back of positive research results to improve the means by which the researchers themselves can pursue their work.”¹³ More than forty years later anthropologist Christopher Kelty observed this phenomenon among technical communities using the Internet. Likely unaware of Engelbart’s prediction, Kelty chose to call such communities a “recursive public”: a form of “social imaginary” through which geeks collectively conceive their “social existence” and are capable of changing the very means of discourse (i.e., communication protocols).¹⁴ I can think of no better example of this notion of “regenerative” or “recursive” feedback than Wikipedia.

To understand why, consider another complementary notion, Etienne Wenger’s “community of practice,” developed with Jean Lave. In this theory people are understood to pursue a shared enterprise over time yielding

a common identity and understanding of their environment; they accumulate a rich repertoire of cultural norms and actions. In addition to actual participation/practice, Wenger's theory provides for reification: "the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal that experience into 'thingness.'" ¹⁵ Whereas others have cast wikis as communities of practice, ¹⁶ I find one of the most interesting facets of the theory to be the relationship between practice (e.g., creating an encyclopedia) and its "reification" (e.g., documenting the community's practice). Wenger argues that practice and reification are not opposites, but coexist in a "duality of meaning" of interaction and interplay. ¹⁷ However, in many traditional projects and organizations the documentation of organizational culture and process (i.e., reification) is often dramatically out of step with actual practice. But the wiki can change this.

Wikis were born of an advocacy for a change in software development with respect to how application requirements were perceived (i.e., as patterns) and satisfied (i.e., agilely). In the 1990s a new way of addressing software requirements was becoming popular: the "design pattern." Rather than confronting every new task as a new problem to be solved, it was believed that experience could be distilled into a shareable set of design patterns. (A pattern is a higher-level abstraction than that of the computer algorithm, which is a common way of addressing a particular computational task, like sorting a list.) For example, a software engineer might be confronted with a task in which a service acts on behalf of another. This might be an instance of the "proxy pattern" that might already be well understood. Ward Cunningham, an advocate of design patterns, attended a conference on pattern languages where he agreed to collect and post user-submitted patterns if contributors sent him a structured text file that he could then automatically process and post online. This was surprisingly difficult for many: "And I was amazed at how people who sent me files couldn't follow even the simple rules. I was three pattern documents into this thing, and getting pretty tired of it already. So I made a form for submitting the documents."¹⁸ This user-editable repository, started in 1995, would come to be known as the Portland Pattern Repository and the first wiki. ¹⁹

Furthermore, requirements, often perceived as patterns, would be satisfied differently too. Unlike earlier software development in which all requirements for a project were carefully collected and completely specified, and only then implemented, "agile software development" advocates

argued these steps should be collapsed and iterated in small increments. Instead of a large collection of requirements going out of date, requirements are often specified as a set of user scenarios and related test cases that can be objectively satisfied and tested for regressions—to prevent fixes and new features from creating new bugs. The authors of the “Manifesto for Agile Software Development,” including Ward Cunningham, wrote that they valued: “Individuals and interactions over processes and tools. Working software over comprehensive documentation. Customer collaboration over contract negotiation. Responding to change over following a plan.”²⁰

A benefit of this approach is that at each step there is always some working code satisfying the requirements encountered so far, and the software is easily extended and adapted as requirements change, as they are bound to do. However, there was still a need for quickly, flexibly, and collaboratively discussing software, design patterns, and the principles of this new paradigm. The wiki, evolving from Cunningham’s user-editable pattern repository, satisfied these needs well, and over time became a useful documentation tool for many others, including those attempting to write an encyclopedia. In fact, the ability to easily document one’s world satisfies a deep need in some Wikipedians, again placating the fear that doom might be averted if we learn from our mistakes:

[W]e need to document best practices, both for new people and for old people, so that we know what we are doing. If we do not document, we cannot learn from our history, and are doomed to repeat it.

The fact that one must document, document, document is ingrained in my psyche (I’m trained as a scientist, and work as a programmer). It is almost impossible for me to understand a world where documentation does not exist. . . . —Kim Bruning (talk) 20:26, 15 May 2008 (UTC)²¹

As we learned, early documentalists made great use of the index card; Ward Cunningham has also spoken about how useful index cards were to him. In his Wikimania 2005 keynote speech “Wikis Then and Now,” Cunningham noted that a piece of software he used when first thinking about software patterns and human collaboration was HyperCard.²² This Apple application was a popular hypertext system before the Web and relied on the metaphor of stacked index cards. However, Cunningham wanted a messier system in which one could talk about and refer to something that did not formally exist yet, hence the famous “red link” on wikis that points to a page not yet filled with content.²³ Furthermore, he began to use real index cards when

meeting with collaborators. Index cards proved a useful way for people to talk about their processes and requirements: one could spread cards on the table, write on them, and pass them around with others—serving as what the knowledge management literature refers to as boundary (spanning) objects.²⁴ People would ask him: “help us find our objects” and handling the cards prompted information sharing between participants regardless of their status within the organization. Furthermore, like a red wiki link, people would often point to a blank area on the table where the nonexistent (not yet defined) card would eventually go: “They had need for a name for something they didn’t know how to say.”²⁵ It’s striking that the index card, a source of inspiration from the beginning of the twentieth century, would inspire hypertext, which in turn would inspire use of the physical card, and then a new type of hypertext.

While it is increasingly difficult to find in Wikipedia articles, the red link does still exist, inviting others to fill in a bald spot of encyclopedic coverage. There is also the “stub,” one step up from the red link, an article with little more than a few sentences or paragraphs. Author and commentator Nicholson Baker considers the stub to be one of the most charming features of Wikipedia collaboration, likening it to an “unusually humble” ask for help.²⁶ And, not surprisingly, wiki-driven editing pervades Wikipedia. That is, in addition to the encyclopedia articles, collaboratively edited using wiki, there are discussion pages about articles; pages in the Wikipedia namespace (or section) of the encyclopedia for its policy and guidelines, the Meta wiki’s policy pages for all Wikimedia projects,²⁷ and pages for discussing changes to the underlying wiki software. (Pages in the Wikipedia namespace are frequently referred to via shortcuts, for example “WP:NPOV” refers to the NPOV policy in the Wikipedia namespace.) Each of these is wiki too. There are even third-party wikis, such as Meatball, “a common space for wiki developers and proprietors from all over the Internet to collaborate.”²⁸ The wiki fulfills Engelbart’s prediction of regenerative feedback, tightens the recursive turn of Kelty’s public, and converges with Wenger’s duality of meaning. Jean le Rond d’Alembert’s 1751 observation about the *Encyclopédie* still appears to be true, that “since there is some incontestable advantages in being able to convey and receive ideas easily in mutual intercourse, it is not surprising that men have sought more and more to augment that facility.”²⁹

Scholars have posited a number of ways in which wikis facilitate this collaborative augmentation. Networking technology and its related collaborative techniques can enable openness and accessibility (e.g., discussion lists, distributed software development, and wikis), furthering accountability and the socialization of newcomers.³⁰ Also, people can communicate asynchronously and contribute incrementally.³¹ With wikis the timing and granularity of a contribution can be as marginal as fixing a typo on a page that hasn't been touched in months. Wikis permit changes to be reverted so contributors can be bold in action and need not be brittle in response to the actions of others.³² "Collective creation" and coordination is facilitated by persistent documentation and use of discussion pages and templates.³³ Automated tools can further aid users, and the collaboration these mechanisms facilitate is likened to "distributed cognition." For example "bots," autonomous programs, can watch edits in real-time and revert them immediately (e.g., if an edit contains profanity) or list them as suspicious. Such information can then be followed by user applications that prioritize suspicious edits based on their own heuristics, such as contributor anonymity or previous warnings, and enable single-click reversion, user warning, and administrative notice.³⁴ Even the ability to temporarily lock a page can be seen as a productive feature that permits the dampening of flamewars and the enforcement of cool-down periods.³⁵ Difficult issues in articles can be broken down: contentious material can be isolated and addressed elsewhere without impeding the progress of everything else; indeed, modularization in general is a powerful aid in interaction and content development.³⁶ Additionally, wikis are wonderful repositories of a community's practice and discourse. As Bo Leuf and Ward Cunningham write in their 2001 book *The Wiki Way*, "In any Wiki, you discover a sense of growing community that expresses itself through its archived writing."³⁷

Wikipedia Policy, Guidelines, and the Five Pillars

In principle, there are three levels of authority associated with Wikipedia norms: *essays*, nonauthoritative pages that may contain useful insights; *guidelines*, actionable norms approved by general consensus; and *policy*, much the same but "more official and less likely to have exceptions."³⁸ The line of distinction between guidelines and policy is rarely bright, as evidenced in discussions about the deprecation of "Assume Good Faith" (AGF) from a policy to a guideline.³⁹ (A simple summary of this discussion is

that AGF was rarely actionable since it involved assumptions about others' motives while "Civility" and other corollaries remain "policy" because they can be tested and enforced against more objective features of behavior.)

Wikipedia's many norms are also commonly grouped together. For example, the "Policies and Guidelines" page stresses these precepts: Wikipedia works by building consensus; Wikipedia is an encyclopedia; respect other contributors; don't infringe copyrights; avoid bias; and add only information based on reliable sources.⁴⁰ The "policy trifecta" states the three central principles of Wikipedia collaboration are as a collaborator on an encyclopedia, use a neutral point of view; as a member of a community, "don't be a dick"; and as a user of a fast and flexible wiki, "ignore all rules."⁴¹ I find the "five pillars" to be the most complete and sensitive summary of Wikipedia collaborative norms:

Wikipedia is an encyclopedia incorporating elements of general and specialized encyclopedias, almanacs, and gazetteers. All articles must strive for verifiable accuracy: unreferenced material may be removed, so please provide references. Wikipedia is not the place to insert personal opinions, experiences, or arguments. . .

Wikipedia has a neutral point of view, which means we strive for articles that advocate no single point of view. Sometimes this requires representing multiple points of view, presenting each point of view accurately, providing context for any given point of view, and presenting no one point of view as "the truth" or "the best view." It means citing verifiable, authoritative sources whenever possible, especially on controversial topics. When a conflict arises regarding neutrality, declare a cool-down period and tag the article as disputed, hammer out details on the talk page, and follow dispute resolution.

Wikipedia is free content that anyone may edit. . .

Wikipedia has a code of conduct: Respect your fellow Wikipedians even when you may not agree with them. Be civil. Avoid conflicts of interest, personal attacks, and sweeping generalizations. Find consensus, avoid edit wars, follow the three-revert rule, and remember that there are 3,002,347 articles on the English Wikipedia to work on and discuss. Act in good faith, never disrupt Wikipedia to illustrate a point, and assume good faith on the part of others. Be open and welcoming.

Wikipedia does not have firm rules besides the five general principles presented here. Be bold in editing, moving, and modifying articles. Although it should be the aim, perfection is not required. Do not worry about making mistakes. In most cases, all prior versions of articles are kept, so there is no way that you can accidentally damage Wikipedia or irretrievably destroy content.⁴²

The first and third pillars of Wikipedia as an encyclopedia and as something "anyone can edit" will be explored in subsequent chapters. Throughout the

rest of this chapter I explore the second and fourth pillars: the norms of neutrality and Wikipedia's good faith "code of conduct."⁴³

Neutral Point Of View and Good Faith: An Example

One of the many contentious articles I follow on Wikipedia is that on evolution. Frequently those with criticisms of evolution, predominately religious literalists, attempt to include these criticisms in the "Evolution" article. Yet, Wikipedia articles are not forums for debate, nor are their discussion pages: "Please remember that this page is only for discussing Wikipedia's encyclopedia article about evolution. If you are interested in discussing or debating evolution itself, you may want to visit talk.origins or Wikireason."⁴⁴

The stance of neutrality implies that contributors should abandon efforts to convince others of what is right or true, and instead focus on a neutral presentation of what is commonly understood about that topic. Consequently, much like a creationist might view the "Evolution" article, I appreciate the "Creationism" article's thorough and dispassionate treatment of the relevant history and arguments, even though I might disagree with them. Once understood and practiced, the neutrality stance permits collaboration between those who might otherwise fall into rancorous discord. Therefore, as Jimmy Wales has noted, NPOV should be understood "as a social concept of co-operation." In response to a question about objectivity and truth in Wikipedia—and the influence of Ayn Rand's Objectivist philosophy on his views—he said "The whole concept of neutral point of view, as I originally envisioned it, was this idea of a social concept, for helping people get along: to avoid or sidestep a lot of philosophical debates. Someone who believes that truth is socially constructed, and somebody who believes that truth is a correspondence to the facts in reality, they can still work together."⁴⁵

Even so, there is still a margin for disagreement about the proportionality of even "neutrally" presented views. How much of the "Evolution" article should be dedicated to creationist objections? "Verifiability" has an important role to play here, as recognized by Gizza's First Law: "Those who believe that WP:NPOV refers to equal respect towards all verifiable perspectives are Wikipedians. Those who think that NPOV means equal coverage of all verifiable perspectives are trolls."⁴⁶ Obviously, those who cannot appreciate the relative weight of well-supported claims (i.e., the consensus of peer-reviewed research supporting evolution) will have a difficult time

at Wikipedia. However, I would not actually consider such contributors as “trolls.” (While the term has taken on a general pejorative function, *trolls* properly signify those who post controversial or irrelevant messages with the intention of disrupting an online community.⁴⁷)

Here, the technical feature of hypertext links can provide a calming effect. A complete treatment of evolutionary mechanisms and its history as a concept need only mention there are related “social and related controversies,” which may merit their own articles. However, one should be careful in articles about controversy to avoid “content” or “POV” forking in which two articles with opposing points of view arise in place of a single NPOV article.⁴⁸ Again, in taking a neutral stance one’s task is to describe the controversy rather than to partake in it.

Just as one can find contentious articles, one can also find apologies. If the stance of neutrality implies a willingness to put aside one’s own “point of view,” an apology is a potentially rich example of good faith. Consider the following exchange from the “Evolution” talk page. Salva31, an admirer of the conservative American columnist Patrick Buchanan,⁴⁹ became increasingly frustrated with the “Evolution” article. After Salva31’s efforts to change the article were rejected, he tried to remind the scientifically minded contributors opposing him that “Wikipedia is not a battleground” and the removal of his text was not in “a spirit of cooperation.” In the conversation that followed, fellow Wikipedian Branaby dawson replied:

I’m sorry Salva but I do not think that your comments to this talk page really qualify either as in “a spirit of cooperation.” I think that you have been guilty of many of those things you are accusing others of. You have broken the above rules in several ways: You’ve insulted people by the tone you’ve used in discussion. You’ve tried to intimidate those who don’t agree with you by the sheer volume of your text (on the talk page). You’ve not been civil or calm with your edits.

As such although I have criticised others for deleting much of your text in which you do these things I would support them in moving all such material to a subpage in [the] future. Barnaby dawson 09:00, 13 Apr 2005 (UTC)⁵⁰

While dawson’s “I’m sorry Salva but I do not think. . .” isn’t a genuine apology, but rather is a form of the infamous “sorry. . . but,” it is nonetheless indicative of a type of discursive openness: “sorry” softens the statement, using a name promotes a sense of connection, and “I do not think” connotes a sense of fallibility. This was followed by an attempted de-escalation:

Let’s not do that. As long as Salva 31 keeps it short and simple and on topic, there shouldn’t be a problem in future, right? Kim Bruning 10:30, 13 Apr 2005 (UTC)

Another participant, a graduate student in biology,⁵¹ soon conceded to some incivility:

Also, to be fair to Salva, I was pretty uncivil to him, I think. Graft 12:02, 13 Apr 2005 (UTC)

And within this conversation a genuine apology did manifest:

Thank you, Graft. This is obviously a debate that is sensitive on both sides. Likewise, I owe you an apology for the contributions I made in escalating the argument. Salva31 09:37, 13 Apr 2005 (UTC)

Like many articles and discussion pages on Wikipedia, the “Evolution” article has plenty of disagreements, arguments, and even downright hostile behavior. However, NPOV policy asks editors to change their (epistemic) perspective with respect to the claims they make about the world. Similarly, the broad notion of good faith, including civility and a willingness to apologize, asks editors to extend their (intersubjective) perspective toward other contributors as well-meaning but possibly mistaken human beings.

The Epistemic Stance of Neutral Point of View

In chapters 1 and 3 I introduce the NPOV policy by way of example because it can be a confusing term. Misunderstandings about it arise in part because, as the Wikipedia article itself admits, “the terms ‘unbiased’ and ‘neutral point of view’ are used in a precise way that is different from the common understanding.” People are acknowledged to be subjective beings (i.e., “inherently biased”), but when used in the Wikipedia context articles are considered to be without bias when they “describe the debate fairly rather than advocating any side of the debate.” A more recent version of the page suggests one way to think about it is to “assert facts, including facts about opinions—but do not assert the opinions themselves.”⁵²

This notion of neutrality is also difficult because it seems impossible to explain without recourse to an equally problematic constellation of concepts. If neutral means unbiased, and unbiased means fair, might fair mean impartial, or something else? Another source of confusion is the subject of the alleged neutrality: the platform, processes and policies, people, practices, or the resulting articles? Can bias in one contaminate the neutrality of another? Additionally, the use of the prefixes *un* and *non* with words such as *bias*, *fair*, and *neutral* is indicative of one more problem. Although

we might find a clear definition of what *bias* is, for example, that definition might not be as useful when we wish to understand what it means to be *unbiased*. Take, for example, the acronym POV, which has acquired a derogatory connotation as the seeming opposite of NPOV. Yet, when the acronym is expanded, to accuse someone of having a point of view seems rather ridiculous, even to those who advocate the NPOV policy.⁵³

In order to bring some clarity to this, one might look to other uses of the notion of neutrality, including in gameplay, technical systems and standards, content regulation, and international conflict. From this, one can discern an understanding of neutrality as a *sensitivity* to the ways in which technical and social systems might be unfairly discriminatory; an *impartiality* and *plurality* between possible participants or positions; an ethos of *sportsmanship* and an *adherence* to known rules; and a submission to some *authority for arbitration*, as well as an expectation of *accountability*.⁵⁴ This understanding does seem to fit the personal intentions and larger aspirations of Wikipedia contribution. In the Wikipedia context the notion of neutrality is not understood so much as an end result, but rather as a stance of dispassionate open-mindedness about knowledge claims, and as a “means of dealing with conflicting views.”⁵⁵

Yet one might ask, shouldn't such a stance be the case for contributors to any encyclopedia, or even any wiki? Historically, reference works have made few claims about neutrality as a stance of collaboration, or as an end result. While other reference works have had contributions from thousands of people, they were still controlled by a few persons of a relatively homogeneous worldview. Indeed, a preoccupation of traditional references is their authoritativeness, quite different from Wikipedia's abandonment of “truth.” As Nupedia's early editorial guidelines noted, “There are many respectable reference works that permit authors to take recognizable stands on controversial issues, but this is not one of them.”⁵⁶ This is not to say that reference works are always regarded as being without bias: reference works have been central to many ideological battles. And pointing out the quaint biases of reference works is an amusing hobby of bibliophiles. For example, A. J. Jacobs's lighthearted diary on reading the whole of the *Britannica* notes many remnants of Victorian cultural bias (e.g., a preoccupation with explorers, botanists, and the victims and mistresses of monarchs).⁵⁷ Or, consider a Wikipedian's description of his 1898 copy of *Pear's Cyclopaedia*:

It had a general encyclopedic section. I think the most wonderfully opinionated article I found in this was on Russia, which after a few breathless passages on how wonderful and civilised the place was ended with “. . . which is why Russia simply must get a port on the Mediterranean!” Extreme case, but not rare.⁵⁸

The concept of neutrality was also absent at the birth of the wiki, which, as described, was a platform for advocating a particular type of software development. Instead, neutrality arose in the context of Wikipedia’s predecessor, Nupedia, and the philosophical interests of its cofounders.

Sanger’s doctoral dissertation in philosophy focused on the thorny aspects of justifying knowledge and was opaquely entitled, as they are apt to be: “Epistemic Circularity: An Essay on the Justification of Standards of Justification.”⁵⁹ Wales, for his part, was not a professional philosopher, but as was not uncommon among early amateur Net philosophers, he was an Objectivist, in the Ayn Rand tradition, and moderated an email list dedicated to the topic.⁶⁰ Sanger recounts that both he and Wales were in agreement on the importance of the principle of neutrality, which was called “nonbiased” at the time:

Also, I am fairly sure that one of the first policies that Jimmy and I agreed upon was a “nonbias” or neutrality policy. I know I was extremely insistent upon it from the beginning, because neutrality has been a hobby-horse of mine for a very long time, and one of my guiding principles in writing “Sanger’s Review.” Neutrality, we agreed, required that articles should not represent any one point of view on controversial subjects, but instead fairly represent all sides.⁶¹

While Sanger and Wales agreed in principle at the outset, they have since expressed differences about the shift from the term *unbiased* to *neutral point of view*. At the start of Wikipedia, Sanger had ported Nupedia’s “Avoid Bias” under Wikipedia’s “Policies to Consider,” but this policy was soon preempted/subsumed by Wales’s “Neutral Point of View” article.⁶² Sanger has since noted that he didn’t approve of this shift as it causes confusion (e.g., using the expression “POV” as the opposite of “NPOV,” when “biased” is preferable).⁶³ Not surprisingly, now that Sanger has started the encyclopedic project Citizendium, its “Neutrality Policy” favors the term *unbiased* over NPOV.⁶⁴ Yet before this recent difference about naming, at the outset of the Nupedia project Sanger and Wales were in agreement when challenged on the naïveté and/or impossibility of the policy. Sanger responded to the question of bias by invoking a principal that neutral contributions should lack ideological flavor:

Nupedia aims to be as unbiased as possible; of course, some people will regard *this* as a political statement. We can't make everyone happy in this regard. In any event, we intend to represent all points of view, including those held by any significant minority of experts in a field, as fairly as possible. This would include creationists, Marxists, capitalists, and all manner of incendiary points of view. This should make for interesting reading at the very least. It should be added that Nupedia's contributors are expected to keep their own views in the background as much as possible. In other words, the point isn't merely to mention other views not favored by an article's author; it is to write in such a way that one cannot tell what view is favored by the article's author.⁶⁵

The notion of not being able to tell the predilection of a contributor, a sort of ideological anonymity, is more fully developed in a corollary of NPOV on Wikipedia, "Writing for the Enemy":

Writing for the enemy is the process of explaining another person's point of view as clearly and fairly as you can. The intent is to satisfy the adherents and advocates of that POV that you understand their claims and arguments. . . . Writing for the enemy contributes to the NPOV of Wikipedia. Wikipedians often must learn to sacrifice their own viewpoints to the greater good.⁶⁶

For his part, Wales responded to someone troubled with the notion of unbiased by acknowledging the challenges and the importance of avoiding bias:

Surely you will agree that there are *_more_* or *_less_* accurate, objective, fair, [un]biased ways of putting things. We should simply strive to eliminate all the problems that we can, and remain constantly open to sensible revisions. Will this be perfect? Of course not. But it is all we can do **and** it is the least we can do. . . . if you are trying to say that someone, somewhere will always accuse us of bias, I'm sure you're right. But we should nonetheless try our best to be objective. It doesn't strike me as particularly difficult. We will want to present a broad consensus of mainstream thought. . . . This does mean that sometimes we will be wrong! All the top scholars in some field will say X, but 50 years from now, we will know more, and X will seem a quaint and old-fashioned opinion. O.k., fine. But still, X is a respectable and valid opinion today, as it is formed in careful consideration of all the available evidence with the greatest care possible. That's the best we can do. And, as I say, that's also the least we can do.⁶⁷

Consequently, this interest in unbiased, or at least less biased, claims about an understandable, or at least partially so, objective universe is central to Wikipedia collaborative culture. The notion of NPOV not only provides the epistemic foundation for the project, but also the intentional stance contributors should take while interacting. It makes it possible to "solve the problem of that jig-saw puzzle" for which H. G. Wells had hoped because, from this perspective, differing claims about the world can be fit together.

The Intersubjective Stance of Good Faith

In Wikipedia's collaborative culture, the scope of an open perspective includes not only the subject of collaboration, claims about the world, but also one's collaborators. In Wikipedia's "Writing for the Enemy" essay, one is encouraged to see things as others might:

Note that writing for the enemy does not necessarily mean one believes the opposite of the "enemy" POV. The writer may be unsure what position he wants to take, or simply have no opinion on the matter. What matters is that you try to "walk a mile in their" shoes instead of judging them.⁶⁸

The "Assume Good Faith" article on Meatball, where different communities discuss pan-wiki culture, characterizes this as "seeing others' humanity."⁶⁹ Indeed, one of the reasons Wikipedia's culture and practice are compelling to me is that it has influenced the way I approach controversy and conflict beyond Wikipedia; I have found these norms to be "a great way to end an argument in real life,"⁷⁰ which corresponds with scholars Yochai Benkler and Helen Nissenbaum's argument that while virtue may lead people to participate in such projects "participation may [also] give rise to virtue."⁷¹ This sentiment and the challenges of collaborative culture are further reflected in Leuf and Cunningham's *The Wiki Way*: "People using Wiki bring their own preconceptions, agendas, and visions—like any community. The remarkable thing is how Wiki as community affects user interactions in an overall positive way."⁷²

Unlike the relatively novel effect of NPOV on collaboration, Wikipedia is not the first online community to recognize the importance of, broadly speaking, good faith, and the challenges of other possibly competing values. In the Debian FOSS community, anthropologist Gabriella Coleman identifies a seeming paradox between liberal individualism/meritocracy and the community values of humility, detachment, generosity, and civility.⁷³ Similarly, Larry Wall, creator of the Perl programming language, playfully argues the success of his project is actually dependent on the coexistence of the seemingly contrary virtues of the individual programmer and the larger collaborative community. That is, programmers who exhibit the individual virtues of "laziness, impatience, and hubris," which often yield efficiency and quality, must also exhibit virtues of diligence, patience, and humility at the community level.⁷⁴ Leuf and Cunningham note that in wiki communities "participants are, by nature, a pedantic,

ornery, and unreasonable bunch,” yet “there’s a camaraderie we seldom see outside our professional contacts.”⁷⁵ Georg von Krogh, in his article on “Care in Knowledge Creation,” identifies five dimensions relevant to the successful creation of knowledge within a community: mutual trust, active empathy, access to help, lenience in judgment, and courage.⁷⁶ Benkler and Nissenbaum argue that “commons-based peer-production” entails virtues that are both “self-regarding” (e.g., autonomy, independence, creativity) and “other-regarding” (e.g., generosity, altruism, camaraderie, cooperation, civic virtue).⁷⁷

In subsequent chapters I too speak of seeming contradictions (e.g., benevolent dictators in egalitarian communities), but in the following sections I discuss good faith via four specific “virtues” or behaviors: assume the best, act with patience, act with civility, and try to maintain a sense of humor.

Assuming the Best of Others

Online communities often suffer the effects of Godwin’s Law: as a discussion continues, someone is bound to make an unfavorable comparison to Hitler or Nazis. (Perhaps this is in part a consequence of the effects of computer-mediated communication, such as reduced social cues and anonymity, and the character of virtual community.⁷⁸) A possible counteracting norm of this tendency is the guideline “Assume Good Faith.” But before examining this norm in detail it is worthwhile to first note that good faith is associated with at least three collaborative wiki norms: good faith, “Assume Good Faith,” and “Assume the Assumption of Good Faith.”

Although present on Meatball, the wiki about wiki collaboration, the broad notion of good faith is not addressed by Wikipedia’s guidelines; there is only a rather obtuse encyclopedic article adapted from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*’s legalistic treatment of the concepts of error and guilt.⁷⁹ But the notion of good faith does have colloquial usage, implicitly referring to a handful of concepts—much as I use it to signify the concepts of this section. This informal sense is captured in Meatball’s description of good faith as a lack of intentional malice, an assumption that people are trying to do their best “for the greater good of the community,” and friendliness, honesty, and caring.⁸⁰ The first two elements of this description are much the same, differing only in their subject: one’s own positive intention and an assumption of others’ positive intentions. It is on the latter assumption that Wikipedia focuses. The guideline of AGF is intended to counteract the common reflex to assume the worst of others, reminding us:

Well-meaning people make mistakes, and you should correct them when they do. You should not act like their mistake was deliberate. Correct, but don't scold. There will be people on Wikipedia with whom you disagree. Even if they're wrong, that doesn't mean they're trying to wreck the project. There will be some people with whom you find it hard to work. That doesn't mean they're trying to wreck the project either; it means they annoy you.⁸¹

Unlike unbiased view/NPOV, which was present at the start, "Assume Good Faith," in name, is a relatively new norm. The page was first created in March 2004; it received its first comment on its discussion page in February 2005.⁸² (The first comment proposed "Assume Good Faith" become policy, although as previously noted AGF was demoted to a guideline in 2006 because it did not focus on behavior and was therefore difficult to enforce.) AGF's origins are most likely rooted in the "Staying Cool When the Editing Gets Hot" essay, which in October 2002 offered five "tips to consider when editing gets emotional," including avoid name calling and characterizing others' actions, take a breather if angry, ignore insults, and "assume the best about people."⁸³ "Assume the best" eventually found its way onto the "Etiquette" essay in January 2004,⁸⁴ but in August this was replaced with a link to the relatively new "Assume Good Faith" page.

While these norms of resisting name calling and of assuming the best seemingly arose in the context of everyday practice and in playground manners, even, they are also the subject of sociopsychological study. Under the fundamental attribution error, we often attribute the failures of others as evidence of a character flaw—but our own failings are construed as a circumstance of our environment.⁸⁵ That is, I succeed because of my genius and fail because of bad luck, whereas you succeed by chance and fail by your own faulty character. Not surprisingly, in a study of email collaboration Catherine Cramton found that in successful groups people typically give others the benefit of the doubt and make situational rather than categorical attributions about their behavior.⁸⁶ Less-successful groups included those that escalated hostility or were overly diplomatic—indicating the danger of both rancorous discord and facile consensus. From a psychological perspective, then, a cultural norm of assuming good faith can mitigate negative attributions.

AGF can also help set social expectations. This assumption is much like the popular aphorism "never attribute to malice what can be explained by stupidity."⁸⁷ The humorous Wikipedia essay "Assume Stupidity" notes that, "While assuming good faith is a fundamental principle on Wikipedia, it

generally does not help you get over your anger at someone's, in your opinion, disturbing edits. Therefore, it is much more satisfying to also assume stupidity."⁸⁸ Fortunately, the official Wikipedia policy is more politic, as an assertion of stupidity might not be any more welcome than that of malice! Also, as the Meatball wiki cautions, low expectations can sometimes be damning: "Be warned that whatever we assume may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We AssumeGoodFaith as a way of creating good faith, but assuming indifference or stupidity will encourage those modes as well." Yet at what point is the assumption of good faith exhausted? Meatball identifies a number of causes: some people might simply be trolling (being disruptive for their own fun), they might be an "angry [storm] cloud" (predisposed to conflict or having a bad day), they might be working at cross-purposes or be confused by a lack of transparency.⁸⁹ In fact, Wikipedia warns against ever attributing an editor's actions to bad faith "even if bad faith seems obvious"; one can always judge on the basis of behavior rather than assumed intentions.⁹⁰ For example, the invocation of "Assume Good Faith," because it is about intentions, can become an act of bad faith itself, leading to the awkwardly named exhortation to "Assume the Assumption of Good Faith":

In heated debates, users often cite AGF. However, the very act of citing AGF assumes that the opponent is assuming bad faith. Carbonite's law tells us, "the more a given user invokes 'Assume Good Faith' as a defense, the lower the probability that said user was acting in good faith."⁹¹

To this end, the AGF guideline wisely recommends, "If you expect people to 'Assume Good Faith' from you, make sure you demonstrate it. Don't put the burden on others. Yelling 'Assume Good Faith' at people does not excuse you from explaining your actions, and making a habit of it will convince people that you're acting in bad faith."⁹²

However, an assumption that counters cognitive bias and sets social expectations still stops short of coming to know and understand others. Here the norm of "WikiLove," "a general spirit of collegiality and mutual understanding,"⁹³ makes the same sort of connection that I am attempting to make in this chapter: an open perspective (or love) of knowledge melded with caring attitude (or love) toward others. Or as Wales said in his 2004 "Letter": "The only way we can coordinate our efforts in an efficient manner to achieve the goals we have set for ourselves, is to love our work and to love each other, even when we disagree."⁹⁴ This is most clearly reflected in a prominent Wikipedian's declaration that Wikilove is the most important principle of all:

I believe that we need to highlight the mission of providing a great, free encyclopedia, along with the core principle *_how_* we want to accomplish it. And the single most important principle I can think of here is not “anyone can edit.” It’s not even NPOV or any other policy. It’s “WikiLove”—of which our commitment to openness is only an expression. We share a love of knowledge, and we treat everyone who shares the same love with respect and goodwill. (That’s the idea, at least.)⁹⁵

At this point I want to point out a possible transition between “Assume Good Faith” and “WikiLove.” In the wide range of literature on interacting with others one might discern three not necessarily exclusive ways of orientating toward others: self, selfless, and group.⁹⁶ The first might be characterized as the strategic choice of a “rational egoist.” Whereas perspective taking often yields “joint gains,” this does not preclude it from being a self-interested behavior that mitigates the erroneous attributions and impasses that impairs one’s own interests.⁹⁷ For example, it is in the self-interest of a negotiator to “understand” the perspective (e.g., the best alternative to negotiated agreement) of her opponent. Another approach is at the other extreme. Here, some actions are construed as being selflessly “other” orientated, even when counter to self- or group interests. This may be present in particular types of dialogue, empathy, and caring.⁹⁸

Another common focus is on the group. In the literature of political economy, “collective action” refers to circumstances in which cooperation is beneficial to the group, and each member, but only if others cooperate as well. In such situations prosocial norms—and a willingness to punish defectors—can support sustained cooperation.⁹⁹ Obviously, the importance of trust, empathy, and reciprocity on building community relationships and facilitating the exchange of ideas is key.¹⁰⁰ Trust is characterized by group members who are honest in negotiating commitments, who make “a good faith effort” to abide by their explicit—and implicit—commitments, and don’t take excessive advantage of others even when opportunities to do so arise.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, trust not only affects the expectations of an interaction, but also the construal of it afterward.¹⁰² Indeed, in “good faith” interactions, trust is the supposition that even though one disagrees and hasn’t been able to see and understand from another’s perspective, one might be missing something. For example, in his study of consensus-based decision making within the Society of Friends, Michael Sheeran notes that a dissenting Quaker might respond, “I disagree but do not wish to stand in the way” because: “For religious reasons, a person may prefer the judgment of the group as ‘sincere seekers after the divine leading’ to that person’s

individual judgment. In more secular terms, an individual may recognize the possibility that everyone else is right."¹⁰³ Trust in others implies a sense of humility toward one's self as noted in Kizor's Law of Humility: "Better an editor who's often wrong and knows it than an editor who's very seldom wrong and knows it."¹⁰⁴

All that said, the debate of whether all altruism is necessarily "egoistic" is a complex one, but Wikipedia might serve as a relevant case for those interested in the discussion.¹⁰⁵ (Obviously, anonymous contribution is a provocative topic for those concerned with the motives of seemingly altruistic contributors.) And, in the case of Wikipedia, one might ask this more specific question: To what extent is good faith simply a matter of being a more effective and respected Wikipedian, a matter of group altruism, or something more? I would characterize the text on and discussion related to good faith as predominately oriented toward the group. This does not preclude egoistic self-satisfaction, or a transcendent intention, but Wikipedia discourse is rooted in extending good faith and WikiLove in service of a mutual love of knowledge: "We are all here for one reason: we love accumulating, ordering, structuring, and making freely available what knowledge we have in the form of an encyclopedia of unprecedented size."¹⁰⁶

Patience

A deficient collaborative culture might be characterized as temperamental and brittle because participants are uneasy and defensive; and existing structures and agreements easily fracture, providing little common ground and means for facilitating agreement. Its opposite, a well-working collaborative culture, might be characterized by patience as participants do not easily panic or escalate conflict. As a Wikipedia essay counsels: "The world will not end tomorrow."¹⁰⁷

In response to community concerns and conflict generated in response to Wikipedia office actions, where the Foundation office removes "questionable or illegal" content given complaints including "defamation, privacy violations or copyright infringement,"¹⁰⁸ Jimmy Wales responded that in such circumstances the community should: "Assume Good Faith. It could be a mistake, it could be a poor decision, it could be a very strange emergency having to do with a suicide attempt. . . . In general, there is plenty of time to stop and ask questions."¹⁰⁹

Another source of contention is the many differing positions about what kind of encyclopedia Wikipedia should be. Should it address topics like those of any other encyclopedia, or is there also room for encyclopedic articles about every episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*? On this question of scope, there is a range of philosophical views (i.e., “isms”).¹¹⁰ For example, there is deletionism (rigorous criteria for a uniformly worthwhile article must be met, otherwise delete), mergism (merge challenged information into an existing article rather than have it stand alone), essentialism (include traditionally nonencyclopedic information but only if it is notable and verifiable), and inclusionism (keep as long as an article has some merit). And yes, at present, every one of the 144 episodes of *Buffy* does have its own article.¹¹¹

Perhaps an explanation of Godwin’s Law is that, as discussed, participants come to believe that the issue at hand is eclipsed by larger, more abstract matters, a conflict of principles, a battle between good and evil. As the essay “Don’t Escalate” notes, “we need to watch how many layers of indirection we’re piling onto the discussion and try not to stray too far from the substantive issue.”¹¹² The recourse of patience can mitigate such escalation: “Cease what you are doing. Count to 10. Take a break. Read a book. Watch some videos on Youtube. Don’t edit. Don’t press the ‘save page’ button. Do what you have to do to cool down.”¹¹³ Consider a discussion as to whether the contentious “Articles for Deletion” process could be suspended for a month,¹¹⁴ in which a Wikipedian recommended that instead of panicking,

both camps could Assume Good Faith and relax a bit, each not thinking that the “other guys” are a bunch of deranged encyclopedia-haters who want to destroy everything in an orgy of deletion and/or garage band stubs [incomplete vanity articles].:) A lot of people are currently disagreeing over what sorts of articles merit inclusion in Wikipedia, but it’s not like most of those people think Wikipedia’s going to go down in flames if the “wrong” standards are picked. At least, they shouldn’t. Wikipedia is more resistant than that.¹¹⁵

Patience is further implicated by “Assume Good Faith,” since frustrating behavior resulting from ignorance, rather than malice, is remedied in time, as the “Please Don’t Bite the Newcomers” guideline cautions:

New contributors are prospective “members” and are therefore our most valuable resource. We must treat newcomers with kindness and patience—nothing scares potentially valuable contributors away faster than hostility. It is impossible for a new-

comer to be completely familiar with the policies, standards, style, and community of Wikipedia (or of a certain topic) before they start editing. If any newcomer got all those things right, it would be by complete chance.¹¹⁶

And the guideline of "Do Not Disrupt Wikipedia to Illustrate a Point" has a similar concern with dampening an escalation toward principle and returning to the immediate concern at hand,¹¹⁷ as does the essay "Wikipedia Is Not Therapy":

Wikipedia is not therapy. If a user has behavior problems which result in disruption of the collective work of creating a useful reference, then their participation in Wikipedia may be restricted or banned entirely. This should not be done without patiently discussing any problems with the user, but if the behavior is not controlled, ultimately the project will be protected by restricting the user's participation in the project.¹¹⁸

Finally, the technology of wiki itself furthers patience as a change can always be reversed without fear of permanent damage; as software developer and author Karl Fogel notes with respect to producing free and open source software: "version control means you can relax."¹¹⁹

The extent to which patience is extended to problematic participants has been a source of (pleasant?) surprise for Wikipedia cofounder Jimmy Wales, who once noted, "when I am asked to look into cases of 'admin abuse' and I choose to do so, I generally find myself astounded at how nice we are to complete maniacs, and for how long."¹²⁰ Yet such patience can be exhausted, as noted by Larry Sanger, the other Wikipedia cofounder and present apostate:

A second school of thought held that all Wikipedia contributors, even the most difficult, should be treated respectfully and with so-called WikiLove. Hence trolls were not to be identified as such (since "troll" is a term of abuse), and were to be removed from the project only after a long (and painful) public discussion.¹²¹

Not surprisingly, the balance of patience to be extended continues to be a topic of discussion. Yet there are cases in which participants disappoint all good assumptions, wear patience thin, and remain lovable only to their mothers; up to, and even after, this point, participants are still expected to remain civil.

Civility

A subtle, but important, incoherence is found within the Wikipedia "Policies and Guidelines" page: "Respect other contributors. Wikipedia

contributors come from many different countries and cultures, and have widely different views. Treating others with respect is key to collaborating effectively in building an encyclopedia.¹²² Are Wikipedians to genuinely respect all others, or (merely) treat them with respect? A comment in the “Civility” policy points to the second interpretation: “We cannot always expect people to love, honor, obey, or even respect another. But we have every right to demand civility.”¹²³ I make this distinction between genuine respect and acting with respect based on Mark Kingwell’s useful definition of civility in public discourse:

It is true that civility as I characterize it is related to mutual respect, but there is a crucial difference: genuine respect is too strong a value to demand . . . in a deeply pluralistic society. The relative advantage of civility is that it does not ask participants to do anything more than treat political interlocutors as if they were worthy of respect and understanding, keeping their private thoughts to themselves.¹²⁴

Consequently, civility acts as both a baseline for building a culture of good faith and as a last line of defense against escalation. Despite expectations to act in good faith, “Assume Good Faith,” walk in another’s shoes, see another’s humanity, and love and respect one another, failing all of this, Wikipedians should still be civil and treat each other with respect. This means refraining from “personal attacks, rudeness, and aggressive behaviours that disrupt the project and lead to unproductive stress and conflict.”¹²⁵ Otherwise, as Kingwell notes, “when civility fails, we all lose, because as citizens we lose the possibility of justice, and of a genuinely shared political community.”¹²⁶ Or, as Wikipedia warns: “Being rude, insensitive or petty makes people upset and prevents Wikipedia from working properly.”¹²⁷ A lack of civility is self-reciprocating, in that alienation begets alienation, and other faults, such as hypocrisy, soon follow, which “has the same effect on good faith that termites have on wooden houses.”¹²⁸

Aside from the communicative aspect of dampening counterproductive hostility, historically, civility has also played a role in the production, or at the least legitimation, of knowledge. In *A Social History of Truth*, Steven Shapin notes that “gentlemen,” as signified in part by their civility, were thought of as arbiters of truth because their privileged status allegedly rendered them immune from external pressure: the man who did not have to labor for his bread was least likely to “shift” his views.¹²⁹ (Though one might argue that the gentleman’s privileged status certainly biased his perspective.) Although civility is still important within Wikipedia, it is not

relied on as a premodern performance to represent social standing and consequently the ability to legitimate knowledge. Rather, encyclopedic knowledge emerges from civil discourse between people who may be strangers; civility facilitates the generation of knowledge rather than being a proxy for social standing or institutional affiliation.¹³⁰

That said, civility can be a difficult principle for the community, as people vary in their outspokenness and sensitivity. In the summer of 2009 a large poll was conducted among English Wikipedians, asking whether the civility policy was satisfactory, or abused or selectively enforced (i.e., were people baited and then attacked with this policy); also, was its application consistent across all parts of Wikipedia, and did it interfere with clarity? The resulting summary concluded that:

The majority of people feel the current civility policy is too lenient, and that it is inconsistently applied and unenforceable. Most people feel that civil behaviour applies as much on personal talkpages as elsewhere, and that there are particular problems with civil behaviour on Recent Changes Patrol and Admin Noticeboards. Almost everyone feels we are too harsh on new users, though just over half the people feel that when it comes to experienced users that expectations of behaviour depends on context and the people involved. Most people feel that baiting is under-recognised, although it was noted that it is difficult to recognise baiting, and that people have a choice in how they respond.¹³¹

This does not imply civility will be abandoned as a policy; the principle at least will persist, although it and its implementation will continue to be discussed, no doubt.

Humor

Humor is not a policy or guideline of Wikipedia, but it suffuses the culture and is the true last resort when faced with maddening circumstances.¹³² Certainly, Wikipedia is the butt of many jokes. The satirical newspaper the *The Onion* has made fun of the often-contentious character of Wikipedia with an article about the U.S. Congress abandoning an attempt at a wiki version of the Constitution; it also lampooned Wikipedia's reliability with the article "Wikipedia Celebrates 750 Years of American Independence."¹³³ Wikipedia has also been the source of fun for many Web comics, such as a *Penny Arcade* strip entitled "I Have The Power," showing the evil cartoon character Skeletor changing He-man's description from "the most powerful man on earth" to "actually a tremendous jackass and not really that powerful."¹³⁴ Wikipedians are also capable of laughing at themselves. In August

2009 there were over seven hundred articles listed in Wikipedia's humor category,¹³⁵ including a dozen or so songs and poems, such as "Hotel Wikipedia" and "If I Were an Admin."¹³⁶ An excerpt from my favorite, based on a ditty from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*, best captures the character of Wikipedians:

I am the very model of a modern Wikipedian, / My knowledge of things trivial is way above the median, / I know, and care, what Kelly Clarkson's next CD might just be called, / And all the insults Hilary and Lindsay to each other bawled. / I'm very well acquainted, too, with memes upon the Internet, / I think the dancing hamster would be excellent as a pet. / About the crackpots' physics I am teeming with a lot o' news, / The Time Cube has but four sides and it's not got a hypotenuse.¹³⁷

Nor is humor relegated only to the funny category. It is present in many of the norms discussed so far, capturing the difficult character of these principles and their practice. For example, the "In Bad Faith" essay collects examples of bad faith, such as "If I compromise, they'll know it's a sign of weakness," and "That policy page is wrong, because it doesn't describe what I do. I'll fix it."¹³⁸ The "Neutral Point of View" policy notes that when you are writing for the enemy "the other side might very well find your attempts to characterize their views substandard, but it's the thought that counts."¹³⁹ The "Don't Be Dense" essay asks the reader to remember that "'Assume Good Faith' is a nicer restatement of 'Never assume malice when stupidity will suffice.' Try not to be stupid either."¹⁴⁰ In recognition of the unavoidable absurdity of "isms" there is the most absurd, though quite reasonable, philosophy of all, the AWWDMBJAWGCAWAIFDSPBATDMTD faction: "The Association of Wikipedians Who Dislike Making Broad Judgments About the Worthiness of a General Category of Article, and Who Are In Favor of the Deletion of Some Particularly Bad Articles, but That Doesn't Mean They are Deletionist."¹⁴¹ And given the hundreds of user-created Laws of Wikipedia, Kmarinas86's Law of Contradiction recommends that "When one law contradicts the other(s), the funniest one applies first."¹⁴²

Humor serves as an instrument of anxiety-releasing self-reflection. As the saying goes, if you can't laugh at yourself, who can you laugh at? Michael Schrage, author of the 1990 book *Shared Minds: The New Technologies of Collaboration*, alludes to the importance of humor when he writes:

Designing for collaboration requires an architect with a sense of humor. After all, collaborative relationships have to cope with the misunderstandings as well as the epiphanies, and the tool should be able to support them all with grace. Creating an

environment that stimulates the relaxed intensity that marks effective collaboration is a craft, not a science. It requires both an aesthetic sense and a grasp of functionality.¹⁴³

Humor is also an instance of intellectual joy, like the many jokes and puns common to geek culture. Ultimately, Wikipedia is supposed to be enjoyable. When circumstances arise such as battling spammers, trying to discern the well-meaning newbie from a troll, politicking over the deletion of an article, and other inherently contentious and non-fun activities, humor serves as a way to restore balance. At times, it may also disrupt balance. For example, sarcasm is a brand of frequently unproductive humor, as parodied in the “Sarcasm Is Really Helpful” essay: “Sarcasm works really well in online media, because it’s so easy to pick up on without all of those pesky extratextual cues. It’s hard to see how the employment of sarcasm could possibly be counterproductive.”¹⁴⁴ Also, many Wikipedians dread April 1 because this tomfoolery isn’t present and understood in all cultures, some use the date as an excuse for outright vandalism, and many object to any change of encyclopedic articles for humorous purposes. English Wikipedia currently solves this problem every year by featuring a new article on a topic so odd you would think it is a prank, but it is not.¹⁴⁵ Sometimes the values of civility and humor are posed as opposites:

P.S. I know I’m not alone in saying that I have considered leaving Wikipedia on several occasions not because of incivility or personal attacks, but because there are people who can’t and refuse to take an obvious joke. The humorless people will ruin Wikipedia before those who aren’t prim, proper and civil.¹⁴⁶

However, I find that gentle humor and civility more often than not are complementary. When they are not, the question often comes down to—just as it may in the schoolyard—who is the butt of the joke.

Conclusion

Wikis are a relatively novel way of working together: online, asynchronous, possibly anonymous, incremental, and cumulative. Do these features alone explain the success of Wikipedia? Not quite. Each also has possible demerits. Flame-ridden, scattered, unaccountable, half-baked piles of bunk are a possible future for any wiki. As the WikiLove essay notes, “Because people coming from radically different perspectives work on Wikipedia together—religious fundamentalists and secular humanists, conservatives and socialists, etc.—it is easy for discussions to degenerate into flamewars.”¹⁴⁷

So, in addition to technology, a community's collaborative culture is an important factor in determining what its future holds. Wiki communities are also a fascinating subject of study because one can closely follow the emergence of and discourse on their culture: what is important, what is acceptable, and what does it all mean? On a wiki, the regenerative, recursive, or dual nature of community policy and practice renders discussions about these questions intensely transparent—not that this makes it necessarily easy to filter and understand. As Leuf and Cunningham wrote in 2001, “Wiki culture, like many other social experiments, is interesting, exciting, involving, evolving, and ultimately not always very well understood.”¹⁴⁸

In the case of the English Wikipedia, there is a collaborative culture that asks its participants to assume two postures: a stance of neutral point of view on matters of knowledge, and a stance of good faith toward one's fellow contributors. Whereas NPOV renders the subject matter of a collaborative encyclopedia compatible, good faith makes it possible to work together. It is as if the NPOV permits collaborators to bring together the “scattered and ineffective mental wealth” of H. G. Wells's jigsaw. However, this doesn't mean the process of working together will be effective or enjoyable. Therefore, a culture of assuming the best of others, and demonstrating patience, civility, and humor facilitates collaborating with one's peers, of varied persuasions, to fit the pieces together. As the “Collaboration First” essay declares: “A productive contributor who cannot collaborate is not a productive contributor.”¹⁴⁹

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The Culture of Wikipedia

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