

6 The Benevolent Dictator

When a building is on fire, a leader will not survey everyone to see what the consensus is about a response. It is time for action.

—Bhadani’s Second Law

Open, civil, egalitarian, deliberative: these are some of the concepts encountered in the pursuit of a universal encyclopedia. While they might seem simple enough in the abstract, they become much less so when used in the practice and discourse of a community. For instance, a perfectly “open” community will likely be chaotic, rendering it inhospitable to many. Or, if consensus doesn’t require unanimity, agreement—unanimous or otherwise—on what it does require can be elusive. Some of the sources and ironies of the English Wikipedia’s collaborative culture are further highlighted when one considers the role and status of leadership. Wikipedia, like other open content communities, is predominately a voluntary effort—aside from a few Wikimedia Foundation staff—and there’s little room for coercion or utilitarian rewards.¹ Yet there is often a seemingly paradoxical use of informal tyrant-like titles (i.e., “benevolent dictator”) for the community leader. What, then, can we make of this latest puzzle?

In this chapter I show how this juxtaposition can be understood as an “authorial” form of leadership whereby exceptional autocratic power is exercised by a respected “author” within an open content community. I then return to the story of Wales and Sanger, for their conceptions of leadership and expectations for the community profoundly shaped its direction and culture. Finally, I consider how the community discusses this type of leadership and the values with which it seems at odds.

Authorial Leadership

During one of the discussions about a feared “neo-Nazi” attack with which I began this book, Jimmy Wales responded, “If 300 NeoNazis show up and start doing serious damage to a bunch of articles, we don’t need to have 300 separate ArbCom cases and a nightmare that drags on for weeks. I’ll just do something to lock those articles down somehow, ban a bunch of people, and protect our reputation and integrity.”² How can such an autocratic statement be made within a supposedly open and consensus-based community? (I continue to use the term *autocratic* to describe, nondisparagingly, leadership actions that do not derive their authority from group decision-making processes.) Actually, such an exercise of power by a community founder is not unique to Wikipedia. Such “authorial” leadership is common to many open content communities and prompts three questions that merit attention: What is the environment from which such leadership emerges? How is it enacted? And, most interesting, how is it discussed and understood by the community?³

With respect to the environment, such leaders often found a project (often by authoring the initial content) around which a community develops, or otherwise emerge from a leaderless context by way of merit; subsequently they influence the direction of a community’s culture.⁴ Furthermore, this type of leadership often operates within a mix of governance models: meritocratic (setting the direction by leading the way), autocratic (acting as an arbiter or defender of last resort), anarchic (consensus); and occasionally democratic (voting).⁵ Wales himself has noted that:

Wikipedia is not an anarchy, though it has anarchistic features. Wikipedia is not a democracy, though it has democratic features. Wikipedia is not an aristocracy, though it has aristocratic features. Wikipedia is not a monarchy, though it has monarchical features.⁶

With respect to conduct, leaders often convince by persuasion and example though they also retain charismatic authority accumulated from their merit.⁷ This authority is frequently employed to act, as a last resort, as an arbiter between those of good faith or as a defender (but an autocratic one) against those of bad faith. As Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) luminary Eric Raymond notes, leaders must be capable of operating with a “soft touch,” to “speak softly,” consult with peers, and “not lightly interfere with or reverse decisions” made by other prominent members.⁸ Additionally,

humor and civility facilitate camaraderie between all participants and ease the exercise of authority and related anxiety.

Finally, such leadership is rarely enacted or understood as a formal office, though prominent leaders might be endowed with the informal moniker of “benevolent dictator” and occasionally act autocratically,⁹ as Wales threatened in the neo-Nazi case. However, leaders whose autocratic actions exceed their accumulated merit or charisma, sometimes referred to “idiosyncrasy credits” or “reputation shares,” risk their status and a forking of the community.¹⁰ For example, while a “benevolent dictator” might be tolerated as a necessity, a “God King” is a “site owner or administrator who uses their special authority more than absolutely necessary.” This is a leader so “arrogant that they suppose they are ‘god’”; this type of leadership is an “abuse,” “a bad thing,” and an “anti-pattern” of good wiki community.¹¹ Also, the possibility of forking—even if unlikely—is central to voluntary community dynamics and discourse, as David Wheeler notes with respect to FOSS communities:

Fundamentally, the ability to create a fork forces project leaders to pay attention to their constituencies. Even if an OSS/FS project completely dominates its market niche, there is always a potential competitor to that project: a fork of the project. Often, the threat of a fork is enough to cause project leaders to pay attention to some issues they had ignored before, should those issues actually be important. In the end, forking is an escape valve that allows those who are dissatisfied with the project’s current leadership to show whether or not their alternative is better.¹²

In short, only those leaders that tread carefully and continue to make important contributions (including, now, the judicious exercise of autocratic authority) are granted the “dictator” title. Whereas this term might not be the most appropriate in capturing the genuine character of this role, it serves as a warning: a good-natured joke balanced on the edge of becoming a feared reality.¹³ It serves as a caution to such leaders, as well as a metaphoric yardstick for discussing any participant’s action.

Because of the voluntary and meritocratic character of open content communities it is not surprising that leaders are expected to lead by example as their very leadership is founded upon exemplary behavior; leadership emerges through action rather than appointment. And while a founding leadership role has some semblance of authoritarianism to it, at least in title, it is eternally contingent: a dissatisfied community, or some constituency thereof, can always leave and start again under new leadership.

Wales and Sanger

Two of the most influential people in the history of Wikipedia are cofounders Larry Sanger and Jimmy Wales. In *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Edgar Schein identifies ways in which such leaders embed and transmit culture including “how leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises.”¹⁴ The following brief account of the crisis of Nupedia’s demise, Wikipedia’s rise, and Sanger’s departure provides a revealing introduction to leadership in the Wikipedia context.

Wales, a co-owner of the Internet content and search company Bomis, hired Sanger in February 2000 to launch and act as the editor in chief of the Nupedia project. Until he resigned, Sanger was the most prominent leader of Nupedia (the original peer-review project) and Wikipedia (its wiki complement and eventual successor). As Sanger writes in his April 2005 memoir:

The idea of adapting wiki technology to the task of building an encyclopedia was mine, and my main job in 2001 was managing and developing the community and the rules according to which Wikipedia was run. Jimmy’s role, at first, was one of broad vision and oversight; this was the management style he preferred, at least as long as I was involved. But, again, credit goes to Jimmy alone for getting Bomis to invest in the project, and for providing broad oversight of the fantastic and world-changing project of an open content, collaboratively-built encyclopedia. Credit also of course goes to him for overseeing its development after I left, and guiding it to the success that it is today.

What precipitated Sanger’s resignation? As discussed in chapter 2, Sanger was caught between continuing frustration with Nupedia’s slow progress on one hand and problems with unruly Wikipedians on the other. Furthermore, Sanger alienated some Wikipedians who saw his actions as unjustifiably autocratic and he eventually broke with the project altogether. In late 2006 Sanger launched the more expert-friendly collaborative encyclopedia Citizendium. In any case, Sanger’s account recognizes the uneasy tension between title and authority and cultural momentum at the founding of this community:

My early rejection of any enforcement authority, my attempt to portray myself and behave as just another user who happened to have some special moral authority in the project, and my rejection of rules—these were all clearly mistakes on my part. They did, I think, help the project get off the ground; but I really needed a more

subtle and forward-looking understanding of how an extremely open, decentralized project might work.

Such an understanding might have been like that of Theodore Roosevelt's recommended leadership style: speak softly and carry a big stick. Whereas Sanger did have special authority at Nupedia as editor in chief, such was not the case at Wikipedia, and Sanger's corresponding "loudness" was a later cause of regret:

As it turns out, it was Jimmy who spoke softly and carried the big stick; he first exercised "enforcement authority." Since he was relatively silent throughout these controversies, he was the "good cop," and I was the "bad cop": that, in fact, is precisely how he (privately) described our relationship. Eventually, I became sick of this arrangement. Because Jimmy had remained relatively toward the background in the early days of the project, and showed that he *was* willing to exercise enforcement authority upon occasion, he was never so ripe for attack as I was.¹⁵

Perhaps unrealized by Sanger, Wales exhibited this pattern of leadership even on an earlier philosophical email list, for which he wrote that he would "frown *very much* on any flaming of any kind whatsoever" and choose "a 'middle-ground' method of moderation, a sort of behind-the-scenes prodding."¹⁶ And most interestingly, Sanger attributes a root of the problem to his failure to recognize the importance of community and culture:

For months I denied that Wikipedia was a community, claiming that it was, instead, only an encyclopedia project, and that there should not be any serious governance problems if people would simply stick to the task of making an encyclopedia. This was strictly wishful thinking. In fact, Wikipedia was from the beginning and is both a community and an encyclopedia project.¹⁷

As noted earlier, upon publication of Sanger's memoirs a controversy arose over whether Sanger even deserved credit as a cofounder of Wikipedia. In a sense, in playing the bad cop one is depleting one's own reputation or leadership credits in favor of the good cop; Sanger, in shifting from bad cop to apostate, prompted some to question whether such credit was merited at any time. A more productive discussion at the time characterized the change in leadership style as a necessary one:

Now, I must say. . . I think a project of such a type can only work *without* a strong authority. It is important to let people built their own organisation. Jimbo has this very powerful strength, in this that he lets most of the organisation be a self-organisation. For those who know a bit about leadership, it is a rather rare occurrence. For the sake of wikipedia, and to let all the international projects grow up

(without a strong hand to lead them), it was important that the role of the editor in chief disappear.¹⁸

Sanger actually concedes as much in the development of editorial policies but is still concerned about controlling abusive editors and attacks, particularly when they alienate high-quality expert contributors. And so he now leads the Citizendium project.

Wales's Influence

Authorial leaders are frequently the initial author of the community's content. This is the case, for example, with Linus Torvalds and the Linux kernel or Guido van Rossum and the Python programming language. In this respect, Wikipedia is a bit different, as was pointed out to me by Evan Prodromou, Wikipedian and a founder of Wikitravel.¹⁹ Prodromou argued that unlike FOSS communities, Wikipedia has many more contributors, many of whom, even at the administrator level, contribute at a low skill and intensity level compared to FOSS contributors. Furthermore, unlike other wiki communities or even other leaders within Wikipedia, Wales has never been a significant "author" in terms of creating content. Indeed, because of Wikipedia's history, the community regards an editor in chief as undesirable, and even Wales's relatively modest editorial contributions are apt to cause concern. (In fact, in *The New Yorker* he admitted he abandoned his efforts to write a scholarly Nupedia article on Robert Merton and options-pricing theory because it was too intimidating and reminiscent of graduate school.²⁰ Sometimes his Wikipedia edits are challenged, as we will see, and statistics on his contributions and "edit count" have been a topic of discussion.²¹) Plus, much of his purview has been understandably limited to English projects. And even though Wales's public presence in the daily life of Wikipedia has receded,²² I consider his leadership to be central because of his founding vision, early activity, contributions to collaborative norms, relationships with other Wikipedians, and latent power.

In addition to reacting to crises, Schein argues that community culture is affected by what leaders "pay attention to."²³ In this way, leadership can be exerted by highlighting rather than coercing. For example, in any early discussion about neutral point of view, Wales identifies an important issue and highlights a sentiment he agrees with: "We should all pay close attention to Larry's wording here, which I think is excellent. Nupedia should

‘include articles **on** all points of view’ (note the emphasis added), not necessarily ‘include articles **from** all points of view.’”²⁴ Or, as seen in the discussion about the blocking of a white supremacist, Wales went out of his way to commend the participants for having “a disagreement with a positive exploration of the deeper issues.”²⁵ Highlighting others’ arguments to make his own has even led Wales to apologize for contravening Netiquette; in a thread about the balance between high-quality content and “cruft,” Wales commented: “I know it is bad form to quote an entire post just to say ‘me too’ but I wanted to say that Daniel is right on the money here, and displays what I think of as true Wikipedia spirit. We have to have a passion to **get it right** or we’ll be full of rampant nonsense.”²⁶ He also can be found highlighting what he thinks to be central Wikipedia values: “Wikipedia is built on (among other things) twin pillars of trust and tolerance. . . . The harmony of our work depends on human understanding and forgiveness of errors.”²⁷

Furthermore, after immersing oneself in Wikipedia practice it is not difficult to see that many of its good faith norms are strongly exercised by Wales himself. In a 2007 discussion about his role at Wikipedia he described his approach as diplomatic and reflects elements of both good faith and neutrality:

I have many faults, but refusal to listen is not really among them. I make mistakes, but I am calm and educable. I try to land in the center on most issues, rather than staking out any sort of extreme positions. And I try to represent all parts of the community’s interest in the broad building of consensus as being better than gang warfare.²⁸

Wales once described his approach to me as “I like to think I’m not stupid, but I’m not in my present position because I’m smart but because I’m friendly.”²⁹ This attitude can be seen in the following interactions in which Wales frequently writes with:

- *patience*: on a thread regarding Serbo-Croatian dialects: “For those who find Mark irritating, and who may not tend to listen to him on those grounds, I would like to say, listen to him on this point.”³⁰
- *civility*: in response to someone who spoke of a threatened fork over a Friulian dialect and challenged “ARE YOU CRAZY!?!?!?!?!?” Wales responded, “Good luck with that. ‘Not yelling at people’ is a critical trait of leadership in an all volunteer project.”³¹

- humility: in response to someone concerned about perennial problems, including language policies, Wales wrote, “I’m very sympathetic to all these points. I don’t have an easy answer what to do.”³²
- a willingness to apologize: when Wales recommended some text be added to a page when it was already present he wrote, “Ok, my mistake, I’m very very sorry. I didn’t see that. I apologize for any confusion.”³³

Additionally, humor serves to further camaraderie and diffuse anxiety about leadership. In response to a message about an April Fool’s Day joke about Wales as dictator, someone responded that many prominent Wikipedians make jokes:

These jokes don’t have a “point.” If you scour the list for all messages, you will find that I am not the only one who has a sense of humour and knows how to make jokes. In fact, this extends to Ant, Mav, Jimbo, etc. who can occasionally be found to be making a joke on this list.

I don’t know how it is with you, but as far as I know the point of humour is to lighten up a situation, and only occasionally to make a point.³⁴

However, as Wikipedia has grown, attempts at humor by those in positions of authority seemingly become rarer because a bad or misunderstood joke can have deleterious consequences exceeding the value of a few chuckles. And, of course, just as Wikipedia sometimes fall short of its ideals, Wales—and other leaders—make their fair share of mistakes, some of which are widely publicized because of Wikipedia’s prominence and a counter-culture of message boards that thrive on complaint and conspiracy.³⁵ Even within the community, his attempts to steer Wikipedia are sometimes challenged. For example, during the 2006 Wikimedia board of trustee elections, Wales’s message encouraging people to vote—and for specific candidates—was thought inappropriate by some because he might have access to the intermediate results; subsequent elections were hosted and overseen by an external organization.³⁶ Or, in response to an embarrassing instance of vandalism in 2009, Wales called upon the foundation to enable the experimental “Flagged Revisions” feature at the English Wikipedia based on his “personal recommendation” and community consensus (roughly 60 percent of those polled supported the idea). This prompted a maelstrom of discussion, and mainstream press attention, about openness, the meaning of consensus, and his role. However, despite initially overreaching, he and the community continued substantive discussion and Wales challenged those who objected for a specific counter-proposal within a limited time frame.³⁷

(I expect using this feature as a way to protect specific pages eventually will be implemented.)

In any case, Wikipedia's good faith culture undeniably has been shaped by Wales's own values and actions; while he did not write many articles, he did help establish many of Wikipedia's essential values and norms. Additionally, after Sanger's departure he once again attempted to move to the "background" in encouraging other forms of governance to emerge and by supporting like-minded persons with a similar temperament.

Beyond the Founders: Admins, ArbCom, and the Board

Whereas cofounder Larry Sanger was editor in chief of Nupedia and he was informally known as the chief organizer of Wikipedia, neither role was ever claimed again after he resigned. Instead, the "Administrators" page stresses that everyone is an equal editor. Those who demonstrate themselves to be good editors may request extra responsibilities but "are not imbued with special authority."³⁸ Yet, while Wikipedia culture values editorial egalitarianism over administrative responsibilities, this does not mean there are no leaders. Consequently, before turning to how the community speaks about leadership, I first present a brief description of the leadership and governance structure of Wikipedia itself.

A novel characteristic of Wikipedia is that most anyone who browses Wikipedia may edit it—though a tiny fraction of pages are "protected" if they are subject to persistent or severe policy violations, such as edit warring, vandalism, defamation, or copyright violations.³⁹ Wikipedia pages claim that contributors who sign up for an account and log in—no longer "anonymous"—do not gain additional powers; instead, they have access to useful features such as a user page and the ability to track the pages one cares about. (Of course, a logged-in user who builds a good reputation can garner informal authority among other contributors.) Additional features are made accessible to experienced users in the role of a *system administrator*, or sysop. These features permit such an administrator to enact Wikipedia policy and group consensus, particularly with respect to the management of protected pages, the deletion of pages, or temporarily blocking sources of vandalism. Yet, the English Wikipedia's "Administrators" page quotes Jimmy Wales as saying, "This should not be a big deal." Indeed, in a 2005

version of this page an association with editorial authority is purposely disavowed:

Administrators are not imbued with any special authority, and are equal to everybody else in terms of editorial responsibility. Some Wikipedians consider the terms “Sysop” and “Administrator” to be misnomers, as they just indicate Wikipedia users who have had performance- and security-based restrictions on several features lifted because they seemed like trustworthy folks and asked nicely. However, administrators do not have any special power over other users other than applying decisions made by all users.

In the early days of Wikipedia all users acted as administrators and in principle they still should. Any user can behave as if they are an administrator, provided that they do not falsely claim to be one, even if they have not been given the extra administrative functions. Users doing so are more likely to be nominated as full administrators by members of the community and more likely to be chosen when they are finally nominated.⁴⁰

Essentially, administrators are able to quickly prevent and intervene in destructive edits. (Textual vandalism isn't truly destructive as the previous versions are available; one administrative feature is the *rollback* that permits the quick reversion of such edits.) However, in an ironic testament that administrators are much like ordinary users, they do sometimes become involved in *wheel wars*, a term going back to the 1970s to describe conflicts among those who gained “big wheel” privileges on a computer system.⁴¹ And, given there are now thousands of contributors, administrators, and administrative actions it is no longer possible to claim that administrators are “applying decisions made by all users” as was claimed in 2005. A clarification in 2008 states: “There is very little extra decision-making ability that goes along with adminship, and it does not add any extra voice in consensus decisions. In that sense, whether a person is an administrator is not, in and of itself, important.”⁴²

In the time since its founding, additional levels of authority have appeared as Wikipedia evolved from a small English-only encyclopedia to a massive project among many at a nonprofit foundation. At the English Wikipedia there are now 900-plus active administrators and about a dozen active *bureaucrats* who appoint administrators and other bureaucrats.⁴³ Elected *stewards* can, respectively, change any such role across all Wikimedia wikis and act as bureaucrats for smaller projects.⁴⁴ Orthogonal to administrative and governance roles there are also *developers*, those who actually write the software and administer the servers.⁴⁵ Volunteers continue to act

in all of these capacities: the Wikimedia Foundation has only a handful of employees who administer the foundation, solicit funding, or perform essential hardware/software maintenance and development.⁴⁶

In Wikipedia culture, and in keeping with the larger wiki culture, delineations of authority are suspect, as is seen in the previous excerpt regarding the role of administrators. Yet, even if these other levels of authority entail responsibilities rather than rights—which is the orthodox line—they could nonetheless be seen as something to achieve or envy if only for symbolic status. This leads to the occasional call for the label associated with this role to be deprecated, as discussed in the thread “Rename Admins to Janitors”:

I’m sick and tired of people misunderstanding what an “administrator” of Wikipedia is. It was a misnomer to begin with, and we’ve had nothing but trouble with this name ever since. Users misunderstand it (and ask admins to make editorial decisions). Media misunderstand it (and either do not explain it, or connect it to power and influence). And it’s no wonder. “Administrator” could refer to a manager, or someone appointed by a court; it typically describes someone in an important official position.

When the role of “bureaucrat” was created, the name was chosen specifically so that people would not treat it as a status symbol. It should be something nobody really *wants*—something people do because it needs doing, not because it gains them credibility and influence. This seems to have worked reasonably well for the most part.⁴⁷

Also, it is worthwhile to note that as one ascends the hierarchy of roles, and the power of implementation increases, policy discretion often decreases. Just as administrators ought not to have extra authority in making editorial decisions, stewards should not make policy decisions. Stewards can “remove arbitrary user access levels” on any Wikimedia wiki. They can toggle whether one has the ability of an administrator (to block users or protect pages), a bot (to run automatic tools), or a bureaucrat (to set access levels within a single wiki), and whether one has the ability of oversight (to suppress revisions), or checkuser (to determine the Internet address of users). Because of this power, stewards are governed by their own policies: don’t decide, don’t promote users on projects with existing bureaucrats, don’t change rights on your own project, act with transparency, and check local policies.⁴⁸ The “Don’t Decide” policy further states:

Stewards are not allowed to make decisions, such as “this user should (or should not) be promoted.” Their task is to implement valid community decisions. . . . Stewards

should always be neutral. They can vote in elections, but when executing the result of the election the steward has to act according to the result, even if they disagree.⁴⁹

At the time of incorporation in 2003, Wales delegated some of his authority to an initial five directors of the Wikimedia Foundation Board of Trustees, in which he serves as chairman emeritus. (The board has since been expanded; elections in July 2009 resulted in a total of ten trustees.⁵⁰) The board “has the power to direct the activities of the foundation. It also has the authority to set membership dues, discipline and suspend members (article III), and to amend the corporate bylaws (article VI).”⁵¹ In the realm of editorial disputes between users (including administrators) dispute resolution can be facilitated by mediation or arbitration, and the Arbitration Committee (ArbCom) can issue a binding decision. The ArbCom, discussed in chapter 5, was first proposed as a “Wikiquette committee” in 2003 and was formally established the following year.⁵² However, it is recommended that disputes be worked out civilly between the participants as mediation and arbitration can be tedious. Or, as Skomorokh’s Law notes, “There are no winners at Arbitration, only losers.”⁵³ The ArbCom, the Board, and Jimmy Wales himself, ultimately, have the authority to penalize or remove abusive users.

Finally, while consensus is preferred for most decisions, voting has had a place in Wikipedia, such as in some elections (e.g., for stewards and board members) and on pages like “VfD” (Votes for Deletion) where allegedly unworthy articles are nominated for removal. Nonetheless voting is widely recognized as difficult and often contentious: “Don’t vote on everything, and if you can help it, don’t vote on anything.”⁵⁴ In fact the VfD process was renamed to AfD (Articles for Deletion) and now speaks of consensus rather than voting.⁵⁵ In any case, and as noted earlier, multiple models of governance coexist within Wikipedia, and democratic voting is widely recognized as problematic.

However, despite an early lack of concern with community structure and culture (e.g., “Ignore All Rules”), protestations that administrators are nothing but janitors, and that the ArbCom was but an experimental delegation of authority from Wales, Wikipedia’s conceptualization of governance and leadership is maturing and stabilizing. Wikipedia has long since recognized itself as a community, people strive to become administrators despite disclaimers, and the ArbCom is unlikely to go away. The cultural significance of administrators was acknowledged in January 2007 by the creation of the page “Advice for New Administrators,” which became part of the “New

Admin School,” which even includes the “coaching” (mentoring) of editors who want to become administrators.⁵⁶ Yet, the orthodox caveats about responsibility rather than power persist, as the “Advice” page cautions:

Remember that administrator status is not a trophy. Generally, therefore, do not act any differently now than you did six months or a year ago. It is true that you may be able to help mediate a dispute effectively, or resolve one, or guide the improvement of an article. But in virtually all of these cases your ability has nothing to do with your being an administrator, just with your experience, knowledge of the policies, and good sense—i.e. virtues you had long before you became an administrator, and virtues shared by many non-administrators. . . . Wikipedia administrators do have certain powers, and you need good judgment to use them. Nevertheless, this does not mean that administrators should act like police or judges. Consider thinking of your new status more like a custodian.⁵⁷

Furthermore, the role of socializing others into the collaborative norms of Wikipedia are represented as a central function of being an administrator, who should be willing to talk and be patient; respond with “gentle” encouragement and discouragement; pay “careful attention to our core policies”; “assume people act on good faith”; and “give people the benefit of the doubt.” They should not “get sucked in” to the disputes in which they intervene.

Discussing Leadership

The prominent leader of an open content community is sometimes characterized as a benevolent dictator. This is a variation on a tradition in online communities, particularly Usenet, of referring to a minority with disproportionate influence as a “cabal.”⁵⁸ While a cabal can still be spoken of in earnest (with a negative connotation), in time it and the acronym TINC (“There Is No Cabal”) became shorthand for referring to the difficulties of community governance and the propensity for some to see conspiracies. The role of the “benevolent dictator” completes this ironic turn while also indicating genuine respect. Jimmy Wales is referred to as a benevolent dictator, though it is not a title he accepts. Indeed, it behooves any such leader to disclaim such a title because, as Eric Raymond notes, hacker culture “consciously distrusts and despises egotism and ego-based motivations; self-promotion tends to be mercilessly criticized, even when the community might appear to have something to gain from it. So much so, in fact, that the culture’s ‘big men’ and tribal elders are required to talk softly and

humorously deprecate themselves at every turn in order to maintain their status.”⁵⁹ (Although Raymond is seminal for theorizing aspects of open source leadership and popularizing the term *benevolent dictator*, its usage appears to precede Raymond’s use in computer communities and even its application to Linus Torvalds.⁶⁰)

Nonetheless, the need for “dictatorship” arises from the difficulty inherent to decision making in large, voluntary, and consensus-oriented communities. While a cabal or dictator might be complained about, so might their absence. In a discussion about whether a redesign of Wikipedia’s portal should use icons of national flags to represent different languages—many nations share a language or use more than one—Wikipedian NSK wrote that continued arguments “do nothing to improve the present ugly portal.” Unfortunately, “Wikipedia suffers from many voices, often contradictory. I think you need an influential leader to take final decisions (after community input of course).”⁶¹ This sentiment is shared in many open content communities. FOSS practitioner Karl Fogel writes: “Only when it is clear that no consensus can be reached, and that most of the group wants someone to guide the decision so that development can move on, do they put their foot down and say ‘This is the way it’s going to be.’”⁶² Clay Shirky also makes this point in his essay “A Group Is Its Own Worst Enemy” by way of Geoff Cohen’s observation that “the likelihood that any unmoderated group will eventually get into a flame-war about whether or not to have a moderator approaches one as time increases.”⁶³ (Again, Cohen’s observation takes the form of the ever popular Godwin’s Law.)

In the Wikipedia context, in addition to differing opinions among those of good faith, an informal and consensus-based approach does not seemingly deal well with those who act in bad faith, such as the feared neo-Nazi attack:

What is needed in obvious cases like this is a “benevolent dictator,” whether it’s Jimbo Wales or the arbcom, to examine the editors’ contributions then ban them, because these are not bona fide Wikipedians who happen to have a strong POV. They are fanatics acting to promote the views of a political cult, and they’re here for no other reason. Yet here they remain, making a mockery of everything Wikipedia stands for.⁶⁴

Where possible, Wales has delegated authority, particularly to the Board of Trustees and Arbitration Committee, but much authority remains with Wales as noted in a 2005 comment:

Wikipedia is “at the mercy of” Jimbo. Jimbo has delegated his “mercy,” to use your term, to the Arbitration Committee that he convened over 15 months ago, and which he periodically refreshes the membership thereof as guided by the wishes of the community. Significant disciplinary matters in Wikipedia are thus guided by a number of editors who are held in high esteem by the community at large (or, at least, so one hopes).⁶⁵

Anthere, a former chairperson of the board of trustees, described this balance of reserved authority and delegation as one of facilitating or hindering a direction, reminiscent of the goal theory of leadership⁶⁶ whereby a leader makes the subordinate’s path more satisfying and easier to travel by clarifying goals and reducing obstructions:

I think that what is especially empowering is the leadership type of Jimbo. Jimbo is not coaching at all, and rather little directing (though hints are sometimes quite clear), as well as rather little delegating (I think the foundation would sometimes benefit from more delegation from Jimbo). His type is essentially supportive. Very low direction but very high support. This leaves basically as much opportunity to work in certain directions as one would dream of. However, one moves in a direction supported by Jimbo much more quickly than in a direction not supported by Jimbo. I[t] can take a long time to find a satisfactory decision, but prevents from travelling in an unsafe direction.⁶⁷

However, this balance can lead to ambiguities that prompt discussion, such as that about editorial authority. In February 2005 an enormous debate erupted over the illustration included in the encyclopedic article on autofellatio. Images tend to prompt many debates and raise questions of censorship, free speech, cultural differences, and of the age appropriateness and quality of Wikipedia. A similar debate arose for the image in the clitoris article, as well as a cinematic still of Kate Winslet wearing nothing but a diamond necklace in the “Titanic (1997 film)” article. The latter debate was resolved when her breasts were cropped from the image;⁶⁸ it was eventually removed altogether because of copyright concerns. When Wales deleted the photographic image of autofellatio, which had replaced the less-contentious illustration, Erik Moeller challenged this action as it raised the old issue of to what extent Wikipedia has an “editor in chief”:

Perhaps you could clarify that this was not done in your role as trustee. I don’t believe it was, as you did not consult with Angela and Anthere [two other trustees], so I consider it just like an edit by any other Wikipedia editor, only that, of course, you hope that people will take it more seriously because of the reputation that comes with your role in the project, past and present. That’s completely reasonable, if done rarely and in cases you consider important.

The page is currently being edit warred over, and one editor uses the comment “rv [revert] to Jimbo’s approved version.” It would be helpful if you could state here that you are not in the business of approving articles. I believe your edit summary “This image is completely unacceptable for Wikipedia” could be misconstrued to be an official statement, when it is your personal opinion. Some people still see Wikimedia as being governed by a benevolent dictator, and any explanation would help to eliminate that misconception.

I still remember how the Spanish Wikipedia forked over some discussion on advertising. I’m somewhat worried that people might misunderstand your comments, and assume that you are acting as “Chief Editor.” On the other side, those who do support the removal of the image might deliberately seek to create that impression in order to further their agenda.⁶⁹

Wales did not respond to this particular email message, but continued discussion with respect to how this image would affect educational use of Wikipedia. However, Wales’s role was further discussed during discussion of the possible neo-Nazi attack. This led Wales to clarify that he would prevent such an attack though he also recognizes the dangers inherent to such action:

The danger of course is that the benign dictator may turn out to be biased or wrong himself. So I hesitate to do this except in cases where speed is of essence, or where it’s just very clearcut and easy. What I prefer is that I can act as a temporary bridge and “person to blame” while we work on community solutions.⁷⁰

Seven months later, on the same thread, Wales further defined his role as a “constitutional monarch”:

I do not believe in the “benevolent dictator” model for Wikipedia. Our project is of major historical significance, and it is not appropriate for any one person to be the benevolent dictator of all human knowledge. Obviously.

But we have retained a “constitutional monarchy” in our system and the main reason for it is to *_support_ and *_make possible_** a very open system in which policy is set organically by the community and democratic processes and institutions emerge over a long period of experimentation and consensus-building. . . . It is not possible for 10,000 NeoNazis (if such numbers exist) to storm into Wikipedia and take it over by subverting our organic democratic processes because I will not allow it. Period. So we don’t have to overdesign those processes out of a paranoia of a hostile takeover.

But this also means that we don’t need to over-react right now. We can wait and see. They’ll talk a big game but just review those message boards and then look around here. A battle of wits between Wikipedians and Nazis? I know who I’m betting on.⁷¹

Wales's conception of his role was further developed and articulated on the "Benevolent Dictator" discussion page:

I am more comfortable with the analogy to the British monarch, i.e. my power should be (and is) limited, and should fade over time. . . .

The situation in nl.wikipedia.org is probably a good example of how I can play a productive role through the judicious exercise of power. My role there is mostly just as advisor to people in terms of just trying to help people think about the bigger picture and how we can find the best ways to interact and get along to get our incredibly important work done.

But it is also a role of "constitutional" importance, in the sense that everyone who is party to the discussion can feel comfortable that whatever agreements are reached will be **binding**, that there is a higher enforcement mechanism. It's not up to me to **impose** a solution, nor is it up to me directly to **enforce** a solution chosen by the community, but I do play a role in guaranteeing with my personal promise that valid solutions decided by the community in a reasonable fashion will be enforced by someone. . . .

And notice, too, that I believe such authority should be replaced as time goes along by institutions within the community, such as for example the ArbCom in en.wikipedia.org, or by community votes in de.wikipedia.org, etc.

We have very few problems, other than isolated things, with sysop abuse or cabals, even in smaller languages, and in part because everyone is quite aware that I would take whatever actions necessary to ensure due process in all parts of wikipedia, to the best of my ability.⁷²

It is worthwhile noting that Wales is articulating a hybrid of leadership types including autocratic (decision made by the leader alone), consultative (the problem is shared with and information collected from the group, before the leader decides alone), and delegated leadership (the problem is shared, ideas are accepted, and the leader accepts the solution supported by the group).⁷³ Also, Wales's concern with not over-designing the "organic democratic processes" echoes findings in the study of FOSS community that the judicious use of charismatic authority can be preferable to a "complex system of rules."⁷⁴ Similarly, in a discussion about the openness of foundation-related committees Wales felt that "it seems to me that the best way to approach this is not with a formalistic board resolution (this is not our traditional way), but through ongoing dialog and discussion, rather than rules-based demands from the board."⁷⁵ And even though Wales is seemingly conscientious about the use of his authority, others note that the "charismatic" character of his leadership can be unsavory. If others

appropriate what Wales has said or done as the justification for their own position, some will object:

This kind of hero-worship begins with Christians who find it more chic to parrot Christ's words than to live them. In our context this translates into using "Jimbo said . . ." as an argument that would stop all debate.⁷⁶

Wales himself is now sensitive to this concern as seen in his qualification of an email about how to distinguish between sites that criticize Wikipedia and those that harass Wikipedians:

I have this funny feeling, after writing this email, that it is the sort of email likely to be misused in some fashion as a WP:JIMBOSAYS fallacy. This note at the top serves as notice that anyone citing this email as setting down policy on Wikipedia is being a goof. I am just discussing and thinking here and trying to be helpful.⁷⁷

Elsewhere he notes that "unless I am very very very careful, it ends up getting used as a stick to beat innocents to death with.:"⁷⁸

Concern about this role and title led to a consideration of alternatives for "benevolent dictator" including constitutional monarch, the most trusted party (TMTP, Linus Torvalds's preferred moniker), eminence grise, and deus ex machina.⁷⁹ And while the notion of constitutional monarch has achieved some stabilization and acceptance within the community, "benevolent dictator" won't disappear from the conversation given its long history within online communities. Indeed, the notion not only serves as a measure of the leader's actions, but also those of other participants. In one of the many threads about sexual content on Wikipedia, one participant wrote to another: "So your opinion is now law? Wonderful. We don't need all of those nasty little polls or votes. . . . All we have to do is have you make the decision for us. I thought Jimbo was the benevolent dictator. You seem just to want to be dictator, period."⁸⁰

Conclusion

To whatever extent Wikipedia has been successful in the pursuit of a universal encyclopedia—a question for the next chapter—I argue an appreciation of the community and its collaborative culture is key to understanding Wikipedia. However, unlike the purity of a utopian dream, Wikipedians must reconcile their vision with the inescapable social reality of irritating personalities, philosophical differences, and external threats. Despite its

good-faith collaborative culture, its egalitarian ethos, and its openness—or because of it—Wikipedia has been shaped by authorial leadership. An informal benevolent dictator serves to gently guide the community, to mediate internal disputes between those of good faith, and to defend against those acting in bad faith. At this point, he or she may achieve a significant amount of symbolic status within the community or even outside attention. However, when a person comes to be responsible for more than he or she can do by dint of will alone, new responsibilities and authority pull taut a tightrope that must be carefully walked before the eyes of one's peers. Sanger's reflections about his exit from the community and continued discussion about Wales's role are testaments to how delicately the tin crown of such leadership must be balanced.

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

By: Joseph Reagle

Citation:

Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia

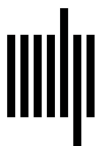
By: Joseph Reagle

DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/8051.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262289719

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2012



The MIT Press

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For information about special quantity discounts, please email special_sales@mit-press.mit.edu

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

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