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Good Faith Collaboration

The Culture of Wikipedia

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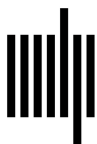
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8 Conclusion: “A Globe in Accord”

The problem with Wikipedia is that it only works in practice. In theory, it can never work.

—Zeroeth Law

Everyone who comes across Raul’s laws eventually adds one of their own.

—Ben’s Revolting Realization

At Wikimania 2007, a gathering of Wikimedia contributors in Taipei, one of the free gifts received during registration was a spherical puzzle. Like any other jigsaw, the pieces must be fit together, but in this case they form a globe much like the one seen near the top of every Wikipedia article. The Wikipedia logo is that of an incomplete world of characters, each piece representing a different language. In discussing Wikipedia’s culture, I use the metaphor of a puzzle to explain the ways in which neutral point of view and good faith complement each other in the collaborative production of an encyclopedia. NPOV makes it possible for the jigsaw shapes to actually be fitted together, and good faith facilitates the process—sometimes frustrating, sometimes fun—of putting them together with one’s peers. In accordance with Ben’s Revolting Realization at the head of this chapter, this idea—and this book itself I suppose—is my own addendum to the Laws of Wikipedia.

But this metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle is even more appropriate when I think back to H. G. Wells and his “world brain.” (This occurred to me at five a.m. on the last day of Wikimania as I gazed unfocused at the puzzle box sitting on the nightstand next to the bed.) Wells and others pursuing the vision of a universal encyclopedia had hoped that new technologies, be they index cards and microfilm or computer networks, might somehow

address the difficult puzzle of the world's troubles. Even if more recent visionaries aren't quite as utopian—or perhaps naïve—as Wells and Otlet were, there is a hopeful and global aspiration nonetheless.¹ In fact, the motto of Wikimania 2007 was “a Globe in Accord”—and I was struck by the sight of multilingual participants wearing “I speak” badges enumerating the languages in which they could converse and help.

However, just as “neutral” should not be understood as a description of the encyclopedia but as an aspiration and intentional stance of its contributors, one should appreciate ideals of universalism, openness, and good faith in a similar light. For example, there are inherent tensions (e.g., “the tyranny of structurelessness”) and practical difficulties (e.g., Wikipedia office actions) within an open content community. Similarly, if one were to read my focus on good faith (assuming the best of others, striving for patience, civility, and humor) as implying that Wikipedia is a harmonious community of benevolent saints, one would be wrong.

If forced to simplify the complexities of online community by way of a single theory I would resort to Godwin's Law, first observed on Usenet.² We often see the world in the parochial terms of “us versus them,” and we tend to be less favorable in judging others than we judge ourselves—and then we are amazingly adept at justifying and rationalizing our own mistakes.³ Given the lack of social context in online interactions (distant, nearly anonymous, and transitory), it is not surprising that people sometimes end up calling each other Nazis. This is why when Wikipedia began to experience its first serious growing pains Wales called for a “culture of co-operation” unlike the “culture of conflict embodied in Usenet.”⁴ And although Wikipedia might be “dedicated to a higher good,” I agree with journalist Stacy Schiff that “it is also no more immune to human nature than any other utopian project. Pettiness, idiocy, and vulgarity are regular features of the site. Nothing about high-minded collaboration guarantees accuracy, and open editing invites abuse.”⁵ What Wikipedia's collaborative culture does, what any culture with positive norms like “Don't Bite the Newcomers” or “Assume Good Faith” can do, is dampen Godwin's Law and call upon “the better angels of our nature.”⁶ Those pursuing the universal encyclopedia believe that while our better nature is not always present, it is at least latent. For example, in response to social arguments about “survival of the fittest” arising from Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, Peter Kropotkin, anarchist and contributor to the 1911 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, wrote “Mutual aid is as

much a law of animal life as mutual struggle."⁷ There are even times when we can surprise ourselves, such as when thousands of (previous) strangers come together to build a world encyclopedia. As Sanger notes, to build a universal encyclopedia one doesn't need "faith in the possibility of knowledge" but in "human beings being able to work together."⁸ The question, then, is how is such a thing possible? Or as Peter Kollock wrote about cooperative online efforts before Wikipedia: "For a student of social order, what needs to be explained is not the amount of conflict but the great amount of sharing and cooperation that does occur in online communities."⁹

One's first impulse in answering the question about Wikipedia's success is to focus on technology. Clearly, as is apparent in my history, technology has played a significant role in inspiring the vision of a universal encyclopedia. And beyond inspiration, networking technology and its related collaborative techniques can enable openness and accessibility, furthering accountability and the socialization of newcomers. On a wiki, contributors can communicate asynchronously and contribute incrementally. Tasks can be modularized. Changes are easily reverted. Accessible documentation, discussion pages, templates, and automated tools further coordination. However, technology, while important, is insufficient. Plenty of projects fail despite the wiki pixie dust. This is why the question "How is something like Wikipedia possible?" leads me to the question "How can we understand Wikipedia's collaborative culture?" As noted, Larry Sanger concedes that at the start he mistakenly "denied that Wikipedia was a community, claiming that it was, instead, only an encyclopedia project."¹⁰ This is a type of mistake he thinks others now make with respect to technology:

It is not anything magic about wiki software in particular that makes Wikipedia work as well as it does. Wikipedia's success is more due to the fact that it is strongly collaborative than that it is a wiki. Wikis and the Wikipedia model are one way to enable strong collaboration, but they are not only one way. I think that the Wikipedia community made a mistake when it decided that it's the wiki part that explained Wikipedia's success.¹¹

Perhaps a lot of the criticism against Wikipedia and "Web 2.0" relates to this issue. People seize upon *wiki* as a buzzword, implying they can magically transform business, government, or anything really. Observing this hyped rendering of technology, some critics ask, but what of individual difference and social bonds? Wikipedia supporters argue these things have been there all along. This is why a focus on community and culture are

necessary to understanding Wikipedia; as Sanger notes, “while collaborative systems should be designed with the needs and values of participants in mind, I think that a certain culture or set of values, is necessary in order to make collaboration work.”¹² My argument is that good faith social norms (combined with wiki features) constructively facilitate Wikipedia collaboration. However, more autocratic forms of authority may be necessary to defend against those acting in bad faith or when there is no community consensus. Hence, egalitarian open content communities are sometimes (ironically) led by a “benevolent dictator.” Jimmy Wales serves in this role at Wikipedia and has influenced much of its culture. Yet, if such leadership or institutional governance persistently fails, the community might then fork.

Even if one accepts my argument about the importance of culture, some might argue my portrayal is off the mark. I’ve already qualified my focus on good faith as an aspiration and cultural norm rather than a description of all Wikipedia practice. (Though the corpus of norms and their imperfect implementation is remarkable still.) Yet some readers might claim things have changed at Wikipedia: it may have once been an encyclopedia with potential, been produced by an open content community, or had a culture of good faith, but not now.

Wikipedia’s status as an encyclopedia was debated from the start, even by its founders, and continues to be thought suspect by critics, particularly when a new scandal erupts as they seem to do every so often. This then prompts much discussion. In fact, the community has discussed every conceivable aspect of its identity and work. As I noted at the beginning of this book, this conversation is frequently exasperating and often humorous, but we now know it is also rather pragmatic and governed by good faith norms. Indeed, Wikipedia is an exemplar of the reflective character of open content communities. And just when arguments that Wikipedia would never amount to anything ceased, new arguments about its death took their place. Based on research showing that Wikipedia contribution is slowing, journalist Stephen Foley asks, “is Wikipedia cracking up?”¹³ In 2005, law professor Eric Goldman predicted Wikipedia would “fail” in 2010 (i.e., close access or become spam ridden), repeated the prediction in 2006, and in 2009 made the claim at a conference.¹⁴ (If you can still edit Wikipedia when you read this book, it is safe to conclude that he was wrong.)

No doubt, the community will change, but change is inevitable—and my efforts are necessarily fixed in a particular slice of time. Also, “golden years”

tend to be subjective and relative. I began this work in 2004, the same year a self-described "old-timer" mentioned he began his wiki career and the same year in which another (older old-timer) told me the project began to go downhill. (JDG's First Law notes each "wave or generation" of Wikipedia editors corresponds to "the human gestation period," which means about nine months.¹⁵) I too have concerns about Wikipedia's quality, community, and culture as it evolves. And just like any community Wikipedia does change. It has been relatively successful and has faced extraordinary growing pains. Almost a century ago the seminal sociologist Max Weber noted that organizations often develop toward bureaucratic forms. We shouldn't be surprised that the same has happened to Wikipedia; perhaps those who are disenchanted should think of themselves as "wiki entrepreneurs," preferring the fast and flexible environment of a small community. And, as Weber notes, "When those subject to bureaucratic control seek to escape the influence of the existing bureaucratic apparatus, this is normally possible only by creating an organization of their own which is equally subject to bureaucratization."¹⁶ It seems as if Weber was speaking of forking over a century ago.

In fact, I considered those who have left Wikipedia to begin anew at another wiki as part of its legacy. In the most extreme and unlikely case, even if the community disappeared and all that was left was a snapshot of its content, Wikipedia still would have been an amazing phenomenon. Among all of those individuals throughout history who have pursued the vision of a universal encyclopedia, Wikipedians have come closest to realizing it. Even the lifeless remains of Wikipedia content would continue to be a useful resource. And there would be dozens of projects with former Wikipedians still pursuing the vision of accessible knowledge and the joy of collaborating in good faith. However, Wikipedia has always been a puzzle. Born almost as a happy accident, growing far beyond anyone's expectations, and applauded not because it is perfect but because it is confoundingly good, I expect Wikipedia will continue to surprise us.

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