

Preface

When I returned to graduate school I faced the task of choosing a research topic. I left my position at the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) with an interest in new Web applications, particularly blogs, and an appreciation for collaboration. Since I had been out of school for a while, and matriculated in an alien discipline, I made frequent use of a new online reference work: Wikipedia. As I grew disenchanted with the fractious narcissism sometimes encountered on blogs, I became increasingly intrigued with the efforts of the individuals producing Wikipedia. While one can find plenty of arguments in both the blogosphere and at Wikipedia, the intention and spirit of the discussion in the two communities is often different. Furthermore, my interest in Wikipedia dovetailed with an especially useful bit of advice I received: the work for a book such as this is long and solitary, so choose something one can live with as it will be the foremost topic on one's mind for years to come. Attempting to understand and portray the spirit of Wikipedia collaboration turned out to be a rewarding obsession.

When I worked at the W3C I participated in and facilitated many working groups. Most people wouldn't think long technical discussions in committees could be very exciting—they usually aren't—but I was inspired by instances in which the varied skills and personalities of my peers complemented one another. The differences that sometimes irritated me or frustrated progress also, sometimes, yielded an elegant solution that exceeded the sum of our individual efforts. I witnessed something similar at Wikipedia. Most people wouldn't think the production of an encyclopedia could be very exciting either, but I found Wikipedia to be a compelling site for the study of collaboration and an endearing but unruly character in a longer historical tale.

Consequently, in the following pages I present a historically informed ethnography of Wikipedia. I also observe that building an encyclopedia is a cumulative and interdependent activity and writing this book is no different. In fact, it seems impossible to properly acknowledge all those who have influenced and supported this work. But as in any other seemingly impossible task, like creating a global encyclopedia, one must start somewhere—and the perfect is the enemy of the good.

I am indebted to Helen Nissenbaum, Gabriella Coleman, and Natalia Levina for their insight, time, and guidance. Thank you. I'm also grateful to other faculty members who helped me while I was at New York University including JoEllen Fisherkeller, Alex Galloway, Brett Gary, Ted Magder, Siva Vaidhyanathan, and Jonathan Zimmerman. When I worked in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I enjoyed perusing the bookshelves of the MIT Press on my lunch breaks, so I'm pleased that this book will appear on those shelves with the help of Marguerite Avery, Susan Clark, Julia Collins, Mel Goldsipe, Emily Gutheinz, Erin Mooney, Johna Picco, and Sharon Deacon Warne. Also, of course, I thank Lawrence Lessig for his support and writing the foreword to this book.

Scholars, colleagues, and friends who discussed drafts, sent comments, listened to me talk an idea through, or pointed out a missed connection or useful reference include Melissa Aronczyk, Phoebe Ayers, Samir Chopra, Shay David, Jonathan Grudin, Said Hamideh, Michael Hart, Sam Howard-Spink, Ian Jacobs, Rob Jones, Jelena Karanovic, Cormac Lawler, Susan Lesch, Lawrence Liang, Andrew Lih, David Parisi, Devon Powers, Evan Prodromou, W. Boyd Rayward, Sage Ross, Aaron Swartz, Michael Zimmer, and Jakob Voss. Michael Buckland, John Broughton, and anonymous reviewers at the MIT Press read the entire manuscript and gave me detailed and patient feedback; this is no small gift. Nora Schaddelee deserves special thanks for putting up with more of my wiki rambling than anyone else, and she also read the earliest—and cruffiest—draft of almost every chapter that follows. Nora, and my brothers Greg and Dan Reagle, were also kind enough to read proofs.

Also, thank you to those who spoke to me about their experiences, especially Wikipedians. I have only named those people who have influenced or commented upon this work specifically, but I benefited from many other conversations. Some appear as sources in this work, but most do not. The vast majority of my sources are a sample of an enormous public discourse,

and I portray only a fragment of that. From a methodological perspective it seems odd to thank those who have contributed to a (public) archive and project, but I feel a sense of gratitude nevertheless. Additionally, I'm grateful to my friends and family, including those who might have had little interest in the particulars of this work but wished me well and reminded me that life is larger than the confines of a computer screen.

Finally, I want to recognize a few institutions that in one way or another served as a home to me. The W3C provided much of the inspiration for my interest in collaboration and consensus. The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School provided me an important opportunity to begin reflecting on the social aspects of online interaction. The Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at the Steinhardt School of New York University generously supported the studies and research that inform this work. Finally, most of this book was written at the Carroll Gardens branch of the Brooklyn Public Library: a hospitable, though often noisy, environment in which I was surprisingly productive up in its little balcony amid comics and tax forms.

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The Culture of Wikipedia

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