12 Community and Communication

A large, diverse, and thriving group of volunteers produces encyclopedia articles and administers Wikipedia. Over time, members of the Wikipedia community have developed conventions for interacting with each other, processes for managing content, and policies for minimizing disruptions and maximizing useful work.

In this chapter, we'll discuss where to find other contributors and how to ask for help with any topic. We'll also explain ways in which community members interact with each other. Though most discussion occurs on talk pages, Wikipedia has some central community forums for debate about the site's larger policies and more specific issues. We'll also talk about the make-up of the community. First, however, we'll outline aspects of Wikipedia's shared culture, from key philosophies about how contributors

should interact with each other to some long-running points of debate to some friendly practices that have arisen over time. Although explicit site policies cover content guidelines and social norms, informal philosophies and practices help keep the Wikipedia community of contributors together.

Wikipedia's Culture

Wikipedia's community has grown spontaneously and organically—a recipe for a baffling culture rich with in-jokes and insider references. But core tenets of the *wiki way*, like Assume Good Faith and Please Don't Bite the Newcomers, have been with the community since the beginning.

Assumptions on Arrival

Wikipedians try to treat new editors well. Assume Good Faith (AGF) is a fundamental philosophy, as well as an official guideline (shortcut WP:AGF) on Wikipedia. It can be summarized as: Unless you have strong evidence to the contrary, you should always *assume that people who work on the project are trying to help it*, not hurt it.

Assuming good faith means that if someone doesn't seem to be following policy, assume that he or she simply made a mistake rather than deliberately disrupted the encyclopedia; always give an editor the benefit of the doubt. The assumption that everyone involved simply wants to make the encyclopedia better leads to more constructive debates and helps foster harmony on the site. As part of this attitude, a user's reputation on another Web forum or project should not be used against him or her.

Assume Good Faith is a good place to begin, but practicing it can be difficult. If an editor starts by apparently creating an article about him- or herself or his or her company, assuming this editor is primarily interested in general encyclopedia work is difficult; a tension exists between Assume Good Faith and Conflict of Interest. If an account is *single purpose*—that is, the editor only makes partisan edits in a small topic area—then assuming good faith is harder because promotional and activist editing is unwelcome. Vandalism is a fairly clear demonstration of bad faith and will usually result in short blocks. What Assume Good Faith means, however, is that you should first try to figure out an editor's intentions by engaging in discussion and informing him or her about policies. A single-purpose or disruptive editor might always broaden his or her contributions to the project.

Please Don't Bite the Newcomers is the name of another guideline (shortcut WP:BITE) that focuses on the importance of being welcoming to newcomers. Obviously this guideline is compatible with Assume Good Faith. It encourages you to be gentle with newbies if you see them making mistakes. Encourage newcomers—you want them to keep contributing—and teach them about Wikipedia. We were all new once! A new editor's ignorance of some policy details is not surprising—what would be surprising would be to find someone new who has already mastered them all.

Random Acts of Kindness
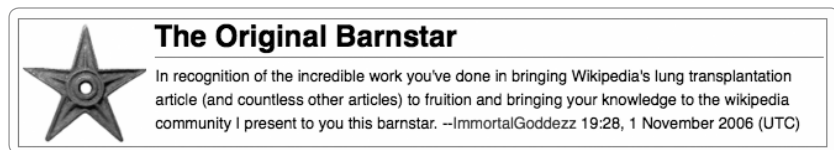
Wikipedia has some friendly customs. One of these is welcoming new editors on their talk page. Simply saying, "Hello, good work!" when you notice a helpful edit from a new contributor is encouraging. Many welcomers leave a more involved initial message, with links to help pages and more information about Wikipedia. The {{welcome}} template, if left on a talk page, is one example of such a message; editors may also code their own welcome messages, as we did in Chapter 9. A personal greeting is irreplaceable. A welcoming committee works on coordinating messages for new editors, but everyone can help out with this task; see [[Wikipedia:Welcoming committee]] (shortcut WP:WC) for more.

Informal mentoring of new users happens all the time, but a formal mentoring program also exists, known as [[Wikipedia:Adopt-a-User]] (shortcut WP:ADOPT), involving hundreds of Wikipedians. To adopt a new user, you need an edit count of 500; to sign up for adoption, simply follow the directions on that page.

Wikipedians are also in the habit of giving each other awards for work well done. The original and most popular award is the Barnstar (Figure 12-1). The barnstar is a template you can add to any editor's user talk page if you feel he or she deserves the award; Wikipedia has many variations on this award, such as the *Anti-Vandalism Barnstar*, *The Tireless Contributor Barnstar*, or *The Random Acts of Kindness Barnstar*. See [[Wikipedia:Barnstars]] (shortcut WP:BARN).

The Original Barnstar

In recognition of the incredible work you've done in bringing Wikipedia's lung transplantation article (and countless other articles) to fruition and bringing your knowledge to the wikipedia community I present to you this barnstar. --ImmortalGoddezz 19:28, 1 November 2006 (UTC)

FIGURE 12-1: *The original Wikipedia barnstar*

> ### The Origin of the Barnstar
>
> The barnstar was created by Sunir Shah on MeatballWiki (see Chapter 2) in 2003; barnstars were introduced to Wikipedia in February 2004. Since then, the concept has become ingrained in Wikipedia culture. Barnstars are rewards for *hard work and due diligence*. The image used most commonly on Wikipedia is of a structural barnstar, a metal object used to help brace a wall, which relates to the wiki notion of *barnraising* by building a page together; see the article at [[Barnstar]] for more details.

You can see other awards at [[Wikipedia:A nice cup of tea and a sit down]] (shortcut WP:TEA). In fact [[Wikipedia:Other awards]] runs to wiffle bats, a Zen garden (for Infinite Patience), a medal for Janitorial Services, and the Exceptional Newcomer Award. (Charles has also been given virtual jellybeans and a virtual bicycle as well as a Random Chocolate Chip Smiley—a cross between a cookie and a smiley face.)

Other aspects of recognition and motivation are not quite as well established. *WikiMoney* was a system of incentives operational in 2003–2004, but this system has fallen into disuse. Article writing competitions, such as [[Wikipedia:The Core Contest]], are sometimes held.

The Open Door

People come and go on Wikipedia all the time. As many as 10,000 new accounts are created every day, and over 7 million accounts have been registered. These numbers are a little misleading, however, since most accounts remain unused or are hardly used at all to edit. But this freedom to join up and participate casually helps ensure that Wikipedia is an open community. Now open editing is not quite the same as easy editing, even with a friendly wikitext editing system. Wikipedia itself has become much more complex, as a first encounter might convince you. And yet, beneath all the technical, social, and administrative complications that editors can sometimes run into, the site's radical and open nature is still recognizable.

Compared to other online communities, Wikipedia is unusual. Conventional wisdom holds that online communities tend to grow to a certain natural scale. They wax and wane, with people being closely involved for perhaps six months. They attract a nomadic populace, aside from a few hardcore supporters, and leave memories rather than marks. Wikipedia is an example that contradicts each one of these statements. It has grown much beyond village scale, and many people have been involved for years.

The drive to keep the community as open as possible (*anyone online can edit*) has shaped the whole debate about how Wikipedia should be operated. The 2001 statement [[User:Jimbo Wales/Statement of principles]], now perhaps

rarely read, put forth eight points about the community and the project. The first three are:

1. Wikipedia's success to date is entirely a function of our open community.
2. Newcomers are always to be welcomed.
3. "You can edit this page right now" is a core guiding check on everything that we do.

Seven years later, this manifesto has largely been delivered. The autoconfirm restrictions introduced in late 2005 and described in "Registering an Account" on page 302 have been the only big restrictions on accounts.

These principles have many continuing implications. For instance, although many people over the years have suggested restricting editing to registered users, this is still unlikely to happen. (What may happen instead is a version of *stable versions*, where some edited versions will only go live after review; this technical development is still being debated.)

Soft Security

You might not completely believe it, especially if you've had an early encounter with an administrator, but Wikipedia's security system—the measures taken to protect the site—mostly stays in the background. Wikipedia's security is *soft*, meaning security is largely reactionary. Bad contributions cannot be completely excluded from the site, so those cleaning up afterward rely instead on checking contributions and reverting bad changes.

One of the paradoxes of Wikipedia is that this system seems like it could never work. In a completely open system run by volunteers, why aren't more limits required? One answer is that Wikipedia uses the principle of soft security in the broadest way. Security is guided by the community, rather than by restricting community actions ahead of time. Everyone active on the site is responsible for security and quality. You, your watchlist, and your alertness to strange actions and odd defects in articles are part of the security system.

Further Reading

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Assume_good_faith   The guideline concerning Assume Good Faith

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Please_do_not_bite_the_ newcomers   The guideline about being nice to newcomers

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Barnstars   Information about barnstars with links to other award pages

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Jimbo_Wales/Statement_of_principles   A statement of community principles

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Communicating with Other Editors

All of these core community principles rely in practice on editors making an effort to communicate with one another. Wikipedia has multiple channels for communication and more forums than any one person can sensibly track. Here we'll guide you through some of the complexities of *where* and *how* you can communicate with other editors to draw attention to a problem, get feedback, ask a question, or even just chat socially.

Wikipedia has several types of pages where editors communicate with one another:

► Article talk pages for discussing article content

► User talk pages for leaving another contributor personal messages

► Project page and policy page talk pages, where individual policies or processes are discussed

- ▶ Project-wide forums for discussing Wikipedia, asking questions, or offering general proposals

- ▶ Noticeboards for raising alerts to problems or items of interest about a particular topic

- ▶ Process pages for getting feedback or taking polls on a particular kind of issue (such as deletion debates)

Outside of Wikipedia itself, or *off-wiki*, discussions happen on IRC, via email lists, on the Meta site (described in Chapter 17), and during in-person meetups. Many Wikipedians also blog, adding to the hundreds of outside media stories that are published about Wikipedia every year. This is a big, ongoing conversation, and any contributor can join it at any time.

Faced with this full range of possibilities, the best thing is not to be daunted but to reach out steadily. Chat with those you have some contact with on the site. Don't jump from "steady" to "spam": Pasting similar messages to many pages at once is discouraged. Stay generally on-topic, maintain a pleasant and respectful tone, and assume good faith.

Talk Page Guidelines

Talk pages for articles, introduced in Chapters 4 and 6, and user talk pages, introduced in Chapter 11, are the primary way that editors connect with one another. Talk page conventions have been developed over time; in other words, Wikipedia has plenty of experience with discussions, helpful and otherwise. When you are writing on a talk page, certain approaches are counterproductive, whereas others make for good editing and create a friendly atmosphere. Staying on topic is important. While on Wikipedia, you are addressing a sophisticated audience that appreciates focus and relevance. At all times, ask yourself whether your contributions are making the encyclopedia better (*before* you click Save, rather than after). If they're not, it might be time to take a break.

✱ **NOTE:** *Staying with these conventions in all types of discussions and debates, whether on talk pages or other forums, is a good idea. Remember that your Wikipedian persona is something you construct largely through communicating with others.*

Notice the general structure of an article talk page (Figure 12-2). Templates and messages appear right at the top. Also somewhere near the top you'll find a list of any archives. Very long talk pages are archived as subpages of the original page (usually divided by date); ongoing, live discussions should not be archived. Then you'll find a list of discussion topics by section. These sections are not normally divided up into subsections; instead, each discussion within the section is threaded, as shown in "Reading and Contributing to Talk Pages" on page 113. Older topics are higher on the page, and new topics should be started with new sections at the bottom of the talk page. For existing topics, the order of postings within the threaded discussion should be chronological, and you should normally join an existing discussion by adding your comment or reply at the bottom of the section.

Talk:Firefly

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This article is within the scope of **WikiProject Arthropods**, a collaborative effort to improve and expand Wikipedia's coverage of arthropods. If you would like to participate, visit the project page where you can join the project and/or contribute to discussion.

| B | This article has been rated as **B-class** on the quality scale. |
| Mid | This article has been rated as **Mid-importance** on the importance scale. |

Article Grading:
The following comments were left by the quality and importance raters: (edit · refresh)

think this article just makes A class. Has a good amount of info but would be better if it was ordered into more subsections with small rewrites for clarity. Would benefit from a small section on the molecular biology of light production. Otherwise good though. Goldfinger820 22:29, 21 November 2006 (UTC)

Contents [hide]

Regional Note   [edit]

Should there be some mention of lightning bug v. firefly as the common name for these insects, based on regional influences?

Life Span   [edit]

What is the life span of a firefly ranging from? In novels/movies (Chinese/Asian), it has been depicted that Fireflies have really short life spans and would usually die soon after "glowing"

Request for sources...   [edit]

The following facts have been added:

- "Unlike a light bulb, all of a firefly's light is used as light, none as heat.A light bulb is only 50% light and 50% heat."

This is done via a chemical reaction, but it will still generate some heat, I think.

FIGURE 12-2: *A talk page*

The prime values of talk pages are the three Cs: communicativeness, civility, and considered answers. These principles, after all, are likely what you yourself hope for in discussions. Be wary of the most contentious topics, such as religion and politics, where conversations are likely to be complex. For these topics, review past discussions and get a feel for the tone before joining the discussion. For most articles you can simply start participating.

Now for some detailed advice.

Stick to discussing the article, and save self-expression for your own user page.

Stay on topic, focusing on how to fix the article. Article talk pages are not provided as a place for general discussion about the article's subject, and they shouldn't be used by editors as platforms for their personal views or experiences. Discussion about other articles should note duplications, possible imports or exports of content, or merges with the article in question. Avoid unrelated conversations.

Use the talk pages for discussing facts and sources.

The talk page is the ideal place for raising verification-related issues. If you believe an article is misleading or plain wrong about a claim, go to its talk page and present your case. Ask for help to find some better sources, compare contradictory facts from different sources, and examine critically the reliability of references. Requesting a verifiable reference to support a suspect statement is often better than merely arguing against it ("Can you tell me who else supports that statement?" rather than "I think you're wrong"). And offering a reliable, contradicting reference won't hurt your case either.

Be brief but not abrupt. Be specific about changes you'd like to see.

Amplify your edit summaries with fuller discussions. In some cases you may be editing the talk page but not the article deliberately (for example, if you are personally involved in the topic). You can expect to be heard if you're reasonable; remember being shrill is probably counterproductive, whereas being patient will gain sympathy from other editors. Explain what you see as the problem with an edit or section, and offer suggestions as to how fix it. Help matters along, even if you're in an argument, by offering new drafts.

Talk pages have a warehousing function.

You can post material removed from an article to the talk page. This is commonly done for verification purposes (to ask other editors if they have any references to support a claim, for instance) or to comment in detail on some problems. This technique is less in-your-face and aggressive than simply discarding someone else's work: The implication is not as strong as a permanent cut. You're also acknowledging that the material may be useful if rewritten or incorporated elsewhere. But you can't move copyrighted materials onto a discussion page. If copyright problems have necessitated a heavy pruning of the article, add a talk page note explaining the issue and referencing a source for the apparent violation.

Be civil, and make no personal attacks.

This is absolutely fundamental. Be reasonable and treat other people with respect; after all, you're having a polite and professional conversation with them. Carry yourself as a colleague, not an adversary. Assume good faith by starting with the attitude that others are trying to do the right thing. No insults: Don't make *ad hominem* attacks, such as calling someone an idiot or a fascist. Discussing an editor rather than the article is going down the wrong path. Bear in mind that *level-headed*, *fair-minded*, *constructive*, *consensus-seeking,* and other similar descriptions (from others) are pure gold in terms of developing your Wikipedia reputation; try to epitomize these qualities when discussion becomes heated.

Avoid the absolute no-nos.

Don't threaten people. For example, promising bans for disagreeing with you is not going to help matters. Bringing up the "administrators you know" is not a great topic to raise. Never make legal threats: Threatening a lawsuit is highly disruptive to Wikipedia and almost never has the intended result. (And you'll likely get banned yourself.) Dispute resolution is more effective, so see Chapter 14 for more on the proper channels. Never post personal details or insinuations about others or threaten anyone with anything off the site. Indefinite blocks await those who do these things.

Don't delete comments, and refactor discussion only as a last resort.

Everyone is entitled to their opinion on a discussion page. Do not delete or rewrite comments, including your own. The convention is to leave other people's comments completely alone: Don't even correct the spelling. If you wish to take something back, delete it and insert a quick apology in its place. But if it is too late and removing the offending comment would make other editors' comments look strange, strike out your comment with the <s> and </s> tags. In principle, talk pages can be *refactored*, or summarized, to make discussion clearer. This is relatively rare and requires skill. The better, and definitely easier, course is to add some summaries of your own.

Don't exclude newcomers.

One statement that is frowned on is "We've already decided that point." A newcomer can reasonably reopen any issue about article content. Wikipedia pages are supposed to improve over time. Learn patience. If a point has been discussed previously and then archived, be courteous and point the newcomer to the discussion. If consensus has been reached, take a moment to explain it or gently refer to the archived discussion.

Problem users show themselves over time.

When you first answer a comment, whether reasonable or not, you really don't know whether a teenager or a tenured professor left it. Part of assuming good faith is not judging other editors based on just one or two comments; good manners are never wasted. Avoid accusations: Say "I disagree" rather than "you're obviously biased on this issue."

After a while you may conclude that the editor is a time-waster, someone who knows little about the subject, or an autodidact who has book knowledge but is mightily confused. Or worse: You might be dealing with a true crank, a malicious user (*vandal*), or a provocateur (*troll*)—and he or she may have more time on his or her hands than you do. The basic tips are to keep cool and be polite; don't outwardly assume bad faith, but do become more guarded; taper off your responses, and don't get dragged into escalating futile, repetitive debates.

Don't Feed the Trolls

Some people are simply attention seeking and argumentative, to the point of being disruptive. The saying *Don't feed the trolls* encourages you to ignore this behavior and not be provoked into an unncessary argument. See *http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/What_is_a_troll?*.

To round off this discussion: At worst, the three Cs may have to turn into the three *P*s—politeness, patience, and policy. Policy matters especially when dealing with hostility and aggressive, biased editing. Learn the appropriate policies and guidelines in sufficient detail, so you can fend off bad behavior without being drawn in yourself.

Those Tilde Signatures

Unlike article contributions, discussion contributions should be signed. Using four tildes to sign (~~~~) is standard and produces your username and a timestamp. Signing with three tildes produces your username but no timestamp. Five tildes, on the other hand, produce a timestamp but no name.

Voting and Discussing

Having everybody vote on everything is cluelessocracy. (User:Eclecticology, April 10, 2007, *wiki-en* mailing list)

Wikipedia is not a democracy, though calling it undemocratic would also be rather misleading. Compared to many other online projects, Wikipedia has few majority votes, but instead uses discussions on talk pages and project pages to gather participant consensus. (Though the scale of Wikipedia seems to justify a move to

representative democracy rather than direct one-person one-vote polling, this is not happening at all—individual participants are still expected to weigh in.)

The structure at [[Wikipedia:Requests for comment]] (shortcut WP:RfC) is typical. In Wikipedia terms, an RfC is a tightly defined but open forum discussion, addressing an issue in one of three areas: content, editor behavior, or policy. Other editors are invited to contribute to the discussion and offer their opinions on the right solution. In addition to being used on RfCs, polling occurs commonly during deletion debates and administrator promotion discussions.

These polls are not simple votes, however. In almost all discussions on Wikipedia, the reasoning behind each comment is taken into more consideration than the number of people indicating support for a particular position. To add to any discussion, support your comment with public facts. Suppose you participate in a debate on a binary decision: yes/no or keep/delete. Don't simply say, "I like it/hate it," but instead offer a reasoned opinion as to why you feel the way you do. Indicate clearly what site policies and other factors inform your opinion to arrive at your conclusions; if you agree with something already said by another contributor, make that clear.

Here's a full comment, logged in a deletion debate for a highly controversial article, [[Allegations of state terrorism committed by the United States]]. The debate here is whether to keep the article or delete it, and the comment is from someone who thinks the article should be kept:

> **Strong Keep** - what has changed since the six previous Afds? Well, take a good look and you will find that the references are now vastly improved, and the content has been significantly expanded upon and improved since the last afd. The content references what is now a considerable body of academic and human rights literature consisting of either references to descriptions of U.S. state terrorism or in-depth examinations supporting the hypothesis. See the references section which includes contributions from professors from Yale, Princeton, MIT, Columbia and Hong Kong University, among others. If you require more evidence that this is a serious scholarly concern, constituting a significant alternative discourse, albeit not representative of the mainstream, then I would be happy to provide a long long long list of academic references. BernardL (talk) 00:13, 18 December 2007 (UTC)

Not everyone contributes at such length, naturally. But notice how the comment focuses, quite properly, on reliable referencing as a way to support notability and verifiability. The framework the commenter uses is basic content policy, not the topic the article discusses, and the points made are targeted, correctly, toward the existing material available to support such an article.

On-Wiki Forums

The Village Pump ([[Wikipedia:Village pump]], shortcut WP:PUMP) is the primary community discussion place on Wikipedia—water cooler and town meeting rolled into one. The postings are divided up into five sections: Policy, Technical, Proposals, Assistance, and Miscellaneous. Active discussion threads take place

here; you'll also find pointers to pages such as [[Wikipedia:Department directory]] (shortcut WP:DEPT), which offers you a view of Wikipedia by Department.

The Community Portal is another entry point into the social life of Wikipedia. Found at [[Wikipedia:Community Portal]], it offers a Community Bulletin Board for announcements. This offers a different way to interface with Wikipedia activity; for example, it links directly to [[Template:RFCsci list]], an updated list of discussions on science articles that asks for community input (in other words, yours). This is a place to post new proposals, requests for help with a topic, and new project announcements.

Further discussion is widely distributed, attached to project talk pages in the Wikipedia Talk namespace and on talk pages (for instance, those for particular templates or categories). Forums about aspects of site management that are not dedicated to particular processes are, by custom, called *noticeboards*; the best known is the Administrators' noticeboard at [[Wikipedia:Administrators' noticeboard]] (shortcut WP:AN). You can post notices there about problems that administrators can help out with.

Asking Questions and Resolving Problems

How do you get help? Here are a few pointers on where to ask questions or raise concerns.

First, go to the Help desk ([[Wikipedia:Help desk]], shortcut WP:HD), the perfect place to ask questions about using Wikipedia. The Help desk deals with a few dozen queries daily—anyone who is knowledgeable about the site can help out. You will need to check back to see if your question has been answered.

You might also find Wikipedia's Frequently Asked Questions page helpful; see [[Wikipedia:FAQ]] (shortcut WP:FAQ). You'll also find other helpful links there, for example, a link to a basic tutorial.

Wikipedia also has a Reference desk ([[Wikipedia:Reference desk]], shortcut WP:RD). This, as the name indicates, functions like a library reference desk. Here you can pose factual questions about any topic, and Wikipedians will try to respond. The service is broken down by broad subject area; for example, the Humanities desk answers about ten questions a day. Again, anyone can help out, and if you are knowledgeable about a topic, feel free to answer a question.

Finally, Wikipedia has a central page, [[Wikipedia:Questions]] (shortcut WP:Q), that links to these pages and a number of others dedicated to fielding questions. For example, from here you can link to [[Help:Contents]], which is the central portal for help pages and documentation.

✳ **NOTE:** *You can read about some of the unusual requests that have been made over the years at [[Wikipedia:Unusual requests]].*

If you have a problem, rather than a question, consider starting at [[Wikipedia:Problems FAQ]]. Is your problem with reading or editing Wikipedia pages? [[Wikipedia:Troubleshooting]] may help. These pages deal with technical issues.

For problems in specific areas, Wikipedia has some specialized places where you can seek help. If your copyright has been infringed by something posted to

Wikipedia, [[Wikipedia:Contact us/Article problem/Copyright]] lists your options. To make a formal complaint, go to [[Wikipedia:Designated agent]]. If you consider that a biography or other article on Wikipedia defames you, go to [[Wikipedia:Biographies of living persons/Noticeboard]], where you can leave a comment for editors who will work to resolve the problem, and/or [[Wikipedia:Libel]], which has an email contact address.

For other content-related problems, join the discussion on the article's talk page, and contribute to the debate in a reasonable, non-adversarial tone. You have a perfect right to be there, but remember others will also have their own views.

Problems with another editor? Leave a civil note on his or her user talk page. In cases where the problem escalates, you can try the Administrators' noticeboard and chose the link that best fits the problem, like vandalism or page protection requests.

If you've been blocked, in particular, you should note that Wikipedia will think of the situation in terms of a *block review*, also called *appealing a block*, rather than being a problem about Wikipedia itself. Go to *http://lists.wikimedia.org/mailman/listinfo/unblock-en-l* for unblock discussions if you feel that you've been incorrectly or unreasonably blocked by an administrator. You'll find more details on what to do (and what *not* to do, more importantly) in Chapter 14.

For more complex issues, or if you're uncertain whether what you've encountered is okay, you can post a comment on [[Wikipedia:Village pump (assistance)]] (shortcut WP:VPA), which is a general forum in which to ask for help. You can also use a mailing list or IRC channel, as described in "Mailing Lists and Internet Relay Chat" on page 346. Try to find a list or channel that matches the issue.

Further Reading

Communicating with Others

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Talk_page_guidelines   Guidelines on using talk pages effectively

Getting Help

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Help_desk   A page where you can ask questions about Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reference_desk   A page where you can ask questions about any subject

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Questions   A page where you can ask questions or make comments

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Getting News

You may want to find out what is currently happening on Wikipedia. [[Category:
Wikipedia news]] is your first source for Wikipedia pages with news content. For
example [[Wikipedia:Announcements]] (shortcut WP:ANN) deals with milestones
and Foundation matters.

Wikipedia has a few projects that bring a broader spectrum of news to the
community. One of the established news services on the English-language Wiki-
pedia is the *Wikipedia Signpost* (Figure 12-3). The *Signpost* is a weekly newsletter
produced on-site at [[Wikipedia:Signpost]] (shortcut WP:POST).

Since 2005, the *Signpost* has carried stories of interest to the Wikipedia
community. You can view all of the archives; this is a quick way to catch up on Wiki-
pedia history. Each newsletter contains a few recurring sections, such as a review
of that week's technical developments and a quick summary of current arbitration
cases. The newsletter was started by User:Michael Snow and is now edited by
User:Ral315, with contributions from a wide variety of editors. Anyone can par-
ticipate by editing at WP:POST/TIPS, where you can also learn how to document
media coverage of Wikipedia.

WikiProject WikipediaWeekly (shortcut WP:WEEKLY), active since late 2006,
concentrates on producing a podcast about Wikipedia. As is also the case for the
Signpost, you can have WikipediaWeekly delivered to your user page or user talk
page. If you like RSS feeds, the Weekly has one. An alternative is the aptly named
NotTheWikipediaWeekly ([[Wikipedia:NotTheWikipediaWeekly]]), which also pro-
duces a podcast show about Wikipedia.

Another such project is *Wikizine*, started in 2006 and edited by user:Walter
from the Dutch and English-language Wikipedias. This newsletter is delivered by
email to subscribers. It covers news about international projects and community,
with a focus on technical issues and Foundation-level discussion. Sign up or read
the current issue at *http://en.wikizine.org/*.

FIGURE 12-3: *The* Wikipedia Signpost, *a weekly on-site newsletter*

Mailing Lists and Internet Relay Chat

A wide variety of mailing lists are used to discuss Wikipedia projects. The *wiki-en* list, which is for general discussion about the English-language Wikipedia, is a very high-traffic list; if you have a specific query, a more specialized forum on-wiki is probably more appropriate. See [[Wikipedia:Mailing lists]] (shortcut WP:MAIL) for more complete information; the lists are generally archived in several places. Lists are typically lightly moderated and publicly archived, so anything you say on them will be accessible through an Internet search.

Wikipedia also uses a number of IRC channels. *Internet Relay Chat*, or *IRC*, is a type of real-time Internet chat, designed for group communication but also allowing for one-on-one chats or private messaging. To access IRC, you need an IRC client. These programs are available for virtually every PC platform. The Chatzilla client for the Mozilla Firefox browser, which runs as a browser extension and does not require additional software, is easy to use and install.[1]

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[1] If you already have Firefox, you can download and install Chatzilla at *https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/16.*

See [[Wikipedia:IRC channels]] (shortcut WP:IRC) for more technical information, a complete list of Wikipedia-related channels, and a link to those classified under Wikimedia. The Wikimedia projects use the Freenode network, which is a network specifically for open-source projects.

The channels most relevant to the English-language Wikipedia include:

▸ *#wikipedia,* the general Wikipedia discussion channel, is notoriously nearly always off-topic. This is a decent place to socialize but not for the faint of heart.

▸ *#wikipedia-en* has fewer people and is more focused on the English-language Wikipedia.

▸ *#wikipedia-en-help* is a help channel.

▸ *#wikimedia* discusses issues related to the Wikimedia Foundation as a whole.

Meetups and Conferences

All it takes to have an offline meetup is to announce it on the wiki and then get a group of local editors together for coffee, drinks, or a meal. The first meetup was in London in 2004 when Jimmy Wales and an international group of editors got together for the afternoon. Remarkably, apart from Larry Sanger, Wales had not met any editors who worked on the site in person during the first three-and-a-half years of its existence. A true child of the Internet era, Wikipedia had been put together almost entirely by people who only knew each other through mailing lists, wiki talk pages, and IRC.

Since 2004, however, hundreds of meetups in dozens of cities from Shanghai to Seattle have taken place. They are usually informal but have ranged in format from picnics in New York's Central Park to formal talks. Meetups are a great way to meet other dedicated wiki editors in a personable forum.

The Meetups page (shortcut WP:MEET) lists current and past meetups; if one doesn't already exist in your area, you can create a subpage for your city from the Meetups page and then recruit others in your area by leaving notes on their user talk pages. Browsing [[Category:Wikipedians by location]] and its subcategories will help you find people who self-identify as being in a particular area. Jimmy Wales has continued to travel to meet Wikipedians; a documentary film, *Truth In Numbers: The Wikipedia Story*, will be released in 2009 and includes footage of his travels.

The first annual Wikimedia Foundation conference, called Wikimania, was organized by volunteers from several Wikimedia projects and held in 2005 in Frankfurt, Germany. This was a major international event, attracting over 300 people from over 50 countries, with a great deal of press coverage. Frankfurt set a trend, featuring research papers about wikis and Wikimedia projects, reports from various communities about the success of the different sister projects, and proposals and community discussions about future work.

Wikimania is now established as an annual event (Figure 12-4 shows the conference logo). Wikimania 2006 was held on the Harvard Law School campus, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the United States. In 2007, the conference was

in Taipei, Taiwan, where the local community hosted the conference at a youth center; both conferences again attracted hundreds of people from all around the world.

These conferences (2008 in Alexandria, Egypt, at the New Library of Alexandria and 2009 in Buenos Aires), like most things Wikimedia, are organized by a team of volunteers from all around the world. Local communities bid for the opportunity to host the conference, submitting a proposal including location and possible sponsorship to a Foundation-based judging team. Most of the organization work takes place online, on IRC and special wiki pages on the Meta site, and combines efforts of the Wikimedia Foundation and local volunteers who lead the planning process.

FIGURE 12-4: The *Wikimania logo (designed by Ben Yates)*

Further Reading

Getting News

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedia_Signpost   The *Wikipedia Signpost* weekly community newspaper

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikipediaWeekly   The Wikipedia Weekly podcast

http://www.wikizine.org/   The *Wikizine* newsletter (in English, Spanish, and German)

Mailing Lists and IRC

http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Mailing_lists   Information about mailing lists and links to their archives

http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/IRC   Information about Wikimedia's IRC channels

http://www.nabble.com/Wikipedia-f14018.html   Email archives of lists at Nabble (provides a forum-like view that is easier to read for high-traffic lists)

Meetups

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Meetup   The page for coordinating meetups, including a list of past meetups along with pictures

http://wikimania.org/   Information about the annual Wikimania conference (will redirect to the current year's website)

http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wikimania   The Meta page where conference planning is coordinated

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Wikiphilosophies

Search for *wikiphilosophy* and you'll get a couple hundred hits from individual users who have written about their personal Wikipedia approaches. Topics include how to work collaboratively on a wiki, how to work productively on Wikipedia, and why you should contribute. Some of these philosophies, like Assume Good Faith, have grown to become guidelines and core parts of the culture; others, like inclusionism versus deletionism, have become long-standing philosophical debates.

The most contentious issues on Wikipedia, in the longer term, have turned out to relate to content policy. This is fortunate because debating the principles of encyclopedic content relates directly to the site's mission. We have already seen two major aspects of this debate: Academic authority and the status of mainstream science was covered in Chapter 2, and conflict of interest in the deletion debate around [[Mzoli's Meats]] was discussed in Chapter 10. Although the core content policies have not been expanded by new major principles, avid discussion continues about how to apply those principles to individual articles, with debates that sometimes get picked up by the media.[2]

The debate on what articles should be included has proved to be one of the most basic and long-standing debates. *Inclusionism* is the philosophy that as much of the material submitted to the site should be kept as possible. The basic inclusionist position is this: *Wikipedia is not paper*, which implies that Wikipedia can afford to keep articles, even if, in their current state, they need to be improved or verified, so editors should strive to help the site grow as large as possible. The opposition to the inclusionists are labeled the *deletionists*, and they feel that an article should be in reasonable shape and about a clearly notable topic before being included; questionable material should be deleted more rigorously. Both sides agree, of course, that some new articles and content will need to be deleted; the question is over which articles and under what circumstances. As Chapter 7 showed, some deletion debates prove controversial, especially for new terms or ideas.

Closely related is a methodological question—*eventualism* versus *immediatism*. *Eventualism*, the idea that things will eventually improve if you leave them around long enough, seems most to encapsulate the wiki spirit, where things are done as people get around to doing them. Many have argued that this approach needs to be modified for certain topics, however, such as for biographies of living people, where any needed action should be regarded as urgent and carried out immediately as an ethical matter.

The debate between inclusionism and deletionism and eventualism and immediatism has flared up many times over the years in various forms. The debate has implications not only for what Wikipedia contains but also for how that content is created and worked on. Initially, the debate presented itself as the way in which Wikipedia differentiated itself from the older wiki tradition. Whereas wikis in general simply gathered opinions, Wikipedia aimed to build a factual reference

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[2] For instance, novelist Nicholson Baker has come out as an inclusionist, interested in trying to save from deletion an article about an individual notable for his face turning blue from drinking colloidal silver. See "How I Fell in Love with Wikipedia," in *The Guardian,* April 10, 2008, *http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/apr/10/wikipedia.internet*.

resource, using notions of what was and wasn't encyclopedic. The concept of Veri-fiability became increasingly important, first as a criterion and then as a policy, and the community now accepts that unverifiable material may be deleted.

Attention then shifted for some years to the implications of Verifiability, such as the debate over the guideline on Reliable sources. Over time, the middle way of eventualism has won this debate, at least in practice—articles always need to be cleaned up, and deleting material that really cannot be verified is simply one aspect of the push for quality.

In 2007, attention turned back to deletionism because the net growth of articles seemed to have peaked (though outsiders were increasingly using Wikipedia for promotional ends by writing about themselves and their ventures). Although deletionism favors clear and relatively rigorous standards for accepting new articles, which are increasingly being adopted, inclusionism and the view that new articles should be given a chance have also continued to be major forces. Regardless, the inclusionist view that all processes are supposed to operate case by case rather than determining whether broad topic areas should be included continues to prevail, though this view is subject to great debate, especially in areas of popular culture.

Endless variants and positions have claimed the middle ground. See [[Category:Wikipedians by Wikipedia philosophy]] with around 30 such classes. Wikipedia has some significant hybrid positions, too. For instance, the eventualist-deletionist position is that deleting articles that really don't improve over time is not a great loss, and if a startup company or new idea prospers, an article on it will be accepted in due course. The immediatist-inclusionist position is that Wikipe-dia's coverage suffers if an article on a new topic is deleted when it didn't have to be.[3] As Wikipedia now tries to be both a reference site and a go-to place for cur-rent new information, the debate will continue.

Funny Business

Silliness, bad jokes, and shared humor have a place in Wikipedia culture. You'll find (allegedly) humorous material on many project pages, and some of these memes spill over into supposedly serious debates.

[[Category:Wikipedia humor]] (shortcut WP:HUMOR) is a collection of some of these funny ha-ha pages. The template {{humor}} is also used on funny project pages, so you can use the backlink trick of seeing what links to [[Template:Humor]] to find more pages, dating from all eras of Wikipedia's history. Many humorous project pages poke fun at Wikipedians going overboard. For instance, the collec-tion of "Lamest edit wars" (shortcut WP:LAME) commemorates the epic battles that have occurred over what are often tiny details. Though humorous, this page also serves as an excellent introduction to Wikipedia history, cultural references, and the kinds of details that may provoke controversies.

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[3] This was argued convincingly by Andrew Lih, a journalist and Wikipedian, who focused on the case of Pownce, an Internet startup whose article was deleted. See "Wikipedia: an Online Encyclopedia Torn Apart," in the *Daily Telegraph*, October 11, 2007, *http://www.telegraph.co.uk/connected/main.jhtml?xml=/connected/2007/10/11/dlwiki11.xml*, which overstates Lih's position; see *http://www.andrewlih.com/blog/2007/10/10/telegraph-uk-on-wikipedia-inclusionismdeletionism/* for Lih's further comments.

How Wikipedia Works

Deadpan or Nothing

Charles once asked the main author of [[The Cantos]], an article on Ezra Pound's poetic masterpiece, whether he was going to add a spoiler warning. That was rightly taken as a joke. But a suggestion that [[0.9999...]] should be redirected to [[1 (number)]] to save arguments fooled a few people into thinking Charles was being serious.

Two of the classic funny memes are BJAODN, meaning "Bad Jokes & Other Deleted Nonsense," a collection of humorous vandalism that was finally deleted with much controversy in 2007 (and is now memorialized at WP:SILLY), and TINC. TINC stands for *There Is No Cabal*—a long-running joke carried over from UseNet culture. The joke really is on those who believe a secretive, small, dedicated group controls Wikipedia.

Wikipedia is a diverse enough place that if a joke relies on a shared cultural reference or technical specialty, the witticism may fall flat. Most slang phrases and Internet dialects will confuse *somebody*. Many contributors are not native English speakers, and certainly, even among those who are, not everyone shares a similar background.

Irony, sarcasm, and deadpan humor are especially difficult to convey online and can cause offense. Although adding a smiley face can help people see that you're joking, you may want to consider how funny the joke really is if you have to flag humor with emoticons to get it across. By the same token, though, if you're

Uncyclopedia

While most Wikipedia humor focuses on long-running memes, for true parody of the site, try Uncyclopedia. Although not a Wikimedia project, Uncyclopedia is a sister project in spirit—that is, if your sister is the type who teases you mercilessly. Uncyclopedia comes complete with its own sister projects—a dictionary, *unbooks*, and a news section (*UnNews*), where current events in the real news are often skewered. Ostensibly run by the shadowy Uncyclomedia Foundation, the site is, in fact, hosted by Wikia. Though the unpolicy is *How to be funny and not just stupid*, Wikipedia in-jokes abound, and a number of Wikipedians moonlight at Uncyclopedia. The mascot is a potato named Sophia that looks remarkably like a misshapen Wikipedia logo, complete with puzzle pieces; Uncyclopedia informs us that it is, in fact, an *untato*—technically a brain that connects to the Uncyclomedia servers that power up all the Uncyclomedia projects. See *http://uncyclopedia.org/*.

confused by something that seems preposterous, ask yourself whether the other person is making a joke before getting indignant. The point of using humor is always to make working together more fun. The [[Wikipedia:Department of fun]] is a long-running Wikiproject to help do just that.

Other fun poked at Wikipedia from outside sources, including Stephen Colbert's not unfriendly joshing, can be tracked at [[Wikipedia in culture]], which also includes additional pop culture references to Wikipedia.

Although avowedly humorous material should only be found in the project namespaces, some articles are funny and factual: [[Tarquin Fin-tim-lin-bin-whin-bim-lim-bus-stop-F'tang-F'tang-Olé-Biscuitbarrel]], for example, was the assumed name of a political candidate in a United Kingdom district election in 1981; he was registered with the [[Official Monster Raving Loony Party]]. Wikipedia has a collection of some of these more oddball (nay, eccentric) articles at [[Wikipedia:Unusual articles]] (shortcut WP:ODD).

Further Reading

Wikiphilosophies

http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Deletionism   An explanation of deletionism

http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Inclusionism   An explanation of inclusionism

http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Conflicting_Wikipedia_philosophies   Information on more wiki philosophies

Humor

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Silly_things   A collection of silly vandalism (previously called Bad Jokes and Other Deleted Nonsense)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Wikipedia_humor   A collection of humorous or parody project pages

http://uncyclopedia.org/   The Uncyclopedia site

The classic odd Wikipedia article is [[Exploding whale]]. Also check out [[Undecimber]], the thirteenth month of the year; [[ETAOIN SHRDLU]]; [[colors of noise]]; and many others. A few such articles are selected every year to appear on the main page for April Fool's Day. This is a carefully weighted joke, at the expense of those who assume Wikipedia would deliberately hoax them.

Who Writes This Thing Anyway?

Who writes Wikipedia? Who are the members of the Wikipedia community? No one knows the exact answer to this question, and Wikipedia has no single point of reference for its social side.

One simple but of course inadequate approach is to ask how much work is actually connected with the English-language Wikipedia. Well, the amount of work is equivalent to 1,000 full-time people. Or it's probably more like 5,000 people working one day a week and even more like those 5,000 people devoting 8 hours a week of spare time. Wikipedia has a division of labor, because people gravitate to work they enjoy, but little hierarchy.

Believing that Wikipedia has one community is a mistake, and referring to "the community" is somewhat confusing. Who is the community? After all, the work on the project includes developing software, writing articles, and tending to the practicalities of managing a publicly editable website. Is the community those few people who actively contribute to the general mailing list or hang out on IRC? The people who care about and watch policy pages or post their thoughts at the Village Pump? Are you thinking of the contributors you encounter at a particular WikiProject? Those people who enjoy going to meetups and conferences and meeting other Wikipedians? Or the handful of people who talk to the press and give presentations? Is it those people who spend hours daily contributing and fighting vandalism, or the majority of people who are silent and occasional contributors? What about those involved with governance on the Foundation level, who may help run the sites as a whole but no longer edit articles?

The answer, of course, is that these people are all part of the Wikipedia community. The degree of social complexity, coupled with the site's large scale, probably undermines all assumptions based on previous discussions of online groups.

Demographics

> Wikipedia—also known as Unemployed Ph.D. Deathmatch (User:Finlay McWalter)

Wikipedia's editors are any recruits who can show that they have the talent to write and upgrade encyclopedia articles. Nothing else counts for much. Contributor anonymity is acceptable, in large part because who you are or what prior background you have is not supposed to have any effect on your contributions being accepted, as long as you respect the content policies. Whether you're a teenager or a tenured Ph.D. doesn't matter: On Wikipedia, no one needs to know you're a Doc.

Godwin's Nine Points

1. Use software that promotes good discussions.
2. Don't impose a length limitation on postings.
3. Front-load your system with talkative, diverse people.
4. Let the users resolve their own disputes.
5. Provide institutional memory.
6. Promote continuity.
7. Be host to a particular interest group.
8. Provide places for children.
9. Most Important: Confront the users with a crisis.

These nine points on promoting a successful online community were published in June 1994 in *Wired* magazine, by Mike Godwin. Godwin is a celebrated name on the Internet, for [[Godwin's law]] and other much more substantial achievements with the Electronic Frontier Foundation. In 2007, he became legal counsel to the Wikimedia Foundation.

Seeing where Wikipedia actually fails any of these points is difficult. On point 7, Wikipedia has played host to thousands of people who are intensely interested in a subject. Young contributors are welcome in Wikipedia: They are, for example, enfranchised in elections because voting doesn't have an age requirement. No one can be sure of the median age of Wikipedians, but for Wikipedia's readers, it probably corresponds to the age of the average college student.

Point 9 about a crisis may raise a wry smile from those who read the mailing lists. When has Wikipedia not had a crisis? When have discussion threads not spoken about imminent disaster? In a sense, the morphing of Nupedia into Wikipedia, with the destruction of mechanisms for approving content, was a founding crisis with constant repercussions.

Because no personal data is collected during the registration process, assumptions and information about contributor demographics are largely anecdotal. Although many editors chose to reveal parts of their identity publicly, either on their user page or in another forum (such as what they do for a living or their real name), many others do not. Meetups provide some information, but this is a self-selected group. The German-language Wikipedia, which is distinctly more academic in tone, has given some survey results suggesting a median age in the late 20s for editors.

One thing that is clear from the English-language Wikipedia is that native English speakers do not necessarily predominate. Wikipedia has many editors for whom English is a second language, and they have historically played a large part in building the site. Some edit Wikipedias in two or more languages. See Chapter 15 for more.

Systemic Bias

If you think of Wikipedia purely as an encyclopedia, its coverage of current affairs and popular culture might seem disproportionate. For instance, around half the biographies are about living people: Much effort is devoted to upgrading those 200,000 articles because real lives can be affected by the content available on Wikipedia. But what about the antiquarian, the obscure but scholarly, and topics not so well known in the English-speaking world?

Systemic bias is a term used on Wikipedia to describe the concept that notions of notability and breadth of article coverage both reflect the community of editors and their demographic. And indeed, Wikipedia's coverage is skewed toward subjects relating to Anglophone countries. For example, articles about people and places in the developing world are often missing or incomplete compared to articles about North American and European geography and personalities. Topics related to women (such as biographies of famous women or articles about feminism) are underrepresented, along with articles about blue-collar trades. This is a known problem but not one easy to address with policy. (The term *systemic bias* is not to be confused with *systematic bias*, which is one kind of violation of Neutral Point of View, where a given article or group of articles is one-sided.)

The articles that prosper on Wikipedia, generally speaking, are those that when created can immediately be linked to from existing articles and that attract editors (other than the initial author) who are active in the same general area. These positive factors can also be read the other way: If an area is somewhat neglected in Wikipedia, a new article's life cycle (Chapter 10) is initiated in a less favorable environment.

These issues are more easily understood than remedied. Volunteer editors will choose the areas they want to work on, and Wikipedia can't legislate its way into being more representative. The community must also work through the *founder effect*, a concept from evolution that the system will, for some time, remember or be influenced by characteristics of the founding group, rather than the larger population. See [[Wikipedia:WikiProject Countering systemic bias]] (shortcut WP:BIAS) for a dedicated forum on this topic.

Dress Sense

WikiProject Fashion was started in March 2007 to address a known weakness. Alexandra Shulman, editor of the British edition of *Vogue*, had awarded the [[Haute couture]] article a lowly 0 marks out of 10 in an October 24, 2005, survey in London's *The Guardian*.*

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* See "Can You Trust Wikipedia?" The Guardian. *Monday, October 24, 2005,* http://www. guardian.co.uk/technology/2005/oct/24/comment.newmedia.

Women and Wikimedia

Are more men than women involved in Wikipedia? Evidence from in-person meetups, mailing lists, and other community forums does suggest that more Wikipedia contributors are men than women, though knowing for sure is impossible. This bias is not unusual on the Internet and in computing generally, but it is definitely not ideal for a project that aims to be welcoming to everyone.

Though discrimination based on personal characteristics (including gender) is certainly against Wikipedia's principles, some feel the site's culture is overly aggressive, a criticism that does depend on where you look for evidence. Does Wikipedia do enough to control misogynistic editors who take gender into account in debates and potentially in more harmful ways such as by harassing female editors? Others feel that given Wikipedia's practices and essential values regarding inclusiveness, no particular issue with gender exists on the projects. The topic remains controversial, and no one editor's experience is likely to be exactly the same as another's, always a difficulty in defining systemic problems.

This debate around the treatment of women on Wikipedia (and how to improve it) led to the creation of the WikiChix project in 2007 (*http://wikichix .org/*). *WikiChix*, which is modeled after the similar LinuxChix group, offers a female-only environment to discuss wikis and the Wikimedia projects and explore ways to make the projects more accessible and friendly toward women. On a Foundation level, several women have won elections to the Board of Directors of the Wikimedia Foundation. These include (as of early 2008) the current chair of the organization, Florence Devouard.

All is not gloom, though, since Wikipedia does gradually overcome some of these limitations. Individual WikiProjects are created for weaker areas that need work (such as [[Wikipedia:WikiProject Gender Studies]]), and Wikipedia attracts some academic experts and others who do steady work filling in gaps in coverage. Working on a neglected area can be rewarding as well, as there is more opportunity to create new articles.

Wikipedians on Wikipedia

Wikipedians love to write about Wikipedia. This is revealed in the large number of essays about the site, posted both on user talk pages and project pages. Happy, sad, critical, and usually interesting, these essays are a mosaic of opinions about the site, its people, and its governance. An essay may aim to influence site policies or the way people behave or may simply be self-expression, one small addition

to the site's culture. Many end up being cited by other editors in discussions, and some even end up as guideline or policy.

Here is a selection of extracts from a small handful of our favorite essays. Some of them connect to points that are made elsewhere in this book, whereas others concern thought-provoking aspects of Wikipedia that we don't follow up.

> A high proportion of Wikipedians are people with issues with authority. That's why many people are attracted to Wikipedia in the first place. Keep this in mind if you become an administrator, for you may have just become, unwittingly, what these people most resent; and no matter how good a job you do, they'll find your one mistake and beat you up with it. It's best just to accept this demographic for the reality it is. They are often the best editors, and as long as Wikipedia remains open to all, this situation will remain. (From [[User:Antandrus/observations on Wikipedia behavior]], shortcut WP:OWB)

> Wikipedia is space age Corningware, not ceramic, and it's not going to shatter if you drop it. Don't let your fear of messing things up keep you from editing. (From [[Wikipedia:Can't break it]])

> Wikipedia, in many senses, can be a byzantine mess of policies, guidelines, style conventions, formatting tricks, and essays. It is essentially impossible for a new editor to know or anticipate most of them and even experienced editors accidentally run afoul of policies and guidelines occasionally. When this happens, it's not necessarily an indication that the editor is acting badly or has lost the community's trust. Usually, it just means they made a minor mistake and someone else corrected it. That's the way wikis like Wikipedia work: mistakes are constantly found and corrected. What is important to the functioning of any wiki, and especially large, complex ones like the English Wikipedia, is not that people become paranoid about avoiding mistakes. Mistakes are inevitable. What is important is that editors learn from errors, read the relevant policy, guideline, or whatever, and try to follow it in the future. Mistakes will happen; don't let them get you down. (From [[User:Chaser/Make mistakes, then learn from them]], shortcut WP:BOOBOOS)

> If a debate, discussion, or general exchange of views has come to a natural end through one party having "won" or (more likely) the community having lost interest in the entire thing, then no matter which side you were on, you should walk away. (From [[Wikipedia:Drop the stick and back slowly away from the horse carcass]], shortcut WP:DEADHORSE)

> Writing for the enemy is the process of explaining another person's point of view as clearly and fairly as you can, similar to devil's advocate. The intent is to satisfy the adherents and advocates of that perspective that you understand their claims and arguments. (From [[Wikipedia:Writing for the enemy]], shortcut WP:WFTE)

The fight-or-flight response developed by our pre-human ancestors may have helped them escape from angry mastodons, but it isn't constructive in an online encyclopedia. (From [[Wikipedia:No angry mastodons]], shortcut WP:KEEPCOOL)

A coatrack article is a Wikipedia article that ostensibly discusses the nominal subject, but in reality is a cover for a tangentially related bias subject. The nominal subject is used as an empty coatrack, which ends up being mostly obscured by the "coats." (From [[Wikipedia:Coatrack]], shortcut WP:COAT)

Wikipedia's articles are no place for strong views. Or rather, we feel about strong views the way that a natural history museum feels about tigers. We admire them and want our visitors to see how fierce and clever they are, so we stuff them and mount them for close inspection. We put up all sorts of carefully worded signs to get people to appreciate them as much as we do. But however much we adore tigers, a live tiger loose in the museum is seen as an urgent problem. (From [[Wikipedia:Beware of the tigers]], shortcut WP:TIGER)

A young novice asked, "Is Wikipedia a community, or an encyclopedia?" Alkivar answered "Yes."; later, another novice asked Alkivar the same question, to which he answered "No." (From [[Wikipedia:The Zen of Wikipedia]], shortcut WP:KOAN)

Wikipedia is just an encyclopedia. The Wikipedia community is at its core just a community made up of a bunch of people who think writing a free, complete, and accurate encyclopedia is a good idea (and a lot of fun, too). The Wikipedia community isn't too happy about people trying to use Wikipedia to promote causes other than having a good online encyclopedia. This includes contributions meant to promote websites and products, political causes, religions, and other beliefs, and of course one's personal view of what's really funny. (From [[Wikipedia:Don't hand out panda sandwiches at a PETA convention]], shortcut WP:PANDA)

It is particularly important to get the last word where you are in some doubts as to the merits of your case. The last word will serve as a clinching argument that will make up for any deficiencies in your logic. (From [[Wikipedia:The Last Word]], shortcut WP:TLW)

Before you make yourself and others unhappy, remember this: you have the Right To Leave. (From [[Wikipedia:Right to leave]], shortcut WP:RTL)

You can find many other such essays collected in [[Category:Wikipedia essays]]. Many Wikipedians also blog about Wikipedia and related Wikimedia issues. You can find a list of self-identified bloggers on Meta, but for easier and more focused reading, you can find a collection of blogs about Wikimedia topics at the Planet Wikimedia site, where they are conveniently aggregated; see *http://en.planet.wikimedia.org/.* An RSS feed is also available.

Operational Analysis: Raul's Laws

One essay in particular, known as "Raul's laws" (shortcut WP:RAUL), contains a collection of observations on how Wikipedia works and how Wikipedians work together. The essay was started by User:Raul654, an experienced contributor, but has been built by dozens of contributors. The page gives what is very much an insider's view of how Wikipedia works, though the later laws that have been added vary greatly in interest.

We've taken 6 "laws" from the original 15. Two bits of jargon are [[Astro-turfing]], a public relations term for an orchestrated campaign meant to look like spontaneous grassroots activity and [[Metcalfe's law]], which points to the square of the number of users in a network as a measure of its value.

► Much of Wikipedia's content and all of the day-to-day functions are overseen by a small core of the most dedicated contributors.

► Content brings visitors—this is as true for wikis as it is for networks, as dictated by Metcalfe's law. Of those visitors, a certain number will stay and become contributors. Of those contributors, a certain number will stay long enough to become dedicated users.

► You cannot motivate people on a large scale to write about something they don't want to write about.

► Over time, contentious articles will grow from edit-war inspiring to eventually reach a compromise that is agreed upon by all the editors who have not departed in exasperation. This equilibrium will inevitably be disturbed by new users who accuse the article of being absurdly one sided and who attempt to rewrite the entire article.

► Wikipedia's steadily increasing popularity means that within the next year or two, we will begin to see organized corporate astroturfing campaigns.[4]

► As time goes on, the rules and informal policies on Wikipedia tend to become less and less plastic and harder and harder to change.

Practical Values, Process, and Policy

Wikipedia has no centralized control, yet the site progresses and is successful. The administration of Wikipedia as a whole has scaled up much better than its critics predicted. Something clearly does work. But what is it that works?

Discussion alone may not achieve much. If no meeting of minds occurs, a productive debate can become an unresolvable dispute. A common theme in interviews with editors turns out to be this: Wikipedians clearly feel they share values with others who are editing.

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[4] Prediction confirmed, August 28, 2005 (nine months after the prediction was made): One anonymous reader contacted Boing Boing to say that he worked at a marketing company that uses Wikipedia for its online marketing strategies. See *http://www.smh.com.au/news/icon/wikipedia-worries/2005/08/23/ 1124562860192.html.*

These values include the following:

▸ The worth of open information that is outside copyright barriers (and, therefore, probably support for free software too)

▸ A commitment to sharing knowledge worldwide

▸ Multiculturalism, diversity, and multilingualism

▸ Fairness in representing diverse points of view

Wikis attract people who can live with freeform structures. But shared and practical values mean that Wikipedians will admit that some structure is necessary and some idea of how the encyclopedia should be built has to be present. Wikipedia's structures, such as how editing permissions are provided, must match up with these core values.

The key way Wikipedia gets through its project-related work is its characteristic structure: Processes consist of decentralized discussions about separable issues. That's how decisions are actually made and how site administration moves forward. Backlogs are avoided by limiting discussion time. These processes are, in turn, governed by policy documents that have general consent. (Chapter 13 picks up from here and will explain how you can have wiki-style *editable* policy.)

Policy and process, then, are closely related on Wikipedia, providing a structure for editors to work together through discussion. So much needs to be done that the sensible approach that has evolved is to have all those differentiated processes, not a single executive body. Processes and policies, despite their imperfections, evolve to meet changing circumstances. See an overview essay [[Wikipedia:Product, process, policy]] (shortcut WP:3P) for more on this idea.

More Research Required

At this point, we still simply don't know some things.

▸ Will the English-language Wikipedia have to evolve different social processes in the long term?

▸ Will every language version of Wikipedia go through the same stages of developing content and community?

▸ Will time bring the English-language Wikipedia's community into a stable demographic composed of people with a broad-based interest in encyclopedic knowledge? How can more people, including experts, be involved in editing?

▸ Can quality be sustained in an open encyclopedia with millions of articles?

See [[Wikipedia:Researching Wikipedia]] (shortcut WP:RW) for some ideas for studies. [[Wikipedia:Wikipedia in academic studies]] showcases some work that has already been done.

Further Reading

Community

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Raul654/Raul's laws   Raul's laws, a collaboratively written collection of thoughts about the community

http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/2.06/vc.principles_pr.html   Mike Godwin's nine points

Demographics and Systemic Bias

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedians   Who are Wikipedians?

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Countering_systemic_bias   WikiProject countering systemic bias

http://wikichix.org/   The WikiChix group, open to any woman interested in wikis

Essays

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Wikipedia_essays   Essays about Wikipedia by Wikipedians; these essays in the Wikipedia namespace are often referenced by other users.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:User_essays   More essays about Wikipedia by Wikipedians; these essays are in user space and may be less widely referenced or only represent the view of one person.

http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Essays   Essays on the Meta site; these are older essays written by Wikipedians about Wikipedia, Wikimedia, and wiki philosophies.

http://en.planet.wikimedia.org   Planet Wikimedia is an aggregator of blogs about Wikimedia by Wikimedians.

Researching Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedia_in_academic_studies   A list of studies that have focused on Wikipedia

http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research   The Wikimedia research network, a page for Wikimedia researchers from around the world to share their work

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Researching_Wikipedia   Some research questions

Summary

Though loose and somewhat ill-defined, the notion of *community* is absolutely fundamental to Wikipedia; without it, the site could not succeed. The way Wikipedia is set up has led to a community that doesn't rely on central authority or a central forum. Instead, Wikipedia's editors communicate largely, but not exclusively, by editing pages for others to read—both article talk pages and central discussion forums. Those pages run quickly into tens of thousands of separate discussions, where issues are separated out and dealt with individually. Each debate will bring together a small, probably diverse group of people interested in any topic. Wikipedia has no true center and no easy overview of all these interactions. Wikipedia's success relies on the way that the overarching philosophies mesh with the intricate, small-scale actions on the site.