

Negotiating with Angry Mastodons

the regulatory function of Wikipedia essays

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Regulatory Mechanisms on Wikipedia

This study is part of *Negotiating with Strangers*, an ongoing exploration of how discursive and editing behaviors are regulated on Wikipedia.

On Wikipedia there are many attempts to inscribe guidelines to support the work of editors engaged in the collaborative creation of Wikipedia articles. We classify these guiding documents (**Figure 1**) according to their **degree of formalization**, a measure of how vested the community is in a particular guiding principle or practice and also its influence with respect to regulating article creation and editor behavior.

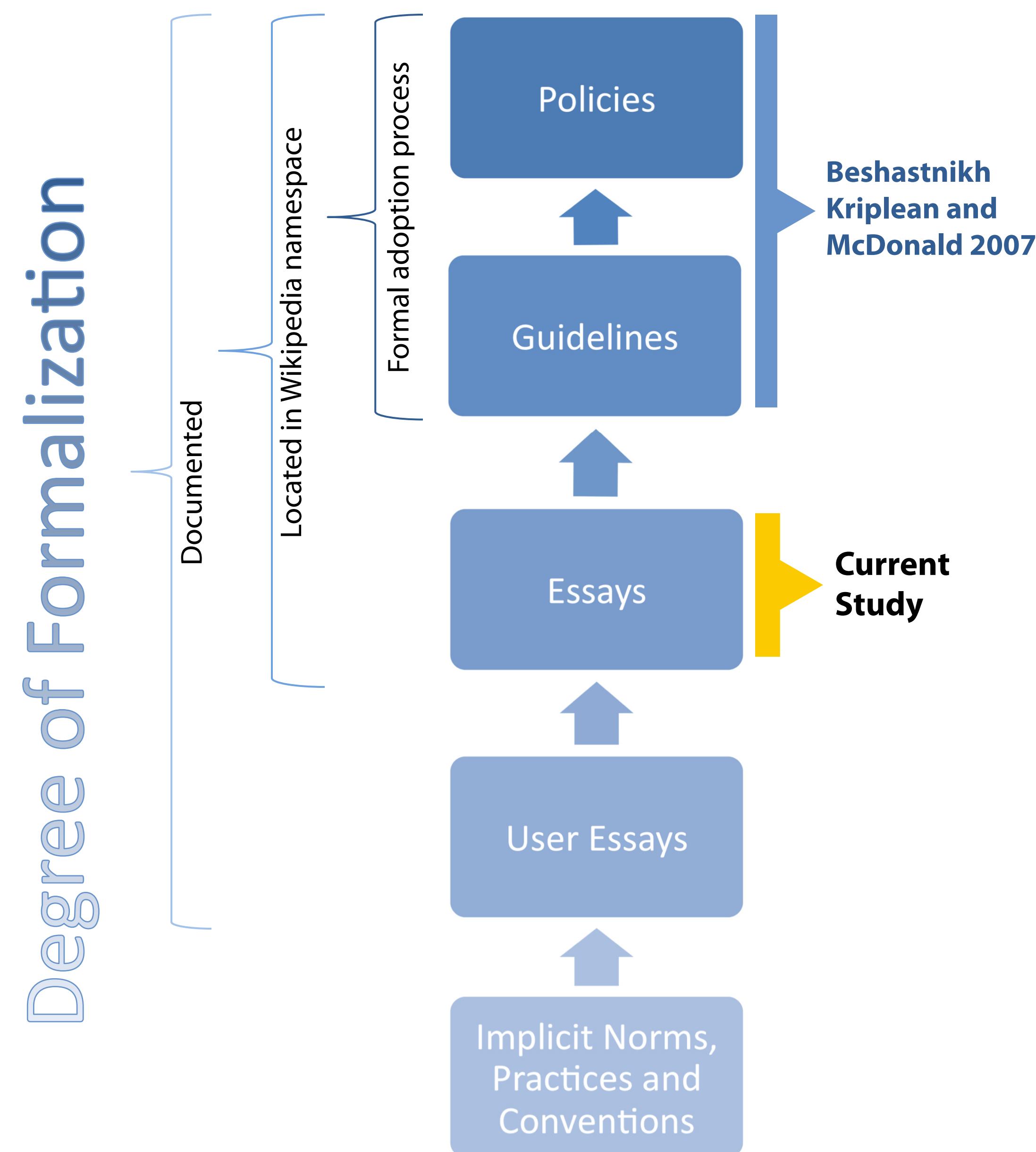


Figure 1: Guidance is considered to be increasingly formalized as it is documented, moved into a public forum and adopted through a formal, consensus-based process.

Related Work

Wikipedia editors frequently create hyperlinked citations to guiding documents from article talk pages—open forums linked to each Wikipedia article in which editors discuss, debate and coordinate their work—in attempts to persuade others about the shape a text should take.

Previous research (**Table 1**) has shown that the most-cited Wikipedia policies and guidelines address critical community concerns such as citing sources, achieving consensus, and regulating editor behavior.

Category Name	Category Description
content	pertains to main space article content
behavior	pertains to user conduct
wikimedia	wikimedia-imposed dictate
meta	high-level reflexive principle about Wikipedia's identity
formal process	relating to a formal process
administrative	regarding administrative actions
tutorial	descriptive summary of some aspect of Wikipedia
user account	implicates the user's account
legal	pertaining to the legality of content or user actions
disposition	implicates legitimacy of user actions or intent
inclusion	non-legally-oriented indication of whether some content should be included in text or page
consensus	directly implicating the consensus-seeking process
bias	regarding the neutrality of content or organization
writing style and organization	low-level stylistic and organizational details
genre	defines wikipedia
attribution	pertaining to the secondary nature of the content in an article

Table 1: Beshastnikh et al. coded Wikipedia's formal policies and guidelines based on the social and work activities they implicated.

The Role of Essays

Our current study investigates the regulatory function of Wikipedia essays, a less formal type of guiding document.

Wikipedia editors write essays for a variety of reasons: to blow off steam, to share advice or opinions, to describe a particular instantiation or interpretation of an official policy or to assert an ideological stance (**Figure 2**).

Our hypothesis is that, like policies, popular essays address issues that are important to Wikipedians, such as behavioral norms, community values and editing practices. However, the type of regulatory work that these essays perform has not been explored.



Figure 2: 'No Angry Mastodons' is a humorous essay with a serious message about proper editor behavior.

Methodology

In this research study, we will perform a directed content analysis based on the coding scheme in **Table 1**. We will code a sample of Wikipedia essays which represent the greatest degree of **community investment (Figure 3)**, as measured by:

- number of **citations** made to the essay
- number of **unique contributors** to the essay
- number of **unique citers** of the essay

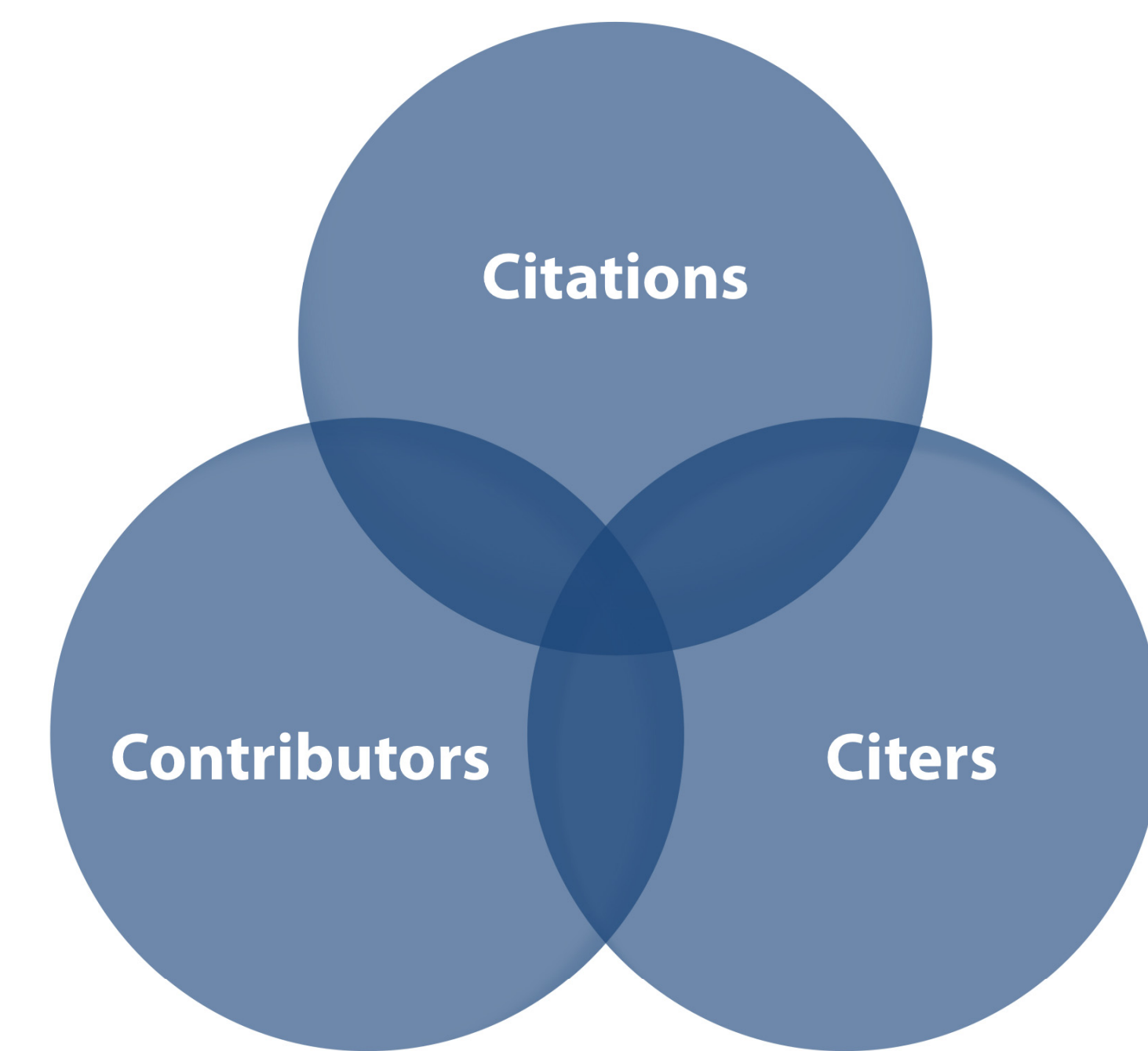


Figure 3: A representation of the population of Wikipedia essays by number of citations, citers and contributors. The interlocking shaded areas represent our sample: the essays with the highest degree of community investment.

By comparing these essays with the Wikipedia policies coded in the previous study, we hope to gain critical insight into:

- how different types of guiding documents differ with respect to the social and work activities they address.
- how differences in a document's degree of formalization may relate to the regulatory role that document performs within the community.

Communicative Practices in Virtual Workspaces
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This research is funded in part by NSF grant
 IIS-0811210