Community, Consensus, Coercion, Control

CS*W or How Policy Mediates Mass Participation

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University of Washington

Joint with:

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Information School             Information Dynamics Lab
University of Washington       Hewlett-Packard Labs
The many C’s of CSCW

• Computer Supported Cooperative Work  
  - Does “cooperative” always mean convivial?

• Work relations are multi-valent and comprise different social patterns of interaction (Kling, 1991)  
  - Coordinated, competitive, coercive, combative, committed...

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Consensus in mass collaboration

• Mass participatory collaborations with high-stakes
  - one decision-making model is consensus-based

• We study Wikipedia as an example...
  - High stakes: widely used as a source of knowledge, if not truth
  - English version started in January 2001
    ▶ 2,000,000+ articles
    ▶ 700,000+ registered users
    ▶ 1000+ administrators
Wikipedia: Control

• As the corpus and number of contributors increases...
  - How does the community protect itself from malicious activity?
  - How is content judged to be legitimate?
  - How is consensus achieved amongst the diversity of views and opinions?

• Technical
  - Reverting revisions, locking pages, banning users

• Normative
  - Socialization - “how we do it here”
  - Elaborate policy environment
Policy environment

- The **policy environment**...
  - Bounds legitimate activity and content
  - Referenced, rewritten
  - Violators may be subject to sanction (banning, blocking, etc.)

- Current hierarchical organization:
  - ~40 **official policies** (content, behavioral, enforcement, deletion, legal)
  - Hundreds of less strict **guidelines**
  - Numerous **informal essays** by community members
Research overview

• We examine the enactment of policy in Wikipedian discourse to ask...
  - How does the policy environment mediate the multi-valent nature of collaborative work?
  - How is consensus forged on discussion pages?

• How does wiki technology support consensus-seeking?
Outline

• Problem motivation

• Anatomy of Wikipedia
  - main page, article page, talk page, policy page …

• Methodology
  - Sample and analyze active discussions

• Findings
  - Grounded example

• Implications
Jimmy Wales

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Jimmy Donal "Jimbo" Wales (born 7 August 1966 in Huntsville, Alabama) is an American Internet entrepreneur known for his role in founding Wikipedia and other wiki-related projects, including the charitable Wikimedia Foundation and the for-profit company Wikia, Inc.

Contents [hide]

1. Personal life
2. Education
3. Career
   3.1 Wikipedia and Wikimedia Foundation
   3.2 Wikia
   3.3 Media appearances and honors
4. Issues and Controversy
   4.1 Bomis
   4.2 Wikipedia biography
   4.3 Birthplace
5. Personal philosophy
6. Published work
7. References
8. External links
   8.1 Audio/video

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Anatomy: article pages

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Personal life
Anatomy: article pages

Revision history of Jimmy Wales

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Who</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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<td>contribs) m (36,148 bytes) (Reverted edits by Vondort (talk) to last version by Kathleen.wright5 (undo))</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 06:01, 27 Oct 07   | LaraLove (Talk | contribs) m (38,354 bytes) (→Wikipedia biography: Quotations per...
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Personal life
Anatomy: talk pages

Talk: Jimmy Wales
From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

User-added template

↓ Skip to table of contents ↓

Jimmy Wales has had a peer review by Wikipedia editors which is now archived. It may contain ideas you can use to improve this article.

This page was previously nominated for deletion. Please see prior discussions before considering re-nomination:

- Speedy Keep, 2007-08-31, see discussion.
- Speedy Keep, 2007-08-14, see discussion.
- Keep, 2006-05-31, see discussion.

If you need to contact Jimbo about something, please do so at User talk: Jimbo Wales, not here. As Jimbo explains...

"People who are trying to leave messages for me will likely be more satisfied if they leave messages on my user talk page than if they leave them here. This is the talk page for the article about me, not a place to talk to me. I rarely read this. --Jimbo Wales 06:05, 23 August 2005 (UTC)"

This is the talk page for discussing improvements to the Jimmy Wales article. This is not a forum for general discussion about the article's subject.
Anatomy: talk pages

- Conversation threads
- Manual threading

First sentence in the education section:

That part I fixed yesterday in the education section is logically inconsistent. It reads like the school was donating the software to itself. It's not Jimbo's user page so I have right to fix it, right? Why has it been undone then? —Greg Park Avenue 13:23, 23 July 2007 (UTC)

Birthdate:

I just blogged about this —Jimbo Wales 09:34, 8 August 2007 (UTC)

Supposedly, he was born on the 8th, and Britannica also thinks its the 7th. See this blog entry from The Oregonian newspaper. Also see the previous, related blog entry about an interview with him, Ward Cunningham and the newspaper, as well as a print article, Open-source thinking —Jason McHuff 22:49, 27 July 2007 (UTC)

It looks like a reporter from a major newspaper has reported on a public records search, confirming what I have been saying for a long time. According to my birth certificate, August 7th is not my birthday. Perhaps someday I will produce a note from my mom for another reporter. And perhaps I will just continue to have a bit of fun with this. :) —Jimbo Wales 09:12, 8 August 2007 (UTC)

Mr. Wales has stated that his birthday is Aug. 7th, 1966. Links to these admissions can be found here and here. Also, both Current Biography and Who's Who is America list his birthday as being the 7th. 68.117.211.187 07:21, 28 July 2007 (UTC)

I hope I am not the only one who is amused that this anonymous ip number calls a discussion of my date of birth an "admission". :) Perhaps I shall next confess to having brown hair. —Jimbo Wales 18:36, 8 August 2007 (UTC)

Thanks for the links. I don't think I saw the archive of this page when I came here. I'm not seeing the first edit you link to in the page history, but the second one does seem somewhat conclusive. Its interesting, because here (at your links) he seems pretty firm that its the 7th, yet the blog post (written by a reporter for a major metro newspaper, so hopefully a reliable source) really sounds like he said that its not the 7th. Overall, it does seem that a difference of a day isn't much to worry about. —Jason McHuff
Anatomy: talk pages

It might also be worth noting that on August 7 we list August 7 as his birthday. If this is incorrect, I think we look really, really stupid here. John Carter 20:34, 7 August 2007 (UTC)

Wikipedia isn't about truth, it's about providing verifiable information from reliable, published sources. I really don't think it's something to worry about. 68.117.211.187 21:40, 7 August 2007 (UTC)

His DOB is on August 8 according to Jimmy. Agreed? Mr.Guru talk 22:46, 7 August 2007 (UTC)

No. Sadly, Mr. Wales cannot be used as a reliable source since his statements about his DOB have been inconsistent. As previously mentioned only verifiable information from reliable, published sources can be used on Wikipedia. Even if that was not the case I can find no records where Mr. Wales has said that his birthday was on August 8th. If you can reference a source for that fact, which meets Wikipedia's guidelines, please do so. Till then I feel that we must continue to rely on the previously mentioned sources and keep his DOB as is. Jhurlburt 03:56, 8 August 2007 (UTC)

Yes! Happily, Jimbo can be used as a reliable source per WP:SELFPUB policy. Cheers. Mr.Guru talk 05:12, 8 August 2007 (UTC)

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Anatomy: policy pages

Wikipedia: Verifiability

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

"VP:V" redirects here. For information on vandalism, see Wikipedia: Vandalism.

This page documents an official policy on the English Wikipedia. It has wide acceptance among editors and is considered a standard that all users should follow.

When editing this page, please ensure that your revision reflects consensus. When in doubt, discuss first on the Talk page.

This page in a nutshell: Material challenged or likely to be challenged, and all quotations, must be attributed to a reliable, published source.

The threshold for inclusion in Wikipedia is verifiability, not truth. "Verifiable" in this context means that any reader should be able to check that material added to Wikipedia has already been published by a reliable source. Editors should provide a reliable source for quotations and for any material that is challenged or is likely to be challenged, or it may be removed.

Wikipedia: Verifiability is one of Wikipedia's core content policies. The others include Wikipedia: No original research and Wikipedia: Neutral point of view. Jointly, these policies determine the type and quality of material that is acceptable in Wikipedia articles. They should not be interpreted in isolation from one another, and editors should try to familiarize themselves with all three.

Contents

1. Burden of evidence
2. Sources
   2.1 Questionable sources
Wikipedia:Verifiability

Summary

This page documents an official policy on the English Wikipedia. It has wide acceptance among editors and is considered a standard that all users should follow. When editing this page, please ensure that your revision reflects consensus. When in doubt, discuss first on the talk page.

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1 Burden of evidence
2 Sources
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Material challenged or likely to be challenged, and all quotations, must be attributed to a reliable, published source.
Outline

• Problem motivation

• Anatomy of Wikipedia
  - Main page, article page, talk page, policy page …

• Methodology
  - Sample and analyze active discussions

• Findings
  - Grounded example

• Implications
Methodology

• Use grounded approach to study how multi-valent relations are implicated and handled through the enactment of policy

• Focus on talk pages
  - “all [Wikipedians] stated that talk pages were their primary communication medium”*
  - Too much discussion, need to focus...
  - Sample “critical sections” of very actively discussed pages
  - Mine Wikipedia database dump (November 2006)

Focus on heavily edited talk pages

Distribution of talk pages by revision count
Focus on heavily edited talk pages

Distribution of talk pages by revision count
Focus on heavily edited talk pages

Distribution of talk pages by revision count

Legend:
- Tail sample
Focus on heavily edited talk pages

Distribution of talk pages by revision count

- 51.1% of all policy references
- 28.4% of all talk page revisions
- 0.3% of all talk pages

Tail sample
Focus on heavily edited talk pages

Distribution of talk pages by revision count

**Tail sample**
Isolate critical sections

*Periods when article and talk editing is significant*
Isolate critical sections

*Periods when article and talk editing is significant*
Isolate critical sections

*Periods when article and talk editing is significant*
Isolate critical sections

*Periods when article and talk editing is significant*

![Chart showing distribution of talk pages by revision count. The chart highlights a significant period for Computer Science edits.](chart.png)
Isolate critical sections

Periods when article and talk editing is significant

Activity on the Computer Science article by month

- Article revisions
- Talk revisions

Months since January 2001
Isolate critical sections

Periods when article and talk editing is significant

Activity on the Computer Science article by month

Months > mean

18, 20-3, 25-6, 28, 31, 43-4, 46-51, 53, 56-7, 34, 45-9, 51

µ=28.3
µ=14.8
Isolate critical sections

Periods when article and talk editing is significant

Activity on the Computer Science article by month

- Article revisions
- Talk revisions

Months > mean
- 34, 45-9, 51

µ=28.3
µ=14.8

Revision count
Frequency
1
10
100
1000
10000
100000
1000000

Computer Science

Months since January 2001
Isolate critical sections

Periods when article and talk editing is significant

---

Computer Science

18, 20-3, 25-6, 28, 31, 43-4, 46-51, 53, 56-7

\[ \cap \]

34, 45-9, 51

\[ \cap \]

Critical Sections:

46-49

51
Isolate critical sections

Periods when article and talk editing is significant

Months > mean

\[ 18, 20-3, 25-6, 28, 31, 43-4, 46-51, 53, 56-7 \]

\[ 34, 45-9, 51 \]

**This is not the exact definition of critical section**
Sample critical sections

• Categorize critical sections
  - Natural categories
    ‣ featured, controversial
  - Synthetic category
    ‣ policy-laden

• Use stratified sampling to sample 69 critical sections
  - 10-100 pages of printed text each
Analyze critical sections

- Use a grounded approach*

- Perform open coding
  - Carefully read critical sections
  - Identify interesting dynamics
  - Generate rough categories

- Perform axial coding
  - Synthesize categories
  - Understand how categories relate

Outline

• Problem motivation

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• Findings
  - Grounded example

• Implications
Excerpt from debate over article scope (2005)

• Begin with extended example
  - Unpack later
  - Excerpt from an argument on a contentious scientific topic
  - Anonymized the topic
  - Policy links are in red
Excerpt from debate over article scope (2005)
This page is about paleocentrism as a scientific theory and controversies that this theory has with religion doesn’t need 1/3 space in the article. . .[specific changes]...I do not want to do these changes before getting feedback. . .

Aye

Yep

Agreed
This page is about paleocentrism as a scientific theory and controversies that this theory has with religion doesn’t need 1/3 space in the article. . .[specific changes]...I do not want to do these changes before getting feedback. . .

. . . consensus is bullshit because I have the facts on my side. I also have the exhortation of Wikipedia to be bold. . . deleting a discussion of the Catholic church’s. . . view of paleocentrism is not only inaccurate, but violates NPOV . . . If you all want an article just on the scientific theory of paleocentrism, write one yourself.
We DID write an article just on the scientific theory of paleocentrism, before you showed up. . . You’re obviously new here, . . . arguing based on your reading of NPOV and Be bold is a bit ridiculous, like a kid just out of high school arguing points of constitutional law. These things are principles that have an established meaning. People who have been here for years understand them much better than you do. They won’t prove effective weapons for you to wield in this argument. . .

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EB writes a few select articles about important subjects in great depth; fine. That’s not what Wikipedia does. The reason why so many people feel that this article should be only about the scientific aspects of paleocentrism is that Wikipedia articles are written about a SINGLE SUBJECT. . . You are proposing to mix two VERY DIFFERENT subjects. . .

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Excerpt from debate over article scope (2005)

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Proof please. I see four that don't share this view, and literally hundreds of editors on the history page. A vocal minority doesn't constitute a majority.
As discussed at *wiki is not paper*, Wikipedia articles should give a brief overview of the centrally important aspects of a subject. To a biologist like yourself, the centrally important aspect of paleocentrism certainly isn't its social implications, but to the rest of society it is...

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Findings: Power Plays

• As Wikipedians collaborate, they take actions
  - e.g. edit, revert, ignore another contributor

• **Power play:** Rhetorical strategy an individual makes to claim the legitimacy of an action

• Consensus is often a product of power plays
  - Often enacted point-counterpoint
  - Competing claims to legitimacy
## Power plays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legitimacy of contributor</strong></td>
<td>Traits of contributors are used to bolster or undermine a position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prior consensus</strong></td>
<td>Decision made in the past is presented as absolute and incontrovertible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Article scope</strong></td>
<td>Central and peripheral content strictly defined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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We DID write an article just on the scientific theory of paleocentrism, before you showed up. . . You’re obviously new here, . . . arguing based on your reading of NPOV and Be bold is a bit ridiculous, like a kid just out of high school arguing points of constitutional law. **These things are principles that have an established meaning. People who have been here for years understand them much better than you do.** They won’t prove effective weapons for you to wield in this argument. . .
# Power plays

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<td>... What you’re talking about isn’t “paleocentrism”. Central issues to paleocentrism are <em>periodic equilibrium, geomorphous undulation, airation</em>. These are the issues that actually have to do with the process of paleocentrism itself. <strong>These “social aspects” you’re talking about are peripheral, not central. They are about paleocentrism, they surround paleocentrism, but they are not paleocentrism. . .</strong></td>
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As discussed at [wiki is not paper](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Originally_created), **Wikipedia articles should give a brief overview of the centrally important aspects of a subject.** To a biologist like yourself, the centrally important aspect of paleocentrism certainly isn’t its social implications, but to the rest of society it is...
## Power plays

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... the first thing the link wiki is not paper says is: “Wikipedia is an encyclopedia.” A real encyclopedia like Encyclopedia Britannica has a fantastic section on paleocentrism, including all the social, political, and philosophical implications.

EB writes a few select articles about important subjects in great depth; fine. That's not what Wikipedia does. The reason why so many people feel that this article should be only about the scientific aspects of paleocentrism is that Wikipedia articles are written about a SINGLE SUBJECT... You are proposing to mix two VERY DIFFERENT subjects...
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Findings: how policy mediates mass collaboration

• Policies are **enacted** to interpret and apply to complex situations
  - Common language and strategies for action*
  - Policies justify actions by appealing to authority and precedent

• Policies are **ambiguous**
  - Relevant policy does not necessarily translate into obvious action
  - Policy enactment does not always resolve disputes
  - Contributors must argue for the relevance and saliency of a policy

• Recall use of **wiki is not paper** policy in example
  - *Enactment*: to understand whether social ramifications should be included
  - *Ambiguity*: divergent interpretation of “importance to topic”

Findings: how policy mediates mass collaboration

• Power plays vary in their conformity to the policy environment
  - Within bounds
  - Borderline
    ‣ our example
  - Outside the bounds
    ‣ see paper for example
Findings: how policy mediates mass collaboration

Is the mean ... not considered original research?

It doesn't look like it to me, it looks like the original research was done by [gov't agency] or am I missing something?

If the [gov't agency] has not published the actual mean, us "calculating" it would be OR, no? I'm not sure.

No, why would it be? Extrapolating data from info already available is not OR.

From WP:NOR: "articles may not contain any new analysis or synthesis of published arguments, concepts, data, ideas, or statements that serves to advance a position." For what's worth...
Findings: how policy mediates mass collaboration

- Power plays vary in their conformity to the policy environment
  - Within bounds
  - Borderline
    ‣ our example
  - Outside the bounds
    ‣ see paper for example
Outline

• Problem motivation

• Anatomy of Wikipedia
  - Main page, article page, talk page, policy page …

• Methodology
  - Sample and analyze active discussions

• Findings
  - Grounded example

• Implications
Implications: design mindset

• Designers must be careful in evaluating organizational overhead posed by consensus-based communities
  - We should avoid repeating the “process loss” framing criticized by McGrath†

• Rather, treat consensus as **fundamental** to Wikipedia’s success
  - CS*W interaction patterns are endemic to mass collaboration
  - These C-words must be worked through when seeking consensus

• Tools should be designed to support the fundamental role that this discursive work performs

Excerpt from debate over article scope (2005)
Excerpt from debate over article scope (2005)

Apparently ☹ doesn't bother to read carefully what others actually wrote. Scroll up to the top of this section and you see that I voted to keep a smaller section on the social aspects of paleocentrism instead of removing it entirely and leaving just a link
4 days of a single conversation thread

On an article that has been around for 5 years

** In our talk, we had the full text of the text scroll by at this point, and it was very very long **
Implications: tool design

Implications: tool design

• For awareness
  - Consensus-seeking is informed by prior arguments
  - Awareness of prior and ongoing consensus not supported well
    ‣ Current mechanisms are minimal (watch lists, diff)
  - Awareness may help align power plays with policy environment
  - Other tools that may raise awareness of activity (and conflict) have been designed*

Implications: tool design

• For awareness
  - Consensus-seeking is informed by prior arguments
  - Awareness of prior and ongoing consensus not supported well
    ▸ Current mechanisms are minimal (watch lists, diff)
  - Awareness may help align power plays with policy environment
  - Other tools that may raise awareness of activity (and conflict) have been designed*

• For reputation
  - Can be used as a potential guide to quality†
  - Can also provide awareness of other editors during consensus seeking
    ▸ Who am I talking to? Who is this person that started the article?

Questions?

Ivan Beschastnikh

Travis Kriplean

David W. McDonald

Scott A. Golder
Questions?

Ivan Beschastnikh

Travis Kriplean

David W. McDonald

Scott A. Golder