

Promoting Quality in Wikipedia through Enculturation

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INTRODUCTION

In professional activities, qualifications earned through training or multiple years of practice, vouch for a person's ability to maintain certain standards in his or her work. Analogous mass collaborative efforts, however, often rely instead on amateur participation. Many of these online efforts compete with, and in some cases have come to replace, their professional counterparts, and have done so with comparable quality standards. Examples of these include citizen journalism [3], NASA click workers [1], and Wikipedia [5].

How do these online collaborations achieve and maintain high quality standards often with little help from professionals? At least part of the answer lies in the sociotechnical processes that these communities have developed to socialize the amateur participant [4].

We examine this phenomenon in the context of Wikipedia, a collaborative effort driven by the participation of a large number of widespread contributors. These contributors, generally called *editors*, rely on their varied experiences to create encyclopedic articles. In our studies of Wikipedia, we have come to view the amateur-professional perspective as a false dichotomy when applied to the range of experiences that people bring to bear in Wikipedia.

In this position paper we use the term *newcomer* to describe a Wikipedia editor who is in the process of being enculturated into the project. Given the complexity of Wikipedia as a resource and as a community engaged in evolving practices, many editors can be considered newcomers in different aspects. For example, some editors may be newcomers to Wikipedia's Articles for Deletion (AfD) discussions, while having mastered the intricacies of the Request for Arbitration (RfA) process. In this paper when we refer to an editor as a *newcomer* without qualification we mean this in a holistic sense. That is, unlike veteran editors, they lack familiarity with the most essential conventions of Wikipedia that are necessary to successfully contribute to articles.

NEWCOMER TO VETERAN ENCULTURATION

We present three popular Wikipedia practices as examples of the enculturation process. We will use these practices as pointers to the newcomer editor and illustrate how each of these practices both indicate and promote enculturation. Briefly, the three practices are the recognition of valuable contributions through barnstars, the practice of pointing to specific policies to illustrate standards, and one-on-one mentoring that is provided by the Adopt-a-User program.

Barnstars

Wikipedians recognize efforts on the project by awarding each other Barnstars. Barnstars are typically templates that include a picture, and can be customized with a few sentences to explain why the receiving user was awarded the barnstar. Editors who receive barnstars usually collect and display them on their user page.

Barnstars usually imply a first-hand account by the giver that the receiver has done something right. Barnstars may be used to identify veteran Wikipedians and have been used to map the range of valued work in Wikipedia. In a previous study we found that a barnstar may indicate socialization [6], which can provide positive reinforcement of the type of work valued work by the community. It is likely that Barnstars also impact editor retention as acknowledgements of one's effort probably lead to further involvement and help editors to recognize their own talents.

The following text from a few Barnstars illustrates socialization and a few behaviors that are valued by the community.

- * This is presented to you for turning a *stub* into an *article* your first week on Wikipedia. Well done!
- * I award you this award for being a newcomer who display exceptional enthusiasm, skill, and boldness beyond your experience.
- * The **Exceptional Newcomer Award** may be awarded to newcomers who display exceptional enthusiasm, skill, and **boldness** beyond their experience. Your recent addition is an apt example!
- * I award you this **Exceptional Newcomer Award** for your *incredible* fast acquaintance with Wikipedia...

Policies

Wikipedia relies on a number of community-maintained policies for its governance structure. These policies are refined over time, and are extensively used on talk pages where editors attempt to come to consensus on issues related to article content.

Here is an example taken from a talk page in which the less experienced editor Biff is informed why the use of a particular term conflicts with the Neutral Point of View (NPOV) policy. Such short pointers to policy provide a lightweight mechanism that helps veteran editors socialize newcomers into complex community practices [8].

Please don't use terms like X, please read the NPOV guidelines.
– **Able**

I don't understand recent edits to this page. How much are we supposed to dumb this thing down? .. It is certainly be possible to acknowledge that fact in a neutral way but not if the site entry keeps getting dumbed down – **Biff**

Regarding the X topic as that was the one I changed, that quote is not attributed to anyone in particular, but is instead used in a phrase that is non-neutral to Y... Using the slang in a sentence about another topic in the way that the community you're talking about uses it is not neutral. ... – **Able**

OK, that makes sense. I have re-edited the entry in a way that hopefully makes this distinction clear. Thanks for explaining. – **Biff**

The practice of citing policy and the accompanying pages where policies are formulated provide a powerful mechanism for distributed socialization [2]. When a policy applies, how a policy is referenced and the ways in which a policy is interpreted are all indicators of stages of enculturation. Fluent policy use is an indicator of successful enculturation, as policies provide editors with powerful rhetorical strategies for negotiations on talk pages [7].

ADOPT-A-USER

Newcomers can have difficulty finding their way in a community without making a few missteps. The policy known as WP:BITE (Please do not bite the newcomers) is a testament to the fact that such missteps are sometimes met with hostility from veteran editors. The Adopt-a-User program is intended to smooth the process of becoming a regular contributor to Wikipedia. Through the program, newcomers are paired with veterans in loose mentoring relationships. The mentoring lasts as long as both editors want to continue.

To participate in the program, newcomers seeking adoption must initiate the process, that is, acknowledge that they would like guidance. This self selection indicates that a newcomer is reflective enough to know that they need to learn something about how Wikipedia works on both the functional and social levels. Such reflection is a self-identified marker of the enculturation process at work.

Here is a short exchange that shows how a mentoring relationship helps a newcomer get started in Wikipedia without committing a faux pas.

Hey, Dibb - Can anyone answer a question on the Help Desk or does one have to have been vetted in some way? – **Cryo**

No, you don't need to be vetted. Jump right in, and don't be afraid of making a mistake. Others will always review the answers anyway. – **Dibb**

In the following exchange, the newcomer is pointed to the appropriate resource and encouraged to research the answer to the question independently as an exercise.

I know, I know . . . there's no such thing as a dumb question. But I can't quite get my head around why there is a category "living people." Can you explain the rationale? Cheers! – **Cryo**

Please read Category:talk:Living people, and summarize two main points for me as to why the category was kept. – **Dibb**

..my cursory review of the discussion provided a couple of insights as to why the category was kept: (1) because Jimmy (Jimbo) Walsh [s/c] said so; and (2) it provides some administrative function that allows editors to more easily monitor vandalism and potential libel. – **Cryo**

Yes, .. correct. Unsourced negative info on living people is always removed due to libel concerns, and Jimbo Wales, the ultimate arbiter, thinks a category needs to exist to aid that process. – **Dibb**

Finally, here is an example of how veteran mentors can use their experience to explain a highly nuanced practice.

Just wondering...what are barnstars, and how does one get a barnstar? – **Epps**

WP:Barnstars are randomly awarded to people. Some give them to their friends, which devalues the award, but it's still nice to get one. Don't get discouraged, though. I've made nearly 8000 edits and have only ever gotten one, so it's really the luck of the draw if you ever get any. I know I've given quite a few out – may you can do the same and hope one day the karma comes back for you! – **Fipe**

Does one just post it on a page? – **Epps**

On the talk page of the person you're giving it to, yes. For example, the other day I was bitten by some over-anxious editors on a page. I didn't feel like fighting with them ... but I was hurt b/c I really wanted to help. The next day, I had a disagreement on another page with someone else, but that editor accepted my suggestion just like that after I explained my reasoning. It made me feel really good again, even though he was just doing what he's supposed to do, and so I gave him a barnstar. – **Fipe**

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Online collaborations leverage their scale and diversity to produce content rivaling that of professional production. To ensure content quality, a self-governing community composed of volunteers must develop complex policies, practices, and processes. With few barriers to participation, this poses a challenge to socializing newcomers. Wikipedians have evolved a number of interesting practices to continually socialize its members in a way that is strongly tied to their actions. Barnstars provide positive reinforcement for work well done and can help editors to recognize their skills. Using policies, editors can point newcomers to "how things are done" and provide negative reinforcement for deviant activity. The Adopt-a-User program provides a way for a newcomer to request help in becoming more veteran.

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