

_____ Wikipedia and Cyberculture _____/
A platform for the social consensus, or a platform for social folly?

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In the nineteen-thirties H.G.Wells wrote a book of essays called “World Brain,” where he called for an educational knowledge network in the form of a “Permanent World Encyclopedia,” whereby “any student, in any part of the world, will be able to sit with his projector in his own study at his or her convenience to examine *any* book, *any* document, in an exact replica.” The essay “The Brain Organization of the Modern World” lays out Wells’ vision for “a sort of mental clearing house for the mind, a depot where knowledge and ideas are received, sorted, summarized, digested, clarified and compared.”¹ Today these words seem like premonitions to our digital era, and had H.G.Wells lived to see the age of the internet, he might have been the man to begin the mass collaborative project towards his ‘world en-cyclopedia’. But by the time the internet came around full swing, H.G. Wells was dead. And Jimmy Wales, internet ‘web portal’ pornographer / founder of free online encyclopedia, Nupedia², was very much alive! Yes he was, and in 2001 he launched a *second*, free online encyclopedia that was different from *Nupedia* in that it was to build its articles through the consensus of a very open-ended, almost anarchistic, mass collaboration. Wikipedia was from its inception an encyclopedia that ‘anyone can edit’, and one of its first policies was to ‘ignore all the rules’.

But the goal in creating Wikipedia was not to subvert the hegemony of an elitist group of professional scholars, or to give the authority on human knowledge to the public at large. Wikipedia was designed to generate content as ‘feed’ for *Nupedia*’s rigorous seven-step peer-review process, whereby volunteer ‘subject experts’ would ‘approve’ final versions of articles with the goal of producing an encyclopedia that was free to the world and of similar quality to professional encyclopedias like the *Britannica*.

While the initial community contributing to Wikipedia consisted largely of the group of ‘(mostly) highly experienced professionals’ from *Nupedia*, with Wikipedia being a depository for rough drafts of articles, the active participation of the general public was encouraged as a means to generate content. It is with this narrow goal of content generation that one of the first official policies, “ignore all the rules,” came into place in the first months of Wikipedia. Larry Sanger, co-founder of Wikipedia, explains the intention of the rule in his memoirs of the period:

If rules make you nervous and depressed, and not desirous of participating in the wiki, then ignore them entirely and go about your business ... The reason was that I thought we needed experience with how wikis should work, and even more importantly at that point we needed participants more than we needed rules.³

What Sanger did not realize until later was that with the initial rule of “ignore all the rules” he was laying the foundation of a tradition that was later to be interpreted by many as the essence of the Wikipedia project:

This provisional “hands off” management policy had the effect of

1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Brain

2 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nupedia>

3 Slashdot: The Early History of Nupedia and Wikipedia: A Memoir
<http://features.slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=05/04/18/164213&tid=95&tid=149&tid=9>

creating a difficult-to-change tradition, the tradition of making the project *extremely* tolerant of disruptive (uncooperative, "trolling") behavior. ... I always took Wikipedia's anarchy to be provisional and purely for purposes of determining what the best rules, and the nature of its authority, should be. What I, and other Wikipedians, failed to realize is that our initial anarchy would be taken by the next wave of contributors as the very essence of the project.⁴

As Wikipedia grew in popularity, the project began to fall away from its initial foundation of 'subject expert' content generators from Nupedia into the hands of the public, the 'cult of the amateur'⁵, and Sanger began his push for an official policy of respect of and deference to expertise. His hope was to establish an authority that could enforce the 'neutral point of view' policy that is Wikipedia's central doctrine, and make Wikipedia a more reliable resource by developing an intolerance for 'trolls'.

With the anarchistic tradition of the 'ignore all the rules' policy already established and seeming to work well (at least generating a lot of content), Wales choosing to exercise his authority to ban individuals in only the worst cases of 'trolling', and the expectation that the editing community would largely regulate itself, Sanger's push for a policy of deference to expertise failed. This failure, argues Sanger, has led to a situation that is too tolerant of abuse, and compromises the quality of Wikipedia with pages that are either hijacked or caught in endless dispute. With the resolution of disputes over content left entirely up to the contributor community at large, administrators (taking sides with no authority over each other and little authority to turn to otherwise), Wikipedia in many places has become a battlefield. This trend was already in place by the end of 2001, when the first pangs of major publicity brought a major wave of new editors. Sanger, chief organizer of Wikipedia from 2001 through 2002, reflects:

Attempts to delete or radically edit [problematic] contributions were often met by reposting the earlier, problem version: the ability to do that is a necessary feature of collaboration. Persistent trolls could, thus, be a serious problem, particularly if they were able to draw a sympathetic audience. And there was often an audience of sympathizers: contributors who philosophically were opposed to nearly any exercise of authority, but who were not trolls themselves.⁶

Among those contributors who were opposed to the exercise of authority could be counted founder Jimmy Wales himself, who "was the only person with the authority to ban users who were not engaging in simple vandalism"⁷ until the beginning of 2004, when his duties were relegated to an Arbitration Committee of highly trusted editors. But the Arbitration Committee is still considered to be only a last resort, and while administrators to Wikipedia have long had the power to block simple vandals, disputes over content do not qualify as vandalism, and editors are left to themselves to resolve their issues with only an unenforced set of guidelines⁸ (that basically say 'be nice, don't fight').

4 Ibid.

5 The title of a book by Andrew Keen, a "Silicon Valley disciple" who describes himself as "a failed dot-com entrepreneur." His book essentially argues that Wikipedia, and the internet in general, is eroding knowledge, wisdom, expertise and culture. <http://arts.independent.co.uk/books/reviews/article2807091.ece>.

6 Slashdot: The Early History of Nupedia and Wikipedia: A Memoir
<http://features.slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=05/04/18/164213&tid=95&tid=149&tid=9>

7 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Arbitration_Committee

8 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dispute_resolution

Simple, immature vandalism remains a problem. For example, stinky-stinky poo cock penis. But the much more complex issues that arise from differences of opinion regarding the relevancy of content, reliability of sources, and 'neutral point of view' lay at the heart of the problem of building consensus. While it might be said that this is as much an issue among expert scholars working towards a contribution to a professional encyclopedia as it is on Wikipedia, this effect is drastically increased when the contributors are from all walks of life, there's more of them, and the article has no final version. The result is that articles are prone to multiple instances of the same dispute where a contributor is forced to defend their content against the same opinions over and over again. The result, argues Sanger, is that experts who would otherwise be willing to contribute to the free encyclopedia become fed up with having to 'suffer fools gladly', and are driven away from the project. This can lead to the situation where, as many have said, the loudest and most persistent voices, although not necessarily the most neutral (or intelligent/informed), will win an argument and dominate an article with its biased views. Thus a controversial page is either caught in an 'edit war' that can persist indefinitely, or it becomes dominated by its editor(s) and expresses only certain views.

The goal for a world encyclopedia would be for it to achieve the 'summation of all human knowledge', as is the stated intention of Wikipedia.⁹ Obviously, opinions are an inevitable part of human knowledge, and 'neutral point of view' entails recognizing bias and having opinions on a subject not eradicated from articles, but expressed factually as opinions, but it is this which has proven to be one of the most persistent problems in the Wikipedia model, given that articles are generally contributed to by authors who both have a passion for their subject and believe they are telling the truth. Perhaps with smaller more limited groups of people, consensus is possible to achieve. However, once Wikipedia grew beyond a certain threshold, with too many people bringing their biases into the content, rephrasing or otherwise subjectively 'correcting' an article, the situation, says Sanger, grew out of control:

After about nine months or so, there were so many contributors, and especially *brand new* contributors, that nothing like a consensus could be reached, for the simple reason that ... [there would] *always* be *somebody* who insisted on expressing disagreement.¹⁰

Despite the creation of the Arbitration Committee, the 'three revert rule' and the guidelines for dispute resolution, the situation was no better in November, 2004, when Jason Scott, an experienced editor who has written several essays criticizing Wikipedia from an insider's point of view, lamented:

It is not hard, browsing over historical edits to majorly contended Wikipedia articles, to see the slow erosion of facts and ideas according to people trying to implement their own idea of neutrality or meaning on top of it. Even if the person who originally wrote a section was well-informed, any huckleberry can wander along and scrawl crayon on it. This does not eventually lead to an improved final entry.¹¹

That there is no final entry for any article thus becomes a curse when faced with the recurring biases that the constant influx of opinion brings to a controversial issue in an encyclopedia that anyone can edit. In this situation, as Scott complains, so-called 'neutral point of view', while good in theory, in

9 "Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing." Slashdot Interview, July, 2004. http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Jimmy_Wales

10 Slashdot: The Early History of Nupedia and Wikipedia: A Memoir
<http://features.slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=05/04/18/164213&tid=95&tid=149&tid=9>

11 Scott, Jason. *The Great Failure of Wikipedia*. November, 2004. <http://ascii.textfiles.com/archives/000060.html>

practice just becomes “yet another hammer for wonks and whackjobs to beat each other”¹² with. So while factual statements of opinions as opinions might sound promising as a way to a more neutral and unbiased article, it has often proven a difficult task given the passion people have for their beliefs, their tendency to think that they are telling a neutral truth, and their freedom to interpret and discredit another author's paragraph as biased or irrelevant.

With the seventh anniversary of Wikipedia fast approaching, it is no surprise that many editors within the community have had the time and experience to come to similar conclusions. Multiple groups from the Wikipedia community have expressed their frustration by branching off to form their own encyclopedias or websites¹³ in order to raise awareness of the perceived censorship on the site, save previous states of certain articles, criticize administrative actions¹⁴, even protest the perceived liberal bias of its content and its troublesome policy for a 'neutral point of view'.

Wikipedia's reputation has only gotten worse with the spreading news of the Essjay controversy in January, 2007, when one of the site's most visible 'academics', a salaried employee of Wikia who enjoyed one of the highest seats within the Wikipedia Administration¹⁵, was exposed to be not the university professor with a Ph.D. that his profile biography claimed him to be, but a 24 year old college dropout with no credentials at all. While Wales initially expressed his support for Essjay using a persona, claiming "I regard it as a pseudonym and I don't really have a problem with it,"¹⁶ he would eventually ask Essjay to resign from 'positions of trust' (ie. the Arbitration Committee) when it was further revealed that he had used his false credentials to win arguments. Of the situation, Wales commented “It's always inappropriate to try to win an argument by flashing your credentials, and even more so if those credentials are inaccurate,” and later proposed that "contributors to [Wikipedia] who claim certain credentials will soon have to prove they really have them,"¹⁷ as was originally done for the Nupedia project.

While the proposal to check credentials might sound promising, it seems rather disappointing in a system where having credentials is not supposed to matter. As noted in the famous New Yorker article that featured the interview with Essjay, Wales “most radical” contribution to the world was to invent “a system that does not favor the Ph.D. over the well-read fifteen-year-old.” In the article, Wales comments: “To me, the key thing is getting it right ... I don't care if they're a high-school kid or a Harvard professor.”¹⁸

It is precisely this mentality that is responsible for counterproductive bickering, argue people like Sanger and Scott, and the resulting frustration has led many to abandon their efforts to contribute to a certain article, or Wikipedia altogether. Once again, the result is articles being dominated not by truth or quality but by the loudest, most persistent voices. It is not consensus, it is hegemony.

This was precisely the case argued in an email discussion from 2006. After Wales claimed that he couldn't “imagine how [Wikipedia] could possibly be any more transparent, and that “there is no such thing as a 'final edit', his correspondent, Robert Cox, replied:

There is something close to a “final edit” on Wikipedia; that is when a handful of individuals take “ownership” of a Wikipedia entry and

12 Ibid.

13 For example, Citizendium, Veropedia, Wikitruth, Conservopedia, and Scholarpedia.

14 Administrative actions such as Jimmy Wales unfairly using his newly minted 'oversight' function to win an argument about his own birth date. http://wikitruth.info/index.php?title=Jimbo%27s_birthday

15 That is to say, Essjay was a highly experienced editor on the Arbitration Committee. He was respected enough to have been interviewed for a high profile article in the New Yorker (listed below).

16 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essjay>

17 Ibid.

18 Schiff, Stacy. *Annals of Information: Know it All*, New Yorker. July, 2006. http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/07/31/060731fa_fact

aggressively revert any attempts to edit “their” page. [...] It’s a neat trick — they demand that I propose changes on the discussion page, ignore me, then when I go ahead and make those changes they revert them, all the while complaining to an admin that I should be banned from editing because I won’t “discuss” changes. The real issues is that these people WANT the page to be massively non-NPOV [neutral point of view] and resent any efforts to alter their “pet project.”¹⁹

As illuminated in Cox's comments, the problems of content dispute, revert wars and page domination remain despite efforts to minimalize them, such as the official guidelines to dispute resolution, the establishment of the Arbitration Committee in 2004, and the 'three revert rule', “whereby those users who reverse the effect of others' contributions to one article more than three times in a 24 hour period may be blocked.”

The point is not to eradicate these problems, although that would be nice, but to minimize them without alienating valuable editors. The general encouragement is “not to feed the trolls,” and thus attempt to resolve differences by means of 'wikilove'. The idea is that a kind and courteous manner, for the most part, leads to the reaching of consensus on articles. This is something that Mr. Wales is sure to understand well from his experience, as reflected in his response to the troubled Cox.

Just listen to the wikilove:

Just make some good faith edits, and write in a non-hostile manner on the talk page that you have an interest in trying to make the article high quality and neutral. Reach out with love and kindness to your opponents and see what happens. I will watch and not interfere.²⁰

Just like wikilove, many other successful efforts to resolve disputes in the past have been created and documented in the official policy for dispute resolution:²¹

- 1) Focus on content
- 2) If urgent, contact administration
- 3) Stay cool
- 4) Discuss with the other party
- 5) Consider a Truce
- 6) Turn to others
- 7) Last resort: Arbitration

It is to be noted that step number six, "turn to others," contains the most options, and presents a formidable gauntlet of noticeboards, third party requests, both unofficial and official requests for mediation, and even links to essays that editors have developed in order to resolve their disputes. The community has by and large established a peer-review system to solve disputes between individuals, and for the more major conflicts between groups, they can now turn to the authority of the Arbitration Committee, a small group of about 30 contributors who have a lot of experience within the community (at least 1000 edits) and are voted into power by the community.²²

There are other measures that have developed to advance the Wikipedia model. First of all,

19 Glaser, Mark. *Wales Discusses Political Bias on Wikipedia*, MediaShift, 21 April 2006, , http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2006/04/email_debatewales_discusses_po.html

20 Ibid.

21 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dispute_resolution

22 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Arbitration_Committee_Elections_December_2007

anybody who contributes for a few months becomes an 'administrator' and is given the tools to block a vandal's I.P. Address and temporarily protect pages from editing while they solve their disputes. To further combat the issue of vandalism and spam, an experimental policy has been put in place for the Wikipedia Germany site, whereby all edits made by users whose accounts are less than four days old require the approval of a 'trusted editor' with at least some experience²³. Other decisive actions include the establishment of an 'oversight' function²⁴, whereby particularly sensitive information such as phone numbers can be permanently deleted from the database from which they would be otherwise retrievable, as the entire history of Wikipedia edits is documented.

That the entire history of Wikipedia edits is documented has also allowed for beneficial software to be developed by volunteers to forward the Wikipedia cause. For example, WikiScanner²⁵, which was designed in August, 2007, by Virgil Griffith, an 'American hacker' and student, links the I.P. Addresses of anonymous edits to their originating organization in the hopes of catching 'insider editing', that is, controversial corporations editing their own articles in their own interest. The use of WikiScanner immediately made headlines around the world when it was shown that individuals from the networks of numerous political parties, governments and newspapers, the C.I.A. and the F.B.I, the Vatican, Fox News, the Church of Scientology, Amnesty International, and many corporations like ExxonMobil and Pepsi, had been making edits to Wikipedia, often to their own pages.

While 'insider editing' (a.k.a. 'conflict of interest editing') may only be discouraged and not forbidden in the policy of Wikipedia, it has been found that many edits to controversial topics about a corporation originated from a network that the corporation owned. In some instances, entire sections of articles describing criticisms of a company had been deleted. By developing the ability to associate the I.P. Address of an article's editor to its originating company, any controversial edits by an organization to Wikipedia can spark a public relations disaster, which was the end goal in Griffith's developing the software. In his "WikiScanner FAQ" he states: "Overall—especially for non-controversial topics—Wikipedia already works. For controversial topics, Wikipedia can be made more reliable through techniques like [WikiScanner]."²⁶

Another software with the aim of making Wikipedia more trustworthy has been developed by professor Luca de Alfaro at the University of California, Santa Cruz.²⁷ Alfaro's software analyzes the entire editing history of a user to estimate their trustworthiness according to the longevity of the content they contribute. The program then assigns a colour code to content according to its author's reliability score, giving viewers at least some idea of the reputation of an article's anonymous author(s).

But what about cases where erroneous information remains in an article for long periods of time? This was the case in the Siegenthaler controversy of 2005, when a hoax article that associated journalist John Siegenthaler, Sr. with the assassination of JFK remained undetected on Wikipedia for over four months.²⁸ In the resulting controversy, Jimmy Wales appeared on CNN to discuss the lack of accountability on Wikipedia, explaining that the site is not reliable as a primary resource, but perfect for "background reading," and declare that since "Wikipedia's use had grown faster than its self-monitoring system could comfortably handle, ... new page creation would be deliberately restricted to account-holders only."²⁹ While this new restriction does not prevent erroneous information from remaining on the site for long periods, perhaps Luca de Alfaro's program, by calculating a reliability score and colour-coding the content of registered editors, will help readers to better discern what facts

23 Niccolai, James. *Wikipedia Taking on the Vandals in Germany*. September, 2006. PC Advisor.
<http://www.pcadvisor.co.uk/news/index.cfm?newsid=7177>

24 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Oversight>

25 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WikiScanner>

26 Ibid.

27 Test the demo of the software yourself at <http://trust.cse.ucsc.edu/>

28 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siegenthaler_controversy

29 Ibid.

to trust.

Wikipedia nevertheless remains a work in progress that is admittedly only reliable as 'background reading'. Considering the "hands off" nature of its model, I don't think Wikipedia's sketchy reputation is going to change any time in the near future. But perhaps its reputation doesn't need to change. While librarians continue to express their mistrust of the model, and universities continue to ban, or at least frown upon, its citation, it remains the 10th most visited site on the internet. It is also by far the largest encyclopedia ever created. As of November 2007, Wikipedia has approximately 9.1 million articles in 252 languages, with its English version alone at 2.1 million pages³⁰ in comparison to the 120,000 articles of the most comprehensive edition of the *Britannica*.³¹

This success has not stopped some groups from forking off to form their own encyclopedias that operate under what they consider to be improved principles. Veropedia is designed to 'mirror' articles from Wikipedia in versions approved by its contributors. Larry Sanger has broken off from Wikipedia altogether to form Citizendium in 2007, which functions on a model that seems rather familiar:

The project aims to improve on the Wikipedia model by requiring all contributors to use their real names, by strictly moderating the project for unprofessional behaviors, and by providing what it calls "gentle expert oversight" of everyday contributors. A main feature of the project is its "approved articles", which have each undergone a form of peer-review by credentialed topic-experts and are closed to real-time editing.³²

While not the only online encyclopedia that produces wiki articles in an 'approved' state³³, Sanger's project hopes to enlist expertise to function as an authority to create its own articles, with the hope of unseating Wikipedia as the "go-to destination for general information online."³⁴

Although Citizendium will work toward a more reliable free encyclopedia, I think that many people will prefer to stick to the anonymity and near-chaotic style of Wikipedia. The cyborg that is the collective mind of the internet needs an encyclopedic place to express both its anarchistic and its authoritative sides. Furthermore, I'm not so sure that the experts at Citizendium will ever 'approve' the type of article that describes, with schematic diagrams, how to build a stove from a discarded soda can.³⁵ Finally, with the headstart that Wikipedia has, and the lack of 'expertise' that at least some of its 252 languages are bound to have, we can expect Wikipedia to long overshadow its competition in at least some parts of the world.

In conclusion, with Wales' description of Wikipedia as the "effort to create and distribute a free encyclopedia of the highest possible quality to every single person on the planet in their own language," one can only hope that this project might continue to evolve in form and quality in order to make H.G. Wells' (and humanity's) dream come true. After all, despite the necessary and inevitable shortcomings that arise out of the attempt to reach a consensus on virtually any topic one can think of, despite the impossibility of writing without a bias, the presentation of such a system -no matter how imperfect- is still a far more advanced opportunity than what came before for the average world citizen to perpetually educate themselves, and one can think of no other way of accomplishing this faster than with an encyclopedia that lays its doors so open for virtually anyone to engage in scholarship.

30 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Wikipedia

31 Schiff, Stacy. *Annals of Information: Know it All*, New Yorker. July, 2006.

http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/07/31/060731fa_fact

32 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizendium>

33 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veropedia>

34 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizendium>

35 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beverage-can_stove