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Open collaboration communities, such as Wikipedia, are a relatively new phenomenon. The advances in technology have made it possible for complex, social systems involving large groups of people, who are dispersed all over the world and do not know each other otherwise, to emerge and successfully cooperate for a common goal (Kelty, 2010). These new modes of collective production rely largely on participative and egalitarian organization models, resembling industrial democracy cooperatives or kibbutzim (Greenwood, González Santos, and Cantón, 1991), and yet are significantly different because of their virtual character. In this chapter, I describe the community decision-making rules and procedures used on Wikipedia, the largest collective project of humankind (Jemielniak, 2014), so as to highlight naturally emerging regulations in an a-hierarchical, large society of knowledge creators.

Wikipedia is a good model community for studying self-regulation in an egalitarian environment for many reasons. First, unlike other open collaboration projects coming from the F/L/OSS (Free/Libre/Open Source Software) movement, the motivations of contributors are largely different (Ciffolilli, 2003; Sun, Fang, and Lim, 2011; Yang and Lai, 2010). While open source developers often work without any financial benefits, they can still build up their portfolio, recognition, and professional network—which is in stark contrast with Wikipedia editors, whose contributions are very unlikely to bring them any benefit in work life. As a result, Wikipedia is a unique movement, in which participation is not motivated by any external gains (which makes it similar to online gaming systems, such as Tibia or the World of Warcraft), but which still comes down to creating a serious knowledge-intensive product for the common good. This fact makes studying emerging regulations all the more instructive/insightful, as the participants are not bound to stay in the community by any financial or work-related incentives.

Second, unlike F/L/OSS projects, Wikipedia is run by a collective of non-professionals.
While open source software engineers can stratify themselves depending on their programming expertise, virtually nobody is an expert in encyclopedia writing style. As a result, Wikipedians have much fewer opportunities to create informal hierarchies based on participants’ external competences, talents, and experience (Lakhani and Von Hippel, 2003; Lampe, Wash, Velasquez, and Ozkaya, 2010). This phenomenon also makes Wikipedia a model example for studying a-hierarchical designs.

Finally, the Wikipedia community is driven by a strong egalitarian ideology. Equality of peers, irrespective of their background, function, or role on Wikipedia, is strongly embedded in Wikipedian culture and procedures. As it is also a virtual community of practice, in which most members never have a chance to see the others in person, it is not prone to stratifying based on typical social stigmas (Goffman, 1963), even though other stigmas naturally emerge (and are related to literacy, vocabulary range, grammar, etc., for instance a person making frequent spelling errors will likely not be treated seriously). For all these reasons Wikipedia offers a fascinating and unique object of analysis for all scholars focusing on participative designs in general, and action research in particular. Moreover we gain insight about how very large, volunteer efforts emerge and self-regulate; a topic of general interest to those involved in change efforts more generally, such as action researchers.

Interestingly, although F/L/OSS communities have been studied by many academics there is much less research about Wikipedia, especially conducted by action researchers or by qualitative means (Chen, 2011; Konieczny, 2010; Reagle, 2010). This may be due to the fact that, although open for everyone, this community still requires a lot of time if one is to gather some understanding of its functioning.

The present chapter is a result of an eight-year participative, ethnographic study of the Wikipedia community. During the time the study was conducted, hardly ever was there a day I would not log into Wikipedia and participate in developing articles or in the community life. I have made over 10,000 edits, have become an administrator, which is to say a trusted user but with little unilateral power, as well as one of seven ‘bureaucrats’ and one of seven ‘checkusers’ of Polish Wikipedia, as well as one of about 40 global ‘stewards’ (users with full technical access, including insight into hidden editions, blocking users, etc.) for the whole Wikipedia movement. I have also become a social activist of the Wikimedia movement, and the first chairman of its Funds Dissemination Committee (a body advising on the distribution of several million USD per annum between Wikimedia organizations). This chapter relies on my native understanding of the community, grounded in participation, as well as participant observations, interviews, and case studies.

ABOUT WIKIPEDIA

Wikipedia was established in 2001. As early as in 2005 it was recognized as going ‘head to head’ with Britannica, according to research published by *Nature* journal (Giles, 2005). Since then the number of Wikipedia entries has increased fivefold. As of now, Wikipedia has 50 times more content (measured by the total number of words) than Britannica. Wikipedia is also proven to be reliable (Reavley et al., 2012), and much better sourced (Rivington, 2007).

English Wikipedia currently has over 20 million named accounts, about 250,000 accounts created every month, and over 130,000 active editors (performing an edit within the last 30 days). There are hundreds of other Wikipedias and related projects (Wikiversities, Wikinews, etc.), run by independent and self-governing communities, and the top nine Wikipedias have over 1 million articles each. Yet, with over 4.5 million articles as of 2014, English Wikipedia is by far the largest project of this kind. Thus, it
is definitely worthwhile to have a closer look at English Wikipedia rules, especially since most other projects share the general principles and policies, and often have developed their own rules based on those originating from the English rules. English Wikipedia is also enormous in terms of its vibrant communal life: even though its number of articles alone is pretty impressive, it is worth mentioning that English Wikipedia contains a total of nearly 28 million other pages. Some of them are redirects, some are categories, and some are discussions for the articles themselves – but a huge part of this output are more general community discussions, rules, comments, or even jokes. Without a good internal understanding of the community it is barely possible to make any sense of any of them, because of the sheer amount of text involved.

Even just the amount of regulatory documents on English Wikipedia is daunting. At present, English Wikipedia has over 50 official policies, with almost 150,000 words. Many of them are related to notability of people, places, or organizations, and many address the norms of conduct in the community. And the official policies are just a smaller part of a wider ecosystem of community regulation. There are additional guidelines and interpretive essays on how to behave, and their number exceeds 450: just 29 guidelines on collaborative practices and on appropriate behavior total to nearly 60,000 words. Beyond that, there are more than 700 additional essays, comments, suggestions, and interpretations of rules created by Wikipedians. In this chapter, I am going to present and analyze several chosen ones, related to participative organization of the community.

**WIKIPEDIA RULES**

**Conduct**

The Wikipedia community relies on a set of clear conduct policies. One of the most important of them, at least for Wikipedians, and forming also one of the five so-called ‘pillars’ of Wikipedia, is *civility* (others are listed at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia: Five_pillars). In principle, this rule requires all editors to refrain from making personal attacks and to be cooperative. What is not typical and obvious about this regulation is that the requirement to remain civil is unconditional: all Wikipedians are expected to behave in a polite way, irrespective of whether they have been provoked or not. This means that if a person is insulted or attacked on Wikipedia and he or she also bursts into anger or retaliates, both the attacker and the attacked may expect to face the consequences (being blocked from editing). In fact, quite often I have witnessed blocking both the aggressor and the defender, and in my role as Polish Wikipedia administrator I have applied such blocks myself. One of the fundamental reasons for such a solution, which at first glance may appear to be unfair, is avoiding the need to find out who started a dispute. While striking, this rule is deeply rooted in Wikipedian egalitarianism: it eliminates the need for an informal arbiter, as it comes down to an assumption that any form of incivility is forbidden. A similar policy states that there should be no personal attacks: in short, only viewpoints may be discussed, and not people. Criticizing or denigrating other disputants is strictly forbidden. These two rules are directly connected with the policy of assuming good faith. It requires editors to try to take what other people say at face value and, unless there is some strong evidence to the contrary, believe that even if what they read may sound malicious or mean, in fact it may be well-meant.

Understanding the rules of civility, no personal attacks, and good faith assumption helps in putting the communal decision-making practices in a wider context. Decisions on Wikipedia are, as a general rule, made collectively, and not just through voting (even though voting is occasionally used to
determine the community’s preferences, it is understood mainly as a tool to discover them and not primarily to make a decision). Reaching a *consensus* is considered to be a fundamental model for decision-making. Editors are expected to seek consensus, even when they are absolutely certain that the other side is wrong and they are right. Advice given to editors is to maintain a neutral, detached, and civil attitude, and avoid engaging in emotional, ideological, or winning-oriented argumentation. Obviously, asymmetries of power still do exist (as will be discussed later), but at least the spirit of the rules emphasizes minimizing them and promotes a radically equal treatment and outgoing attitude. This approach indicates an important difference from an action research process, where asymmetries of power make it often impossible to arbitrate disputes on the mere basis of formal rules of fairness and civility.

On Wikipedia, not being outstandingly conciliatory and outgoing is naturally not punished; however the community very much appreciates those who can keep their cool. Stoicism and patience in dealing with even the most radical disputants earns a lot of respect among Wikipedians, and so do active attempts to understand the other side and to make even the most obvious truth more explicit and logical for all disputants. On the other hand, losing temper even with the most evident ‘troll’ (disruptive users indulging in inciting and irritating others) lowers one’s status in the community, which is visible in communal elections (people, who have reacted emotionally in the past, are much less likely to gather sufficient support to be elected – quite obviously, this rather patriarchal norm of lack of emotion favors a very particular type of a user, very much in line with the archetypal computer geek).

### Roles

All roles on Wikipedia are community-elected. There are several functions of special trust which relates to levels of access allowed, however, all of them are considered to be technical rather than hierarchical. This means that the functionaries are only given certain tools in recognition of the communal trust that they are not going to abuse these rights, but they have to follow all policies just like everyone else. Moreover, they cannot use their status in disputes: arguing that a disputant should give in, because she or he is challenging an administrator most likely leads not only to losing an argument, but also to a demotion of a given administrator (demotions are technically performed by stewards, but only within the community’s mandate; Wikimedia Foundation paid staff cannot interfere). In practice, naturally, just holding the status of an administrator may add some weight to arguments with certain editors. However, it should be noted that general expectations toward administrators in terms of conforming to norms are definitely higher than toward regular users. Also, norm enforcement in the case of administrators is sometimes stricter: administrators may be more likely to be blocked or warned when they misbehave, as it is generally assumed that they should know better.

Interestingly, some members of the community nevertheless believe that Wikipedia is run by a powerful, informal cabal. The notion of cabal dates back to Usenet and is quite widespread in many open collaboration projects. This fact may be related to the way this social system works in practice, as will be described below.

### Participative Design at Work: Mistrust

In spite of the highly egalitarian rhetoric and ethos, typical for open collaboration projects (Raymond, 1999/2004, pp. 88–89), or perhaps as a result of it, community roles of trust are shrouded with a lot of tension. As becoming an administrator on English Wikipedia requires a consensus of at least 80% support of all voters and as it is one of the few
situations in which a single voice of any user has so much weight, administrative elections are often the ground of severe criticism. In fact, the procedure of requesting administrator rights is commonly referred to as ‘running the gauntlet’, simply because of the amount of bashing and denigration a candidate receives. Although the rules of civility, no personal attacks, and assuming good faith may be followed by most of the voters, there are still many ways of challenging a given candidate’s suitability for the position, or asking him or her tricky questions to ‘prove’ they are not ready. The egalitarianism results also in a type of passive-aggressive anti-elitism and general resentment towards any organizational power. Possibly as a result, since 2007 the number of people applying for adminship on English Wikipedia decreases year by year (by as much as 40% per annum), while the success rates for being elected drop as well (from about 75% in the years before 2005 to an average of about 35% in recent years).

Although, as mentioned, administrators do not have any formal status giving them more power per se, and even the array of additional technical privileges they enjoy is limited, in a highly equal environment even the slightest appearances of status differential raises a lot of contention.

Similarly, as the rules for consensus-seeking determine that agreement is of highest importance, as long as the disputants do not insult each other and are involved in a ‘democratic dialogue’ (Schafft and Greenwood, 2003), they can discuss at length. And discuss they do, which leads to another adverse effect: winning an argument on Wikipedia more often than not is based on one’s persistence, rather than solely because of being right. Simply enough, less determined disputants get tired and leave the conversation. Also, the lack of hierarchies encourages users to be bold and express themselves. However, such openness results in blistering public criticism (Shirky, 2012), which especially for newcomers and bystanders creates an image of an extremely antagonized and hostile environment and deters them from joining the community: even if discussions are civil, niceties are not a priority for most of disputants, and most certainly the debates are much more verbose than in traditional organizations. According to some studies, the highly critical and discursive character of the Wikipedia community may also be discouraging female editors from participation (Collier and Bear, 2012), which is a serious problem for Wikipedia, as currently just less than 20% of editors are female (Lam et al., 2011). Similarly, the aforementioned expected detachment and emotionless discourse favors users who resemble Mister Spock more than a regular human (or Counselor Troi, the uniquely feminine character on the popular TV Sci-Fi show, Star Trek).

A related problem stems from collaborative rule generation. Participation in the creation of rules definitely forms part of the attractiveness of open collaboration designs (Jessop, 2010). However, it also leads to severe bureaucratization and instruction creep, deterring new users (Butler, Joyce, and Pike, 2008). With the amount of regulation so high, it is not only very difficult for new users to find motivation to acquire the minimal sufficient understanding of them, but also the very process of formalization results in stratifying users as those in the know, and those who still did not learn enough rules and procedures. For an ideologically free-driven and flat organization such a process is disastrous (Ostrom, 1990), possibly resulting in social system instability in the long run.

Finally, even the very egalitarian character of the community brings unique problems of its own. After all, ‘to strive for a “structureless” group is as useful and as deceptive, as to aim at an “objective” news story, “value-free” social science or a “free” economy’ (Freeman, 1972, p. 152). Indeed, Wikipedia has many informal stratifications (Rafaeli and Ariel, 2008). The participative design does not prevent informal organizational hierarchies from emerging (Viggiani, 1991), but they are perceived as more unjust than in
regular organizations (Viggiani, 1997), and the legitimization of natural informal leaders is much more difficult.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Even though participative designs have immediate and obvious advantages, they also have adverse effects, which are particularly visible in the clear-cut examples of open collaboration communities.

Quite surprisingly for a volunteer-driven community putting so much emphasis on reducing hierarchies and formalities, Wikipedians are facing advancing bureaucratization of their rules. Such procedurализation definitely increases the threshold of participation for newcomers. Similarly, the open critique culture allows everyone to express their view. Yet, at the same time, it deters those who are less used to being criticized, those who are more oriented at feeling good with the collaborators than on the product of the collaboration, and also those who simply misread the lack of fear of hierarchy as a symptom of fundamental, major discord. As mentioned, the enforcement of fully egalitarian organizational culture and of absolute peer equality adds to natural leaders’ delegitimization.

With obvious similarities to action research projects, open collaboration initiatives seem to be more radical in terms of egalitarianism and democracy, with all their pros and cons. Overcoming hierarchy is not an issue for them, which is a refreshing novelty when compared with traditional organizations – action researchers often spend way too much time fighting the inertia and a formal pecking order. At the same time, formalities sometimes exceed the commercial standards, and definitely are not typical for a volunteer movement, and the lack of hierarchy occasionally results in disruptive conflicts, and leadership impotence, impossible to overcome even with help of the most competent action researchers.

Since open collaboration communities practically introduce many of action research postulates, observing the nuances and differences is of utter importance for action research theory. Further studies are needed to better understand the context of member empowerment, spontaneous rules enactment and fossilization, member retention, as well as organizational democracy in a highly bureaucratic environment, to mention just a few directions.

**NOTES**

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1 Current statistics can be checked at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedians
3 For more on trust and access see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:User_access_levels
4 For a list of more and less serious cabals on Wikipedia, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_cabals

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