

# **Wikipedia and Authority**

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*Preliminary and incomplete – Please do not quote.*

As it celebrates its tenth anniversary in January 2010, Wikipedia can rightfully claim to be the most successful example of online commons-based and oriented peer production. This mass project has taken on many features of the hacker universe, starting with the notion that power should detach from corporate hierarchies so that participants are free to create their own management structures. Hacker-inspired peer projects are also characterised by the tension between openness and elitism; what distinguishes Wikipedians from outsiders is their familiarity with project language and rules.<sup>1</sup> The term ‘governance’ is frequently used to describe the arrangements of power relations in such groups: Wikipedia governance has variously been described as an example of the give and take typical of bazaar governance,<sup>2</sup> as anarchic,<sup>3</sup> as democratic,<sup>4</sup> as a hybrid of different governance systems,<sup>5</sup> in any case as a self-governing institution<sup>6</sup> which can also be called an ‘adhocracy’.<sup>7</sup>

Domination in Web 2.0 projects such as Wikipedia is indeed distributed: this means that new entrants can rapidly attain powerful positions, resulting in a multiplicity of autonomous leaders. This paper argues that a good way to understand this distribution of power is to examine the roles of people within the Wikipedia organisational structure. Occupying a recognised role means that people can operate as authorities who legitimately exercise restraining actions over other participants. ‘Authority’ or legitimate domination was long a core notion for organisation studies, but its meaning was eroded by its association with functionalist theory and its emphasis on the stability of systems.<sup>8</sup> Rather than framing actions in terms of legitimation, a strategy more appropriate to an anti-authoritarian environment such as Wikipedia might be to frame authorities as *justifying* restraining actions by referring to common understandings or conventions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wiki-vocabulary includes ‘forum shopping’ (canvassing for support), ‘fancruft’ (unencyclopaedic content), ‘smerge’ (small merge), ‘hatnote’ (‘short notes placed at the top of an article before the primary topic’) and the like. This specialised language does not appear in ‘article space’ but in talk pages where participants debate and negotiate.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Raymond, *The Cathedral & the Bazaar*, Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Reagle, ‘A Case of Mutual Aid: Wikipedia, Politeness, and Perspective Taking’, *Wikimania 2005*, Frankfurt, Germany, 5 July, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Don Descy, ‘The Wiki: True Web Democracy’, *TechTrends* 50.1 (2006): 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Todd Holloway, Miran Bozicevic and Katy Brner, ‘Analyzing and Visualizing the Semantic Coverage of Wikipedia and its Author’, *Complexity* 12.3 (2005): 30-40.

<sup>6</sup> Sander Spek, Eric Postma and H. Jaap van den Herik, ‘Wikipedia: Organisation from a Bottom-up Approach’, *WikiSym 2006*, Odense, Denmark (2006, August).

<sup>7</sup> Piotr Konieczny, ‘Adhocratic Governance in the Internet Age: A Case of Wikipedia’, *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 7.4, 263-283.

<sup>8</sup> Stewart R. Clegg, David Courpasson, Nelson Phillips, *Power and Organisations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

<sup>9</sup> Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006 [1991].

## Authority and Justification

To name these conventions, I propose a remix of the classic Weberian concept of ‘authority’ or ‘legitimate domination’. An individual type of justification, based on the extraordinary skills of an individual, is *charismatic hacker justification*. Steven Levy defined the ‘hacker ethic’ as the commitment to the free access of computers and information, the mistrust of centralized authority and the insistence that hackers be evaluated solely in terms of technical virtuosity and not ‘bogus’ criteria such as degrees, age, race or position.<sup>10</sup> In Weber’s original typology, merit-based promotion distinguishes legal systems from patrimonial and charismatic ones.<sup>11</sup> But in the hacker universe, and by extension in all volunteer-staffed online peer projects, if work for the project constitutes the basis for recognition, this recognition is ‘paid’ in affect, in the shape of the respect of one’s peers, and not by an official promotion, commendation or financial bonus awarded by a hierarchy. This de-bureaucratisation or charismatisation of merit means that people have to prove their competence to all during public performances of excellence.

[table 1 about here]

Web 2.0 precipitated an evolution of online charisma, which no longer solely depended on exceptional competence, on creative action. Online charisma now also stemmed from the position on a network, and could apply to non-human actors such as websites. This new justificatory resource is called *index-charisma* since the authority of actors is being derived from their relative position in an index of web pages, which is the core component of search engines. Index-charisma results from the independent choices of a multitude of people: in the case of Google for example, links made by other sites and decisions made by Internet users when confronted to the result of a query determine the ranking of websites. While it is a kind of network centrality, index authority differs from the network centrality traditionally studied by Social Network Analysis (SNA) because in SNA centrality measures are calculated only over the actors in the study, while index authority is calculated over the entire web graph. The index authority of a given website cannot be easily modified by changing a few links in the hyperlink network formed by this website’s immediate

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1978 [1922].

ecological niche.<sup>12</sup> While the site itself obviously has high index authority, this justificatory regime cannot be said to operate within the project, with the possible exception of highly-trafficked policy pages.

Though the democratisation of online communication and production thanks to tools such as blogs and wikis has stretched the boundaries of belonging, the Internet remains an exclusive enclave. Within this protected universe, strong divisions persist, deriving from the identity of its first inhabitants. Like Free Software, Wikipedia constitutes an environment with a highly skewed gender distribution. According to a United Nations University survey, only 25% of Wikipedians are female.<sup>13</sup> Criticism of aggressive behaviour in online settings was long disqualified as constituting an intolerable censorship of freedom of speech.<sup>14</sup> The agonistic spirit of netiquette lives on in Wikipedia, as it is still acceptable to communicate aggressively on the site, provided that the comments are not ‘personal’.<sup>15</sup> Other manifestations of *archaic force* are the vandalism and trolling which afflict the project.

After charisma and archaic force, a third type of convention can be detected in online projects. Following the expansion of free medical clinics, legal collectives, food cooperatives, free schools, and alternative newspapers in the 1970s, Rothschild-Whitt defined collectivist organisations as alternative institutions which ‘self-consciously reject the norms of rational-bureaucracy’.<sup>16</sup> Aside from their value-rational orientation to social action (based on belief in the justness of a cause), collectivist organisations are groups in which authority resides not in the individual, by virtue of incumbency in office or expertise, but ‘in the collectivity as a whole’; decisions become authoritative to the extent that all members have the right to full and equal participation. There are no established rules of order, no formal motions and amendments, no votes, but instead a ‘consensus process in which all members participate in the collective formulation of problems and negotiation

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Ackland and Mathieu O’Neil, ‘Online Collective Identity: The Case of the Environmental Movement’, under review.

<sup>13</sup> Rüdiger Glott and Rishab Ghosh, ‘Analysis of Wikipedia Survey. Topic: Age and Gender Differences’, UNU-Merit, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Herring, ‘The Rhetorical Dynamics of Gender Harassment On-Line’, *The Information Society* 15.3 (1999): 151-167.

<sup>15</sup> Sage Ross, ‘Review of *Cyberchiefs: Autonomy and Authority in Online Tribes*’, *The Wikipedia Signpost*, 15 June, 2009, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedia\\_Signpost/2009-06-15/Book\\_review](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedia_Signpost/2009-06-15/Book_review)

<sup>16</sup> Joyce Rothschild-Whitt, ‘The Collectivist Organisation: An Alternative to Rational-Bureaucratic Models’, *American Sociological Review* 44.4 (August 1979): 509.

of decisions'.<sup>17</sup> The Internet Engineering Task Force thus always took pains to portray itself as anti-bureaucratic, as a collection of 'happenings' with no board of directors or formal membership, and open registration and attendance at meetings: 'The closest thing there is to being an IETF member is being on the IETF or working group mailing lists.'<sup>18</sup> In reality, this formal openness was based on an unspoken premise: only the highly technically competent need apply. Therein lies an important difference between the free encyclopedia and free software. Central to Wikipedia is the radical redefinition of expertise, which is no longer embodied in a person but in a process: the aggregation of many points of view. This is the famous concept of the 'wisdom of the crowd' which applies to knowledge the free-software slogan that 'with enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow'.<sup>19</sup>

The learned authority of experts is commonly distinguished from the administrative authority of leaders - but when computers started to be networked, only hackers knew how to manage systems: they assumed the power to control conditions of access and user privileges. Wikipedia shares the hacker rejection of outside credentials (only work for the project counts). Further, work being broken down to such a micro-contributory level has led many to posit that the project rejects any kind of expert authority. In reality homegrown forms of expertise have emerged and the importation of real or imaginary external credentials occurs frequently.<sup>20</sup> However these forms contradict the wisdom of the crowd: traditional expertise cannot support administrative actions in an online mass peer project.

## **Authority and Wikipedia**

If expertise is not the basis for decision-making on Wikipedia, what is? Like most commons-based peer production projects, the free encyclopedia comprises both collectivist or *sovereign* and charismatic justifications. Diverse manifestations of online charisma share a central feature: they are intimately linked to the characteristics of the individual person or site, they are not transferable to anyone else. The *identification of role and person* of hacker charisma is first embodied in Wikipedia in the person of the project's remaining co-founder. Without a doubt, Jimmy Wales occupies a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid: 511-512.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Hoffman and Susan Harris. 'The Tao of the IETF: A Novice's Guide to the Internet Engineering Task Force', RFC 4677, 30 November, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond, *The Cathedral & the Bazaar*; James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, Boston: Little, Brown, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Mathieu O'Neil, 'Shirky and Sanger, or the Costs of Crowdsourcing', *Journal of Science Communication* 9.1 (2010).

special place in Wikipedia. Semi-facetiously known by others as the project's 'God-king' or 'benevolent dictator',<sup>21</sup> and by himself as its 'spiritual leader',<sup>22</sup> he is in any case Wikipedia's chief spokesperson and champion. Though ultimate effective power may rest in the Wikimedia foundation, this is a distant and faceless entity, whereas Wales' visage adorns fundraising campaigns and he involves himself in site management.

In 2006 Marshall Poe approvingly described his 'benign rule', asserting that Wales had repeatedly demonstrated an 'astounding reluctance to use his power, even when the community begged him to', refusing to exile disruptive users or erase offensive material.<sup>23</sup> In fact Wales still wields extraordinary powers. When a user contradicted him by unblocking a block of a problematic user made by Wales, the co-founder slapped a week-long ban on him. In July 2008 Wales intervened in a discussion about whether an admin had acted appropriately when accused of misogyny by stepping in and cursorily 'desysopping' the admin.<sup>24</sup> Wales also makes dramatic interventions in policy discussions, as in March 2007 when he reverted the merger of the categories of "Verifiability", "No original research" and "Reliable sources" into "Attribution", a move which had been under community discussion for months.<sup>25</sup> Since they were performed by the project's charismatic co-founder, these actions were not perceived as unjustified. However they contradict the procedural basis of a sovereign authority regime, and generated controversy. For all that, it is apparent that interventions by the co-founder have such high visibility and, as the project continues to grow, diminishing justificatory power, that they will be increasingly challenged as newer entrants enter the project.

Charisma can also be distributed, as when it appears though the affective rewards which editors exhibit on their personal pages. Contributions to the project are statistically measurable by software tools: reputation on Wikipedia is a function of the number of edits or 'edit counts'.<sup>26</sup> But there is

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<sup>21</sup> David Mehegan, 'Bias, Sabotage Haunt Wikipedia's Free World', *Boston Globe*, 12 February, 2006: C1.

<sup>22</sup> Jimmy Wales 'Foundation Discretion Regarding Personnel Matters', posting to Wikimedia Foundation mailing list, 15 December, 2007,

<http://lists.wikimedia.org/pipermail/foundation-l/2007-December/036069.html>

<sup>23</sup> Marshall Poe, 'The Hive', *Atlantic Monthly*, September 2006 [online].

<sup>24</sup> Mathieu O'Neil, *Cyberchiefs: Autonomy and Authority in Online Tribes*, London: Pluto Press, 2009: 258.

<sup>25</sup> Konieczny, 'Adhocratic Governance in the Internet Age': 270.

<sup>26</sup> See Aniket Kittur, Ed Chi, Bryan A. Pendleton, Bongwon Suh and Todd Mytkowicz, 'Power of the Few vs. Wisdom of the Crowd: Wikipedia and the Rise of the Bourgeoisie', Twenty-fifth Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, CHI 2007, San Jose, CA, 28 April–3 May, 2007.

little social validation to be found in a display of statistics, or in assertions that one's best work lies in Featured Article x, y and z for that matter. Regard for the hard graft accomplished for the project is instead materialised in 'barnstars', idiosyncratic tokens of appreciation which are publicly conferred by one participant to another and appear on the personal pages of project participants. Ultimately however, though reputation may serve to influence others during a debate or dispute, it does not enable restraining actions.

The clearest manifestation of administrative power on a digital network is the capacity to exclude participants (or classes or participants) or to strip them of some of their privileges (such as editing a page). Originally the Wales dealt with every instance of disruptive behaviour, but in October 2001, he appointed a small group of system administrators.<sup>27</sup> The rising volume of contributions eventually compelled him to formally announce in 2003:

I just wanted to say that becoming a sysop is \*not a big deal\*. I think perhaps I'll go through semi-willy-nilly and make a bunch of people who have been around for awhile sysops. I want to dispel the aura of 'authority' around the position. It's merely a technical matter that the powers given to sysops are not given out to everyone. I don't like that there's the apparent feeling here that being granted sysop status is a really special thing.<sup>28</sup>

The project similarly claims that it is 'not a bureaucracy'.<sup>29</sup> Yet Wikipedia, like most large peer produced projects, comprises typically bureaucratic features such as the maintenance of archives of all decisions, the existence of rules, and, particularly, the *separation of roles and persons*: any Wikipedia editor can become an 'administrator' and hence exercise authority over other participants; these officers can also be replaced by someone else. A complex hierarchy has emerged, composed not only of 'admins' (or 'sysops') but also of 'stewards' and 'bureaucrats', each of these roles being endowed with specific tools and competencies. The difference with corporate bureaus are the stated transparency of decisions and commitment to consensus-building. The complement to online charisma - online sovereign justification - can be thought of as a fusion of direct-democratic and bureaucratic traits.

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<sup>27</sup> Stacy Schiff, 'Know it All', *New Yorker*, 31 April 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Jimmy Wales, 'Sysop status', posting to *Wikien-I mailing list*, 11 February, 2003.

<sup>29</sup> Wikipedia: What Wikipedia Is Not, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:What\\_Wikipedia\\_is\\_not](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:What_Wikipedia_is_not)

## Authority and Vandalism

Traditionally content creators were ‘pre-admins’: they were occasional editors, specialists. A study analysing the work of a sample of Wikipedia editors showed that new users created three-quarters of the high-quality content, especially during their first three or four months on-wiki. Initially admins produce high levels of content at a less rapid pace, but as they become more involved in meta-matters their contributions become both more frequent and less content-oriented.<sup>30</sup> Their primary concern is now for the health of the project itself; they have become custodians. This division between content-oriented and process-oriented users can generate tension.

Editors nominated for a request for adminship (WP:RFA) must field questions from the community for seven days in order to assess their experience and trustworthiness. Close attention is paid to a candidate’s record on handling contentious issues, such as content disputes with other editors. Any registered user can ask questions or vote. The decision is not based on strict numerical data but on ‘rough consensus’ (as determined by a bureaucrat), which means receiving around 75 per cent of support.<sup>31</sup> It is proving increasingly hard to become a Wikipedia administrator: 2,700 candidates were nominated between 2001 and 2008, with a success rate of 53 per cent. The rate has dropped from 75.5 per cent until 2005 to 42 per cent in 2006 and 2007. Article contribution was not a strong predictor of success. The most successful candidates are those who have edited the Wikipedia policy or project space; such an edit is worth ten article edits. Conversely, edits to Arbitration or Mediation Committee pages, or to a wikiquette noticeboard, decrease the likelihood of being selected.<sup>32</sup>

The most important responsibility of sysops, and the one which has proved most momentous in terms of long-term impact, is to protect the project from malicious editing. Since anyone can contribute anonymously to Wikipedia, the temptation to cause mischief has seldom been resisted. There are many shades of vandalism, including ‘misinformation, mass deletions, partial deletions,

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<sup>30</sup> Seth Anthony, ‘Contribution Patterns Among Active Wikipedians: Finding and Keeping Content Creators’, *Wikimania*, 5 August 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Wikipedia: Guide to request for adminship, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Guide\\_to\\_requests\\_for\\_adminship](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Guide_to_requests_for_adminship)

<sup>32</sup> Moira Burke and Robert Kraut, ‘Taking Up the Mop: Identifying Future Wikipedia Administrators’, in *Proceedings of the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, Florence, Italy, 5-10 April, 2008: 3441–6.



offensive statements, spam (including links), nonsense and other'.<sup>33</sup> Widespread vandalism has resulted in the emergence of a new breed of sysop, whose main claim to adminship is their work as 'vandal bashers', using reverting software such as Huggle. Defacements occurring in 'articlespace' are easily detectable and reversible, especially when they are crude or juvenile. More insidious vandals attempt to abuse the policing system. The deliberate misuse of administrative processes is a favourite 'troll' game.<sup>34</sup>

Many of these activities involve the use of 'sockpuppets' (known in the French version as *faux-nez* or 'fake noses'): people create alternative accounts, in addition to their existing Wikipedia identities, in order to take part in debates and votes. 'Sock' lore has become an important part of the project's inner cultural consciousness. According to this specialised knowledge, socks have been created so that users can conduct arguments with themselves; some editors have created hundreds of fake personae. How can one tell if a sock is at work? Certain signs are telling: socks exhibit a strong interest in the same articles as their other personae; they often employ similar stylistic devices; and they make similar claims or requests as their puppet master. When editors suspect that a user is 'socking', that is to say exhibiting 'sockish' behaviour, or that a 'sock farm' has been detected, they can call on a special weapon to be used. This is the CheckUser software, accessible to a restricted number of admins. CheckUser identifies what IP address registered Wikipedians are accessing the site from. If it is found that distinct accounts involved in disputes are issuing from the same terminal, Wikipedia's authorities can ban entire areas or even ISPs. Though technology-savvy users can always use proxys or anonymising mechanisms such as TOR (The Onion Router), CheckUser is regarded by Wikipedians as a valid means to identifying vandals, and those admins who are entrusted with it are held in high regard. The problem with developing a strong counter-sock response capability is that it opens the door to a mindset which detects 'enemies of the project' where none exist, opening the door to possible miscarriages of justice.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Reid Priedhorsky, Jilin Chen, Shyong K. Lam, Katherine Panciera, Loren Terveen and John Riedl, 'Creating, Destroying, and Restoring Value in Wikipedia', in *Proceedings of the International ACM Conference on Supporting Group Work*, Sanibel Island, FL, 4-7 November, 2007: 259-68.

<sup>34</sup> Examples include the continual nomination for deletion of articles that are obviously encyclopaedic, the nomination of stubs (draft articles) as featured-article candidates, the baseless listing of users at WP:Requests for comment (a dispute resolution mechanism), the nomination of users who obviously do not fulfil the minimum requirements at WP:Requests for adminship, the 'correction' of points that are already in conformance with the manual of style, and giving repeated vandalism warnings to innocent users. See Wikipedia: What is a troll? Misuse of process, [http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/What\\_is\\_a\\_troll#Misuse\\_of\\_process](http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/What_is_a_troll#Misuse_of_process)

<sup>35</sup> O'Neil, *Cyberchiefs*: 164-166.

As the volume of work and of disputes grew, a Mediation Committee aiming to find common ground between edit warriors was established; it had no coercive power. Eventually Wales decided to establish an Arbitration Committee comprising a dozen individuals (since 2010 expanded to eighteen); it constitutes Wikipedia's Supreme Court, being the last step in the dispute resolution process. The ArbCom now also grants special tools to admins such as or CheckUser and Oversight (permanently removing data from the archive). This body could impose solutions that he would consider binding, said the co-founder, though he reserved

the right of executive clemency and indeed even to dissolve the whole thing if it turns out to be a disaster. But I regard that as unlikely, and I plan to do it about as often as the Queen of England dissolves Parliament against their wishes, *i.e.*, basically never, but it is one last safety valve for our values.<sup>36</sup>

This fail-safe mechanism's constitutionality or applicability is doubtful, because Wikipedia lacks a Constitution which would enable this process to occur in a peaceful manner.

## **Authority and Rules**

In order to make the project work, 'all it takes,' we are told, 'is mutual respect and a willingness to abide by referenced sources and site policy'.<sup>37</sup> Benkler and Nissenbaum have argued that Wikipedia constitutes a remarkable example of self-generated policing. They extol the project's use of open discourse and consensus as well as its reliance on 'social norms and user-run mediation and arbitration rather than mechanical control of behaviour'.<sup>38</sup> The system does indeed work well for many; scores of editors, and particularly admins, treat others patiently and fairly. However in other cases it does seem that the power asymmetries deriving from the accumulation of competencies and tools over time can lead to injustice. This stems from the interrelated impact of three elements which lie at the heart of the Wikipedia experience: surveillance, rules and anonymity. We should

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<sup>36</sup> Jimmy Wales. 'Mediation, arbitration', posting to Wikien-I mailing list, 16 January, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Wikipedia: No Angry Mastodons, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No\\_angry\\_mastodons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No_angry_mastodons)

<sup>38</sup> Yochai Benkler and Helen Nissenbaum, 'Commons-Based Peer Production and Virtue', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 14.4 (2006): 397.

bear in mind Bryant et al.'s key observation that Wikipedia software is designed to *encourage the surveillance of others' contributions*, through watch lists for example.<sup>39</sup> This feature allows the project to be protected from vandals. But it also offers experienced editors golden opportunity to engage in the surreptitious stalking and hounding of people they do not like, or whose opinion they disagree with.

Uncertainty over the relationship between physical and digital identities is the rationale for the surveillance ethic. And controlling identities has significantly contributed to the documented increase in the proportion of policy and regulatory discussion in relation to mainspace content.<sup>40</sup> The crucial fact about Wikipedia's rules is indeed that *there are more and more of them*. A study by Kittur et al. found that non-encyclopaedic work, such as 'discussion, procedure, user coordination, and maintenance activity (such as reverts and vandalism)' is on the rise.<sup>41</sup> Conversely, the amount of direct work going into edits is decreasing: the percentage of edits made to article pages has decreased from over 90 per cent in 2001 to roughly 70 per cent in July 2006, whilst over the same period the proportion of edits going towards policy and procedure has gone from 2 to 10 per cent.<sup>42</sup>

The proper formatting of the energy of the crowd was the central dynamic of Wikipedia's first phase of development. The overwhelming majority of new policies and rules applied to editors, who needed to be controlled, not to admins.<sup>43</sup> Later on, the exponential growth in the number of participants has resulted in admins taking on roles that are more social than technical. A series of interviews with editors at varying levels of authority found that almost all the interviewees believed that 'the role of administrator carries with it more social authority than it ever has in the past'.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, it could be argued that since admins have been entrusted with power by their peers, this

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<sup>39</sup> Susan L. Bryant, Andrea Forte and Amy Bruckman, 'Becoming Wikipedian: Transformations of Participation in a Collaborative Online Encyclopaedia', in *Proceedings of the GROUP International Conference on Supporting Group Work*, Sanibel Island, FL (2005):1–10.

<sup>40</sup> Aniket Kittur, Ed Chi, Bryan A. Pendleton, Bongwon Suh and TedMytkowicz, 'Power of the Few vs. Wisdom of the Crowd: Wikipedia and the Rise of the Bourgeoisie', CHI 2007, San Jose, CA, 28 April–3 May, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Aniket Kittur, Bongwon Suh, Bryan A. Pendleton and Ed. H. Chi, 'He Says, She Says: Conflict and Coordination in Wikipedia', in *Proceedings of the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, San José, CA, 28 April–3 May 2007: 453.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid: 455.

<sup>43</sup> Brian Butler, Elisabeth Joyce and Jacqueline Pike, 'Don't Look Now, But We've Created a Bureaucracy: The Nature and Roles of Policies and Rules in Wikipedia', in *Proceedings of the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, Florence, Italy, 5–10 April 2008: 1101–1110.

<sup>44</sup> Andrea Forte and Amy Bruckman, 'Scaling Consensus: Increasing Decentralisation in Wikipedia Governance', in *Proceedings of HICSS* (2008): 157–166.

power can in theory be withdrawn by the community. In reality, though they were initially meant to operate only as janitors, admins, who are never subject to re-election, have taken on increasingly greater responsibilities, of a behavioural and editorial nature.<sup>45</sup> An interesting example is that 46% of page blocks effected by administrators of the English Wikipedia between December 2004 and January 2008 had to do with the question of whether articles should be deleted. In other words, 1.500 people are determining what is 'encyclopaedic', whilst the project has 12 million user accounts.<sup>46</sup>

Means of domination are not limited to the crude use of blocking tools. In fact, such measures are less effective than more subtle means which rely on superior project knowledge. The easiest way to defeat an opponent is to assert that their views are not authoritatively backed up by a proper source, that they are violating the sacrosanct WP:NPOV (neutral point of view) or WP:RS (reliable sources) rules. By extension, all references to editorial, stylistic and behavioural policies and guidelines serve as weapons in battle. It sometimes seems as if every single action having to do with the project has been distilled into a handy WP:SLOGAN, ready to be whipped out at the slightest provocation.

Some participants are evidently attracted to high-pressure situations. In 2007, a proposal ('prise de decision' or PdD) defining the use of scientific terminology or vernacular language for the classification of zoological species on the French Wikipedia generated a rancorous debate. The objections to the proposal were that it was not procedurally sound, and it was ultimately defeated. One of the proposal's authors took a 'wikibreak' to calm down. Returning to the project two weeks later, she wrote on the administrator's noticeboard about her feeling of unease when she realised that most opponents of the decision had less than 40 per cent participation in the encyclopaedic part of the project (one having less than 10 per cent), whereas most of those who had initiated and supported the proposal had participation rates in the encyclopaedia which were higher than 80 per cent. There were people, she realised, who *specialised* in pages where votes were held.<sup>47</sup>

If pacification fails to resolve disputes, appeals to the higher authorities may be necessary. However

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<sup>45</sup> Andrea Forte and Amy Bruckman, 'Scaling Consensus'.

<sup>46</sup> Max Loubser, 'Wikipedia Governance: Are Administrators a 'Big Deal'?', in Malte Ziewitz and Christian Pentzold (eds) *Modes of Governance in Digitally Networked Environments. A Workshop Report*, Oxford Internet Institute, 2010: 21-24.

<sup>47</sup> Cited in O'Neil, *Cyberchiefs*: 156.

mounting a successful appeal to the Arbcom requires precise knowledge of the appropriate socio-technical forms of evidence presentation. Editors are particularly expected to provide links to evidence, or DIFFS. DIFFS are pages showing the difference between two versions of a page, which are automatically generated and archived each time an edit is made to a page. Experienced editors can thus present more convincing cases and dispute resolution on Wikipedia has increasingly become affected by the mastery of this pseudo-legal culture.

## **Authority and Losers**

Some users are particularly likely to be at the losing end of conflicts with experienced users and administrators. In this section, I offer a brief summary of categories of participants who face structural (common and systematic) disadvantages.

### Newbies

Wikipedia's editorial process, understood as the herding or disciplining of autonomous content providers, cannot but generate some bad blood, in the shape of participants who feel they have been ill treated, or even humiliated, by experienced editors and administrators. Unfairness or injustice can be hard to evaluate, as both sides in disputes invariably feel that they are in the right, so a structural example will best illustrate the issue: creators of articles set its tone. Because of a 'first-mover advantage', the initial text of an article tends to survive longer and suffer less modification than later contributions to the same article.<sup>48</sup> It is to be expected that article creators who maintain an interest in the article would put it on their watch list and, despite the project's injunctions, would experience feelings – if not of ownership – at least of heightened sensitivity and possibly unhappiness if someone attempts to 'improve' their baby. The problem is compounded when editors have access to administrative tools, and/or belong to friendship cliques.

### Experts

Problems may also arise when a person with intimate knowledge of the project's operations debates an outsider with poor knowledge of the site's norms but with great expertise in the subject being debated. The archetypal example is that of William Connolley, a Wikipedia editor who in his day

<sup>48</sup> Fernanda B. Viégas, Martin Wattenberg, and Kushal Dave. 'Studying Cooperation and Conflict Between Authors with History Flow Visualisations', CHI 2004, Vienna, 24-29 April, 2004.

job was a climatologist at Cambridge University's British Antarctic Survey. When he attempted to correct mistakes on Wikipedia's climate change article, Connolley was accused of 'promoting his own POV [point of view] and of having systematically erased any POV which did not correspond to his own'.<sup>49</sup> His anonymous opponent brought him before the Arbitration Committee, where Connolley was, for a time, duly punished: he was only allowed to make one 'revert' a day, apart from cases of vandalism. This sentence had more to do with breaches of etiquette, with Connolley's not suffering fools gladly, than with the promoting of a biased perspective: it showed what can befall respected researchers who run afoul of the project's behavioural codes.

### Anonymous editors

The regulation of the activities of vandals or propagandists who use duplicate identities is a potential breeding ground for discriminatory treatment. For example participants who have not registered on the site and instead just use an IP address are more likely to be involved in semi-protected articles, where disputes and insults typically occur. Their work is also not being treated fairly: casual users who add high-quality content have less chance of their edit surviving: more than half of the text inserted by 'IPs' on the French Wikipedia was deleted.<sup>50</sup> A growing resistance to new edits was also found in Suh et al's study: the percentage of reverted edits in the English Wikipedia went from 2.9% in 2005 to 6% in 2008, and there was an increasingly higher likelihood of edits by unregistered editors or ordinary editors being reverted than edits by members of the administrative elite.<sup>51</sup> This disparity of treatment may be having a chilling or discouraging effect on recruitment, as the tremendous increase in numbers of participants appears to be tapering off.<sup>52</sup> Suh et al. have proposed a Darwinian explanation, whereby a diminishing amount of resources (in the form of creatable articles) results in increased competition (in the form of reversions).<sup>53</sup>

## **Authority and Critique**

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<sup>49</sup> See Wikipedia:Requests for arbitration/Climate change dispute, 22 March-23 December, 2005, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Requests\\_for\\_arbitration/Climate\\_change\\_dispute#Final\\_decision](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Requests_for_arbitration/Climate_change_dispute#Final_decision)

<sup>50</sup> Nicolas Auray, Martine Hurault-Plantet, Céline Poudat and Bernard Jacquemin, 'La Négociation des Points de Vue: Une Cartographie Sociale des Conflits et des Querelles dans le Wikipédia Francophone', *Réseaux* 154 (2009): 15-50.

<sup>51</sup> Bongwon Suh, Gregorio Convertino, Ed Chi and Peter Pirolli, 'The Singularity is Not Near: Slowing Growth of Wikipedia?', in *WikiSym'09*, Orlando, Florida, 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid; see also Felipe Ortega, 'Wikipedia: A Quantitative analysis', PhD Thesis, 2009. Available at: <<http://libresoft.es/Members/jfelipe/phd-thesis>>

<sup>53</sup> Suh et al, 'The Singularity is Not Near'.

Wikipedia's equal part combination of charismatic and sovereign justifications is characteristic of a new kind of organisation, online tribal bureaucracy.<sup>54</sup> This hybridity impacts an essential aspect of online peer production projects: their capacity to generate and manage critiques. In contrast to corporate bureaus, collectivist organisations are characterised by open and frank communication, of which self-reflexivity and critique form an essential part. However on Wikipedia, when editors lose content disputes too often, their persistent critiques of administrative authority come to be seen as disruptive, and there is decreased scope for their arguments to be heard. Some leave the site (or are banned), but rather than disappearing altogether, these self-described victims of injustice often migrate to hypercritical sites such as Wikipedia Review (WR) and Encyclopaedia Dramatica (ED). Participants to these sites stereotypically allege that Wikipedia is controlled by 'cliques' or 'cabals' who manipulate the system for their own biased purposes. Anyone who dares to disagree, charge these critics, is accused of 'wikilawyering', of violating consensus, and is labelled a troll.<sup>55</sup> An ex-editor asserted that expressing his point of view in a message to the Wikipedia English-language mailing list was answered not with an examination of his case, but with 'platitudes about rules and regulations the newcomer did not follow'. Questioning the sagacity of an admin generated the response: 'You don't get anywhere by attacking an admin' – not even if they were wrong'. According to this ex-editor, Wikipedia adminship has a 'dirty secret': it is a 'cult, a good old boys network, a Masonic society of sorts'.<sup>56</sup> The accusation that Wikipedia has acquired the hallmarks of a 'cult' such as 'hierarchy, arcane rules, paranoid insularity, intolerance of dissent, and a cosmic grandiose mission'<sup>57</sup> has a corollary: banned editors have been victims of 'abuse'. Since WR and ED sometimes reveal personal information about editors and administrators, they have been accused of engaging in harassment, accordingly been labeled 'attack sites' and it is forbidden to create links to them from Wikipedia.<sup>58</sup> It should be noted that another ex-Wikipedia editor has argued that accusations of 'cyberstalking' are a highly effective way of silencing criticism in the project.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> O'Neil, *Cyberchiefs*, 169-189.

<sup>55</sup> See for example Wikipedia, [Wikipedia:How to Ban a POV You Dislike, in 9 Easy Steps](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:How_to_Ban_a_POV_You_Dislike_in_9_Easy_Steps), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:How to Ban a POV You Dislike, in 9 Easy Steps](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:How_to_Ban_a_POV_You_Dislike_in_9_Easy_Steps)

<sup>56</sup> Parker Peters, 'Lesson #2: Procedure vs Content, or "You didn't genuflect deeply enough"', *LiveJournal*, 18 January, 2007, <http://parkerpeters.livejournal.com/1195.html>

<sup>57</sup> Sam Vaknin, 'The Wikipedia Cult', *Global Politician* (May 2010), <http://www.globalpolitician.com/26423-wikipedia-cult-jimmy-wales>

<sup>58</sup> Wikipedia: Attack Sites, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:BAD\\_SITES](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:BAD_SITES)

<sup>59</sup> Kelly Martin, 'Wikipedia's Al Qaeda', *Nonbovine Ruminations* weblog, 11 December, 2007.

<http://nonbovine-ruminations.blogspot.com/2007/12/wikipedia-al-qaeda.html#comments>

Second, legitimate internal criticism of institutional structures is made difficult by the size of the project and by the absence of a Constitution which would spell out important roles and processes such as the exact powers of the charismatic co-founder or recall mechanisms for abusive authorities.<sup>60</sup> The issue of the impeachment of authority figures has often been raised. In 2008 a Wikipedia editor put forward an admin recall proposal which was extensively discussed and tweaked on his talk page, before being defeated. The proposal attracted the attention of the co-founder, who commented that any such processes were matters of deep concern, because ‘people in positions of trust (the ArbCom for example) [should be] significantly independent of day-to-day wiki politics’. Since he was unaware of any cases in which a recall process had been needed, the co-founder viewed it as a form of ‘process-creep’: if there really were such an example, then the project should simply ‘look harder at what went wrong’.<sup>61</sup> This approach to governance - keep it loose, keep it personal, seek consensus - has several consequences. Dismissing codified solutions as ‘rigid’ or ‘bureaucratic’ guarantees stasis, as there is no universally accepted way of changing the way things are; there are few avenues for legitimate critique; finally, the approach’s long-term viability is open to question. As Wikipedia operates following the constant reform and refinement of social norms, the issue of changing policy with an ever-increasing number of participants becomes more complex. The absence of a stable policy-making system means that ‘site-wide policy-making has slowed and mechanisms that support the creation and improvement of guidelines have become increasingly decentralised’.<sup>62</sup> Finally Wikipedia’s lack of a Constitution, or of clearly defined voting procedures that would enable this Constitution to be updated, means there is a danger of the project fragmenting into a multitude of smaller wikiprojects – local jurisdictions over which a limited number of participants will have a say, and who may start writing rules that conflict with others.

Finally the justificatory structure limits the democratic and liberating potential of online critique. What participants in peer production projects such as Wikipedia seek, first and foremost, is a feeling of unity between their identities as consumers and producers, between their activities of work and play, ultimately between themselves and the project. Anything that contradicts this holistic fusion is to be denounced, whether it is separated expertise or separated justice, the antithesis of online

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<sup>60</sup> In 2009 a proposal to limit the co-founder's arbitration role was defeated. See Wikipedia: Arbitration Role of Jimmy Wales in the English Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Arbitration\\_Role\\_of\\_Jimmy\\_Wales\\_in\\_the\\_English\\_Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Arbitration_Role_of_Jimmy_Wales_in_the_English_Wikipedia)

<sup>61</sup> Cited in O’Neil, *Cyberchiefs*: 168.

<sup>62</sup> Forte and Bruckman, ‘Scaling Consensus’: 161.



justification.<sup>63</sup> Therein lies online peer production's implicit critique of the wider social order. Contemporary domination bases its legitimacy on the authority of experts, to the detriment of legitimacy based on popular representation.<sup>64</sup> Citizens are dispossessed of their political autonomy by a system in which technological and even economic stakes outpace their understanding and capacity for decision-making. When it operates as it is supposed to, hacker expertise and its derivatives is democratic: the only criteria is excellence, participants are equal, and deliberations and criticisms are public. It constitutes a rejection of technocracy which operates in secret and does not always seek the common good. As for collective regulation, the spirit of online projects is that the law applies to all and it is open to criticism and debate by all.<sup>65</sup> This represents a stark contrast with non-virtual society where a defining characteristic of the power of dominants is the ability to laugh at the rules which the dominated observe, without ever paying a price. The confused status of roles and positions induced by Wikipedia's overlapping justificatory regimes sometimes renders this spirit elusive, though its potential goes a long way towards explaining the project's enduring appeal.

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<sup>63</sup> Mathieu O'Neil, 'Critiques of Separation: Leadership in Online Radical-Prosumer Projects', under review.

<sup>64</sup> Luc Boltanski, *De la Critique. Précis de Sociologie de l'Emancipation*, Paris: Gallimard, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Mathieu O'Neil, 'Critiques of Separation'.

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