

“Move Along Now, Nothing to See Here”: The Private Discussion Spheres of Wikipedia

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SUMMARY

The enforcement mechanisms on Wikipedia enact an internal conflict between Wikipedia’s open, inclusive ethos and its organizational reliance on power, hierarchy and punishment. Wikipedia resolves the conflict by burying the punitive practices behind a series of mechanisms that make them less visible to newer users. The characteristics of the MediaWiki software and different use patterns of different Wikipedia contributors join to form the mechanisms that mediate the conflict between the aspirational and organizational goals. The split between main pages and talk pages, the fragmentation of a single discussion to multiple pages, and the use of notice boards, create private spaces for administrators and advanced users to act away from the eyes of new users. While these elitist consequences obviously go against the open ethos of Wikipedia, they give valuable tools in the hands of administrators keeping Wikipedia interruption-free. Therefore, these mechanisms present an important challenge to the community - one that requires it to rethink both Wikipedia’s technical infrastructure and its normative vision.

KEYWORDS: Acoustic Separation, Wikipedia, Technical Affordances, Social Sciences, Patterns of Use, Administrators, Newbies, New Users, Talk Pages, Noticeboards, Arbitration Committee, System Design, Social Effects of Technical Infrastructure, Code is Law, Environment Design.

INTRODUCTION

The scholarly literature rarely discusses the question of enforcement on Wikipedia. Many articles and books written about Wikipedia present it as somewhat of a miracle of anarchic cooperation. Its enforcement mechanisms seem to be a minor necessary evil, marginal to the bigger project. But attention to enforcement, power and punishment offers potential to reveal much about the roles of authority and elitism in the Wikipedia community, often unnoticed and unremarked, thus left unknown to the outsider.

This paper presents a preliminary account of the structural aspects of norm enforcement on Wikipedia. This account, based on a small-scale ethnography – observation, recording, and analysis – of the English-language Wikipedia, shows that Wikipedia reproduces important features of formal national legal systems. As a long array of legal literature has demonstrated with regard to formal legal systems, there exists a major gap between the official public policies adopted by Wikipedia (“the law in books”) and the actual day-to-day practices of enforcement (“law in action”). Moreover, like the criminal justice system, Wikipedia also embeds specific mechanisms that hide its actual enforcement practices from the general public

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and its members themselves – thus maintaining the image of the system as founded upon public and well-known rules. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of Wikipedia lies in the tight connection between the mechanisms that hide the practices of enforcement and the technical features of its infrastructure – the Wikimedia software. As I will show, we can spot certain technical features that create private discussion spheres that allow administrators and advanced users to negotiate enforcement away from the eyes of the broader community. Following these descriptive accounts, I will move on to a normative analysis of the mechanisms of separation. Lastly, I will point to the relevance of this project to suggested changes to the user interface of MediaWiki.

The first section of the paper presents the gap between ethos and practice in regards to Wikipedia's enforcement system and adds a normative account of the benefits of separation, as they promote Wikipedia's appeal to different kinds of users. The second section focuses on the mechanisms used to separate different sets of practices, as well as representations or images of Wikipedia to different audiences. In that section I will demonstrate how these mechanisms cluster around specific attributes of MediaWiki, mainly the separation to main page and talk pages. The last section connects this argument to current endeavors to re-shape Wikipedia, calling for an open and informed discussion of the social aspects of the technical infrastructure of Wikipedia.

1. ENFORCEMENT ON WIKIPEDIA

Wikipedia is sometimes portrayed as an example of a radical alternative to hierarchy: an inclusive, open, and egalitarian community (Zittrain, 2008). The objection to hierarchy has been one of the pillars of the Wikipedia ethos ever since its founding moments. Promoters and fans of Wikipedia believe they have – through modern technologies – been able to realize the long illusive dream of an ideal society. In his 2001 'Statement of Principles', Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, famously wrote: "There must be no cabal, there must be no elites, there must be no hierarchy or structure that gets in the way of this openness to newcomers" (Wales, 2001). Another example is the slogan "ignore all rules", which is one of the first of Wikipedia's policies, intended to appeal to those made 'nervous and depressed' by regulation (Sanger, 2005).

Yet when looking at the actual practices of enforcement and punishment on Wikipedia, it seems to operate as any other hierarchically organized system. Wikipedia is a system with zero tolerance for deviance, as acts of vandalism are reverted in minutes (Viegas et al., 2007). This enforcement is placed almost solely at the hands of administrators, who are officials selected by the community to keep the peace. Currently, the English-language Wikipedia has 1,635 administrators, who are a small fraction from its community of roughly 10 million registered users and 40,000 active users (Wikipedia, 2009d) An administrator is a Wikipedia editor who holds privileged technical abilities that allow her to block interrupting users from editing Wikipedia pages, as well as protect an article from future edits and easily revert changes made to articles. The administrators' enforcement monopoly is apparent when we look at the lists of banned and blocked users. These numbers are important to our discussion as banned users are banned only following a consensus of the community, while blocked users are ones ostracized following a unilateral decision of a single administrator. While there are less than 300 users currently banned by the community (Wikipedia, 2009a), hundreds of thousands of users are currently blocked, with over a thousand blocks added daily (Wikipedia, 2009b). These figures

show that Wikipedia's blocks are anything but "rare and usually temporary" events (Zittrain, 2008). On the contrary, the enforcement is common. Moreover, this most common form of exclusion is based on the independent decision of individual administrators.

A second gap between appearance and practice is to be found in the ways in which administrators use their authority. Many of Wikipedia's policies present a carefully structured process for enforcement, following Wales' call that: "Any security measures to be implemented to protect the community against real vandals [...], should be implemented on the model of 'strict scrutiny'. 'Strict scrutiny' means that any measures instituted for security must address a compelling community interest, and must be narrowly tailored to achieve that objective and no other."

In practice, however, administrators rely on their personal discretion. For example, while the Vandalism policy page describes a restrained, graduated process, composed of five levels of escalating warnings to be initiated prior to blocking a vandal, administrators regularly block a user without any prior warning. As one administrator put it: "it's not the policy that dictates the actions of admins, it's the actions of admins that create the policy; you can't force us to do anything". He later added: "Does the possibility exist that an admin will block a vandal without a warning? Yes. I've done it many times. Do we need to mention that possibility in the policy or the noticeboard? No, because, quite frankly, it's none of your concern. And I don't mean that in some elitist way; it's none of anyone's business, admin or not, if I choose to wait for a full set of warnings. Nobody can make me block someone I don't feel like blocking [...]. If and when there is an exception to be made (and that may never happen, as far as you know) the individual admin will make it on a whim. Some admins never block anybody, ever, for any reason. I might decide not to block a user simply because I just ate a nice breakfast, and French toast makes me happy".

The gap between the official policies and the actual practice is not new or surprising by itself. The gap between the "law in books" and the "law in action" is long accepted in the legal literature (Pound, 1910). Yet its appearance in the legal regime of Wikipedia raises the question how does Wikipedia deal with the tensions that emerge out of this duality. Similarly to the formal legal system, I will show that Wikipedia embeds several mechanisms that hide, or mask the practices from the community, and as a consequence work to preserve the legitimacy of its official policies.

2. STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF ENFORCEMENT ON WIKIPEDIA: MECHANISMS OF SEPARATION

How could it be that while Wikipedia's ethos rejects authority and hierarchy so forcefully, Wikipedia's system of enforcement relies on a hierarchy separating participants from officials who operate with unreviewed authority and autonomy? The answer, I suggest, derives from two contradictory images of Wikipedia that coexist through a set of mechanisms that hide this hierarchical administrative practice from the mass of Wikipedia users.

The notion of mechanisms of separation was introduced in the early 80s by the legal scholar Meir Dan-Cohen, who focused on these mechanisms in his study of the criminal justice system (Dan-Cohen, 1984). Dan-Cohen described the criminal justice system as an imaginary world in which the general public and the officials who apply the law live in two spaces, separated by a wall that stops the general public from "hearing" the actual practices of officials (therefore he

termed this kind of separation “acoustic separation”). The wall allows the officials to deviate from the rules represented to the public without the public being aware of it.

Wikipedia manages its “crime control” through a similar structural accommodation: the power to sanction is held in the hands of a small group of officials (administrators) that exercise their authority on the basis of personal discretion, which does not always follow official rules and policies. Moreover, as in the legal system, we can identify various mechanisms that conceal the sanctioning practices of administrators from public view, especially new and less-experienced users. Thanks to these mechanisms, the newcomers see only the official, open, and inclusive policies, while the enforcement of rules and sanctioning practices take place in separate spaces, visible only to senior and advanced members of Wikipedia community.

It is interesting to note, however, that although this structure resembles the separation Dan-Cohen found in the national criminal justice system, the content of the separation on Wikipedia is reversed. In criminal law, the conduct rules that address the general public and the potential criminals are usually harsher and more punitive than the sentencing decisions of judges (often generating, when made public, criticism regarding court leniency). On Wikipedia, on the other hand, the official policy pages are generally more accepting and open than the actual practices of the decision makers – the administrators. In place of the fear of under-deterrence, which is at the heart of criminal statutes with maximum punishment, on Wikipedia the policies send a message of fairness and solidarity in order to motivate voluntary compliance.

As for the normative status of these separation mechanisms, they obviously pose a challenge. The most common reaction is to see the mechanisms of separation as unjust and contrary to the free spirit of Wikipedia. Administrators and other old-time users who take advantage of the ‘private discussion spaces’ they provide are described as elitist. As one user put it, when talking to an administrator: “In one of your edit summaries you say, quite rightly, 'administrators know when to make exceptions'. But these pages are not for administrators, but for ordinary users. [...] It seems to go against the community spirit to deliberately keep information out of the policy pages because the masses can't be trusted to interpret it correctly. If it's sometimes right for the project for admins to block vandals without warnings, then it's something right for the project for non-admins to report them without warnings.”

But theory suggests that separation fulfills a function in the structure of Wikipedia, as it helps the community accommodate competing values and goals. Wikipedia holds a potential trade-off between an efficient regulation mechanism and the community ethos of trust, solidarity and empathy. Under-enforcement could result in a paralysis of the community and damage to the collaborative project, while over-enforcement might be perceived as an abuse of power by the community leaders, which will create a backlash from community members. One solution would be, of course, to design a perfectly accurate enforcement system (such an endeavor could be spotted, for example, in the moderation system of Slashdot.org (Slashdot.org, 2009)). Separation presents a second solution, as it eliminates the conflict between openness and punitiveness by restricting each to a different audience. The mechanisms of separation intervene in the potential conflict by sending different messages to different people. Old users, who are already in the community, enjoy the efficient protection of the project as it is provided by authoritative, administrative and bureaucratic sanctions, while new users are attracted to the project’s image of a free and open community. Thus, by using mechanisms of separation, Wikipedia can promote law-and-order practices without suffering the consequences of giving up on its constitutive openness ethos.

The possible downsides of making sanctioning practices entirely transparent were illustrated by the incident of the Community Sanctions Noticeboard. The community noticeboard was split off from the Administrators' Incident Noticeboard in February 2007, in order to empower the community by creating an accessible procedure that would invite more members of the community to take part in the discussions that were previously conducted on the Administrators' Noticeboard. As one of the users had put it: "The [community] notice board helps make Wikipedia less Kafkaesque, in the sense that people want to know where to turn or how decisions get made. Do you need to be an insider-insider before you have any idea what is going on?". But soon after its creation, the Community Sanctions Noticeboard turned out to be a failure. Only three months later, it was nominated for deletion for being a place infected with conflict of interests. The community sanctions noticeboard was closed down in October 2007.

Even without reviewing in detail the practices of the Community Sanctions Noticeboard, there is no place to assume that the bans that were publicly discussed on it suffered from more problems than the thousands of blocks initiated unilaterally everyday by administrators. The reason for the community sanctions board's failure was different. It provoked outrage because the discussion on the noticeboard made sanctioning practices transparent. The sanctions noticeboard forced the community to take part in the practices that stand in the sharpest contrast with its ethos and values, thus directly challenging and undermining those values themselves. When a considerable part of a Wikipedian's time is spent on punishing other users, it makes policing and punishment a major part of what being a Wikipedian means, and takes energy away from promoting the project itself. Thus, if separation mechanism put issues such as policing and sanctioning in the background, they successfully divert the attention of the majority of the community to writing articles and similar issues (which are, assumably, the supposed tendencies of most users to begin with).

2.1 Mechanisms of Separation: Talk Pages, Fragmentation of Pages and Noticeboards.

In order to understand the mechanisms of separation used on Wikipedia, we must combine an analysis of the social aspects of the different classes of users on Wikipedia with an understanding of the technical features of the MediaWiki software. In other words, the social barriers that separate novice users from administrators "cluster" around certain technical features. When placed against the background of a specific social interaction, a certain technical feature becomes a mechanism for hiding information from less-advanced classes of users, even when it was not created with the intention to set such a separation, nor seems at first sight to create any separation at all.

Effective mechanisms of separation are not necessarily features that were created in order to set such separation. They are also not features that would seem at first glance to create any separation whatsoever. They do not need to technologically or normatively prohibit the members of one group from entering particular virtual spaces. We should not be looking for password-protected pages or other means of restricted access. In the following examples, minimal differences in the format or the name of a web page serve as effective mechanisms of separation because they correlate with common social practices. When certain types of pages appear irrelevant or obscure to new users, allocating information in these pages makes that information effectively inaccessible to new users.

Bryant, Forte and Bruckman (Bryant et al., 2004) created a framework for understanding the social patterns on Wikipedia. They looked at the differences in roles, goals and uses of the Wiki software between newcomers and advanced users of Wikipedia. Their study shows that the contributions of new users are limited to primarily correcting minor mistakes in the articles that interest them, derived directly from their own personal knowledge or expertise. Their main use of the site is as an encyclopedia, a source of information. They do not see Wikipedia as a community, but as a collection of articles edited by random people. New users use the search box that allows users to find articles as their favorite, most often used technological tool. None of the participants in Bryan, Forte and Bruckman's study mentioned reading a talk page or a history page at the early stages of involvement in the community.

Unlike the limited intervention of new users at the community, more advanced participants, who have spent a considerable time editing Wikipedia, see themselves as participating in a broader community, not simply looking for information. Expert Wikipedia editors focus on the encyclopedia as a whole. Besides editing individual articles, they engage in the life and internal practices of the community. Their broader goals also influence the scope of tools that are visible and relevant to them. Editing talk pages and reviewing history pages become a part of their routine activities on Wikipedia. (The talk pages and history pages are pages that accompany every article page on Wikipedia. The talk pages are pages for discussing proposed changes in the article and working toward consensus for improving the main article. The history pages allow editors to review past versions of the main article). But advanced users go even further, as they are interested in discussion pages that are not linked to specific articles, such as the Village Pump, various notice boards, and pages used to discuss policies and general issues of the community.

These difference in the patterns of use between new and experienced users lie at the core of the separation mechanisms. The separation mechanisms translate these gaps in the ways different users use Wikipedia into gaps in the visibility of sanctioning practices to them. The more experienced a user is, he sees a broader image of the use of power on Wikipedia.

2.1.1 Main Pages and Talk Pages

Talk pages are the principal mechanism of separation on Wikipedia. The split between the talk pages and the main pages becomes normatively problematic, and a mechanism of acoustic separation, once the main page/talk page structure is also used for policy deliberations.

Wikipedia's policy pages hold the texts of policies, guidelines and descriptions of processes for the internal governance of the Wikipedia community. As any other Wiki page, each policy page has a talk page used to discuss the policy and seek consensus for proposed changes in it. The functional separation arises because there is stratification among different classes of users across the main policy page and the policy talk page. The main policy page is generally approachable to most of Wikipedia's users, including new users, through the links on the main Wikipedia page. The policy talk page, however, is accessed only through the 'discussion' tab at the top of the policy page, which as shown, is practically visible to advanced users only. These different patterns of use create a barrier that surrounds the policy talk pages, thus allowing them to become a private sphere of discussion that is hidden from most of the community. In this space we can find administrators' practices that stand in contrast to the official policies themselves, as the citation above from the Vandalism talk page shows.

2.1.2. Page Fragmentation

A second mechanism of separation mimics the talk pages/main page structure, by using more than one page to discuss any particular topic. Advanced users are familiar with the entire set of pages, while newer users read only the main pages and assume that they represent and include the entire discussion. Again, a set of “back pages” leaves a space that is visible only to advanced users in which they can present a different picture of the topic without it being observable to new users on the main page. The “back pages” here are more varied than simply a binary of main pages/talk pages.

An example for the fragmentation mechanism is found in the structure of the Arbitration Committee decisions. The Arbitration Committee (ArbCom) imposes binding solutions to disputes that individual administrators or communal discussions were unable to resolve. When reading a main page of the ArbCom, the ruling is presented as clear-cut, short, and logically following the non-disputable findings. However, an opinion of the Arbitration Committee is actually combined of eight different Wiki pages. In addition to the primary page of the case (the Request for Arbitration page), there is an Evidence page, a Workshop page, a Proposed Decision page, and four respective talk pages (one for each of these process oriented pages) (Wikipedia, 2009e). Many times, these internal pages hold the true nature of the dispute, which is not visible on the primary page.

For example, the effects of fragmentation were visible in a random 2007 case (Wikipedia, 2007), in which there was a huge gap between the case as it was represented on the primary page, and its representations as they appeared across the other pages. The case was debated through 146 printed-out pages in total. Only 11 of these pages (7%) were in the primary arbitration page. On a first reading of the primary report, the case appears to be a routine ban of a user following the use of rude language against an administrator, following a discussion held on the Community Sanctions Noticeboard (which will be described at length later). All there is to be found on the main page is a subtle critique of the process by the Arbitration Committee: “Where [community] bans affect established contributors, a period of discussion and consensus-building should precede the ban”. But reading the accompanying pages revealed a heated debate about the allegedly outrageous process through which the user was banned. One of the users discussing the case on the talk page summed it up as an “appalling example of the lynch mob mentality of the community sanction board”. He pointed out to the fact that less than 24 hours passed between the initial ban proposal and the block was made. As he put it: “If I ask the question, 'should user X be banned' and ten people who don't like user X show up and answer yes, that doesn't mean that the community has reached a consensus – it only means that the people who don't like user X did a good job of showing up quickly”. This strong critique, as well as the extreme facts of the case, is invisible to any user limiting himself to reading only the main pages on the decision. The acoustic separation was used to make it seem unimportant and routine to casual users, while it was actually in the center of a heated debate among advanced community members.

2.1.3. The Use of Noticeboards

The use of specific noticeboards to conduct community discussions is a third example of a mechanism of separation. Noticeboards post and collect discussions of particular areas or topics named in the title of the noticeboard. For example, there are the Biographies of Living

Persons Noticeboard, the Conflict of Interest Noticeboard or the Neutral Point of View Noticeboard (Wikipedia, 2009f). As is the situation with other non-article pages, they are not easily accessible for new users. But even for those users who are advanced enough to be aware of the use of noticeboards, there are different techniques for creating an internal separation between different classes of users. For example, naming a noticeboard one-way or the other can be seen as an invitation for certain members of the community only. Naming a notice board "Administrators' noticeboard" (Wikipedia, 2009c) excludes many non-administrators from participating in the discussions held on it. As one user put it: "although the administrator's noticeboard is open to everyone, its title does tend to scare away the unmopified crowd (it certainly had that effect on me before I assumed janitorial responsibilities)". Thus, the noticeboard becomes a private space for administrators to engage in discussion that is hidden from the general community of Wikipedia users.

CONCLUSION: POLITICIZATION OF CODE

In this article I presented a preliminary account of the ways in which certain technical features of the MediaWiki software are combined with different patterns of use of different users to create "private discussion spheres" that allow advanced users and administrators to act in ways contrary to official Wikipedia policies or go against the open and inclusive ethos of Wikipedia. I showed how the fact that new users rarely look beyond main articles allows experienced users to act away from public scrutiny. I also hinted to certain reasons why would that apparently elitist structure is necessary and beneficial to the development of the Wikipedia community.

This article suggests that changes in the MediaWiki software should follow a politically informed discussion within the community. As I have shown, the technical features of the user interface carry certain implications for the social stratification of the community, as they make certain spaces and not others visible to new or advanced users. Therefore, technical changes are not a matter only for programmers and those with technical knowledge. It should be at the center of normative decision-making of the community as a whole (Lessig, 2006).

The architecture of Wikipedia influences the way its legal order works; its legal rules and policies attribute to certain social norms; and social norms and practices give meaning to its technical infrastructure. Therefore, the structure of the MediaWiki software, its code, should be at the heart of political contest, and code programmers should be controlled by the political involvement of the community.

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