



Wikiality

Student Handout #1: The Wikipedia Editing Model

According to its editors, Wikipedia “allows anyone to edit, and relies on a large number of well-intentioned editors to overcome issues raised by a smaller number of problematic editors.” In plainer English, that means that anyone can put anything into nearly any Wikipedia entry; there is no centralized editor who decides what information can stay and what must go. That task is left up to other individuals. The theory is that, over time, the quality of an article will improve as the editors reach a consensus about the information being included. Wikipedia refers to itself as “communal knowledge,” and contrasts its method with more traditional forms of publishing which “attempt to limit content creation to a relatively small group of approved editors in order to exercise strong hierarchical control.”

Wikipedia editors have discussed creating “stable versions” of articles, but the proposal met with objections from many editors who argued that significant technological upgrades would be necessary to implement such a policy. Instead, Wikipedia’s editors adopted a policy which allows pages to be placed under protected status.¹ Protection ranges from full protection, which allows only administrators to edit articles, through semi-protection, which disables editing by anyone without a confirmed account. Accounts can be confirmed in different ways, with most regular accounts requiring only a few days and a few edits to receive confirmation. Anonymous accounts may require as much as 90 days and 100 edits.²

In August 2009, the Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit that governs Wikipedia, announced that it would implement a two-month trial of a feature called “flagged revisions.” An article that was free of “vandalism or other problems” would be “flagged” by an editor.³ The most recent “flagged” version would be the one that appeared to users visiting the site. According to Wikipedia, flagged revisions can be used as a substitute for semi-protected pages, and the trial program applies only to articles that have already been marked as protected. Most articles will continue to operate under the standard editing model. The flagging policy is potentially less restrictive than protected status as “unregistered and new users are allowed to edit, but their edits are not shown to readers by default until confirmed by a reviewer.”⁴

Wikipedia relies upon a relatively novel approach to content creation. Prior to the arrival of the Internet, widespread collaborative projects such as Wikipedia were fairly rare. But the Internet age has brought several highly successful such ventures, most notably with open-source software such as Mozilla’s Firefox Internet browser. Many of these projects are new and still evolving, however, with rules being developed largely through trial and error. Wikipedia’s editorial tools are no exception. Like other open-source, cooperative

projects, Wikipedia can grow very quickly by virtue of its ability to take advantage of hundreds of thousands of editors.

But unlike many other collaborative projects, its editors say, Wikipedia “goes further in trusting ... [its] community [of editors] to self-regulate and become more proficient at quality control.” With more than 2.8 million entries in the English language version alone, Wikipedia has attracted the interest of professionals in fields as diverse as “information technology, business, project management, knowledge acquisition, software programming ... and sociology,” all looking to determine “whether the Wikipedia model can produce good results, what collaboration in this way can reveal about people, and whether the scale of involvement can overcome the obstacles of individual limitations and poor editorship which would otherwise arise.”

But experts are looking at Wikipedia not just because of its size alone. The “growing and widespread reliance on Wikipedia by both websites and individuals using it as a source of information,” has prompted experts to question the reliability of a source that is “susceptible to rapid change – including the introduction of misinformation at whim,” its editors acknowledge. Those who express such concerns “seek reassurance of the quality and reliability of articles,” and analyze “the degree of usefulness, misinformation or vandalism” on its many pages.

Source: Adapted from “Reliability of Wikipedia.” 8 Apr. 2009. Wikipedia. Accessed 9 Apr. 2009.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliability_of_Wikipedia#The_Wikipedia_editing_model>.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Protection_policy

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:User_access_levels#Autoconfirmed_users

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flagged_revision

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Flagged_protection_and_patrolled_revisions