

Changing Wikipedia Policy: Skills and Roles in a Multilingual Environment

Steve Jankowski
University of
Amsterdam

Claudio Celis Bueno
University of
Amsterdam

Jakko Kemper
University of
Amsterdam

Ouejdane Sabbah
University of
Amsterdam /
Hogeschool Utrecht

Abstract

The paper presents preliminary analyses of a two-year research project on the way that Wikipedians have cultivated different skills and roles to change policies within a multilingual environment. To understand this situation, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the policy edits and talk page discussions of fifteen policies selected from the Arabic, Dutch, English, French, and Spanish language versions starting in 2005. From this broad corpus, we identified that the different language editions have developed a set of common roles for engaging in policy development, including the deontic expert and scope definer. However, some versions require other social roles not typically found on English Wikipedia, such as translator. As such, we have found that different language versions engage in a mix of policy development that both reflects the initial policies set forth by English Wikipedia, as well as a degree of situated innovation that goes beyond an Anglocentric Wikipedia. This research therefore provides granular details on an area of Wikipedia participation that has been less often studied and contributes to theorizing about the organizational and social dynamics of peer production.

Keywords: policy development, multilingual governance, qualitative content analysis, social theory

Introduction

To understand the connection between Wikipedia's ideals and the type of work that Wikipedians engage in, Christian Pentzold argued that Wikipedia exist as a "real utopia," one that materializes through the "mundane practices" of "transcribing, republishing, and relicensing" content (Pentzold, 2021, p. 817; p. 816). These editorial actions are important for understanding the encyclopedic aspects of Wikipedia, but they do not speak to the transverse side of the site, the community. Using this framework of "mundane practices," how does the encyclopedia govern itself in way that allows it to exist, as Pentzold once described, as an "ethos-action community" (Pentzold, 2020)? In other words, what are the skills and the social roles that Wikipedian take on as they shift their attention from creating multilingual encyclopedic content within in articles to creating a multilingual encyclopedic community through its policies?

As Pentzold's work indicates, there has been a long-standing focus on Wikipedians as editors and their adjacent skills. At a basic level, Wikipedian editors begin with Internet skills which are "the ability to use the Internet effectively and efficiently" (Hargittai and Shaw, 2015 p. 427). With these skills at hand, their first forays into contributing to the site depend on a participation "pipeline" that requires that users have heard of Wikipedia, visited it, understand that it is editable, and then contribute (Shaw and Hargittai, 2018, p. 146).

Once users begin contributing, their skills and actions often become associated with specific social roles. For example, one of the earliest studies of this process came from Bryant et. al (2005) who studied "how newcomers become members of communities of practice" and take on the identity of the Wikipedian through "legitimate peripheral participation (2005, p. 2). One of the key facilitators of this process is the edit function located on every page that allows "novices to make the initial transition from reader to editor" (p. 5). From here, these newly minted "novice" editors tend to start with editing what they know. As they become more familiar with the site and its processes, the novice may become an "expert" or "Wikipedian" when the "goals broaden to include growing the community itself and improving the overall quality and character of the site" (p. 4). Such experts can be subdivided into their technical access and social status within the community through the labels of administrators, bureaucrats, stewards, account creators, and developers (Forte et. al., 2005, p. 57).

While these social roles are technically codified into the structure of the site, Wikipedians engage in collaborative patterns that are suggestive of other roles. In Liu and Ram's study of collaborative behaviour, they found that editors tended to cluster around certain practices that presented latent identities as all-round contributors, watchdogs, starters, content justifiers, copy editors, and cleaners (2011, p. 11:8). A different angle of analysis has been to identify the types of authority that Wikipedians express. Through his application of Weberian social theory, Mathieu O'Neil identified how "regimes of online legitimation" associated with charisma, collectivism, and archaic forces manifest on Wikipedia through the social roles of elders and maintainers; judges and enforcers; and trolls or scapegoats, a category that which also includes anonymous vandals and propagandists (2011, p. 310; p. 319).

These combinations of editorial and authoritative social roles help to map the topology of what Christian Pentzold described as the "ethos-action community" of Wikipedia (2020, p. 715). Importantly, for him, it was necessary to recognize that the principles that guides the ethos of this community were largely "drafted in the context of one particular language version [...] the English-language" (p. 715). It is on this last point that this paper ties the attention of skills and social roles to this Anglocentric situation, one that poses a valuable opportunity for investigation and understanding the global nature of the project.

On the one hand, most studies of the social roles on Wikipedians have concentrated on their skills associated with editing articles and have yet to pay the same attention to editing policies that are responsible for governing the community and the encyclopedia. While both actions are similar in that they are "editing" a page, the purposes of each action need to be distinguished. On the other hand, it is necessary to take Wikipedia's status as a multilingual project seriously by studying how Wikipedians in different language editions do the work of changing policies. In this paper, we ask what are the social roles and skills that Wikipedians have cultivated to change and develop policies, and how does these differ across language editions?

Methods

To answer these questions, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the policy edits and talk page discussions of fifteen policies selected from the Arabic, Dutch, English, French, and Spanish language versions starting in 2005. Data collection began by scraping the history page of each rule using the Wikipedia Edit Scraper and collecting a total of 8040 edits during the period of February 2005 to April 2023. We reduced this corpus further to analyze the moments when the status of the policy was changed from one level to another (i.e. from an essay to a guideline) to identify the type of consensus work required to make certain rules more authoritative within the community. We began the analysis by adopting the coding scheme presented in Liu and Ram (2011, p. 11:6) and then used open coding to iteratively categorize 60 technical actions that form the basis of 20 skills, and a cluster of social roles. A similar method was adopted to analyze actions, skills, and social roles on the associated talk pages.

Discussion

In our preliminary analyses of the corpus, we identified that the different language editions have developed a set of common roles for engaging in policy development, including the deontic expert and scope definer. These positions exist in ways that serve to "institutionalize"

emergent practices on Wikipedia in ways that are not dissimilar to Open Source Software development communities (Chakraborti et. al, 2022). At the same time, some versions require other social roles not typically found on English Wikipedia, such as translator and situated interpreter. These roles raise the concern over whether non-English policies should be literal translations of English policies, or they should be hand-crafted to reflect the situated practices of the linguistic community. Such actions suggest that the relationship between English and non-English policies is not a deterministic relationship.

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