

The Free Encyclopedia: Wikipedia and Jacques Rancière's philosophy of radical equality

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SUMMARY:

Beyond its importance as a major Internet destination and vast store of knowledge, Wikipedia exhibits a further cultural and symbolic importance. We use Rancière's political philosophy, specifically his idea that “equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom—or it is nothing,” to examine the idea of a “free encyclopedia”. From this point of view, a free license, such as the GFDL or CC is not sufficient. The software and editors must recognize and practice freedom in order to grasp it. Freedom and efficiency are not necessarily compatible. While continued efforts to improve the quality and further the scope of Wikipedia are admirable, we shouldn't allow these goals to eclipse its symbolic power as a free encyclopedia.

KEY WORDS: Wikipedia, Jacques Rancière, democracy, equality, social software, free culture, free software

1 MORE THAN AN ENCYCLOPEDIA

If Diderot's *Encyclopédie* was revolutionary, expressing the Enlightenment's rational and irreverent view of the world, in the recent past, encyclopedias have not held a dominant position in cultural debates, academic studies, or the thoughts of most people. They were more a source for schoolchildren to look up staid facts than an expression of a new worldview.

Wikipedia's introduction and rapid growth have changed that. Once again, an encyclopedia manages to arouse strong feelings. Not everyone likes Wikipedia. Jaron Lanier (2006) likens it to “digital Maoism,” saying, “The hive mind is for the most part stupid and boring.” For Lanier, Wikipedia and other large scale collaborative systems of knowledge are dangerous because they don't sufficiently value individual talent and creativity.

Andrew Keen (2007) feels a similar need to extol the necessity of “experts” in *The Cult of the Amateur*. Keen characterizes Wikipedia as

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the blind leading the blind — infinite monkeys providing infinite information for infinite readers, perpetuating the cycle of misinformation and ignorance (p 4)

Wikipedia certainly has its enthusiasts, too. The authors of *Wikiworld* claim

The Wikipedia has an obvious Gutenbergian potential. It is a free encyclopedia providing all the emancipatory potential of encyclopedias of the Enlightenment era (Suoranta & Vadén, 2008, p 66)

Lawrence Lessig (2006) dedication in *Code 2.0* reads, “To Wikipedia, the one surprise that teaches more than everything here.”

What exactly elicits such strong emotion about Wikipedia? We agree with Castells when he wrote

Neither utopia nor dystopia, the Internet is the expression of ourselves — through a specific code of communication, which we must understand if we want to change our reality. (2001, p6)

The cause for concern and celebration is the same. Wikipedia offers insight into our own nature and our own ambitions. Clearly, there is no single interpretation of something as vast as the Internet, or Wikipedia. Therefore, the interpretation itself becomes powerfully important in shaping which direction we take and how we understand our world.

2 READING WIKIPEDIA

Several scholars offer insight into how and why Wikipedia works. Two legal scholars, Yochai Benkler and Lawrence Lessig, have written at length about the ability to improve information production using the Internet as a means of collaboration. Benkler offers that the forces that made open source software development a success were not specific to hackers or other software developers.

I generalize from the phenomenon of free software to suggest characteristics that make large-scale collaborations in many information production fields sustainable and productive in the digitally networked environment without reliance either on markets or managerial hierarchy. (2002, p 374)

Benkler (2006) expanded his definition of “commons-based peer production” in *Wealth of Networks*. The technical affordances of high speed Internet and low-cost, powerful personal and mobile computing greatly reduce the cost of aggregating the efforts of many people, in loosely held networks:

the networked environment makes possible a new modality of organizing production: radically decentralized, collaborative, and nonproprietary (2006, p 60)

The effect is “improved identification and allocation of human creativity (2002, p 377).”

Benkler (2002) recognized something important in the Wikipedia community early on (p 386). Writing of the “2000 volunteer” editors, he noted that their work indicated that the methods of peer production could apply to more integrated and intricate means of knowledge production.

Lessig, in interaction with the work of Benkler, is particularly concerned with human creativity and creative production. He discusses a

“Walt Disney creativity”—a form of expression and genius that builds upon the culture around us and makes it something different. (2004, p 24)

In Lessig's view, we are at a crossroads, digital tools open the floodgates for this creativity of remix and sharing. At the same time, legislated and technical restrictions on sharing digital media threaten to extinguish this type of creative expression.

Surowiecki (2004) and Sunstein (2006) focus on a different aspect of networked collaboration: the aggregation of dispersed knowledge. Both focus on the notion that the average intelligence of a group outperforms the intelligence of a single expert. Surowiecki identifies his "four conditions that characterize wise crowds": diversity of opinion, independence, decentralization, and aggregation of judgment and knowledge (pp 17-18).

Acknowledging the power of "crowds", Sunstein is particularly worried that the Internet can polarize opinions and propagate information bubbles. He writes that "deliberative bodies are subject to exceedingly serious problems" (pp 220-221). The personalization and specialization that the Internet affords allows us to tune-in to like-minded opinions and to tune-out those who disagree, violating both the diversity and independence conditions noted by Surowiecki.

Both authors warn that crowds are not unconditionally wise. Instead, if certain conditions are met, they can surprise us with their aggregate results. Individuals remain the best sources for innovation (if they have access to other creative work, according to Lessig). Groups are better suited to skim the cream from individual efforts: in the case of Wikipedia, this entails choosing which information is the most relevant and how it should be archived and organized.

Wikipedia does not necessarily constitute a classic example of Sunstein or Surowiecki's model. Most articles are edited by a handful of people, not the aggregated work of hundreds or thousands. From a different perspective, the large Wikipedias represent such a force on the Internet, and receive so much diverse traffic, that, if and when Wikipedia lives up to its promise as the Encyclopedia that anybody can edit, it surely is the result of aggregated knowledge. In this scenario, every *reader* brings her knowledge to the article, and the standing edits are the aggregation of the self-selection of Benkler's peer production.

Taken together, these theories provide a coherent and compelling story for Wikipedia: it represents a new, more efficient way of producing information. One that is not only faster and less expensive than traditional methods, but which also produces higher quality results. It offers a democratic appeal in that large groups, working together, hold an advantage over elite experts. Surowiecki and Sunstein offer a theoretical framework to predict that Wikipedia's articles, at least in high-trafficked pages, will achieve higher quality than those produced by single or small groups of experts in efforts such as *Britannica*.

This story of efficiency and quality may not be the whole story. Marcuse (1964) warned,

The insistence on operational and behavioral concepts turns against the efforts to free thought and behavior from the given reality and for the suppressed alternatives. Theoretical and practical Reason, academic and social behaviorism meet on common ground: that of an advanced society which makes scientific and technical progress into an instrument of domination. (p 16)

It is exactly "operational and behavioral concepts" that dominate the discourse on the phenomenon of Wikipedia and the larger Internet. We do not claim that Benkler and his peers are mistaken in their analysis, only that it is not enough. What do we

find if we substitute freedom and democracy for efficiency and production as the loci of our research? How does Wikipedia support such goals; how does it subvert them?

3 THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA

Freedom is clearly on the mind of Wikipedians. Below the Wikipedia logo, on every page, is written “The Free Encyclopedia” or “La enciclopedia libre” or a similar translation, depending on the language version. Wikipedia co-founder, Jimmy Wales talks about the mission to provide “free access” to knowledge:

Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we are doing.

To understand Wikipedia, then, we must try to understand the meaning of free in the context of an encyclopedia. Wales writes,

What do I mean by free? I mean free as in speech, not free as in beer. It means we give people four freedoms. You get the freedom to copy our work. You can modify it. You can redistribute it. And you can redistribute modified versions. And you can do all of these things commercially or noncommercially. When we talk about Wikipedia being a free encyclopedia, what we're really talking about is not the price that it takes to access it, but rather the freedom that you have to take it and adapt it and use it however you like. (Wales in Lih, 2009b, p xii)

The freedom described here hews closely to the one advocated by Stallman (see Free Software Foundation, 2009) and Lessig. It is a freedom that emanates from a “free license”. Raymond (1999), Lessig, and Benkler have successfully argued the quantitative and qualitative advantage of such a freedom in creating digital works. Still, it merits further discussion whether this is the best freedom we can hope for, or if this initial definition leads us closer to a “free encyclopedia”.

Political philosopher Jacques Rancière offers a different view of freedom. According to Rancière, freedom can never be granted by a license, or any other formal structure.

Democracy is, first of all, a practice, which means that the very same institutions of power may or may not be accompanied by a democratic life. The same forms of parliamentary powers, the same institutional frameworks can either give rise to a democratic life, that is, a subjectivation of the gap between two ways of counting or accounting for the community, or operate simply as instruments for the reproduction of an oligarchic power. (2003, p 199)

Rancière holds that struggle, rather than formal structure, invites freedom.

Egalitarian effects occur only through a forcing, that is, the instituting of a quarrel that challenges the incorporated, perceptible evidence of an inegalitarian logic. This quarrel is politics. (2004a, p 5)

This doesn't indicate that Free Software or Wikipedia's free license are meaningless. The power of both, though, resides not in expanded legal rights, but in the direct challenge to the status quo, the ability to bring about a struggle, embodied in the act of using a free license.

From this point of view, Free Software is political because it broke our expectations of who had the time, the funds, and the talent to create software, especially “enterprise” software like the GNU/Linux operating system. According to Rancière, our own expectations limit our freedom. Through the “partition of the sensible” we close ourselves to certain voices, experiences, and opportunities.

The partition of the sensible is the cutting-up of the world (...) This partition should be understood in the double sense of the word: on the one hand, that which separates and excludes; on the other, that which allows participation. (Rancière, 2001, thesis 7)

Like Free Software, Wikipedia reconfigures our expectations, altering the demographics of expertise and knowledge creation. Keen (2007), ironically, in his attack on Wikipedia, reveals this disruption. He writes:

Can a social worker in Des Moines really be considered credible in arguing with a trained physicist over string theory? Can a car mechanic have as knowledgeable a “POV” as that of a trained geneticists on the nature of hereditary diseases? (p 45)

At first it's hard to discern the root of Keen's distress. He never indicates that the social worker or the mechanic are wrong, and, apparently he does not draw on actual Wikipedia controversies. He reveals his primary concern on the following page.

Today's editors, technicians, and cultural gatekeepers—the experts across an array of fields—are necessary to help us to sift through what's important and what's not, what is credible from what is unreliable, what is worth spending our time on as opposed to the white noise that can be safely ignored. (p 46)

In this passage, Keen underscores the affront of Wikipedia. People might listen to things they have not heeded in the past and to speakers who do not have the right to speak. Wikipedia is political in a specific Rancierean sense:

Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibility of time. (2004c, p 13)

If Wikipedia is credible, we must listen to new voices, to voices that were formerly “white noise”; what we experience as “sensible” has grown.

In his keynote address at *Wikimania 2009*, Richard Stallman (2009) declared that he was not interested in Wikipedia because it is a *wiki*, but because it is *free*. Stallman's mistake here is that he believes that freedom is devoid of context. If Wikipedia is free at all, it is precisely because it is a wiki, an encyclopedia, and used a certain way.

Freire (1971) understood why an encyclopedia might be considered free. He writes about “naming the world” as a path towards freedom.

To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it (...) Men are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.
But while to say the true word—which is work, which is praxis—is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every man. (p 76)

Wikipedia offers such an opportunity to name the world, to assert knowledge and expertise.

Following Rancière, Wikipedia may be a “free encyclopedia” because it offers a means to verify equality. He writes, “It is true that we don't know that men are equal. We are saying that they might be (1991, p 73).”

Rancière argues that “equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom—or it is nothing (2004b, p 223).” Our task, our attempt to live in a free society, requires us to approach everyone as our full equal — intellectually, morally, and practically.

Some of this philosophy shows in the affordances of MediaWiki, the software that powers Wikipedia.

There's very, very little in the software that serves as rule enforcement. It's all about dialogue, it's all about conversation, it's all about humans making decisions (...) It's about leaving things open-ended, it's about trusting people, it's about encouraging people to do good (Wales in Lih, 2009b, p xv)

MediaWiki inverts the normal editorial process, by asking editors to write first, and edit after. The invitation to new users to change the page they are reading, immediately and without asking permission, goes against the grain of all other digital publishing systems. Wales understands that if people can't be trusted, Wikipedia cannot work. Wikipedia cannot be achieved by any system of workflow and user/group/role permissions. In fact, there would be no point in trying, because the result would be nothing more than an encyclopedia.

Journalist, scholar, and Wikipedia chronicler Andrew Lih (2009a) is concerned that the Wikipedia community, at least in the large languages, is becoming a less open and less inviting. He suggests that the proliferation of “policy” may be partly culpable. In the early years, a few basic rules governed the spirit of Wikipedia. “Assume good faith” and “neutral point of view” sufficed to provide focus for most articles and moderate most conflicts.

Today, the talk pages of disputed articles read like legal briefs peppered with acronyms, linking to hundreds of pages of “official policy”. Additionally, the wiki mark-up used to format Wikipedia pages has become increasingly dense and obscure. A simple page, written in wiki-text looks more or less like plain text. Most pages today, though, begin with several includes (transclusions in wiki-speak), “info boxes”, “banners”, and other advanced formatting. Clicking the edit button for these articles brings up source that has more in common with computer programming code than descriptive text. In short, the tagline may say that “anyone can edit”, but editing a page on Wikipedia is not a task for the faint of heart or the uninitiated.

While we are sympathetic with Lih's analysis — that Wikipedia is a less friendly place for new editors — we disagree with his conclusions. Lih fears that the cool reception to novice users will slow Wikipedia's growth and hamper its ability to fight vandalism and expand the quality and quantity of articles. He might be right, but there is more at stake. Freedom is tenuous. To the degree that Wikipedia earns its moniker of the free encyclopedia, lessening the assumption of equality limits the freedom of its users.

Wikipedia has become an important source of information and an important destination on the Internet. Its passionate editors are justified in their desire to improve the quality, expand the content, and fight vandals. As MediaWiki accrues more tools to aid administrators and as the various Wikipedias expand their policies and practices for deciding who has the right to speak, we should reflect on the type of freedom we want.

We can build, or architect, or code cyberspace to protect values that we believe are fundamental. Or we can build, or architect, or code cyberspace to allow those values to disappear. There is no middle ground. There is no choice that does not include some kind of building. Code is never found; it is only ever made, and only ever made by us. (Lessig, 2006, p 6)

Wikipedia will never be more or less than what we make it. And a *high-quality* encyclopedia is not the same as a *free* encyclopedia.

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