

Wikipedian Self-Governance in Action: Motivating the Policy Lens

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Abstract

While previous studies have used the Wikipedia dataset to provide an understanding of its growth, there have been few attempts to quantitatively analyze the establishment and evolution of the rich social practices that support this editing community. One such social practice is the enactment and creation of Wikipedian policies. We focus on the enactment of policies in discussions on the talk pages that accompany each article. These policy citations are a valuable micro-to-macro connection between everyday action, communal norms and the governance structure of Wikipedia. We find that policies are widely used by registered users and administrators, that their use is converging and stabilizing in and across these groups, and that their use illustrates the growing importance of certain classes of work, in particular source attribution. We also find that participation in Wikipedia's governance structure is inclusionary in practice.

Introduction

In online communities, technology is the medium through which members act – and for many communities, this data is available for researchers to data mine. Despite the availability of such data, it is difficult for quantitative research to move from basic measurements of frequency counts and network representations to confident assertions about the establishment and evolution of social structure. And while qualitative studies can provide rich descriptive information, it is difficult to generalize results. With this paper, we open a dialogue about how quantitative methods might be used to bracket the rich social practices.

We examine Wikipedia, a prominent example of a community seeking to collectively produce and maintain a valuable artifact – a neutral account of all human knowledge. At the heart of this effort is the idealized decision-making mechanism of consensus. As Wikipedia grows in popularity and notoriety, achieving consensus is a challenge given the wide range of backgrounds, intent and attitude of participants. A rich set of policies and guidelines mediate the difficult work of seeking consensus (Kriplean *et al.* 2007; Viégas *et al.* 2007; Forte & Bruckman 2008). This *policy environment* articulates strategies of action, principles of encyclopedic content, and proper user behavior. Each policy

is described and summarized on its own page just like any other Wikipedia article. For example, the *Assume Good Faith* guideline states that users should regard other users' actions as well intentioned, while the *Verifiability* policy states that all facts need to be attributed to a verifiable source. The policy environment encodes and explains norms, but it is not imposed from up high; rather, policies are created and managed by the Wikipedia community at large. This is facilitated by two technical mechanisms:

First, contributors can easily hyperlink to policies during discussions concerning article content. We call these hyperlinks *policy citations*. By relying on policies, contributors can more easily interpret complex situations and legitimate their actions (Kriplean *et al.* 2007). Policy citations serve to help users educate new users, work through and resolve content disputes, and to deal with trolls (Viégas *et al.* 2007).

Second, policy pages are subject to the same open-editing and consensus-seeking processes as the rest of Wikipedia, giving contributors a participatory role in which experiential knowledge and best practices can be shared (Viégas, Wattenberg, & McKeon 2007). The policy environment therefore is reflective of social practice, not simply prescriptive of social behavior (Forte & Bruckman 2008).

We focus on one concrete manifestation of the enactment and enforcement of the policy environment: policy citations. Specifically, we provide a quantitative account of the practice of citing policies on the talk pages that accompany each article. We take the stance that we can learn more about the normative structure of the community by how its members enact policy, rather than examining the development of the policies themselves. The policy lens gives us leverage in identifying the challenges that online communities encounter at different scales of participation, strategies for addressing these difficulties, and empirical data for evaluating the efficacy of these strategies. We demonstrate that policy citations track community concerns and hence provide an interesting normative lens. Our results also corroborate and extend a number of qualitative findings about Wikipedia.

We begin by surveying the complex Wikipedia policy environment. Next we position our research amidst a growing body of prior work on Wikipedia. We then describe our methodology for extracting policy use on discussion pages and present our investigations into policy use. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings.

