

Wikipedia in the Noosphere – Part One

David Sloan Wilson: Well, hello Anne Clin, aka Risker. I am so happy to be talking to you about Wikipedia, so thank you for joining me.

Riskier/Anne Clin: Well, thank you very much for having me.

DSW: Wikipedia is just the shining example of a form of social organization which has risen in the Internet, which is often called self organizing. And we'll discuss exactly what that means, but it's definitely a distributed form of governance resulting in something which is absolutely magnificent. I want to say, first of all, I support it financially and I encourage everyone listening to do the same. And I used it at least three or four times today just in my work before this conversation, and I use it every day. So it is awesome really to contemplate it, and that's why I'm so eager to have this conversation. You are not as I understand it high up in any kind of Wikipedia hierarchy, if there is such a thing. But you are very engaged with it and tell us your story as to basically who you are as a person, how you became involved in Wikipedia and your current degree of engagement, because I think that says a lot about Wikipedia.

R/AC: Well, like you, I started off on Wikipedia by reading it, and I'm a little bit of a grammar nut. And so I would read articles and there'd be grammar or spelling mistakes in them and they would bother me. So one day I just thought maybe I would actually click that edit button and see what happened if I tried to fix a mistake and it worked and then I saved it, and all of a sudden it dawned on me that I had just taken a step that had changed the Internet. I had changed this for everybody else who read the article after me. And that felt very powerful. And I enjoyed that feeling and I continued doing that as an unregistered user for a little while, and then one day I had an article where I had to be a registered user to edit it. So I created an account, I'd been sort of reading around the Wikipedia site and learning things like that.

And then I moved on and I created my account and started participating more fully, had more opportunities to do things, went on to become an administrator, went on to become a member of one of the major dispute resolution body on English Wikipedia, which is called the Arbitration Committee, picked up some extra user rights along the way and just kept going. And since then I've worked more and more with what we call our meta level or our global level, where I take on roles on various committees that work across the multiple Wikipedia and Wikimedia sites. We have over 800 sites and we have sites in hundreds of languages. So having that opportunity has meant an awful lot to me.

DSW: Well, and this is entirely voluntary, Anne?

R/AC: Entirely voluntary.

DSW: Tell us more about yourself as a person. What do you do professionally? Or just a little bit more about you as a person please?

R/AC: Well, I'm retired now but before that I worked in healthcare administration. I'm from Canada, I live near Toronto. I have a family and I do Wikipedia instead of doing things like watching television or stuff like that. This is how I use my volunteer time. My husband jokingly says that, it's certainly a much healthier midlife crisis than buying a red Ferrari or something like that.

DSW: Yeah. Exactly, exactly, what we do with our spare time. So how much of the Wikipedia workforce is like that? I mean, as opposed to a paid staff?

R/AC: Almost all of it. On a weekly basis I believe we have over 30,000 volunteers editing some part of one or more sites. The Wikimedia foundation has roughly 500 staff and of all of the employees for all of the support areas, we have several chapters in different countries and some of them have employees. I would say there's probably less than a thousand people who are paid to work on the system. At least, they're mainly doing development, software development or user support, or administrative background

work, but they're not actually editing the project with those accounts. They'll still communicate using their official Wikimedia or whatever account to communicate, but they will not actually be editing articles with those accounts.

DSW: Right. So there is a small paid staff proportionally it's quite small, very small but you made it sound like it might be a one to 30 ratio of volunteer work versus paid work, is that a rough ballpark?

R/AC: Oh, easily. When I say 30,000 that's the number of people who are doing five or more edits a month. There's an awful lot more people who are editing less frequently or are not registered users, and who edit frequently.

DSW: Okay, so there's motivational part of this and a governance part of this. Let's begin with motivation, why is it so meaningful? That makes this so worthwhile? It's not financial capital it's something else, but it's really sustaining for some people such as yourself. So what is it that gives it such a meaning for you that keeps you doing it?

R/AC: I think the knowledge that we do make a difference in sharing information across the world is very important to a lot of people. For some people it's important to share a very limited section of information. They may focus completely on trains or they may focus on politicians or they may focus on some other aspect. For some people it's being able to share information about their native country or their local region. And I have sometimes worked with an editor who writes extensively about the history of early Quebec, for example, and the families that were involved, the towns that existed at the time, and how it has impacted Quebec as it has developed over the years. And I've worked with people who are starting to bring out more information about African countries and figuring out how to fit that information in, to an English Wikipedia that is primarily written by Westerners. So we want to make sure that we integrate that information.

DSW: I think of this as a very democratic form of scholarship. And let me just say you a little bit on scholarship, because I'm a scholar and a scientist. And I have a reverential attitude towards scholarship, this community of people that are just really assiduous about getting the facts right. And I attribute almost like a sacredness to knowledge and scholarship, but of course, so much of it takes place in universities, inside the proverbial ivory tower. And is therefore very biased in its own way and very restricted and so on. And so Wikipedia, it seems, offers an opportunity for people from anywhere, any walk of life to contribute to scholarly knowledge like the early history of Quebec, you don't necessarily have to be a professor to do that. Is that part of the motivation here? I mean, people want to talk about trains or their nation in Africa or the early history of Quebec is that they're basically eager to function as scholars, no matter what their day job?

R/AC: I think that's definitely part of it. And there are a lot of people who enjoy reading and researching and having hobbies outside of Wikipedia, that they are then able to share on Wikipedia. Share that knowledge that they've gained about their various hobbies or their various personal interests. I think that's really important because it does have some effect. You'd also be surprised at how many universities participate in Wikipedia.

DSW: Oh, yeah. I'm not surprised at that.

R/AC: Literally...

DSW: Yeah, yeah.

R/AC: There are literally hundreds of professors who create Wikipedia classes and bring their students and require them to participate on Wikipedia. And they'll often contribute in areas where scholarly expertise is really important. I will use the example of something that we ran into during the last United States election, where some Internet meme decided that Benford's Law, which is a very esoteric mathematical theorem would show that, the results of the US election were false and they started

editing this article. And I can assure you that 99.98% of Wikipedians don't understand math at that level to be able to edit the article. However, we do have a whole core group of mathematicians and we just sort of said, come and check this out, figure out whether not this makes sense. And they, cleaned up the article made sense of it and got rid of all of the nonsense from the Internet memes.

DSW: Yeah, we're going to get to that, governance, we're going to spend a long time on governance. And I just wanted to say, I have a colleague who teaches classes just that way. The student projects are to create Wikipedia pages for an organism or something like that. That's definitely the case. I also wanted to mention and I've forgotten the reference so bad on me as a scholar, but what the article said was, "In the first place, if you're a professor and you're writing something, you never actually reference a Wikipedia article", it's just like it's not good enough. You have to reference an academic article, but what the study showed is that where do they find those academic articles? Wikipedia. And actually Wikipedia has become as in my case, just the go to place for information.

And then when you cite something, you cite something that's cited in the Wikipedia article. So it's kind of like a silent source for academics and I think that almost everyone is using Wikipedia in that way.

Anne, I wanted to ask how much recognition, status, prestige, recognition, within this circle figures as part of the motivation that not only are you contributing to this knowledge, but in some ways you're becoming known for it? That's a very basic human motivation, nothing to be ashamed of that you have some standing and in a community. And I wonder how does that figure in yourself, and in others that you know within this community?

R/AC: There are many ways to be recognized. Some of it is simply a little, what we call a Wiki-love or a Wiki-note that somebody leaves on the user's talk page, where they would leave messages for somebody saying, "Geez! You did a great job on this article or I've seen your work and here's a cookie". And those sorts of things, at the base level that's where it starts for editors who've worked on more complicated or more complete articles. I mean, a lot of our articles are okay, but they're very basic. And for people who've worked on articles that have received a certain amount of recognition, their name is directly tied to that article's recognition as well. And they receive a notice. In the page history, we actually have a way of saying this article became a good article on this date, this version, and it usually will have the username of the person who promoted it and developed it. And the same thing for what we call our featured articles, the articles that run on the front page of Wikipedia.

Those are much more complicated, they have to follow very precise requirements, they have to have incredible sourcing. Those sources are all double checked, quite often by scholars who specialize in that area. And then all of the images have to meet our certain criteria and so on. And they are formally recognized as the promoter of that feature article. They will receive formal recognition of that. And so that is certainly, from the content side, that's one way of recognizing people. Other ways of recognizing people are to provide them with additional user rights or user permissions. Somebody who has demonstrated some ability in assessing new articles, will be given a particular user permission to be able to continue to do that without being overseen. Editors who have developed skills in identifying people who run multiple accounts, may get special authorizations or special permissions to do that in a more formal and more complex way that involves private information.

DSW: So there's a ladder to climb. You described that for yourself, that you're able to do more and more and more and get access to more permissions and so on. And so, of course I could imagine that being very motivating, just like a video game when you want to climb the levels of a video game. Is there a there some public recognition of that? That you become more widely known? And that may or may not be important to you or anyone else, but I'm just really quite eager, as someone who thinks a lot about social systems and how they work, just to know how much that you gain a kind of a reputation for what you do.

There's the private satisfaction of accomplishment, and then the public part, and how much of that is built into the digital platform? So that if you want to praise somebody give them a cookie, I think you just said that there's a way to do it. That would have to be built into a digital platform, just for someone to say thank you would have to actually be built in. Otherwise, it wouldn't be possible, so more on that please.

R/AC: Well, definitely it is built in, we actually have two tools. The first one is that, anybody can thank an individual editor for a specific edit they've made. You go to the page history and you see the username and it says at the end of it, "Do you want to thank this person?" And you can click yes, and that thanks goes directly to them. So they know that somebody appreciated what they said or what they edited in that particular edit. It could be removing vandalism, it could be making a very erudite statement on a talk page or in a discussion. These are all very important things and it's immediate recognition. As soon as you click that button, they get a notice saying, you have been thanked by so and so.

DSW: How many thanks do you get on an average day?

R/AC: Oh, I'll get a couple a week maybe.

DSW: Okay.

R/AC: Depends on how much work I'm doing on English Wikipedia that week.

DSW: Right, right.

R/AC: And that is a dependent thing. A lot of the work that I do is either behind the scenes or on one of the other projects that we have, so I may not get as many as some people, but certainly a lot of thanks go out. And again, the message that gives somebody a cookie, we call them Wiki-love messages believe it or not, is a software link that you just click and you choose which photo you want to use and exactly what thing you want to say to them. And then you just save it to their top page, it's very easy to do.

DSW: How many of those do you get couple a week?

R/AC: Maybe a couple of a month.

DSW: How many do you give?

R/AC: I'll thank people probably several times a month.

DSW: Okay.

R/AC: Yeah. It's very individualistic.

DSW: Yeah, yeah. How social is it? And I hope you don't... You can see how interested I am in this. In some sense it seems like it's a solitary activity you're there and at your computer, but how many social interactions are there of any kind on a given day? Are you actually interacting with another person in a way that's fulfilling? The way we do when we say hi to a friend or just with someone or so on. How many people do you actually interact with on a given day? So that this could actually become a fairly rich social life?

R/AC: It's definitely a very significant aspect for a lot of people. I can tell you right now that I can personally think of at least 20 couples who have gotten married, who met on Wikipedia. So clearly, there is a social element. Many, many friendships have developed over the years. And it depends on the level that the individual wants to have that social interaction as well, whether they want to limit it to just talking about articles and stuff like that, whether they want to include some external friendships and so on. Quite often we'll go offline with that we know or who's whose work we've enjoyed and say, hey, how are you? And a lot of background work is done offline, where it's not necessarily visible. And those committees become very close, and the people in those committees tend to get very close.

We also have external in person meetings for a lot of things or online meetings for various things. Everything had to go online due to the pandemic, but it certainly has reminded us of how easy it is for us to just get together and have these conversations with each other. But we have regular in person sessions together, whether they're local, we can meet in New York City, whether they're regional, the Central and Eastern Europe group has an annual conference, or whether they're global. Our annual Wikimania events conferences, which usually attract about a thousand people from around the world. They're all very useful and they have to build the connections that are used for continuing to develop the projects. Having gone to several of the Wikimania's I've been able to develop friendships and working relationships with people from all over the globe. I have friends in Africa and it is a fantastic portal.

DSW: And it's all enveloped by an ethos of dedication to knowledge basically. I mean, the whole cause of it is something which is very prosocial and intellectual and so on. So that you're really working on something that has real value and that everyone shares that value. And so, we're going to get to the Ostrom core design principles in a minute, but strong sense of identity and purpose is the first thing that's needed for any group to function well, is a strong sense of identity and purpose. And here's something that anyone can join anywhere in the world, any culture, any level of expertise and then they're welcomed into that world. And so, I think that that is really very, very interesting.

R/AC: I think one of the biggest challenges that we face, especially as we are spreading our wings and making a point of trying to develop editing groups in areas outside of the Western world, is that there are a lot of areas where it is financially or socially very costly for people to participate in these things. They have to have an Internet connection, they have to have the hardware to actually connect to the Internet and to participate, they have to have access to some information sources, and that can be very, very expensive in some parts of the world. So that's one of the areas where we're looking at trying to figure out how we can support people to participate from those areas. We've got lots of ways now for people to make use of our knowledge in those areas, we have offline Wikipedias and special software that can be built off of Raspberry Pi, which is an incredibly inexpensive piece of technology.

DSW: What is that? That is a little bit more I'm unfamiliar with that, Anne, what is that?

R/AC: It's called a Raspberry Pi. It's a kind of... Well, it's like a PC, except it's incredibly inexpensive has very limited capacity and it can be used to hold or store a large amount of information. So quite often what we'll do is we'll have an offline Wikipedia built into those Raspberry Pis. And Pi is spelled P-I. You could probably find out more about it the Wikipedia article about Raspberry Pi.

DSW: That's where I'll go.

R/AC: It makes our information more usable, but we also need to have those people contributing so we can work against the inherent biases of the Western worldview or the North American continental worldview, or the European worldview. A lot of the things that we mess up are not because we intended to mess it up, it's because we simply don't have enough knowledge to be able to identify things. For example, understanding what the best reference sources are amongst Nigeria media is not something that's somebody in New York city is going to know, unless they came from Nigeria.

DSW: Yeah, there's an acronym and I wonder if you've encountered it White Educated Industrial Rich and Democratic that's WEIRD, WEIRD, White Educated Industrial Rich and Democratic. Have you encountered that acronym?

R/AC: I haven't, but I fully understand what it means.

DSW: Yeah, and so it's a huge challenge to basically to first recognize how peculiar WEIRD cultures are. And yet of course, almost everything that we call scholarly or technological, it comes from those WEIRD cultures. And so the need to appreciate non-WEIRD societies and to include them in everything, including an enterprise like Wikipedia is like first and foremost, that's what you've got to do once you

appreciate how peculiar we are. And Joseph Henrich, is the scholar, he's a professor at Harvard University, good colleague of mine is the person who coined it, and has a beautiful book called *The WEIRDest People in the World*, that lays all this out. I mean, it's just amazing when you think of it, our entire conception of reality, it needs to be broadened out.