

Wikipedia in the Noosphere – Part Three

David Sloan Wilson: I've got to get to Ostrom's core design principles. So to set the stage for our listeners, Elinor Ostrom was a political scientist, and she became famous for studying the famous tragedy of the commons, the tendency of people to overuse natural resources. And that term of course, was coined by the ecologist Garrett Hardin in an article published in science magazine in 1968. And the received wisdom was, was that the tragedy would always occur unless you privatized the resource or regulated it in some top down fashion. And what Ostrom did, Lin Ostrom, was actually study common pool resource groups around the world. And she showed that some of them were able to avoid the tragedy of the commons, to regulate, self-regulate their resources, but only if they implemented certain what she called core design principles. If they didn't implement these core design principles, the tragedy did in fact occur.

And so she won the Nobel prize in economics for that in 2009. And I was blessed to work with her for three years, prior to her death in 2012, to generalize the core design principles and to show that these principles are required basically for all forms of cooperation at all scales. And so there's just tremendous utility in these core design principles.

So I'm going to list them and then to ask you how much they're implemented, how relevant they are to Wikipedia and some we've already covered. And so I think that as I list them, we'll see that we've already talked about these, but it's very useful to bring them to light. And so the first one, and the most important one, is a shared identity and purpose, a strong sense of identity and purpose, that you have to know that you're a part of this group, that what it does is important, who's a member and what they're supposed to do. So to what extent is a shared sense of identity and purpose represented in Wikipedia? I think we've already talked about this a lot, but maybe you could just summarize that.

2:30

Riskier/Anne Clin: I think, this is probably the easiest one to answer because we actually have this is our mission statement. We are here to share education to everybody in the world, and that's what we're here for. There's no question about it. It is why you're here, why you use it, why you participate in creating it. And if you can't track what you're doing to that, then you're probably not quite on the, people will say, "If you're not doing it for that purpose, maybe you don't need to be here." The companies who hire people to try and create or edit articles about them. Those editors are told, "You're not here for the right reason. You're not going to be here anymore." If they don't have that philosophy as they're coming in to participate, they're not tremendously welcome. Sometimes we will be able to turn people around, but that isn't our goal.

3:53

DSW: Mostly they have to leave. Yeah. And so we'll actually get there, that's some of the other principles. Number two, Anne, is equitable distribution of contributions and benefits. Not sustainable for some members of the group to get the benefits and others to do all the work. And you can see how that would work in a common pool of resource group. If you're managing a forest or a lake or something like that. Wikipedia, I think, it's really interesting to reflect upon this because so much is done on a voluntary basis and people choose their level of effort. So what are your thoughts about this idea that the benefits and the workload and so on has to be fairly distributed? So how does that relate to Wikipedia?

R/AC: As you point out, on Wikipedia, because individuals get to choose what they want to focus their time on, where they want to focus their time and how much time they want to put into the project, whether it's a huge amount or it's tiny little bits, the distribution works out pretty well. Sometimes people are pressured to consider doing certain tasks or invited to think about doing certain tasks that

may not look particularly appealing in the first place. But quite often, those tasks come with a fair amount of internal prestige. For example, our arbitration committee on English Wikipedia comes with a fair amount of prestige, but it's a really hard job. And it takes people away from a lot of the other things that they like to do, because they're basically dealing with disputes all the time, of various nature, of various kinds. And that can be hard.

DSW: Well, is there a free-riding problem? Is there some sense in which you can be a slacker, that you could be part of the community and not doing much, but getting something from it despite not contributing? Is there even a danger of that, or is it what you get so well aligned with what you give that slacking is not a problem?

R/AC: Slacking isn't really a problem because there's no requirement that people do a certain amount of work. How much respected authority and responsibility you get is to your choosing. There is a correlation, if you're only making five edits a month, you are probably not going to get named administrator of the year, but you're not going to build a feature article if you're doing that. But at the same time, those five edits may be really valuable.

DSW: Yeah. Yeah. So we actually do that in other groups. We contextualize it basically. What are you in a position to give and what do you want from this? And then as long as we understand that, then that's fine. We've basically looked at it and we've agreed upon it, and thanks for the contribution to the degree that you can do. So I think that that is very interesting.

7:22

Okay. Number three is fair and inclusive decision making. Not sustainable for some individuals to call the shots and for others to have decisions made for them without their consent or participation. Does not have to be a strict consensus, but there needs to be some sense in which decision making is fair and inclusive. How well does Wikipedia measure up on that?

R/AC: Almost everybody is permitted to participate in discussions about decisions, at any level, whether it's how we spell Gaddafi's name, and we have a big discussion. That's not a minor point, I have to tell you. How we spell that person's name and have a big discussion on a talk page. And as many people as want to participate in that discussion, are going to participate. And then a decision gets made. It may be reviewed by somebody else, or it may be obvious as we go through what the answer is going to be, but decisions, just like any other organization, decisions are made by those who show up. And to some extent, if you don't show up, you're not going to get to change that decision, at least not right away. Because we have to at least try the new decision.

DSW: Yeah. So it has to be efficient. That's the great trade off. The great trade off for decision making is basically participation and efficiency, but there's no closed doors, it sounds like. It's up to you to show up, but you're not prevented from showing up. I mean, you have to have a certain access and status, I'm sure.

R/AC: Well, not even necessarily. With a few exceptions, there may be sometimes where we had decision making processes that are closed off to unregistered users or closed off to people who don't have a certain number of edits, but those edit numbers are usually low, like 10 edits in four days or something like that. But that is the main limit is that once a decision is made, it's made. We don't want to be revisiting those decisions right away. There may be times where we have to change something very quickly. When we don't have time to have an extensive discussion, but a lot of decisions are very simple and very straightforward. Do we use ABC or NBC as the reference source? "Hey, let's use both of them. Why not?" Those sorts of things.

DSW: Have you evolved a more deliberative procedure for the important decisions? Almost like your checklist, for the more important decisions?

R/AC: Yes. We have various processes for deciding whether or not somebody is suitable for being an administrator. Administrators are people who have authority to block other users or to delete material. We have a process called request for administration. The candidate goes through a process where they're reviewed by members of the community and asked questions. And at the end of it, they are either granted or not granted administrator status.

The arbitration committee that I've mentioned before is a dispute resolution body. Its formal decisions that go there can only be modified by the arbitration committee. Those decisions are final. The community has to follow them. And they are user based as opposed to content based. They're based on user behavior. We have a notice board called administrators' notice board incidents, or as we call it ANI, where people will come with issues or concerns and decisions will be made as to whether or not, there's some disciplinary issue that needs to be dealt with. We have what we call, request for comment, where we have a question usually about article content or a policy content, which will be open for a given length of time, to have a discussion about do we want to do A, B, C. What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing each of these things? And it's a community discussion. And then at the end of it, it's usually solidified.

DSW: Yeah. So a lot of structure there.

R/AC: There's a lot of structures and we use the structure that's right for the situation.

12:44

DSW: Yeah. I can see that's highly evolved. Number four, Anne, we've commented on extensively. Monitoring agreed behaviors, monitoring agreed upon behaviors. And our entire conversation has been shot through with monitoring. If you don't know what's happening, then forget about it. And so your checklist is all about monitoring and so I'm not sure, is there anything more you want to say about monitoring or is it just like we've said it throughout this conversation?

R/AC: It is so inherent to the Wikipedia model that I don't think we have anything more to say at this stage.

DSW: Sometimes monitoring becomes invasive and people feel like their big brother is watching or a little brother is watching. Does monitoring ever become problematic in the sense that there's over-monitoring or some kind of inappropriate monitoring?

R/AC: Sometimes we've run into situations where we have somebody who's developed a history of manifesting a certain kind of behavior. For example, adding material that violates copyright into articles or similarly, creating a whole series of articles from a boiler plate and then not updating the information to match the title of the article or something like that.

And these people can sometimes be very proliferate. And if one person is going through all those edits, article by article, it can feel very harassing. And we have to try and find ways to balance that. Because, I mean, we have problem content and a problem editor, but we also don't want to create a sense of a harassment. So finding that balance can be very tricky sometimes.

14:50

DSW: Okay. Next is graduated responding to helpful and unhelpful behavior. Let me repeat that. Graduated responding to helpful and unhelpful behavior. We've already talked about positive reward for good behavior. Now, when it comes to misbehavior, then the graduated part is important. According to Ostrom, it need not start out harsh, it starts out friendly. And I have to tell a story, Anne. Her favorite example was the lobster gangs of Maine. And so the bays of Maine are owned by groups of lobster fishermen. And they're the only ones that have access to the bay. And if somebody else comes in with their lobster pots, you know it, because those colorful buoys that you know are emblematic of the state

of Maine. Those actually identify the lobstermen. And so the lobstermen know when somebody's come in and is inappropriately fishing in their bay, and what's the first thing they do?

And Lin loved to tell the story. They tie a bow around the buoy, they tie a bow. And she used to laugh and say, these big burly lobstermen, tying a bow around the buoy. So that was the friendly part. But you know if that guy didn't get out of there, what would happen next. And so, starting out friendly, but with the capacity to escalate and you've already said, Anne, in this conversation. That escalation part in the case of Wikipedia happens pretty fast. So, there's a point at which you don't mess around, if somebody's misbehaving, presumably they get some kind of warning, but if they don't respond, then it escalates pretty fast. Did I get that right from our conversation?

R/AC: Yes. I'll clarify this a little bit. We actually have a series of warnings. Generally speaking, a new editor who is doing something comparatively minor like a little bit of vandalism, or doing minor things that change content and somebody has to fix it, will get four warnings before they get blocked, up to four warnings. Somebody who is doing something really bad, like coming on, creating an article saying, "Professor Sloan is blahdy, blahdy, blah, and there are certain things that we will simply block immediately, accusations of pedophilia, those sorts of things, really, really bad stuff, is going to get an immediate block.

We're not going to mess around with a warning there. We're going to go straight to the heavy duty stuff. But if it's somebody who just doesn't understand that we have British spellings and Canadian spellings and American spellings in different articles and they don't know that you don't change the British spelling on the article about Buckingham Palace, they're just going to get a minor warning. They're just going to get a minor warning, and we're going to work from there.

DSW: But it's sensitive. It sounds very sensitive basically that if something goes wrong, then it's kind of like that, that something happens.

R/AC: And sometimes we won't use our official warning templates. We'll just drop a nice little message, a handwritten message from somebody saying, "Hi, welcome to Wikipedia. We noticed that you did this." We actually have welcome messages, and we actually have warnings that have a welcome message built in.

DSW: Okay, okay, you've got that down. Yeah, this is perfect, this is perfect.

R/AC: Yeah, we want to make sure that people who are there in good faith are not going to get scared off just because they change manoeuvre to maneuver.

19:05

DSW: Yeah. Okay, number six is fast and fair conflict resolution. We've also talked quite a bit about resolving conflicts. An important point there is to have respect for both parties because in a dispute, most parties think they have a point of view. So say a little bit more if you like, or maybe we've already covered it on conflict resolution mechanisms.

R/AC: In most of our conflict resolution processes, there's a relative degree of fairness. It's not always going to be perfectly fair. And again, it depends on who shows up to have that conversation and participate in that dispute. I can't say that all of our dispute resolution is fast. Some of it is intentionally not fast, and some of it doesn't necessarily work out the way people expect. We often jokingly say that the disputes that the arbitration committee is working on are interpersonal disputes, in most cases. But at the end of the day, the primary customer is the encyclopedia as opposed to the people. So they have to make a decision that is based on maintaining the encyclopedia, not making the people happy. It won't always work that way.

DSW: And I think by fast, I think the meaning of that is fast to initiate. So things don't fester, and then how long it takes.

R/AC: Initiating can go pretty quickly. Yeah.

20:41

DSW: So number seven is authority to self-govern, because if members of a group don't have the elbow room to manage their own affairs, then all bets are off, if they're being bossed around from the outside. And I think it seems from everything we've said and the whole nature of Wikipedia is that it is to have authority to govern itself, or perhaps not. I don't know. Maybe there's aspects of the larger world that impinge upon it. So we're now shifting basically, with the seventh and eighth design principles. We're shifting from internal processes within the group to the relationship between the group and other groups in a multi-group population of some sort. So speak to that, authority to self-govern. How does Wikipedia fare there?

R/AC: And as you mentioned, this is something that goes a little bit outside of the individual groups. Now, as I've mentioned before, we have a lot of different projects. We have about 800 of them. We also have, I think, 120 or so what we call affiliates, they're user groups or chapters in geographically specific regions. And overall, each of those groups self-manages. The affiliates, the projects themselves, they self-manage. They decide where they're going to focus their attention, they decide who their primary consumer is going to be, or who their client is, to some extent. But there can come a point where the larger group, the movement group, as we call it, or the larger overarching community of all the projects and all the affiliates may have to say, "You're losing the plot here, guys. You're not following the rules."

There are certain limited rules that you're expected to follow you. You can't have neo-Nazis running one of the sites. It's that simple. We're not going to allow it. We're not going to grant this particular group authority because we already know they're infiltrated by your government, those sorts of things. It's really hard within our movement to get to that point, but there are times where we've definitely had to do it, where projects have been closed because of inappropriateness, where users have had to be removed from them because of their behavior, because the project itself can't handle or manage their issues.

And sometimes there has to be a way for a project to step out of itself and say, "Hey, we've got a really big problem, and we need some help here." So that can be an issue too. Certainly, in a large project that has input coming in from a lot of parts of the world, those are not commonly seen, those kinds of issues are not commonly seen. But for a smaller project or a medium-sized project where almost all of the editing is done in a very small geographic area, it can be prone to capture, and we have to be able to prevent that from happening. So, on the whole, yes, our projects are self-governing, but there are some guardrails.

24:52

DSW: Yeah, well, that actually gets to the last design principle of collaborative relationships with other groups. The Catholics have this principle of subsidiarity, the lower level unit has authority until there's some problem up the line, and then that requires some top-down attention. Do you actually think about subsidiarity at all, or do you have the equivalent? Do you ever use that term?

R/AC: We have just gone through a big process right now of looking at our long-term strategy for the entire Wikimedia movement. And one of the very core principles that we have included in our strategic proposals is subsidiarity. We've had very extensive discussions about it. And it is pretty widely agreed that subsidiarity is really important and really valuable for us, and that it's actually one of our better features.

25:54

DSW: That's great. And so basically, it looks like this eighth core design principle, basically governing intergroup relations within Wikipedia, it sounds like you do pretty well on that. But now, if we think of Wikipedia in a still larger ecosystem, which is of course a market capitalistic ecosystem. Well, you're worldwide. So Wikipedia is attempting to survive in every kind of political background. So it's almost like a natural experiment that you have this amazing social organization and it's attempting to grow in every kind of political environment, authoritarian, democratic, capitalistic, social democratic, socialist. And so talk about the ecosystem at that level where Wikipedia is an agent within this still larger ecosystem, which is much less in its control. I mean, beyond its control. So what are some of the challenges of Wikipedia surviving and thriving in these very different sociopolitical cultural environments?

R/AC: There is no doubt that these are challenges. At various times, Wikipedia has been blocked in entire countries. There was a very long blockade by Turkey. China has blocked Wikipedia on and off intermittently for almost as long as I've been editing. Other countries do it. Other countries will narrow what they block to specific articles if they can, or have threatened to block. We've had countries who have threatened to cause harm to various members of our editing community or our Wikimedia community, our local communities there.

And we have to be sensitive to protecting those individuals and not putting them in positions where this is a real danger for them. So, for example, we have certain countries where people who are residents of certain countries are not allowed to hold certain kinds of permissions so that they cannot be seized by the government and coerced into abusing those permissions. This is not necessarily always authoritarian countries. It happened to somebody from France, where somebody in the French military wanted an article taken down and a Wikipedia administrator was arrested and told to delete this. So this is not just authoritarian regimes. This can happen in the Western countries too.

29:22

DSW: Well, yeah, western countries could become authoritarian. And so there's that, which is frightening enough. But then there's the problem of commercialization, just basically in a highly capitalistic country. What are the dangers from that end of things in a laissez-faire market economy? What are the dangers on that side?

R/AC: There are two dangers. And the first one is people using our content without giving proper credit. It would be like, plagiarism, basically. It is possible to plagiarize Wikipedia as crazy as it sounds, because we have a certain licensing requirement that says, if you're going to use our content, you've got to tell us, say that you're using our content. You've got to attribute it. I know very well that one article that I worked on quite extensively was practically quoted verbatim in a number of news media sources afterwards. And when I say verbatim, I mean literally they picked up the paragraph and they put it right into their articles.

DSW: This wasn't some college student. This was some news source.

R/AC: No, this was a supposedly reliable source publication. That does still happen, but there's an awful lot more recognition from media that this is a bad thing because it started happening to them too. So they realized that they've got to start doing this. For example, we used to have a lot of problems with images coming from Wikimedia Commons being used in news reports without credit. But I'll bet you couldn't open up a news site right now without finding on their front page someplace a Wikimedia Commons image that is actually attributed to Wikimedia Commons. It may not be right down to the very photographer, but it is attributed to Wikimedia Commons. So we're getting there. That's improving.

The other end, of course, is companies trying to weasel their way into articles. Some companies behave quite legitimately, and they'll have somebody, Joe Blow PR of ABC corporation with a username that says this and his user page says, "I work for such and such, ABC corporation." And they'll comment on the top page of the article, and they'll say, "We have some information here that you might want to include in

the article, or we're a little bit concerned about such and such." And then they have a discussion with the community and it's then worked out.

DSW: They're responsible, basically. They're agents of the company. They're responsible agents. Yeah.

R/AC: They're being responsible. Yeah. That's it. They're being responsible. There are some companies who are not behaving that responsibly. They tend, not all the time, but they tend to try and hire out of certain sites and hire people to do this stuff, and that's hard to do because the quality quite often doesn't come up to standards and the article will be deleted because it's junk, as far as we're concerned, or it's a really, really bad article. So a lot of it, we'll take one look at it, we'll say that's spam, it's junk and it's gone. And quite often the account will get blocked at the same time.

And sometimes there's middle grounds, where they're just adding little bits and pieces, or where somebody who may or may not be hired is trying to influence an article in a certain direction. We don't know whether or not they're paid to do it. It may simply be that they really love that particular product and they want to support it, or that particular company. But we do have ways of dealing with that. Now, on a big project, it's not too hard to catch those things. And different projects have had a few different ways of dealing with that.

On German Wikipedia, they've actually experimented with having an official account for some companies to work on, to do that kind of editing as opposed to having a specific individual, but having accounts for the company that are only allowed to edit top pages. They're actually prevented from editing anything else. Special kind of account. I don't know how well it's worked because I haven't really talked to my German colleagues about that, but I know other projects have had issues with this. And for small projects, it can be very challenging to try and keep that kind of stuff out, especially some of our projects may only have 15 or 20 regular editors.

34:37

DSW: Oh, I can easily see how it would become overwhelming. This might be my final question, Anne. We have now, back to WEIRD societies and problems with colonialism and where the people providing content are just not of the cultures that they're writing about, and so a recognition of that problem and then doing something about it. How does Wikipedia, first of all, I believe it has acknowledged that and is making an effort, but how do you go about that, where basically you're challenging the authority structure and then you're trying to create a more of a balance in just who counts as the authority on a given topic?

R/AC: Exactly. It is one of our biggest challenges. Definitely we recognize that this is a challenge. And it's one of those challenges that cannot just be resolved by one or two processes, or by doing everything at once. A lot of this is very piecemeal, but at the same time it tries to respond to the individual communities that we're trying to encourage to participate. A good example here is that in the Province of Quebec here in Canada, we have several editors from Wikimedia Canada, a recognized chapter, who work with the Inuit of James Bay who are helping them to develop their native language Wikipedia and dictionary and all of these projects. They're providing a lot of the support, the how-to, the training of how to use a Wikipedia, the kinds of things that will help them with sourcing.

And it's very difficult sometimes for some communities, especially indigenous communities that may not have a written language to participate in some of these. So we're looking at, are there some kinds of different projects that are not Wikipedias that we can capture a lot of this knowledge in because we want Wikipedias to be a certain thing. But can we capture a lot of this knowledge in a different way? Can you imagine trying to capture all of the legends? To us, this is incredible cultural information. We'd love to do this. So we are trying to look at that.

DSW: Yeah, but it would be an oral history. But you've reminded me that's what anthropologists have done forever. Ever since there's been a field of anthropology, is people have gone and they've learned enough about the culture very respectfully. They've translated the culture to their own readership, to the best of their ability, and then they've provided as much opportunity as possible for the people of the culture that they're studying to speak in their own voice.

And now, what we're doing is we're adding a technological dimension to that, which might be Wikipedia, that's primarily print, for which you need a written language, which might not exist in some cases. And if not, then something else, an oral archive, or images, or so on and so forth. In which basically there's the core design principles, the kind of respect and moral equality that we hope for. And so I think that's quite optimistic. And to see that Wikipedia is playing a role in that is wonderful. But that's doable, I think, with appropriate sensitivity.

So, Anne, this project is part of a series of conversations that are built around the concept of the noosphere by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a kind of a thinking, brain-like entity, which can expand to the entire globe. Do you think at all, and your brethren there at Wikipedia about Wikipedia as being something like the memory of a global brain or something like that? Is that part of the conversation?

R/AC: Well, certainly that's part of our objective, our mission, is to be one of the information centers of the world, the globe. We aren't all the way there yet. We continue to develop. We know that we have some parts that are well-developed and some parts that are just in their infancy. But yes, this is part of our goal. So we do see ourselves as part of the information base that the world will use.

40:06

DSW: So, Anne, Wikipedia stands in such contrast to other major social media sites like Facebook and so on. Are there lessons to be learned there, that how other social media sites that are so rampant and so pathological can learn from Wikipedia?

R/AC: We're fundamentally different from them. They operate under a profit motive. Somebody's making a lot of money from them. So their motivation is about money, not information exchange. They have a completely different motivation. I can't think of a social media site that isn't for profit. And I think the reason that Wikipedia works and is more balanced than most of these sites is that we have no motivation to keep you from reading the article on Senkaku Islands, which would be motivating if we were a Chinese company because we don't want you to know the Senkaku Islands exist. Those sorts of things.

We don't have a motivation to show you articles about the heroes of some war because we're going to generate more advertising that way. We don't advertise. And that is probably the biggest change and the biggest difference is that because it's volunteer-driven and it's not monetarily focused and it's not trying to make money for anybody, it's just trying to keep itself running like the Internet Archive. All those externalities that make websites like Facebook, like Twitter, like Parler—whatever they're calling themselves now—operate, just isn't a motivation for us.

DSW: Right. And it's interesting, Anne, that you mentioned in your reply much more than financial motivation. So there's a profit motive, but there's also might be a political motive, there might be an ideological motive, all kinds of motives that basically tear away at the truth. So you have a motive, Wikipedia has a motive. It's a motive to provide accurate information. That's its motive. It goes to say that unless that's your motive, then don't expect any other motive to lead to a repository of accurate information. You get what you aim for.

And so that, I think, is the fundamental message. We have to have generally prosocial motives, in this case, accurate information. And if you don't have a prosocial target, then there's no invisible hand that's

going to get you there. So that resonates very deeply with me for all things prosocial and accurate information is one of those prosocial things. So that's awesome.