

THE LINK

A Policy Fiction

A creative complement to the *Journal of Peer Production* article *Making consensus sensible: The transition of a democratic ideal into Wikipedia's interface.*

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PREFACE

When writing about utopia, Ruth Levitas combined the critical traditions of sociology with utopian creativity as a method to reconstitute society (2013, p. 198). It is along these lines that she celebrated Lewis Mumford's vision for acknowledging that a "social imaginary affects human action, and new eutopias are necessary to help us act in ways that overcome the momentum of existing institutions" (p. 90). It is from this perspective that many Wikipedia researchers approach their critiques. For example, Nathaniel Tkacz recognized that Wikipedia retains "a language from which to speak back to openness" while still being indebted to it (Tkacz, 2014, p. 181). Mathieu O'Neil likewise considered how online authority can be used to create "more autonomous and sustainable ways of living" (O'Neil, p. 189, 2009). But perhaps even more aligned with Levitas' architectural mode of utopia was Amanda Menking and Jon Rosenberg's (2020) experiment in speculative policy-making. By reimagining Wikipedia's five pillars through feminist theory, they provided both a critique and an architecture for addressing the

limits to Wikipedia's epistemological framework.

What must be noted is that these efforts exist along a spectrum of "utopian speculation" that Levitas argued is "formed always in the double squeeze of what we are able to imagine and what we are able to imagine as possible" (p. 19). This means that not only do we need to create openings for imagining the political in Wikipedia — as O'Neil, Tkacz, Menking and Rosenberg have done — but to also imagine that moving beyond the status quo is a possibility. The following fiction makes a similiar attempt.

"The Link" is a narrative that binds encyclopedic production with stories about knowledge that are already laboring away beneath the presumption of consensus. In this vein, it explores a moment of transition between where we are today and a future where feminist epistemological and political theory is imagined to be an integral and mundane aspect of the encyclopedia. As such, it is committed to teasing out the struggle, the inconsistencies, and the contradictions that one should expect from such a transition. The goal is that by imagining the vulnerable beginning of stories underway — instead of a perfected end — it will make it easier to see the hope we are already generating for the future.

REFERENCES

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Something was amiss after Kay typed “wi” into the browser address bar and let the auto-complete bring her to Wikipedia. Just beyond her awareness was a fragment of unfamiliarity at the edge of her vision. She scanned the page several times before her eyes centered on the header. She knew from experience that when the Wikimedia Foundation devs tinkered with the top fifth of Wikipedia’s page, it meant that the slow and plodding pace of the encyclopedia’s design had turned a new point. She read the header out like a mantra until it was ruptured by the new addition.

“Username, Alerts, Notices, Talk, Sandbox, Preferences, Beta, Watchlist, Contributions, ... Usergroups”

She murmured under her breath, “They added Usergroups.”

Once her initial astonishment passed, she wasn’t sure how she felt. In reality this interface change amounted to just the addition of a simple hypertext link made up of a string of ten characters. It was more than that.

It started three years ago.

After hearing about Wikipedia's under-presentation of women in the sciences, Kay joined a WikiProject that posted links to women's biographies that worked toward making them into "Featured Articles." She was proud of the work that she did, and she occasionally branched out to other projects dedicated to increasing the representation of other groups. But over the course of a couple of months, these WikiProjects became the target of a revolving carousel of users who reverted edits and filled the talk pages with chatter. The annoying thing was that they were infinitely polite but terminally patronizing. It felt like a kind of purposeful harassment, but it was hard to pin down exactly how. Instead, their actions always skirted just at the margins of what was acceptable and then they would leave. New usernames appeared, and they were clearly different users, but their conduct was always the same. Kay witnessed it herself and saw some of the other WikiProject members push back too hard. Kay tried to keep the talk pages calm.

An arbitration case was opened and some of the members were punished for their uncivil conduct. It hurt. Here they were, trying to make Wikipedia a more inclusive and representative space and they were punished for defending the

project's purpose. After a couple of long discussions, a number of the Wikiproject's members started a campaign to try and fix a couple of policies. Kay joined in but was not at the forefront of this effort. She chimed in with the occasional support. She made sure the grammar and the sentence structures of the proposed changes were tight and unambiguous. They made some headway for the small changes. But once they started proposing to move politeness into its own guideline and remove it from the main policies altogether, there was an uproar.

Jimmy Wales' user talk page, the village pump, and the policy talk pages were flooded with comments about the detrimental effect of downgrading the role of politeness. Kay remembered that on Wales's user page Lord Manor said "Being polite is how we are civil and show respect for one another. I don't understand how you think it isn't." It sure didn't feel like respect when the Wikiproject was a playground of trolls testing the limits of the new harassment policy. There were a couple of edit wars, discussions had to be unceremoniously closed, and the talk pages were peppered with policy shortcuts about how the idea directly conflicted with community consensus. Before long, it was clear that Wikipe-

dians understood politeness as an integral piece of Wikipedian civility.

But then Ohşoşo started the essay entitled WP:Dissensus. It proposed that the Wikimedia Foundation should step in and support the users' voices that were being drowned out by the majority. No matter how rational and well thought out their arguments had been for redirecting the project back to its principles of universal access and participation, the community could politely say "No thanks." The essay argued that the power of the community had overpowered the purpose of creating an inclusive space to produce an encyclopedia.

Kay added support for the comment and began posting the link on a couple of Wikiprojects as an invitation to comment. But then things changed. Ohşoşo and the rest of her group got carried away. The essay described how the foundation should facilitate a five-year policy review where Wikiprojects would submit recommendations based on the specific needs of their groups. The Wikiprojects would apply to the WMF to be part of the review process, demonstrating that they have a minimum number of active members who regularly contribute to increasing the inclusive capacity of the platform. There would

be elections and council meetings between the WikiProjects. Recommendations that were voted down could be accompanied with collaborative documents that recorded the dissent of the WikiProject to the decision. The gist of the essay's protocol described how the Wikipedian community — the majority — had to confirm and engage with the dissenters until the dissent was understood. If members of the majority did not confirm their understanding, their capacity to vote would be revoked for a period of time.

This proposal was laughed off by a few editors. But it gained supporters. Over 400 edits were made to flesh out the details of the proposal: how WikiProjects could apply, what counted as contributions to inclusion, election processes, how votes would be counted, where dissent documents would be stored, the format of proceedings. It was an intricate and complicated project, one that had 200 signed usernames.

On the talk page, the tenor of those who opposed it was apocalyptic. It was the end of Wikipedian community if this was adopted. Others were open to the possibility. A thread entitled “Wikipedia, not a community?” brainstormed on whether the term “community” accurately described their sense of togetherness. Were they

a culture, an assembly, a movement, a nation? The thread died quickly after Kay put this speculation to rest. Wikipedia, to her, was obviously a community. When the proposal felt substantial, the contributors pushed the WMF to consider the proposal. It refused to do anything with it. The essay was considered to be too divisive and upset the coherency of the community.

A couple of years passed before there were small rumblings about a new interface feature. The WMF had been helping different kinds of usergroups off of Wikipedia to encourage the retention of editors. It had been successful in increasing the number of users who continued to contribute to the encyclopedia. After a number of polls, it was clear that more Wikipedians wanted the platform to support more socially-oriented forms of collaboration and interaction. So they decided to officially bring these usergroups into Wikipedia's infrastructure. After some successful beta testing with usergroups for women, students, and educators, the WMF rolled out its new interface space.

As Kay's mouse hovered over the text, she knew the meaning of what of she was about to see. It was the foundation's response to WP:Dissen-

sus, a small step toward recognizing the role that both groups and individuals already play in producing Wikipedia's encyclopedic knowledge. The same problems would that had been identified would be there. This was not a solution. In fact, the old concerns would come into contact with new ones. All this would emerge from this single string of hypertext. Though it wasn't perfect, she decided that it would be... different.

Kay clicked the link.

