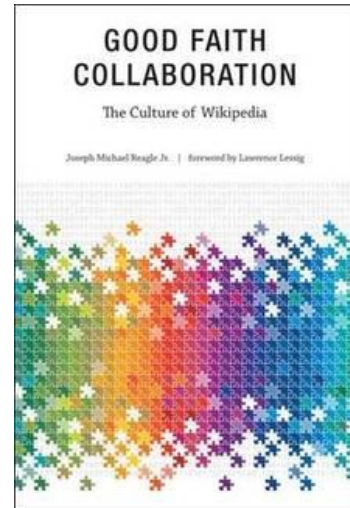


Joseph Michael Reagle, Jr., **Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia**, Cambridge, UK: MIT Press, 2010, 244 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

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Since the launch of Wikipedia in 2001, researchers have attempted to understand the implications of a collaborative encyclopedia to determine whether it is a reliable resource. In **Good Faith Collaboration**, Joseph Reagle explains the history of Wikipedia and the complex workings of this seemingly simple website. The book is an overview of Reagle's ethnographic research on Wikipedia and is based mostly on his observations, not on his participation. The volume is intended simply as a popular introduction to Wikipedia. The author's extensive field research, including his work on other topics, gives him credibility, even though the only main conclusion he offers readers is that Wikipedia will continue to grow and thrive. Nevertheless, the volume is a well-organized and detailed description of the workings of Wikipedia, the ways in which its users collaborate, and the issues that arise along the way.



The roots of Wikipedia reach back long before 2001 to nearly a century ago when a research and philosophical tradition that sought free and open access to information originated with such forward thinkers as H. G. Wells and Paul Otlet (p. 13). Reagle shows that the motivation behind Wikipedia is well-established; what is new is the technology that facilitated it. In the 1800s, philosophers such as encyclopedist Henri Saint-Simon believed that access to the best information from the most educated people would promote world peace. Knowledge and information, it was thought, would unite people to promote beneficial projects across borders. However, the validity of this claim could not be tested, because there was no way to travel or communicate quickly enough to establish the ties and relationships that would be needed for such a project. Only with the invention of the printing press and viable transportation options could the creation of a comprehensive encyclopedia be undertaken.

The emergence of the Internet and of "wikis" shortly thereafter made Wikipedia possible. "Wikiwiki" means "super fast" in Hawaiian, thus the name (p. 39). It refers to how quickly a person can edit a web page using a "simple editor within a Web page form, with formatting and linking functions carried out by the wiki server" (p. 39). Wikipedia's founders, Larry Sanger and Jimmy Wales, wondered whether this type of technology would work for an encyclopedia. When the firm for which they worked decided against using wikis in its effort to create a collaborative encyclopedia, Sanger and Wales left the company and formed Wikipedia. Their differences in opinion helped shape Wikipedia and solidify its goals and guidelines.

The two main “laws” for users of Wikipedia are: Adopt a Neutral Point of View (NPOV) and Assume Good Faith (AGF). These two pillars dictate how users of Wikipedia collaborate. “The stance of neutrality implies that contributors should abandon efforts to convince others of what is right or true, and instead focus on a neutral presentation of what is commonly understood about that topic” (p. 53). The intent of NPOV is to avoid philosophical debates, which distract from the overall effort. Essentially, contributors are instructed to focus on proven facts that can be cited rather than on issues of opinion. The goal is to maintain the integrity of the articles while maintaining civility and cooperation among users. Users are encouraged to describe a debate rather than advocate for one side or the other. Sanger and Wales asked users to try “writing for the enemy,” describing opponents’ arguments as clearly as possible to understand their perspective. NPOV also is used to avoid “forking,” which occurs when two articles with opposing views replace one NPOV article (p. 54). For example, the “evolution” page explicitly shows where Wikipedia users disagree, even providing contributors to this page a space for debate. Most discussions about disagreements on what should be included on the page are cordial. Most often, those with opposing personal stances find agreement by adhering to the principle of NPOV.

The second Wikipedia pillar, AGF, also fosters agreement in that it helps disputants in “seeing others’ humanity” (p. 59). It addresses the fundamental attribution error: “We often attribute the failures of others as evidence of a character flaw—but our own failings are construed as a circumstance of our environment” (p. 61). Users are encouraged to always assume other users and editors are acting out of good faith and to act out of good faith themselves. This pillar was added after NPOV was, but since its introduction, users have embraced it. AGF and NPOV are complementary because understanding someone’s POV usually takes good faith. It encourages users to avoid name-calling and insults, which is important for a collaborative culture (p. 61). Reagle notes that it can be difficult to embrace, because not “yelling ‘Assume Good Faith’ at people does not excuse you from explaining your actions and making a bad habit of it will convince people that you’re acting in bad faith” (p. 62). Although this system is flawed and not everyone adheres to these pillars, it provides a strong foundation for Wikipedia users to collaborate effectively.

Reagle also addresses several other challenges faced by Wikipedia, including the definition of an “open” community, consensus issues, leadership, and encyclopedia anxiety. These problems were and continue to be significant stumbling blocks, for Wikipedia.

### **Open Community**

Can anyone edit Wikipedia? This is a longstanding issue faced by Wikipedia’s founders and users. The “open” community should be inviting: Everyone is welcome and anyone can contribute. However, this is a concern, because some contributors continually contribute misinformation, and “trolls,” whose intent is to wreak havoc and vandalize the site, prowl. Whether such people should be “banned” or “blocked” is a hot topic for a community that advertises its openness. A debate rages over what “open” means, especially when it threatens to compromise the project’s integrity.

### **Consensus**

The vast number of users on the website makes defining "consensus" difficult. Disputes are widespread in the Wikipedia community. When disagreements arise, a forum is created in which to discuss the topic. Forums can last hours, days, or weeks. Founders are pressed to decide when consensus is reached. Also, "if consensus is a process whereby participants discuss and reason together, openness has another challenging implication beyond the question of who is contributing to the conversation: In an open and forever changing group, how long might any decision be considered the group's consensus" (p. 104)?

### **Leadership**

Leadership issues include when and how much founders should intervene, thereby diluting Wikipedia's openness. Should leaders be allowed to block certain pages or people or decide when and what a "consensus" is? Reagle argues that "An informal benevolent dictator" should be able "to gently guide the community, to mediate internal disputes between those of good faith, and to defend against those acting out in bad faith" (p. 135).

### **Encyclopedic Anxiety**

A debate still rages over Wikipedia's reliability. Does Wikipedia make people dumb and spread disreputable information to gullible users? There are rules about citing information, and when errors are found, they are corrected immediately. However, the notion of an open community makes people think the worst. For example, the "Criticisms of Wikipedia" page on the site states that it has "systematic bias in coverage, systematic bias in perspective, difficulty of fact-checking, use of dubious sources, exposure to vandals, privacy concerns, quality concerns, anonymous editing, abuse of power, male domination, lack of credential verification, and humorous criticism" (p. 145). Nonetheless, Wikipedia's popularity has soared, so it is now the largest encyclopedia in the world.

*Good Faith Collaboration* should appeal to readers intrigued by the specific workings and history of encyclopedia research and the technology of wikis. It assumes some prior knowledge of the technology required to create and run collaboration-based websites. Reagle delves into the technology when discussing the start-up and maintenance of Wikipedia, but these passages can be challenging to the uninitiated. Wikipedia is now familiar to the general public, but Reagle provides detail for those who want to go a bit further. He stresses that users should remain alert, because while Wikipedia is a "work in progress," it is not an "overly open" forum that allows anyone to write anything about any topic.

Reagle's book is mostly descriptive but does offer some theoretical ideas about the issues Wikipedia faced early on and that it will continue to confront. The author especially builds on the issues that arise from implementation of the two founding pillars of the website: Neutral Point of View and Assume Good Faith.