

Final Paper

**What does it take to be pro bono?**

Social and organizational factors supporting new editors' survival rate in Russian  
Wikipedia

In 2006, Wikipedia editors' community underwent an accidental social experiment: the Wikimedia Foundation introduced their first anti-vandal automated tools. This experiment had different outcomes for the English and the Russian language communities. It is well known that after the new algorithm started catching newly joined editors on vandalism, often mistakenly, the English Wikipedia saw a sizable decline in their editor's population. It is not widely known that the Russian Wikipedia was the only one among the Wikis that did not experience that problem. This difference engenders a lot of questions.

Do Russian pro bono editors differ from the English speaking ones? Is their motivation stronger? Does the Russian wiki-community provide a better support for the newbies? Can the new editors' high survival rate be explained with the difference in social organizational structure of the Russian Wikipedia?

I will try to answer these questions by examining similarities and differences between the Russian and the English Wikipedias. Two dimensions along which I will be comparing these two Wikipedias are (1) organizational which explores the size and the structures of the communities and (2) socio-psychological which is focused on personal motivations and socio-political backgrounds of the editors. This framework should help

me, without reducing Wikipedia editors to atomized individuals, consider how different organizational and social contexts lead to different outcomes.

This comparative analysis should be important for understanding how online communities work, what makes peer production and commons governing successful, and what makes a user-generated content (UGC) platform successful.

## Background and Problem

Wikipedia is a social media platform of a type described by Van Dijck as a user-generated content (UGC) platform. “They promote creativity, foreground cultural activity and promote the exchange of amateur or professional content” [Van Dijck, 8].

But there were more to Wikipedia at the moment of its creation. Incepted in 2001 and experienced unprecedented growth till 2007, a period of a strong anti-corporate sentiment in the United States<sup>1</sup>, Wikipedia benefited from Internet users’ enthusiasm about their new virtual spaces, which they often regarded “as experiments in online citizenship and a reinvention of the rules of democratic society” [Van Dijck, p.15].

Wikipedia is a true platform, in all positive senses of the word Gillespie mentions in his *The Politics of Platforms*. Although Wikipedia does evade some responsibility for the user-generated content, it still bears the burden of keeping the platform unsolicited and open to everybody. Unlike YouTube or Facebook, Wikipedia is a non-profit and does not place ads on its pages, so it doesn’t have the tensions described by Gillespie: “between user-generated and commercially-produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising, between intervening in the delivery of content

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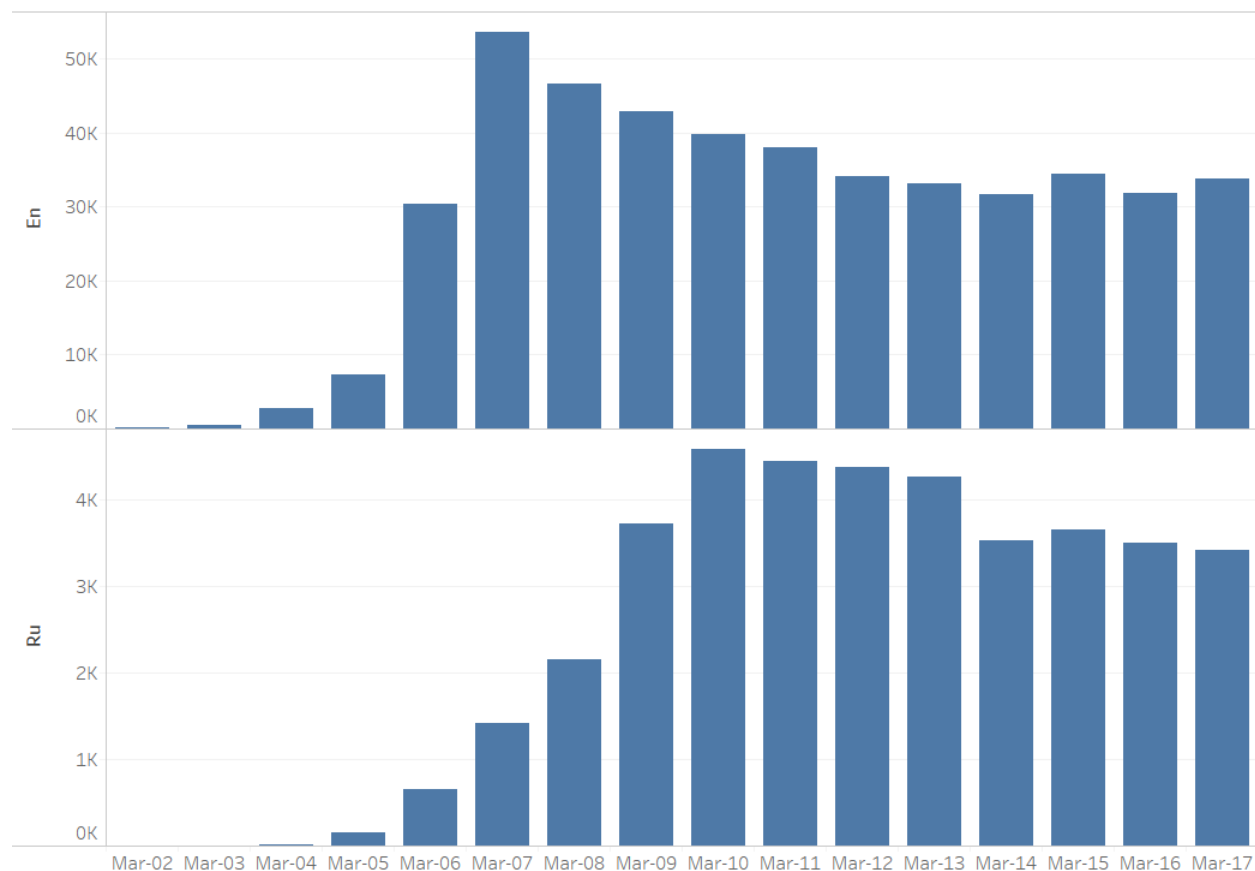
<sup>1</sup> Just a few pieces of evidence of the zeitgeist: in 2000, an influential book *No Logo* by Naomi Klein was published; in 2003, a documentary *The Corporation* was screened; in 2005, a non-profit Walmart Watch was formed.

and remaining neutral” [Gillespie, 348]. Apparently, Wikipedia’s altruism builds trust between the users and the platform and attracts new editors.

However, after Wikipedia introduced their early anti-vandal bots in 2006, followed by the Twinkle bot in 2007 and a tool called Huggle in 2008, the number of volunteer editors started declining. These tools were used by a trusted cohort of editors to revert the edits of all other contributors, and were used extensively. As Wikipedia’s researcher Aaron Halfaker suggested in his paper, a significant number of desirable, good new coming editors fell prey to the ivory tower editors who relied on automated tools too much [Halfaker, 666].

Surprisingly, the Russian Wikipedia, being exposed to the same tools at about the same time, did not experience any decline in editors then (Figure 1). On the chart below, we can see a significant decline in the number of the English speaking active (5 and more edits per month) editors started in 2008 and continued till 2014 as opposed to a growth in the Russian wiki till 2010 followed by stagnation and decline.

*Figure 1. The number of active editors is plotted over time for the English and Russian language Wikipedias*



As we can see from the chart, English and Russian Wikipedias differ significantly on absolute numbers of active editors. In 2016, from over 2000 new editors joined Russian Wikipedia every months, about 160 on average “survived” (Wiki’s terminology for new editors remaining “active” for at least 30 days after joining). In mid-2016, ru\_wiki had about 3500 active editors. By comparison, the English Wiki is much more populated, with over 30,000 active editors in 2016. This difference cannot be explained only by the difference in the general number of speakers because even proportionally to a general population, number of English wikipedians is higher. As of for March 2017, number of English speaking editors per million English language speakers was 21; the

same number for Russian was 12<sup>2</sup>. This may suggest that the Russian Wikipedia is at the earlier stage of development compared to English one.

Different stages of development may help us explain why still young ru\_wiki did not experience decline in new editors' interest in 2008. At that time, the Russian Wikipedia was still actively growing, attracting those who soon became its core members. The English Wikipedia, on the contrary, reached certain saturation in the number of its "nuclear" members.

For a collaborative project, the stage of life and, correspondingly, the size of the community can be crucial for the quality of collaboration and a product. Benkler, describing the young English Wikipedia in 2002, when the project involved "roughly 2000 volunteers", referred to it as "a rich example of a medium-sized collection of individuals who successfully collaborate to create an information product of mid- to highbrow quality" [Benkler, p. 387]. In 2007, right before the infamous decline, the English Wikipedia tried to maintain a community of over 50,000 active editors. The Russian wiki, on the contrary, was at this 2000 active editors mark in 2007, with three more years of growth ahead of it.

There are some particular factors though that make stage of a collaborative project a stage, including the organizational form of a community, its diversity and governance model, as well as the personal motivation of the members, cultural and socio-political situation in the society. I will explore some of these factors below.

### Organizational Dimension

Similar to other open source communities contributing to a shared endeavor, the bigger Wikipedia grows the more internal hierarchies it develops. People normally tend

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<sup>2</sup> <https://stats.wikimedia.org/EN/Sitemap.htm>

to group around the prominent members of the community. “Open source communities are elitarian clubs where [a number] strong hubs control the global flow of information generated by many peripheral individuals <...> even distributed systems develop internal hierarchies” [Valverde and Solé, p.6]. This hierarchical type of network, from a “child” to a “parent” node, as opposed to “child-child”, disconnects team members.

The smaller the community, the shorter this “child”-“parent” chain and the better the information flow between the ordinary members. In this light, the structure of the Russian Wiki in 2007-2008 was closely resembling co-op as oppose to the more hierarchical English one. Russian Wiki can be treated as an enterprise of a small or small-medium size with a healthy information circulation and a will to cooperate, which, according to Ostrom, is a good prerequisite for building an efficient common property resource (CPR) management system governed by a common property protocol.

Consequently, the Russian Wiki curated their newbies better than the English one. In a custom namespace called Википедия: Инкубатор and created in 2009, Russian wiki offers a template for creating an article, as well as instructions, a list of useful links and the contacts of a few dozens of experienced editors ready to help. Even earlier, in 2008, for the shy new editors who were unwilling to take the risk of editing in the main space, Russian Wikipedia implemented a special function “report a mistake” for each page. This comfortable format of editing was an immediate success, and is still in high demand. All that is absent from English Wikipedia.

Instead, the English Wikipedia blocked anonymous editors from creating new articles in 2005, in response to the Seigenthaler incident. John Seigenthaler Sr., a former USA Today journalist, found his false and not particularly flattering biography on Wikipedia written by an anonymous. The incident prompted a discussion about misinformation in Wikipedia which forced Jimmy Wales, the Wikipedia founder, restrict the anon articles creation “on an experimental basis.” This anti-vandalism experiment is still ongoing, although some wiki researchers found that anon created wiki-articles have,

on average, a higher survival rate (read: better quality) than the articles written by the registered but inexperienced users<sup>3</sup>.

The inclusive, welcoming organization of Russian Wikipedia and more hierarchical one of English Wikipedia can be compared to the “bazaar” and “cathedral” models of open-source communities described by Eric Steven Raymond in his seminal essay *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*. “No quiet, reverent cathedral-building here – rather, the Linux community seemed to resemble a great babbling bazaar of differing agendas and approaches (aptly symbolized by the Linux archive sites, who’d take submissions from anyone)” [Raymond, p.2].

For Wikipedia to continue to grow, it is important to support the bazaar as much as possible, accepting work from anyone and promoting participation by all means. As to the quality concerns, Wikipedia proved Linus’s law that “given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow” [Raymond], because the vast majority of the wiki articles that will ever be deleted are being deleted between one minute and one hour after their creation<sup>4</sup>. Admittedly, the Seigenthaler incident was just ...an incident.

### Socio-psychological Dimension

What kind of motivation works best for an active pro bono contributor? As Balestra et.al. have discovered in their research on the English speaking wikipedians’ motivations, active new editors were more motivated by their reputation, while less active newbies were rather motivated by a sense of the obligation to the community. As the researchers explain, “individuals tend to contribute more when it can enhance their reputation”, and “tacit knowledge sharing is more important to individuals who are more intrinsically motivated than those who are extrinsically motivated [by a sense of the

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<sup>3</sup> [https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research:Wikipedia\\_article\\_creation](https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research:Wikipedia_article_creation)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/File:Wikimedia\\_Research\\_%26\\_Data\\_Showcase\\_-\\_February\\_2014.webm](https://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/File:Wikimedia_Research_%26_Data_Showcase_-_February_2014.webm)

obligation]" [Balestra, 4-5]. Thus, the more intrinsically motivated, social active, reputation-caring people will be accepted by the core Wikipedia members, the higher the new active editors retention will be and the more new articles will survive.

Are the ru\_wiki editors motivated by obligation or reputation, enjoyment or some social matters? To answer this question, I conducted an interview with one of the most active ru\_wiki editors, P. According to P., the most frequent reason for the Russian editors to join Wikipedia was a desire to see a pay-off of their activity, to feel they actually have influence on something, can at least improve access to the knowledge in the country. "It is not clear what else you can change in Russia," – P. concludes.

In Russia, Wikipedia occupies a niche of an independent (from government), for-people (as oppose to for-profit) media platform that stands for freedom of speech. For example, in 2012, the Russian Wiki closed access to their articles for 24 hours in protest against the internet censorship proposed in the new amendments to the Russia's Information Act. Although the Russian Wikipedia is not a citadel of the democracy in the country and many ru\_wiki administrators are conservative, yet over half of the members are of liberal views. In today's Russia, this kind of socio-political positioning attracts likeminded supporters with similar ethics, motivations and educational level. Thus, not only the Russian Wikipedia editors is a more homogeneous group than the English Wikipedia's, they are also more motivated to support independent, impartial, non-profit and non-governmental projects like Wikipedia.

## Conclusion



Since the nature of the UGC-platforms like Wikipedia is pro bono, to be successful, they have to offer people something beyond the money but equally valuable. Using the framework of two dimensions, organizational and socio-political, I have described several such valuables.

One important asset a UGC can offer is a self-regulated, inclusive and open to anyone community with as few hierarchical and bureaucratic barriers as possible and a tangible support to newbies from the existing members. Ideally, it should help peoples' self-actualization and promote creativity under the bazaar model when everybody can contribute.

Another valuable thing can result of the socio-political role the platform plays for a certain community. Whether it's an anti-corporate sentiment in the United States or a protest against censorship in Russia, to be attractive, the platform should give members a sense of creating an impact, or, in Silicon Valley terms, of making the world a better place.

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