

The Politics of Wikis

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Anarchism has a pretty bad rap. Put aside all the people who think it's about smashing windows and shooting presidents and just focus on the idea (*an arch* — without rulers). If someone told you that you should start a business where basically no one is in charge of anything and everyone shares ownership of everything and all decisions are made by consensus, you'd think they were a hopeless utopian about to get a large dose of reality. Yet that's pretty much what Wikipedia is.

There's the obvious anarchism of wikis: namely, “anyone can edit”. No intelligence tests or approval rules or even a temporary probation. Anyone can just wander up and hit that edit button and get started. Where in the world can a random person get a larger audience?

That's pretty radical in itself, but things go much deeper. There's no ownership over text. If you write something, as soon as you post it to Wikipedia, it's no longer “yours” in any real sense. Others will modify and mangle it without a second thought and anyone who quotes those words in the future will attribute them to “Wikipedia” and not to you. In a culture where directors are suing people for fastforwarding over the smutty scenes in their movies, that's pretty wild.

And while there are a few technical tricks to give some people more software features than others, for the most part the Wikipedia community is pretty flat. Every non-edit decision, from which pages get deleted to what the logo in the corner is, gets made by consensus with everyone getting a chance to have their say.

In real life, few people are willing to take such a radical stand. Even the farthest reaches of the far left hold back from proposing such extreme ideas, suggesting that not only that such extreme freedom wouldn't fly in a capitalist culture like ours, but that perhaps some of these restrictions are just necessary because of human nature. But it's humans who edit Wikipedia, and mostly humans raised in capitalist culture as well. Perhaps it's time to give more extremism a chance.