

Formalization and Community Investment in Wikipedia's Regulating Texts: The Role of Essays

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ABSTRACT

This poster presents ongoing research on how discursive and editing behaviors are regulated on Wikipedia by means of documented rules and practices. Our analysis focuses on three types of collaboratively-created policy document (policies, guidelines and essays), that have been formalized to different degrees and represent different degrees of community investment. We employ a content analysis methodology to explore how these regulating texts differ according to a) the aspects of editor behavior, content standards and community principles that they address, and b) how they are used by Wikipedians engaged in 'talk' page discussions to inform, persuade and coordinate with one another.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.3 [INFORMATION INTERFACES AND PRESENTATION (e.g., HCI)] Group and Organization Interfaces – *Computer-supported cooperative work, Theory and models, Web-based interaction.*

General Terms

Management, Documentation, Experimentation, Standardization, Languages, Theory.

Keywords

Computer-supported cooperative work, computer-mediated communication, sociotechnical systems, wikis

1. INTRODUCTION

On Wikipedia there are many attempts to inscribe rules and principles to support and regulate the work of editors engaged in the collaborative creation of encyclopedia articles. We classify these *regulating texts*¹ according to their **degree of formalization**—a measure of how vested the community is in each particular guiding principle or practice, as well as its influence with respect to regulating article creation and editor behavior. At the lowest level of formalization, guidance on Wikipedia is undocumented and consists of implicit community norms, practices and conventions for editor behavior and content

creation. Guidance is considered to be increasingly formalized as it is a) *documented on the website*, b) *placed in a public forum* and c) *adopted through a formal, consensus-based process*.

The three most common types of regulating texts on Wikipedia are *essays*, *guidelines*, and *policies*. Guidelines and policies are considered to be more formalized than essays, since they are officially adopted through a process of open discussion, polling, and collaborative editing until a consensus is established as to their purpose and value to the community. Once adopted, these texts possess official weight. For instance, violation of a Wikipedia policy—the most formalized type of regulating text—can result in a user being banned from the website.

2. RELATED WORK

Wikipedia editors frequently create hyperlinked citations to these texts from article *talk pages*—open forums linked to each Wikipedia article, in which editors discuss, debate and coordinate with one another—in attempts to persuade others about the shape the article should take. Beschastnikh et al.² coded Wikipedia's formal policies and guidelines based on the social and work activities they implicated, demonstrating that the most-cited Wikipedia policies and guidelines address critical community concerns such as citing sources, achieving consensus, preventing bias and regulating editor behavior. Kriplean et al.³ demonstrated that editors frequently invoked policy as part of “power plays”—attempts to sanction or discredit other contributors, or to bolster one's own position on an issue.

3. THE ROLE OF ESSAYS

Our current study focuses on the regulatory function of Wikipedia *essays*, a less formal type of text. Wikipedia editors write essays for a variety of reasons: to blow off steam, to share advice or opinions, to describe a particular instantiation or interpretation of an official policy or to assert an ideological stance. Essays often use humor, hyperbole and anecdote to convey serious messages about proper editor behavior, high-level principles or best practices for editing.

Unlike policies and guidelines, Wikipedia essays are not subject to a formal consensus-based adoption process and have no official authority. However, essays show many similarities to policies and guidelines: they are often collaboratively created, heavily edited, and cited on article talk pages—evidence that they may serve a regulatory function.

The type of regulatory work that these essays perform within the community has not been explored. Our hypothesis is that, like policies and guidelines, popular essays address issues that are important to Wikipedians such as behavioral norms, community values and editing practices. However, the tone and subject matter of essays—as well as their less-stringent adoption criteria and subsequently weaker authority—sets them apart from policies and guidelines and suggests that they play a distinct regulatory role.

4. METHODOLOGY

In this research study, we perform a comparative content analysis methodology to code a sample of Wikipedia essays, policies and guidelines that represent the greatest **degree of community investment**, as measured by a) the *number of citations* made to the essay b) the *number of unique contributors* to the essay text, and c) the *number of unique citers* of the essay. Each text is coded for a) the *work activity* it addresses (e.g. style guide, editor behavior, criteria for inclusion) and b) the *social signal* sent by citing that text on a talk page (e.g. an appeal for mediation or coordination, or an accusation of bias).

5. FUTURE WORK

By comparing the relative frequency of each work category and social signal across our sample of essays, guidelines and policies, we hope to gain critical insight into a) whether regulatory texts with different degrees of formalization address different work activities and/or are used to send different social signals, and b) how the style and subject matter of the texts themselves may

reflect the regulatory role that they performs within the community.

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7. REFERENCES

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