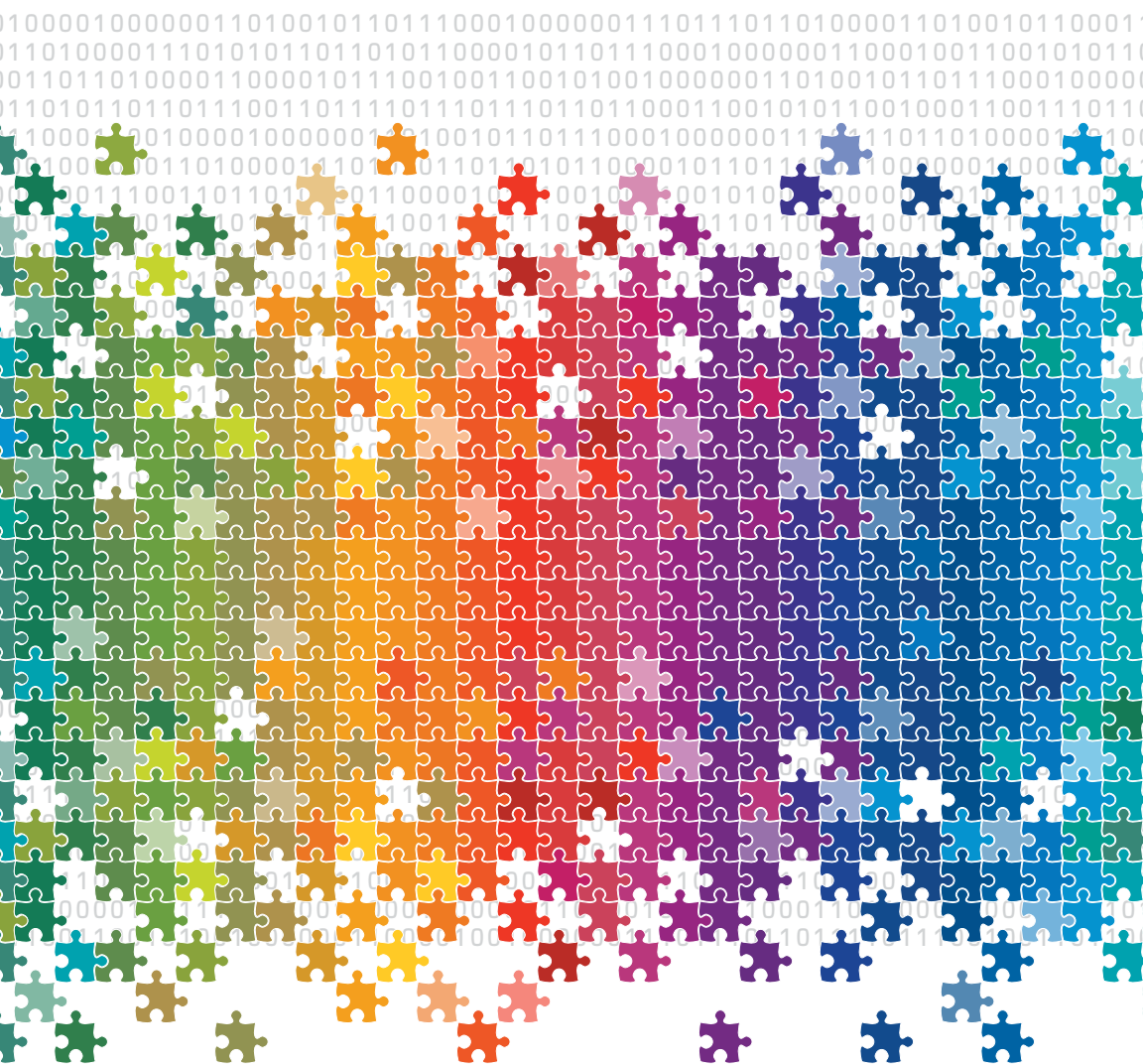


GOOD FAITH COLLABORATION

The Culture of Wikipedia

Joseph Michael Reagle Jr. | foreword by Lawrence Lessig



Good Faith Collaboration

History and Foundations of Information Science

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Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia by Joseph Michael Reagle Jr.

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Joseph Michael Reagle Jr.

Foreword by Lawrence Lessig

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To my family, a barnstar.

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Foreword

There is value in studying anything that was once thought impossible but then proves possible. There is significant value in studying it well. A decade ago, no one—including its founder, Jimmy Wales—would have imagined “Wikipedia” possible. Today it is one of the very top Web sites on the Internet. And not just the Internet: Wikipedia has come to define the very best in an ethic of a different kind of economy or community: at its core, it is a “collaborative community” that freely and voluntarily gives to the world a constant invitation to understand and correct. More than any democracy, it empowers broadly. More than any entity anywhere, it elicits the very best of an amateur ethic—people working hard for the love of the work, and not for the money.

Most of the world has known of Wikipedia for no more than a few years. Even the “digerati” have not paid much attention to the project for more than seven years. Like the most important innovations throughout human history, this one too stole upon us when most of us were looking elsewhere. And now, none of us understands anything new without first pinging Wikipedia’s brain to see its cut on whatever piques our curiosity.

Scholars will spend a generation understanding its birth and growth. There have already been important books understanding open source production specifically (Steven Weber, *The Success of Open Source* [Harvard 2004]), and the culture of commons-based production (Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks* [Yale 2007]).

But Joseph Reagle’s contribution here is something new and important. Reagle came to this subject as a native. He was a computer scientist at MIT. He helped me work through early thoughts about what he called “social protocols”—an explicit mixing of computer science ideals with insight about social organization and norms. When he decided to return to

graduate school to get his PhD, I was skeptical that such enormous talent should be lost to the stacks for so many years.

This book proves me wrong. Reagle comes to this ethnographical project understanding more about the technology and its history than the people he intended to study. But that knowledge doesn't get in the way. He has opened himself to a community that is similar to some he has worked within—the World Wide Web Consortium, most prominently—but importantly distinct. And as his book convincingly demonstrates, it is a community with a family resemblance to lots in our world, but unlike almost anything else.

Wikipedia is a community, but one formed through a practice, or a doing—collaboration. That collaboration happens within a culture, or a set of norms, guided by principles that the community accepts and fights about, and through that struggle defines. The collaboration produces a social good that an enormous number of people from around the world rely upon. The project is a generation away from its objective of “a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge.” But it is the first time in ten generations that this aspiration of the Enlightenment seems even possible to anyone but the likes of Jefferson.

We need many academic disciplines—economics, political science, history, even law—to help us understand this phenomenon. But the first rich understanding must come from ethnographies. Only a deep reading of the culture of this community—for it is a community rich with a distinctive culture—can begin to make the important lessons of Wikipedia accessible.

No utopia is to be found in these pages. Wikipedia is not written by angels; nor does its founder pretend to perfection. What is most striking throughout this lucid and informed account is the human-ness of everything inside. Wales, the founder, self-consciously practicing the humility every great leader teaches. A community, struggling to get it right, some devoting thousands of hours to making knowledge free.

There are relatively few organizations that inspire respect, flaws notwithstanding. Very few retain that respect after serious scrutiny. These pages introduce one such institution. No one doubts it produces an encyclopedia that has errors. But it is hard to imagine a more significant and sustained community, manned by volunteers, from teenagers to retirees, working to produce understanding.

Every serious soul must try to understand this impossibility. For there is little doubt that its lessons have much to teach far beyond the millions of entries on Wikipedia pages. Nor that an important first step in that understanding is found in these pages.

Lawrence Lessig

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