

Global Platform Governance: Multilingual Policy Development on Wikipedia

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Abstract

The paper presents preliminary analyses of how Wikipedians develop policy within a multilingual environment and how that relates to knowledge equity. To understand this situation, we argue that it is necessary to examine how Wikipedians propose policy changes and how these practices impact the development of equity-based policies. The research utilizes a mixed methods approach to analyzing three policies each from the Arabic, Dutch, English, French, and Spanish language versions. Due to the combination of qualitative content analysis and a media studies approach that is sensitive to the materiality of media, this research provides a unique perspective on Wikipedian governance.

Keywords: knowledge equity, policy development, multilingual governance, qualitative content analysis, interface analysis

Introduction

Wikipedia never ceased cultivating its revolutionary moment as a global peer production platform. However, its capacity to keep up this labor needs to be continually rearticulated and finessed. In this paper, we argue that an important component of Wikipedia's innovation is within the maintenance, development, and reflection of its multilingual policy environment.

While in early 2000s Wikipedia was seen as radical, the last two decades have been sobering from the project. The assumption that the use of wiki software would naturally lead to egalitarian ends has been shown to be naïve. In 2019 the Wikimedia Foundation identified several knowledge gaps or "disparities in content coverage or participation of a specific group of readers or contributors" on Wikipedia (Redi et al., 2020, p. 4). While Wikipedia's governance procedures enable collaborative participation, the report also identified how they also present "major barriers for diverse content inclusion" (p. 25). Part of this issue stems from the nature of the policies: they are slow to change, conservative in their iterations, they rely on community precedent and practice for legitimacy. This also means they create obstacles for recognizing epistemological practices that are

marginalized. Our research argues that if Wikipedia is to stay true to its revolutionary commitments — and to lead the way in finding ways to communicate and collaborate our knowledge in a diverse world — it is therefore necessary to examine how Wikipedians propose policy changes and how these practices and techniques impact the development of equity-based policies. Within this context, this paper is guided by two research questions: How do Wikipedian's develop successful policy proposals and how are these practices reflected in Wikipedian's efforts to increase knowledge equity? To answer these questions, we used a mixed methods approach to analyzing a total of fifteen policies from five different language editions: Arabic, Dutch, English, French, and Spanish. Based on analyses of edit histories, talk pages, and the composition of each policy, we demonstrate how policy development is a cultural technique. From this perspective, we elaborate on how this approach explains the success and failure of a sample of equity-based policy proposals. Pragmatically, this paper contributes to the study of platform governance by offering a nuanced account of how Wikipedia's revolutionary promises are tied to carefully rearticulating the sociotechnical conditions for producing knowledge.

This research builds upon many of the insights gathered by other researchers who have examined how Wikipedia's policy development plays a key role in shaping its revolutionary forms of governance (Kriplean, et. al, 2007), history (Keegan and Fiesler, 2017) and culture (Reagle, 2010). Based on the conclusions of these works, broad changes in policy editing behaviors should be understood as markers of the community's changing perception of what policies should do. Despite early optimism about these practices of self-organization, recent research has also complicated this perspective. Coming from the perspective of feminist science and technology studies several researchers have explained how Wikipedia's core policies reinforce problematic norms about knowledge processes (Menking and Rosenberg, 2020), specifically in terms of reliable sources (Berson, Sengul-Jones and Tamani, 2021) and notability (Tripodi, 2021).

Theoretically, our paper takes this literature and redeploys it through the intersection of science and technology studies, media studies, and more specifically, media archaeology. It does so by conceptualizing policies in terms of what scholar

Cornelia Vismann argued about legal media: they exist as “cultural techniques” (Vismann, 2008). This means that the “making” of policy is not simply the translation of a wiki-based discussion into a document. Instead, policy development is conceptualized as the combination of actions and tools that connect communication logics, inscription and storage, and its circulation. This theoretical approach falls in line with previous research about Wikipedian governance that is sensitive to the entwined relationship between social practices and technical operations (Ford and Wajcman, 2017). Consequently, this socio-technical approach also requires a unique set of mixed methods. In particular, one that combines the interpretative benefits of qualitative content analysis and the media-sensitivity of interface analysis.

Methods

The first part of our analysis examines the moments when Wikipedians created successful policy proposals within five of Wikipedia's language versions: Arabic, Dutch, English, French, and Spanish. From each version, a sample of three of the most viewed and referenced rules were analyzed to identify how these policies began and how they proceeded to higher levels of policy and community acceptance. These moments were then coded in terms of lobbying (Keegan and Fiesler, 2017, p. 118), consensus practices and page composition (Jankowski, 2022), and other emergent activities such as defining the deontic scope of each policy. After establishing a definition of "equity policies," a purposive sample of policies is collected from each language version and analyzed in terms of the skills and roles used in successful policy development. With these combined sources, we compare the lifecycle of successful and failed proposals for equity-based policies as they move through the various stages of essays, proposals, guidelines — and for some — actual policies. Through our analysis, we identify the various ways that Wikipedians have used this cultural technique in the construction of equity-based policy proposals for the five languages of this study.

Discussion

Overall, our preliminary research presents a compelling and novel approach to studying how and why policies develop on one of the web's most important sites. As a result of our analysis, we have identified that the successful shift in the status of policies often differs depending on each language edition. The fact that different language editions respond differently to the development of policy has significant implications for understanding where, at which pace, and through which means the cultural technique of policy reform for increasing knowledge equity should be pursued.

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