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WIKIPEDIA AS AN ENCYCLOPEDIA – ANALYSIS OF A SURVEY

The development of information technologies has triggered interesting transformations in the field of literary and non-literary genres. The growth of the world wide web has been accompanied by the emergence of new text types appearing on the web, as well as the formation of various digital analogues to traditional genres. This revolution has also affected the world of reference materials (Lan 2005). Dictionaries, lexicons or encyclopedias have all found their place in the new medium, being globally and easily available.

One of the most popular online reference works is Wikipedia – the free online encyclopedia (www.en.wikipedia.org). The most interesting aspect of this encyclopedia is the fact that its compilation constitutes a voluntary activity, gathering authors of different backgrounds and various levels of education. Currently, there are more than 75,000 active contributors collaborating in the creation of the encyclopedia, not only editing articles, but also coordinating the functioning of the whole project.¹

The editorial freedom of Wikipedia and its openness towards volunteers clearly runs contrary to the traditional process of encyclopedia-making. Conventionally, encyclopedias are compiled by a body of scholars associated with a particular discipline of science, which is to guarantee correctness, accuracy and validity of the work. Moreover, contributors need to comply with editorial guidelines delimiting the style-sheet of the articles, which is to assure a uniform character of the work (Collison 1964, Marszałek 1986). The editorial restrictions governing the production of an encyclopedic work follow, among others, from the specificity of the genre, a universal source of information, directed at a large and diversified audience. Wikipedia, on the other hand, offers every user of the web an opportunity to contribute to the encyclopedia.

We assume that within such a large and diversified group of authors, not governed by official requirements and restrictions, there must exist considerable

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>

differences in individual approaches toward the compilation of the encyclopedia. In order to investigate the personal attitudes authors have to the project, we conducted a survey among the community of Wikipedians regarding their contribution to the free encyclopedia. The aim of the survey in question was not only to recognize the scope of awareness the authors have with regard to the genre of encyclopedia, but also to verify the degree of their understanding of the changes in the genre and of the differences between Wikipedia and traditional paper encyclopedias.

The survey consisted of five questions reviewing the authors' conception of a "good article", cases when authors modify the existing articles, the contributors' awareness of the distinction between Wikipedia and a standard encyclopedia, concerning both the form and content, and the sphere of discourse, as well as their perception of the ideals behind the existence of the free encyclopedia. The questionnaire, with the consent of Wikipedia's administrators, was placed on Wikipedia's Community Portal for a month (September 2007). It was answered by 94 contributors. The answers were given in different forms. Some of the respondents restricted themselves to laconic and trite replies, while others presented extensive and elaborate justifications of personal opinions concerning contribution to and the functioning of the free encyclopedia.

1. What are the characteristics of a "good article"?

Replying to the first question in the survey, the majority of the respondents (41%) referred to the principles enclosed in the Manual of Style and to the policies of the free encyclopedia outlining the most desirable features which an article should exhibit.² These characteristics, to an extent, match the properties which are conventionally associated with an encyclopedic entry (neutrality, formality, intelligibility). Some contributors (14%) stated explicitly that they follow the guidelines set by the portal:

Athaenara: Accuracy, readability, useful citations and links, interesting and informative images.

Blue Tie: Well researched, well-cited, well written and neutral.

Mgm: I pretty much follow the basic policies set out by Wikipedia.

Yet, as one respondent noticed: *many editors know nothing of these principles, and some choose to ignore them* (Orane). Such approach towards the guidelines is as well reflected in the answers to the survey. Nearly 34% of the respondents demonstrated a relative degree of compliance with the principles of the Manual, presenting their personal approach towards writing, exhibiting an individual understanding of what a "good article" looks like:

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_policies

Trendyshay: *I tend to try at least vaguely follow Wikipedia rules; but really prefer to insert whatever information I have, and let others do what they may with it.*

Srdjan: *Following strictly (but not blindly) Wikipedia's rules. If they're wrong change them, don't brake (sic!) them.*

Sherakou: *Instead of any hard and fast rules toward a 'good article' I think a good article needs to be able to stand alone, that someone could turn to it and say 'ah, this is what I was looking for, it answers my question'.*

Among the most significant criteria, the authors identified the need for a proper stylistic shape of the articles. Nearly 37% of the surveyed mentioned the criterion for an article to be “well-written”, yet without stating explicit language features of a good article, and providing very concise answers. Out of the major criteria, that of the neutral point of view and objective presentation of contents were given particular attention. As many as 26% of all the contributors considered it most significant, e.g.:

Rny9286: *It has to be neutral (It can't sound like it's attacking the subject, nor can it sound like a fansite). It has to be well-written (no spelling or grammar errors).*

Omegatron: *I'd say neutrality is most important. I need to make sure that if I have any biases, they aren't present in my writing, and try to present things only as objective facts of interest to the reader.*

4% of the authors focused on the need for a proper coverage of content and inclusion of an adequate amount of information associated with the subject, stating that: *a 'good article' should give a general idea of what it is about (Hare), without going into too much detail (Aceron99)*. Some contributors exemplified their opinions by quoting instances of information which, in their view, is inappropriate:

Siyuan: *A good article presents information which is pertinent to the subject matter. For example, an article on a basketball player should focus on his basketball career and not contain a disproportionate information on say, his one-time fracas with the law.*

Jeremy Visser: *I think that articles that are neither too technical nor too toned down are good. For example the article on Sulfuric Acid contains way too technical information, and not enough about its uses.*

Surprisingly, only two authors pointed to the need for adjusting the subject-matter and function of an entry to the specificity of an encyclopedic work:

MrDolomite: *Firstly the article should be about a topic which is appropriate to have in an encyclopedia. Unfortunately, the mob mentality of WP does not always agree on that criteria. The best analogy for article existence is like the definition of pornography, one may not be able to specifically define it, but you will know it when you see it.*

Wolff: *When writing or editing I try to keep the general appearance of an encyclopedia in mind. I therefore try to explain as much jargon in layperson's terms, provide extensive wikilinks to related pages, and strive to keep articles logical and organized.*

An equal number of the respondents (6% and 11%, respectively) pointed to the need for proper structuring and referencing of articles, as factors greatly increasing the value of entries. “Proper structuring” means that an article *should*

be well organized and pleasing to the eye (Richard Frantz) and *should start with a short simple introduction that covers the topic quickly* (Daniel Smith). References, as the respondents indicated, should be reliable and verifiable, should *serve the reader well as a starting point for further research* (Dick Clark). What is more, it seems that referencing sources constitutes one of the basic requirements an article needs to fulfill to be accepted by other collaborators, which is confirmed by a respondent stating that *first-hand experience, being uncitable, isn't considered 'good enough' by the community* (Joe Sewell).

Moreover, nearly 11% of the surveyed put emphasis on the need for images to be attached to an entry, while 6% considered the presence of internal and external links as significant:

Nicholas: *Apt free photographs of sufficiently high resolution, svg graphs, maps and diagrams.*

Mike Riney: *Links to other articles. Has external links. I use Wikipedia as a Google.*

Only 7% of the respondents reflected a recognition of the audience, i.e. the need to take into consideration the readers of the encyclopedia. These respondents, as their replies prove, saw the need for adjusting the content and the language of the articles to the needs and expectations of the readers, in that way showing the awareness of the purpose of the work. In this case, it was mainly the accessibility of the article and the assimilability of the language that constituted primary importance. A good article, in simple terms, should be clear and easily understandable for any reader, irrespective of their education, knowledge of the subject, and their proficiency in English:

Richard Frantz: *The material should be relevant to the intended audience. We try to write for the general audience. This means keeping technical terms to a minimum and wikilinking them so that people can check them if they don't already know them. I consider it that first we should try to write for an educated layperson and then try to improve it so it is accessible to a beginner.*

Sidaway: *An article that is pleasant to read and accessible, covering the subject in as few words as possible within those constraints.*

Stephen Tilley: *Plain language. Remembering that not everyone who reads it is English, American, Canadian or Australian, etc. and thus may need things making clearer than the resident in one of those countries.*

Around 7% of the authors (6 answers) saw the importance of a constructive cooperation with other editors as a factor contributing to the composition of a high-quality article. Such perspective manifests their recognition of the community as a significant aspect of the functioning of the free encyclopedia:

Leskinen: *Because Wikipedia is a community comprising of great many people having widely different personas I try to take account other users' viewpoints and preferences and avoid edit wars.*

Titoxd: *Get a lot of people to edit the page as well. More heads = more better, as I usually say, even if that is bad grammar.*

Within the analyzed answers, there occurred instances of replies signifying a personal approach to the process of composition, where the authors outlined individual principles which guide their collaboration in the project:

Angus: *Before I start, I like to have an idea of my objectives. A two paragraph article which I will start and abandon is entirely different from something which is intended to be comprehensive, which I will work on off and on until it is as good as I can manage. I like to have a plan and some understanding of the topic. Ideally I want a heap of references so I can form and ideas of what is credible and what is not.*

Sidaway: *The main principle I follow is: does this action further the goal of making Wikipedia a better encyclopedia. It's a very broad one.*

Block: *Intellectual honesty. I don't always achieve it, but I always try to present the information in a way that doesn't misrepresent a position.*

Still, nearly 17% of the contributors provided answers which were either vague, too general, or which illustrated a lack of concern and indifference towards the problem, e.g.:

Unckie_Bob: *Good articles are the opposite of bad articles ☺*

Angus: *Anything which isn't in obvious need of fixing is a good-enough article.*

Cas: *I had never thought about that.*

2. When do you correct other articles?

As mentioned above, the next question in the survey concerned the circumstances in which authors decide to revise an existing article and introduce corrections or modifications.

It turns out that the most frequent instances of modifications made by the contributors concern grammatical and spelling corrections, as nearly 45% of the respondents pointed to such mistakes as the main reason for their intervention:

Siyuan: *I can't stand grammatical, spelling or formatting errors.*

Visser: *I'm very obsessive about grammar, punctuation and spelling, so over 90% of my edits would be correcting those things.*

In the second place (9%), the authors mentioned instances of vandalism, i.e. purposeful damages done to the structure and content of articles, as cases which require involvement and revision:

Mike Riney: *I will always correct an existing article if I spot vandalism.*

Sjc1: *I patrol the Recent Changes for vandalism, and revert articles that are vandalized to a previous version that is not vandalized.*

The same percentage of the contributors (9%) focused on technological modifications associated with systemic errors, where other authors, unaware of the inner workings of the encyclopedia, did not format the entries correctly. Such interventions consisted in the improvement of the so called “wiki syntax”, e.g.:

Utcursch: *Most of the times I edit articles to 'wikify' them. Several articles are written by users with little knowledge of wiki syntax (which takes some time to learn).*

Unckie_Bob: *Date formatting is misunderstood. Usually people just put in dates without any formatting. Some people think they can format dates, but think they are like wikilinks; they are different.*

A surprisingly small number of the surveyed (5%) pointed to the purpose of adding substantial content to an article or correcting factual errors as the reasons for modification. This proves that factual accuracy does not constitute the primary concern for the authors:

JoJan: *I correct an existing article every time I think I can contribute something more to the article. I often upgrade stubs to at least an article in the 'start' class.*

Mike: *If I happen to stumble upon an article with either a factual error or an ambiguous statement.*

Interestingly, only one author pointed to the need for a modification of an existing article due to inappropriate content, unsuitable for an encyclopedic source of knowledge:

Cailil: *Some articles require serious corrections because they are not encyclopedic entries and because they do not conform to site standards. Some users take a free-speech and open sourcing point of view on Wikipedia. That is a thorough misinterpretation of the site and is sometimes a deliberate attempt to use Wikipedia like a blog.*

A small group of the respondents (4%) indicated that they are more likely to become engaged in substantive revisions or editing of articles which are associated with their profession or area of interest or of articles in which they have some expertise:

Milligan: *I mainly write in biology articles, so corrections I make are often the result of a non-specialist reading something in the media that has not explained the actual research very well.*

Beland: *I'm a scientist and engineer by training, so on certain topics, like medical conditions, nutrition, science articles, etc. I tend to have a low tolerance for bias and inaccuracy, and a greater willingness to dig up references and correct the article accordingly.*

The remaining answers concerned the removal of inappropriate citations and links (3%), as well as the improvement of the organization of an article (2%).

As many as 13% of the respondents did not identify any circumstances in which they decide to modify the existing articles:

Pascal: *I don't usually interfere.*

Visser: *I rarely add any content.*

3. Are there any differences between Wikipedia and a standard encyclopedia?

The purpose of the following question was to review the contributors' awareness of the dissimilarity between Wikipedia and a standard encyclopedia.

Generally, the respondents focused on the enumeration of positive aspects of the free encyclopedia associated with the functionality of the web and an increased potential that lies in a digital encyclopedia.

In the first place, the authors mentioned the possibility of constant updates (40%):

Walkiped: Unlike standard encyclopedias, Wikipedia can update quickly in response to rapidly changing information. For example, if a famous person dies, Wikipedia will typically reflect that person's death much more quickly than a standard encyclopedia.

Ultrajoe: Wikipedia is up-to-date, while a standard encyclopedia must be republished, including reviews and so forth, before its info can be updated.

For as many as 16% of the contributors, the most significant difference constituted the size of Wikipedia and its potential for growth enabled by the digital technology:

Srdjan: Wikipedia has much, much more prospect to grow, it is already ahead of any other (believe it or not) encyclopedia in the world with the info it includes.

Abakharev: Wikipedia has much more space than a paper encyclopedia – it allows much longer articles and more illustrations.

The absence of size restrictions contributes to a greater scope of materials included in Wikipedia, which 18% of the authors perceived as the major differentiating factor. The authors underlined the advantages of the electronic coverage of information which enables the inclusion of topics that are of interest to a relatively small audience. The surveyed pointed to the sheer breadth of the free encyclopedia and to the fact that it offers a large collection of articles diversified in thematic reference, that is entries which, as Yathster observed, are *not notable enough for inclusion in a standard encyclopedia*, or articles which are too specialized, e.g.:

Iamgoingtospew: Wikipedia has a greater breadth of articles, especially in current events and media-related articles.

Mike: There are articles written by enthusiasts about a great number of very specialized topics which otherwise are considered too narrow for a 'standard' encyclopedia.

Gwern: It is just light years beyond Encarta and company in its diversity of coverage, what kinds of info it will include, what websites it will link to.

Further, nearly 6% of the authors saw the importance of hyperlinks and the facility of a smooth transition between articles as aspects differentiating the genres:

Cmadler: the value of hyperlinks. If I'm reading a Wikipedia article and come across an unfamiliar term or concept, I'm much more likely to find out what it is, since it only takes a quick click, as opposed to pulling out another volume and flipping through pages.

Frantz: *We can link every word and an explanation is only a click away. The closest a paper encyclopedia can come is underlining key words so the reader can, inconveniently, look it up, probably in a different volume of the encyclopedia.*

In addition to greater scope and constant updating, freedom of access and convenience in using the free encyclopedia were identified by the contributors (12%) as important factors making the two genres different:

Icarins: *Wikipedia is currently free to access – long may it continue.*

JP06035: *It is free to use whenever one needs it, unlike a hard-to-lug-around set of encyclopedias.*

Apart from the above mentioned technological advantages, the users perceived the superiority of the free encyclopedia in the contribution principles which underlie its construction. Nearly 7% of the authors pointed out the potential Wikipedia has to encourage people to pursue knowledge, in contrast to a standard encyclopedia, where the process of compilation is restricted to a circle of experts of a specific field of science, e.g.:

Athaenara: *I think the most important difference is that it encourages people who might not otherwise have thought themselves suited to scholarly pursuit to give it a try.*

Yathster: *Openness – Wikipedia's openness motivates more people to share and to contribute to something that benefits everyone.*

Interestingly, almost 7% of the authors exhibited a certain bias against paper encyclopedias, stating that it is the digital character of Wikipedia which contributes to its advantage over the traditional works and which guarantees greater usefulness and functional value:

Mayhemics: *Wikipedia enjoys one tremendous advantage: it is not a paper encyclopedia.*

Circee: *primarily the fact it is not a paper encyclopedia, because it means it can afford to be a topical encyclopedia on everything, whereas even general encyclopedia can't be as detailed as Wikipedia on every topic.*

Aceron: *A standard encyclopedia will never have half of the articles that Wikipedia can... and already does.*

Some authors stated plainly that Wikipedia is of greater significance than its paper equivalents, though without providing any justification for their claims:

Jennica: *More important than another encyclopedia, in my opinion.*

Surprisingly, 4% of the authors did not identify any important factors which differentiate Wikipedia from the standard encyclopedia:

Wolff: *Wikipedia is not different from standard encyclopedias, save for the fact that it is free.*

Milligan: *I think they aspire to the same thing.*

Still, apart from the above described positive opinions concerning Wikipedia, a group of the contributors (3%) identified problematic areas associated with the free encyclopedia and frankly pointed to a lower degree of reliability of Wikipedia articles, as compared to paper equivalents. These answers prove that some

authors are aware of the influence of the system under which the free encyclopedia operates on the quality of the articles:

Vickers: *Wikipedia is less reliable since there is constant vandalism and not all articles are written accurately.*

Jyri: *On the minus side, only a few Wikipedians could qualify as professional encyclopedists. Language is often lacking, and article structure and typography is often poor.*

Pascal: *Although we do our best to improve, I have to admit that the quality of Wikipedia's articles can't compete with most standard encyclopedias.*

Similarly, Utcursch stated explicitly that the free encyclopedia should not be fully relied on, but rather treated as a springboard for further research:

Utcursch: *Wikipedia's readers cannot trust it blindly. Wikipedia is a good for getting quick overview of a topic, but it should not be used as a source for an academic paper or report. The readers should verify the 'references' mentioned in an article, and use them for further research.*

4. Are there any language differences between the articles in Wikipedia and a standard encyclopedia?

Answers to this question exhibited a wide variety. Nearly 6% of the contributors left the question without any comment or stated they did not know the answer. The remaining replies presented a diversified collection of opinions concerning the question.

Interestingly, as many as 11% of the surveyed could not identify any language differences between Wikipedia and a standard encyclopedia due to the fact that they do not use the latter:

Geniac: *I wouldn't know because I never use paper encyclopedias; they're heavy, expensive, a waste of paper and obsolete.*

Acs4b: *I'm sorry, but I won't be able to answer this question as I don't use paper encyclopedias.*

Wesenwr: *I actually haven't read a traditional encyclopedia for a long time, so I don't know.*

As many as 9% of the answers pointed to a lack of recognition of any differences between the discourse features characterizing the free encyclopedia and its paper antecedents. The contributors stated that they perceive the language form as the same in both instances. The answers ranged from explicit statements, such as:

Tracker11: *Not really.*

Omegatron: *I think the language is relatively similar.*

to more abundant justifications of the similarity in question:

Frantz: *Many of our articles are quite comparable in tone, wording and language to a professionally prepared encyclopedia article. I've looked at an article and wondered if it wasn't a copyviolation of a professionally written article and it's turned out to be the result of numerous online edits that have reached the same quality as a professional would.*

The answers of 28% of the contributors illustrated a degree of awareness of the difference between Wikipedia and standard encyclopedias and of the unevenness characterizing the former as far as its stylistic structure is concerned. These respondents pointed mainly to the informality characterizing the language of Wikipedia:

Roberts: *The language used in paper encyclopedias is more consistent. It means that they speak in the same voice and grade level in every article. Wikipedia has pockets of highly technical jargon and pockets of weak grammar, but we are working on improving this.*

Willbyr: *Many articles in Wikipedia are written in an informal style which would never be permissible in a paper encyclopedia.*

Interestingly, the majority of the respondents recognizing the difference (15%) manifested a somewhat positive attitude towards the variation in language, perceiving this stylistic irregularity as an advantage, adding originality to the project:

Dancase: *Ideally, I do think we don't need to be quite as dry and uniform as a paper encyclopedia. Our MoS allows for a good deal of individual variation, more than I think some people think, and we already recognize the importance of regional differences. The differences in style of individual writers do make for a bit of flavor in individual articles of an otherwise uniform quality level that you wouldn't get in a paper encyclopedia.*

Beland: *I'm sure Wikipedia is contributing to the international unification of English by highlighting internationally intelligible vocabulary, and exposing everyone to a wider diversity of grammatical styles than they would normally get in their local dialect.*

Underlining the superiority of Wikipedia, the respondents commented on a far-reaching specialization and restricted readability of paper encyclopedias, their use of scientific terms which may prove incomprehensible for many users. As many as 14% of the contributors focused on the "friendliness" and the already mentioned assimilability of Wiki-discourse, as a factor differentiating Wikipedia from its paper antecedent and deciding about its superiority over traditional encyclopedic writing:

Ultrajoe: *Wikipedia articles tend to be more 'down to earth' and friendly vs. 'scholarly' in their tone and language.*

Steve Block: *If we look at the articles Wikipedia feel are of a reliable standard, I think articles on Wikipedia aim at the general reader better than paper encyclopedias, which can take too academic a tone.*

Shyam: *Paper encyclopedia sometimes is not easy to understand, but Wikipedia is very easy to understand, if someone does not have any knowledge about the topic.*

What is worth noting, nearly 6% of the respondents perceived the quality of writing in Wikipedia as more consistent, more formal and generally finer to that represented by traditional encyclopedic discourse:

Linus: *The encyclopedia can be deeper in some areas, and shallower in others. Wikipedia offers more uniform coverage, and more uniform style and presentation.*

Firsfron: *Wikipedia's articles on extinct reptiles includes more formal language than that of Encarta or Britannica's equivalent articles (when they have any).*

Only a fraction of the contributors (5%) admitted that the free encyclopedia represents a lower quality of writing as compared with a traditional printed encyclopedia:

David: *Many of the articles are far from finished, and they do not have the polished, complete, professionally edited prose that is expected from a print encyclopedia.*

Angus: *I imagine the quality of prose in Wikipedia is poor. Some write well, most don't. I wouldn't confuse my own writing with anything resembling brilliant prose. The number of competence copy editors is low. Like the systemic bias in content, this is a hard problem to fix.*

The answers provided by these authors signify a higher degree of their genre awareness and the understanding of the inadequacy of the stylistic shape of chosen articles.

5. Are there any ideals behind the project?

In answers to this question, the most frequently appearing descriptions were freedom, openness and public knowledge. The majority of the contributors (26%) pointed to the ideals of freedom of knowledge and of unrestricted dissemination of information to anyone and anywhere, emphasizing that *Wikipedia is changing the world by putting information in places that are easy to access* (Skylar). In addition, the authors highlighted the fact that the right to diffuse knowledge should not be limited to the individuals with an expertise in an area, but rather anyone who is willing to put time and effort into the project should be given such opportunity. Along the freedom of information, the contributors emphasized the ideal of cooperation between people, which appeared in 14% of the answers. The surveyed saw the main advantage of the free encyclopedia in its ability to attract and unite people of different backgrounds, cultures and degrees of education to cooperate in the construction of a source of knowledge. What the authors underlined was the idea that the greatest product can be better achieved using the collective efforts of many individuals. The authors emphasized the fact that Wikipedia encourages people to work together and spread knowledge by allowing them to have a say and add what they know, irrespective of their education, e.g.:

Alensha: *WP is probably the most known free content project in the world. It promotes the notion that information has to be free and everyone has the right to it. Also WP*

shows that people can work together and create something great, without getting money for it.

Steve Block: *For me you have the goal of information being free, of learning being collaborative and of the fact that there should be no barriers to learning.*

Wesenwr: *I think that the overwhelming value of WP is that knowledge gives power. WP, and the internet in general, equalizes access to information among people, whether they live in Chicago, Tennessee, Minnesota or Swains Island. If they have Internet access, they all have access to the whole sum of mankind's knowledge. Ultimately this will promote democracy and civil rights, and preclude the effectiveness of oppressive regimes.*

The respondents put focus on the fact that Wikipedia stresses acceptance, allowing people of all ages and races to contribute. The value of Wikipedia, as the authors pointed out, lies in the fact that it shows that everyone has some sort of knowledge that can prove relevant and interesting. In other words, it seems that what is most appreciated is the autonomy contributors are given in composing their articles and the lack of restrictions governing collaboration.

Surprisingly, only 4% of the authors identified negative values of the above mentioned freedom. These authors recognized the need for expertise behind the freedom and noticed that cooperation is difficult to achieve when multiple editors disagree over an issue. Interestingly, the respondents stated that though Wikipedia promotes the freedom of information, it also sets limits on the freedom of action within the site, due to administrative policies and the existing hierarchy among contributors. The respondents pointed out that though decision-making on Wikipedia is reasonably egalitarian, the overall tone and approach of articles follow to an extent the biases, prejudices and values of the majority of editors. In that way, the authors explicitly commented on the existence of an adverse side of the freedom of contribution:

Ultrajoe: *In general it promotes cooperation and 'egoless' contribution. Wikipedia is based on consensus, which can be both its best and worst value. To misquote Anton French, if the consensus of thousands of contributors lead to a stupid point of view, it's still a stupid point of view.*

MrDolomite: *WP promotes free information sharing, but at a cost. Many times of the negatives of mob rule, or even a single, or small handful of editors can damage content and hinder the content improvement process. Many real world experts and authorities may attempt to contribute, but are run off by the WP cabal, WP processes and procedures (what there are of them) or general irritation of dealing with the geek-rule mentality which pervades much of WP.*

Lordameth: *WP espouses values such as neutral points of view, cooperation, and the idea that the everyman, regardless of his age or experience or formal education has things he is knowledgeable about. (...) However, looking not at the policy pages and instead at the actual life on WP, other values and concepts become unfortunately apparent. Racism, bigotry, and bias of every kind is represented on WP. Allowing anyone to edit means opening WP up to vandals, to the misguided and ill-informed.*

A considerable number of answers (9%) pointed to the propensity of Wikipedia towards the presentation of contents from an American perspective,

as well as a certain political bias and a liberal perspective to be observed in the articles:

Omphaloscope: Yes, it is quite evidently Amerocentric. On any given topic, the American perspective, interpretation or definition that topic is almost always given more attention. Look at articles on law and you shouldn't have trouble finding an example of a legal concept which has English and American meanings, but of which only the American meaning is explained.

Trendyshay: I think Wikipedia potentially represents freedom of information, but also betrays an occasional left-wing bias, and especially in other language wikis, tends to favour the establishment.

BlueTie: Yes, democracy of access to and expression of ideas. But there is also a very strong socialist, liberal bend in the leadership.

Interestingly, a worth noting proportion of the answers (8%) pointed to the “fun” of contributing and identified volunteerism as the primary value of the free encyclopedia. The authors stressed the fact that it is not professionalism that matters, but enjoyment and passionate approach towards participation in the project that are of importance, e.g.:

Pascal: I edit Wikipedia to learn and because it can be fun.

Alensha: Last year at a conference the editor of Magyar Nagylexicon (that's kind of the Hungarian equivalent of Encyclopedia Britannica) said that what's great in WP is that 'it made encyclopedia writing seem cool'. That's a good thing too – writing articles is now cool, not something that only 80 year old professors do. ☺

JoJan: Generally I think, and hope, WP represent the best in humanity. We are all volunteers spending our spare free time trying to divulge knowledge to the rest of the world, and this on a free basis and without any copyright.

Nearly 5% of the contributors manifested their indifference towards the ideals or stated that Wikipedia does not promote any values or, contrary to the above outlined views, that the free encyclopedia has a negative facade:

Willbyr: Honestly, I haven't given this any thought. I'm sure that WP has values which it wants to represent, but they are not a concern to me.

Yathster: Some people use Wikipedia as a vehicle to exhibit disdain for experts. This is a problem because – although Wikipedia has definite advantages over an expert-laden team such as Encyclopedia Britannica, it has disadvantages as well. Experts and societal structures that vet and recognize them, are also an indispensable part of society.

Omphaloscope: I see Wikipedia as a clearinghouse for facts and opinions, established elsewhere, and said by others, with appropriate citations.

6. Conclusion

The results of the survey prove a wide differentiation in the approaches towards the free encyclopedia as expressed by the collaborators. The survey proves

a specific and sharp discrepancy in the level of genre awareness among the contributors. The answers illustrate also different conceptions of the quality of entries, different approaches towards the stylistic shape of articles, as well as their content. On the one side, there are authors who observe this online reality and the popularity of Wikipedia with a considerable degree of criticism and are aware of the disadvantageous sides of the project, but on the other there is a majority of contributors who exhibit a highly favourable and positive approach to Wikipedia.

What is more, the answers given by the respondents reflect a change in the perception of the genre of encyclopedia and illustrate what expectations users have regarding a modern encyclopedic site. It turns out that what matters most for users, and in this case authors, is the sheer scope of the project, the magnitude of information which can be found in Wikipedia, as well as the freedom of contribution it promotes. Contributors see Wikipedia as an embodiment of a departure from the centuries-old conceptions regarding encyclopedia-making, where the compilation of the work was limited to experts, with the restrictions put on the thematic scope and content of articles.

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Streszczenie

Wikipedia jako encyklopedia – analiza ankiety

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