

# Sociocultural Implications of Wikipedia

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## INTRODUCTION

Wikipedia is a free encyclopedia that operates worldwide on the Internet. Articles on Wikipedia are developed with close collaboration of volunteers and anyone can edit the content (Wikipedia, 2006e). Although there are many advantages of using Wikipedia as a group collaboration tool, there are important implications. First, Wikipedia community is diverse and intercultural differences can distort the communication process. Second, the neutral point of view (NPOV) policy can lead to disputes. Third, lack of supervision and open source policy can be another source of conflict. Fourth, administration of articles can be complex due to differing cultural and political stand points (Smith & Kollock, 1999). Lastly, differences in time and space as well as low level of access to the Internet can significantly impede collaboration efforts at Wikipedia (Berry, 2006; Madon, 2000; Parayil, 2006; Sahay, Nicholson, & Krishna, 2003). Hence, the aim of this paper is to examine sociocultural implications of using Wikipedia as a group collaboration tool spanning multiple countries and how social and cultural climate, differences in time and space, as well as technological infrastructure of countries affect collaboration between individuals given the distinctive operational and administration policies at Wikipedia. It is believed that findings from this research will increase the awareness of the underlying cause of many disputes arising at Wikipedia. In addition, this research will lead to cultural relativism and provide neutral grounds for collaborative efforts at Wikipedia in the future.

## WIKIPEDIA AS GROUP COLLABORATION TOOL

The wiki name has been borrowed from Hawaiian term “wikiwiki,” which means fast, swift, or quick (Wikipedia, 2006d). The father of wiki, Ward Cunningham, defined wiki as “a freely-expandable collection of interlinked Web pages, a hypertext system for storing and modifying information—a database, where each page is easily editable by any user” (Leuf & Cunningham, 2001, p. 14). In addition, wikis can be applied as a source for gaining information and knowledge, and also as a system for virtual collaboration (Boulos, Maramba, & Wheeler, 2006). Wikipedia is based on such technology and is often viewed as “wiki in action” (Boulos et al., 2006). Wikipedia was launched by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger on January 15, 2001, and can be defined as a free-content, Web-based encyclopedia, produced collaboratively by volunteers around the world (Wikipedia, 2006e). On July 1, 2006, the English edition of Wikipedia had nearly 1.3 million articles, which add up to 511 million words, and giving a total of 3 billion characters (Wikipedia, 2006g). Perhaps the open source policy and easily editable content maybe attributable for Wikipedia’s increasing popularity worldwide. Because anyone around the world can make edits on Wikipedia, some people may argue that it can lead to low quality of the content. However, it has been observed that articles forwarded to Wikipedia are of high quality. First, mostly academics and researchers have been attracted by this idea, thus a high quality of content is reflected in the articles. Second, numerous reviews are made, which increases content’s credibility.

Then, Wikipedia has a policy which restricts articles to a neutral standpoint, which enables the content to be for a wide range of readers. Although initial policies were imposed by Wales and Sanger (founders of Wikipedia), today the community operates without much management interference.

Numerous studies on Wikipedia as a group collaboration tool have been conducted in the recent years. Raitman and Zhou (2005) examined various ways in which students could share their ideas and outputs by using Wikipedia. It was found that Wikipedia needs to be improved in terms of design and interface to enable effective knowledge creation and sharing. In addition, the study also revealed that the security and privacy of Wikipedia needs enhancement. Another study was conducted with Australian students to identify learning experiences using Wikipedia. Conclusions made from this study confirmed Wikipedia is an effective and useful online collaboration tool for creating and sharing knowledge (Brereton, Donovan, & Laubacher, 2003). In the recent decades, cross-cultural communication has been a major concern of online collaboration (Gannon & Newman, 2002; Thomas, 2002). Numerous studies on culture and technology have shown beliefs and values shared by the members can influence group behavior in a variety of ways that can either speed up or slow down the implementation and adoption of a new group of a collaboration technology. One such study conducted by Zhang, Vogel, and Lowry (2006) measured the impact of culture on the “use” and “adoption” of collaboration technology. In particular, this study was conducted to increase understanding of cultural issues in collaboration technology from theoretical, technical, empirical, and practitioner perspective. Kim and Bonk (2002) investigated two interrelated conferences from Finland and the United States. Upon analyzing the findings, it was discovered teachers had limited knowledge about other cultures. Hence, this study recommended that in order to communicate and collaborate globally, teachers need to increase intercultural awareness.

## **SOCIOCULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF WIKIPEDIA**

Advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs) are changing the fundamental nature of group work. We are no longer constrained by physical boundaries to collaborate and work effectively with

individuals from different places. Today, intercultural awareness and effective cross-cultural communication skills are essential to the success of group work spanning multiple countries. Nevertheless, working, collaborating, negotiating, and dealing with people from other cultures can be complex in online environments. One wrong assumption or basic misunderstanding can spoil or delay months of collaborative work. Smith and Kollock (1999) identified four causes of disagreement in online virtual communities.

1. Internet community spans multiple countries.
2. Unclear goals give way to disagreement.
3. Lack of supervision and open sharing of ideas result in much conflict.
4. Administration policies intensify conflict.

According to Reagle (2005), the aspects mentioned above are applicable to Wikipedia. The Wikipedia community is diverse and the collaboration and communication can be distorted due to cultural differences. People from differing cultural backgrounds commonly vary in their communication style, including the motivation to discover and share information (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Although culture can manifest in various ways, societies are commonly distinguished as individualistic or collectivistic. In an individualistic society such as the United States, people value their own needs, ideals, and ambitions before group goals. On the contrary, in a collectivistic society such as India, people value group needs before individual goals. In addition, people from an individualistic society are not concerned with self-categorizing, are not influenced deeply by group membership, have a tendency of joining and adjourning groups, and commonly engage in more open and straight communication than people from a collectivistic society (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Hofstede, 2005). In addition, a research study by Pearce (1974) revealed that people from a individualistic society tend to reply more to anonymous e-mail messages than people from a collectivistic society. Also, experiences of other societies have significant impacts on the communication behavior. Individuals with knowledge of other societies and cultures are more likely to engage in communication with individuals from other countries (Gordon, 2005; Magala, 2005). Hence, in my view, people from individualistic societies may have more trust in online communication environments than individuals from collectivistic societies. The studies also imply that

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