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## Hospitable Texts

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# Hospitable Texts

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## **Hospitable Texts**

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This dissertation examines Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia that “anyone can edit,” in order to locate an emerging digital rhetoric. That emerging rhetoric is being developed from the bottom up by various rhetors, and it offers rhetoricians a framework for rethinking some of the foundations of the discipline. The discipline has tended to define agency in terms of the conscious rhetor, intellectual property in terms of an author-origin, and community in terms of a shared project that a collective has agreed upon. This dissertation rethinks each of these disciplinary key terms by examining Wikipedia’s hospitable structure, a structure that welcomes writers regardless of identity or credentials. This structure of hospitality troubles the notions that agency can be reduced to consciousness, that texts are easily linked to an owner, or that community is the result of an agreed upon project. In many ways, Wikipedia acts as a microcosm of the various rhetorical collisions that happen to rhetors both online and offline. The proliferation of new media makes for more rhetors and more rhetorical situations, and this requires a complete rethinking of certain portions of rhetorical theory. The theory of hospitality that grounds this project is not utopian—it is instead a full consideration of the complications and perils of welcoming others regardless of identity or credentials. This is a structural hospitality, one that is not necessarily the result of conscious choice. This structure means that Wikipedia is far from a utopia—certain voices are filtered or silenced. But these filters are put up in the face of a hospitable structure that welcomes a broad range of

writers, invites colliding interests, allows libelous or inaccurate writings, and encourages an endless chain of citations. The invitations extended by hospitable texts open up difficult questions for rhetoricians: Who is editing this text as I read it? How do we define “community” in such a situation? Who owns this text? “Hospitable Texts” rethinks these questions in light of the Web’s emerging ethical and rhetorical structures.

## Table of Contents

Chapter One: Hospitable Texts.....	1
Opening the Floodgates, Examining the Aftermath.....	5
Hospitable Code.....	11
Hospitality and its Problems.....	14
Tolerance: A Measured Form of Hospitality.....	19
Structures of Tolerance and Hospitality.....	22
Wiki-critics and the Discourse Magnet.....	27
Telling the Stories of Wikipedia’s Code.....	33
Chapter Two: Ghostly Writing and Biographies of Living Persons.....	37
Wikipedia’s BLP Policy.....	43
The Séance of Jay Mariotti.....	48
Timothy Noah’s Ghostly Writings.....	56
The Attention Economy or the Intention Economy?.....	60
Agencies Beyond the Rhetor.....	63
The “Obviously Educable”.....	69
Chapter Three: Anonymity Trouble.....	74
Linking Texts with Origins.....	82
Anonymity Trouble.....	84

Essjay Fallout.....	95
Advantages of Anonymity.....	98
Wikipedia and Citizendium.....	102
Delivery Platforms and Origins.....	109
Chapter Four: Colliding Collusions.....	117
Negation: What Wikipedia Isn't.....	123
Collision: Wikipedia's Sausage Factory.....	130
Responsibility: Who Wrote Those Five Sentences?.....	137
Collusion: Exposing Community.....	144
Proximity: Rhetorics of Community.....	148
Coda: Wikipedia as Courseware.....	155
Works Cited.....	162
Vita.....	175



## Chapter I

### Hospitable Texts

In 1995, Ward Cunningham created WikiWikiWeb, a program that allowed computer programmers to exchange information quickly. “Wiki” is the Hawaiian word for quick, and using a word twice is one way to emphasize Hawaiian words. So, when Cunningham developed a tool that provided a simple markup language, he decided that the first Hawaiian word he learned would be a good fit:

I learned the word wiki on my first visit to Hawai'i when I was directed to the airport shuttle, called the Wiki Wiki Bus. I asked for that direction to be repeated three or four times until the airline representative took the time to define the word wiki for me. The next day I picked up a small book about Hawai'ian and learned more interesting things about the language. (Cunningham)

Anyone passing through airport security after September 11, 2001 can attest to the need for speed and quickness. Flying on an airplane has become an entirely different experience—the infrastructure of travel has been overhauled. It is now both difficult and necessary to get through the airport quickly. For some time, the Wiki Wiki Bus has participated in this culture of quickness; however, it will soon be replaced. The Bus is not quite quick enough, and by fall 2010 it will be replaced by a \$36.1 million corridor ("New International"). It seems that Cunningham's metaphor of quickness is already dated.

This reworking of the Honolulu airport infrastructure offers a useful metaphor for the shift required of rhetorics, digital and otherwise. Things are moving more quickly, and this requires a shift in how we think about texts and writing. As we find ourselves in on-line and off-line situations where discourse moves faster and where opposing arguments can arrive unsolicited, we are forced to develop new methods and technologies for dealing with speed. But before we begin to lay out plans for an infrastructural overhaul, we would do well to examine some emerging digital structures. These structures are not engineered the same way that the Honolulu corridor is. Instead, Web

denizens have slowly and messily collaborated on structures that attempt to address our need for new ways of reading and writing online. Cognitive scientist Edwin Hutchins would most likely call these digital spaces distributed cognitive systems. Hutchins has been the driving force behind a rethinking of cognitive theory, and he has insisted that the boundaries of the cognitive unit need to be expanded beyond the human skull. That is, a system itself can be a cognitive unit, and this unit is the result of a loosely connected collection of agents and activities. Viewed this way, a number of collaborative digital structures are both emerging and emergent. They are emerging in that they are constantly being revised, and they are emergent because they are the result of a complex compositional process that is driven by various agents (human and otherwise). These agents are not necessarily following a single design plan. By examining the ethical and rhetorical codes embedded in these emerging and emergent structures, we can begin to see how an infrastructural overhaul has been in progress for some time. These codes are much more than the 1's and 0's of computer code (though, as we will see, the *computer* code of Wikipedia is in a certain sense tied to the *ethical* code of Wikipedia). The codes I'm discussing here are rooted in the structure of the Web, and the case study I undertake here focuses on one of our largest textual repositories: Wikipedia.

Many of the Web's emerging digital infrastructures are built upon a code of hospitality. This hospitality welcomes digital writers without putting up many of the filters that have long controlled what does and does not get published. At the level of *structure*, texts like Wikipedia are hospitable. That is, they invite writers inside and call for participation. This structural hospitality is not necessarily about a choice made by a writer or central entity to invite others to edit the text. Rather, it is a predicament that each reader and writer is caught up in, and it is not entirely new. All texts are hospitable to a certain extent in that they invite interpretation. But Wikipedia and certain other Web texts extend an invitation to both readers *and* writers. This structural hospitality does not guarantee kindness on the part of Wikipedians, and there is plenty of evidence that the contributors to this space can be very inhospitable in practice. However, regardless of

what happens at the level of practice, the structure underlying Wikipedia has (to this point) remained hospitable.

This hospitable code is in need of investigation for at least three reasons. First, these emerging and emergent constitutions underlie a great deal of digital writing and collaboration. By acknowledging that such constitutions are already in place, academics (not to mention policy makers, engineers, and those in the commercial sector) can avoid a kind of engineer's hubris that aims to build more efficient, responsible, or ethical online structures. While many of the Web's various tools have been designed by capable engineers and programmers and while rhetoricians can offer some valuable advice to digital rhetors, some of the smaller, incremental changes and advances made on the Web are the result of the actions of millions of Web denizens who use technology in unpredictable ways. This more distributed notion of design can serve to remind rhetoricians that rhetorical practices need not necessarily originate in the academy. Rhetoricians can and should have a role in the direction that digital rhetorics take, but we are only a small part of a complicated process. Existing Web texts and practices can represent an untapped resource for those in search of new digital rhetorics.

The second reason for investigating the hospitable Web is linked to the first. As the hospitable structure of the Web raises sticky questions about what counts as a "publication" and how we should understand authorship, there is a strong possibility that this structure will be locked down and made less hospitable. In this version of engineer's hubris, we see certain stakeholders (corporations, researchers, or network designers to name a few) deciding to rein in a Web that has become too open, too sprawling, and too difficult to control. We have already seen this happen. Until recently, the Recording Industry of America Association (RIAA) has pursued litigation against those taking advantage of the hospitable Web's penchant for textual collaboration and exchange (those who use and abuse file-sharing services).<sup>1</sup> Discussions about "net neutrality"

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<sup>1</sup> In December 2008, the RIAA announced that it would no longer pursue individuals who were illegally downloading music. Instead, it has decided to pursue relationships with Internet Service Providers (McBride and Smith).

reflect this attempt to lock down as well, as internet service providers begin to consider building a smart network that can move information packets from the higher paying internet user (often corporations) at a faster rate.

As we will see, Wikipedia is not immune from such discussions. A number of critics suggest that Wikipedia's open structure should be revised and that some of the filters that have traditionally determined what counts as a publication should be put in place. Such policies work against the Web's traditionally dumb network, a network that does not distinguish between packets of information. In essence, calling the network "dumb" is another way of saying that it is hospitable. Open to various writers regardless of identity or credentials, the dumb/hospitable network welcomes a broad range of contributions. This network allows rhetorical practices to emerge both from the bottom-up and from the top-down. Those practices may raise difficult questions and may violate our received reading and writing practices. They may also, at times, violate the law. However, a study of these practices (a study that attempts to understand the codes of the Web prior to locking them down or reining them in) can help us sort through which parts of Web constitutions might merit serious consideration.

A third reason for examining the Web's hospitable structure is connected to these various attempts to lock down the Web. This reason is an ethical one: What are the ethical implications of a structure that welcomes more voices to the conversation and thus creates a great deal of textual noise? What would be the ethical implications of shutting such a structure down? Again, I am not arguing that a more open structure is necessarily *more* ethical. Instead, I am arguing that Web denizens build various rules and regulations in response to a hospitable network, and we require a study of the ethical implications of such rules. The hospitality of Wikipedia has been a part of its constitution from the start, and it has meant that more writers are invited to help compose this "open source" encyclopedia. By inviting this broad range of voices, Wikipedia's code makes a different kind of determination about which voices count and about which writers should be allowed to participate. The ethics that underlie such an open structure can be portrayed as democratic or utopian, but I believe such discussion is misguided. It is much more

complicated than this. Wikipedia's open invitation is part of a risky and intriguing ethical code, a code that I believe is worthy of analysis.

Rhetoricians are in a good position to take on some of these issues and questions through the analysis of the codes that underlie Web texts and communities. The rhetorical analysis of Web texts themselves is an important task, and this is indeed happening. However, rhetorical analyses of the Web's codes and structures are also necessary. When such codes emerge from rhetorical exchanges amongst millions of digital writers, when the debates about whether or not these codes should be revised and brought under control, and when the ethics of Web structures determine how many writers will be invited to our textual conversations, it becomes easier to see a role for rhetoricians in these debates.

### **Opening the Floodgates, Examining the Aftermath**

While I have said that hospitable codes are emerging and emergent and that we should be wary of any kind of engineering hubris, it is important to note that certain engineering decisions have played an important role in the design of the Web. In fact, Lawrence Lessig argues that the designers of the Web were smart enough to be humble: “With talent comes humility. And the original network architects knew more than anything that they didn't know what this network would be used for” (*The Future* 39). But what interests me here is not necessarily the intelligence or humility of Web architects. Instead, I am interested in the ethical and rhetorical implications of a hospitable network that welcomes texts and writers from multiple angles. For Lessig, this kind of structure was fortuitous. Any attempt to make the network itself “smart” might have served to foreclose certain possibilities: “when the future is uncertain—or more precisely, when future uses of technology cannot be predicted—then leaving the technology uncontrolled is a better way of helping it find the right sort of innovation” (*The Future* 39). Lessig argues for a dumb network in the interest of maintaining the Internet as a commons—a “resource to which anyone within the relevant community has

a right without obtaining the permission of anyone else” (*The Future* 19-20). Designed as a dumb network, the Web’s structure of hospitality invites innovation and contribution.

The early days of Wikipedia reveal a similar kind of decision—a decision that shaped “the encyclopedia that anyone can edit” in profound ways. The wiki was a way to address Cunningham’s need for the quick exchange of information amongst computer programmers. And when wiki technology was taken up by Larry Sanger and Jimmy Wales in 2001 for their online encyclopedia, it was an attempt to address a similar problem. Sanger and Wales were developing an encyclopedia project called Nupedia, but they were struggling to get content through a “rigorous seven-step system” (Sanger “The Early” 313). Nupedia was a smart network attempting to guide articles through a fairly linear and controlled vetting process. When he learned of wiki software, Sanger thought it might address the bottleneck in Nupedia’s process:

The more I thought about it, without even having seen a wiki, the more it seemed obviously right. Immediately I wrote a proposal—unfortunately, lost now—in which I said that this might solve the problem and that we ought to try it. (“The Early” 315)<sup>2</sup>

And so Wikipedia was born. Within the first five months, the project contained nearly 4,000 articles (as compared to the two dozen completed for Nupedia over the course of about a year), and as of April 2009 the English version of Wikipedia has over 2.8 million articles.

In its early stages, Sanger viewed Wikipedia as a “very silly project,” but he was also excited to see the text growing so quickly. This quick growth can be traced to one of the first rules Sanger created: “Ignore all Rules.” This rule isn’t as anarchic as it sounds. It simply means that “if rules make you nervous and depressed, and not desirous of participating in the wiki, then ignore them entirely and go about your business” (“The

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<sup>2</sup> At first glance, the loss of Sanger’s proposal seems insignificant. But given his eventual discontent about Wikipedia’s penchant for archiving every exchange (he likens such ongoing conversations as “festered wounds”), we might here note how Sanger’s misplaced proposal leaves a gap in Wikipedia’s history. Hospitable texts archive nearly everything, even the seemingly inane. This kind of ethic would have preserved Sanger’s proposal for those interested in the history of Wikipedia.

Early" 318). Thus, the first rule of Wikipedia is a green light to “go about your business” and not let bureaucracy slow you down. This rule initiates everything on Wikipedia, and it indicates the hospitality of the text. As the “Ignore All Rules” page explains:

You do not need to read any rules before contributing to Wikipedia. If you do what seems sensible, it will usually be right, and if it's not right, don't worry. Even the worst mistakes are easy to correct: older versions of a page remain in the revision history and can be restored. If we disagree with your changes, we'll talk about it thoughtfully and politely, and we'll figure out what to do. So don't worry.

Be bold, and enjoy helping to build this free encyclopedia. ("Wikipedia: What")

The message is clear: Welcome. Go, go, go. Write now, ask questions later. Be bold. As the above quotation recognizes, this policy can invite mistakes, but the hope is that these mistakes will be addressed after the fact by millions of contributors. As we will see in later chapters, the process is imperfect and certain errors are not fixed immediately. Still, Sanger and Wales were up against a system that slowed down textual production in the interest of accuracy and reliability, and the creation of Wikipedia turned on the faucet through a structural gesture of hospitality.

Things started to move quickly. Sanger's choice to use a wiki had opened the floodgates by welcoming the enthusiastic as well as the unsavory, and this was the result of the code of hospitality that underlies the wiki infrastructure. In many wikis (depending on certain permissions settings), a broad range of writers can gain access to the text and change it quickly, meaning that more writers can participate and that the textual conversation can become unwieldy. While Nupedia had been painfully slow, Wikipedia soon became a messy, noisy text, and this eventually drove Sanger away from the project. It wasn't long before Sanger found himself in the position of Dr. Frankenstein—the free encyclopedia that “anyone can edit” resisted control. At the level of structure, Wikipedia had become a radically hospitable text that invited anyone who was willing to write. By flattening some of the hierarchies built into the Nupedia process and inviting non-experts to edit and write, Wikipedia became a new kind of text. It offered a process of radical collaboration, and this meant that no one person could control

the conversation. Sanger's decision to eventually leave the project stemmed from this lack of control, and he had a number of arguments with those in the Wikipedia community who took "Ignore All Rules" to an extreme.<sup>3</sup>

As Wikipedia grew and accumulated more information at a quickening pace, the text grew noisy. In this way, Wikipedia is a microcosm of the Web. As Richard Lanham argues, we are reminded on a daily basis that we live in an "information economy." But Lanham also reminds us that economics is the study of scarce resources, and this doesn't seem to apply to the current state of information: "Information doesn't seem in short supply. Precisely the opposite. We're drowning in it" (6). For Lanham, the availability of vast amounts of information makes "fluff" (style) more important than "stuff," and he argues that rhetoricians can offer useful tools for navigating fluff: "in a society where information and stuff have changed places, it proves useful to think of rhetoric...as a new economics" (21). Since *The Electronic Word*, Lanham's work has been putting rhetoric and the language arts in conversation with the digital world, and his discussion of "the attention economy" offers the possibility that rhetoric is a useful tool for sifting and sorting a flood of information. I explain in the next chapter why I am skeptical of Lanham's enthusiastic celebration of the great "attention economists" of our time (his examples include Warhol and Duchamp). It is difficult to argue with Lanham's point that more voices have been added to our textual conversations, but while Lanham's economics of attention provides an understanding of style that can help Web denizens sift through mounds of information, my focus will be on something different. This project offers an examination of the structures that allow that broader range of voices to participate. In this opening chapter, I will begin to describe the structure of hospitality I

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<sup>3</sup> Sanger's debates with a Wikipedian named "Cunc" are legendary in the Wikipedia community. Cunc is short for Cuncator. In his discussion of Sanger's arguments with Cunc, Marshall Poe points out that Cuncator is Latin for "procrastinator" or "delayer" (92). Sanger viewed the delaying of the conversation by "wikitrolls" like Cunc as an obstacle, but we might also view Cunc as introducing some rhetorical noise into the circuits. This noise slows things down, but it also frustrates the push toward certitude. Wikipedia's penchant for noise and subsequent wariness of certitude is what makes it a rhetorical (and not philosophical) project.



see at work on the Web—a structure that is not necessarily utopian or dystopian but that does raise some difficult questions for both rhetoricians and Web denizens.

By allowing more writers to contribute to the text, Wikipedia makes itself a noisy, messy, and contradictory text. Such messiness opens the door for the discipline of rhetoric, a discipline that in my view makes mess its business. Giving us ways to think through arguments, parse disagreements, and make sense of all different kinds of texts, rhetoric provides a way to sift and sort information. As Lanham notes, sifting information is becoming increasingly important on the Web as more rhetors enter the fray. But beyond studying the texts that populate the Web, it is also necessary to study the structures that allow for those texts. Wikipedia is not the only text that is hospitable—we can think of the Web itself as hospitable. By putting up fewer filters than print publication processes, the Web allows more voices into the conversation. And the more voices that are introduced into our digital and analog conversations, the more we need to rethink some of the key terms of rhetorical scholarship, including agency, community, and intellectual property.

This project uses Wikipedia as a case study for examining these key terms. By examining the underlying ethical and rhetorical code of Wikipedia, I hope to offer rhetoricians a way to rethink some disciplinary concepts. However, I also hope that my discussion offers all Web denizens a new way to think about electronic texts that are often derided for dissolving authority, encouraging piracy, and inviting irresponsible behavior. Reworking the key terms I have laid out here means that they become contingent and negotiable. Such contingency can be framed in terms of a loss of traditional values, or it can be framed in terms of new opportunities for meaning-making and argument. I see this latter way of thinking as more useful, and it can be aided by an approach that recognizes the hospitable structure of the Web and of certain electronic texts.

Blogs, wikis, and other forms of electronic communication are forcing us to rethink traditional rhetorical practices. The term “hospitality” might at first seem to frame things utopian terms. Rhetorics of the web (and of technology in general) can tend

toward extremes. Depending on one's perspective, Web users are drowning in information, participating in democratic meaning-making activities, pushing us away from truth and toward relativism, or bringing down "traditional media." The list goes on. One of my goals is to move beyond such extremist, dichotomous rhetorics. With that being said, the use of hospitality as a framework would seem to be an odd place from which to begin. In what way does reframing certain texts as hospitable avoid utopian rhetorics of participation, democracy, and egalitarianism? It appears that I may be stacking the deck. However, in the chapters to come I argue that reframing web texts as hospitable allows us to examine the effects of such texts rather than attempting to evaluate them.

As Greg Ulmer argued a decade ago, "society as a whole, and education in particular, have committed to a new apparatus" (xi). For Ulmer, that new apparatus is electracy, a new mode of rhetorical invention and writing. However, the electrate apparatus is more than the Internet or the machines linked to it; it is "the matrix of a language machine, partly social and partly technological, that operates in a given epoch. An apparatus is not only a technology (e.g. the alphabet, paper, ink etc) but also an institution and its practices developed along with the technology" (Memmott). For Ulmer, a given apparatus "organiz[es] language use in a civilization" (Ulmer xi). He argues that the shift from a literate apparatus to an electrate one requires new theories and pedagogies and that we are still looking for the method of electracy. While Plato laid the ground rules for literacy with dialogues such as the *Phaedrus*, Ulmer encourages digital rhetoricians to seek out the electrate analogue for the *Phaedrus* (Memmott).<sup>4</sup> But where might we seek out such analogues? If, as Alan Liu argues, "the academy can no longer claim supreme jurisdiction over knowledge," then we will most likely have to look outside of our universities for digital rhetorics (21). This is why Wikipedia is an ideal

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<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia does not necessarily fit Ulmer's notion of electracy. Ulmer's electracy attempts to account for the affective and "felt" aspects of writing, something that Wikipedia does not necessarily address. An electrate encyclopedia would most likely have to incorporate art, poetry, and a number of individual experiences that are often filtered out of "literate" writing. Literacy values objectivity and reason. Ulmer's electracy attempts to incorporate for subjective experience and emotion.

space for examining the shifting terrain. Not situated within the academy, it offers a way to see how what Liu calls “knowledge work” is not confined to classrooms.

The “edit this page” link that welcomes a seemingly infinite number of writers radically disseminates a textual invitation, and this nags the reader/writer: Who has written this text? Who owns it? Who is responsible for it? How is it shifting even as I read it? All of these questions pose problems for reader/writers who have been trained to deal with texts in particular ways. Humanities scholars have for many years been grappling with wiggling and writhing texts, texts that resist any kind of final interpretation, and Wikipedia raises these issues constantly as it extends infinite invitations to a seemingly infinite number of writers. As we will see, some of the more hostile responses to the hospitable text stem from a commitment to particular reading and writing practices. Wikipedia and other hospitable texts encourage us to engage with texts in new ways, and these new ways can be foreign and disturbing. By accepting that many electronic texts extend hospitality to a broad range of writers, we might acknowledge that we are both required to respond to such texts and that the responsibility to respond is never finished, never complete. Our responses join a crowded, hospitable Web that is always and everywhere shifting.

### **Hospitable Code**

The central factor to Wikipedia’s proliferation is its structure—anyone with basic know-how and an Internet connection can be a Wikipedian. But we should be careful not to equate textual proliferation with freedom or democracy or any number of other utopian descriptions. Egalitarianism is by no means the guaranteed result of spaces such as Wikipedia (not to mention the “blogosphere” or the “ancient” bulletin board systems). In fact, utopian rhetorics can be as unproductive as bemoaning the dangers of life online. As Lessig argues, the early days of cyberspace “promise[d] a kind of society that real space would never allow—freedom without anarchy, control without government, consensus without power” (*Code 2*). These dreams were never realized, but many still view the Web as a lawless space where anything goes. Lessig argues that the aim should not be an

Internet without rules. Instead, scholars and citizens should pay close attention to the rules, the “constitution,” the *code* that lies beneath:

We can build, or architect, or *code* cyberspace to protect values that we believe are fundamental. Or we can build, or architect, or code cyberspace to allow those values to disappear. There is no middle ground. There is no choice that does not include some kind of building. (*Code 6*)

Lessig’s discussion of the constitution of cyberspace is not a call for a document that will dictate how we live our lives online. Instead, he urges citizens to pay closer attention to the values that various codes encourage or discourage. The values of a community—its assumptions about what counts as knowledge, how discussions should be conducted, or who is “in” or “out”—are intricately tied to the code that lies beneath it. For online communities, that code involves the norms, values, and cultural assumptions (code as in *constitution*), but it also involves the computer code that drives technologies (code as in *ones and zeros*).

Wikipedia’s constitution is one of openness. In theory, a wide range of users can edit and contribute to it. Further, it is published under the GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL).<sup>5</sup> GNU Licenses were originally developed by Richard Stallman and others in the free software movement in order to develop a free version of the UNIX operating system (GNU is a recursive acronym that stands for “GNU’s Not Unix”). These licenses allow users the “freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software” (“Gnu Free”). Such licenses have been expanded to cover other types of intellectual property, and this has meant that texts like Wikipedia can be licensed under free software licenses. In addition, MediaWiki, the software developed specially for Wikipedia, is an open source project licensed under the GNU General Public License (GNUPL). Anyone can access and edit the MediaWiki source code as long as they share their changes with others under the GNUPL. Thus, a license similar to the one that

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<sup>5</sup> In December 2007, the Wikimedia Foundation began steps toward modifying the GFDL licensing and eventually publishing Wikipedia under a Creative Commons license. As of April 2009, that decision is still under review by the Wikipedia community.

allows for the editing of Wikipedia content allows for the editing of the software that lies beneath it. The millions of articles that make up Wikipedia—a text that operates through a constitution of collaboration—sits atop collaborative computer code. Code as constitution begets code as programming code, and vice versa.

This rhetoric of openness makes it easy to fall into the trap of utopianism. On the Web, there are lower barriers to entry than print, television, radio, or film; the rise of blogs, YouTube, podcasting, and digital filmmaking provide evidence of this. However, there are also limits to the freedom of online discursive spaces, and these limits are happening in reaction to the Web’s hospitable structure. Debates continue about the existence of a digital divide, despite the efforts of some to declare it solved.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the exclusion of technological “have-nots,” those already online are not free from constraints. I have already mentioned the RIAA’s litigious history, and increased surveillance has caused many to wonder about the possibility of privacy on the Web. These are broad issues and they are only tangentially related to our discussion here, but the important point is one that Lessig repeats often: the Web is not necessarily a free, democratic, or utopian space. It was conceived with an open architecture in mind, but the Web continues to close down in certain ways. In many ways, the hospitable structure envisioned by WWW inventor Tim Berners-Lee has survived to present day, but Lessig reminds us that there is no guarantee that such a structure will remain in place:

There is no single way that the Net has to be; no single architecture that defines the nature of the Net. The possible architectures of something that we would call ‘the Net’ are many, and the character of life within those different architectures is diverse. (*Code 32*).

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Digital Divide : Facing a Crisis or Creating a Myth*, Benjamin Compaine anthologizes a number of pieces that claim the digital divide to be a myth . However, others such as Karen Mossberger argue that Compaine and others ignore the difference between the closing “access” gap (access to computers) and the widening “skills” gap,

Lessig argues that the Web has no essence and that it is not inherently free or open. Its openness is the result of a set of design decisions that create a messy situation of textual noise.

As Lessig notes, a hospitable or “dumb” structure is not “essential” to the Web. When critics of Wikipedia argue that it should require users to provide their “real names” (an argument I deal with in detail in chapter three), we can see an urge to bring the hospitable Web under control. But what are the far-reaching ramifications of such debates and the decisions that grow out of them? How would Wikipedia change if “anons” (Wikipedians’ name for users who edit the text without creating a user name) were no longer able to edit the text? A lockdown that prevents anons from editing may make for a better encyclopedia, but such a change to Wikipedia’s constitution should only happen after closely examining that constitution. Requiring users to provide their “real names” might be proposed as a way to hold Wikipedians responsible.

But how does Wikipedia’s constitution currently deal with issues of reliability and responsibility? This is the kind of question that often gets skipped over in discussions about this kind of collaborative, digital space. The assumption behind a number of critiques of Wikipedia is that the text and its community operate without any concern for responsibility. But careful study of Wikipedia reveals that there is in fact a set of rules in place. Wikipedia’s constitution may not be the result of a pre-planned constitution. That is, many of its rules have evolved over time as a result of its open structure and bottom-up model. Dismissing the bottom-up creation of Wikipedia’s constitution runs the risk of skipping over a legitimate emerging digital rhetoric. This emerging set of rules makes different assumptions about texts, communities, authors, and intellectual property. These assumptions represent important shifts, and they offer an intervention in both disciplinary and extra-disciplinary conversations in which rhetoricians find themselves.

### **Hospitality and its Problems**

While Lessig’s discussion of the utopian days of the Web points us to the dangers of viewing the Web as inherently open and unregulatable, we should also recognize that

an ideal structure of hospitality (an ideal that is indeed unreachable) still serves an important purpose.<sup>7</sup> This is where the work of Jacques Derrida becomes important to our discussion. My discussion of hospitality should not be understood as an argument that the structure of the Web is inherently “good” or “more ethical,” and this is why Derrida’s work provides the groundwork for my discussion of electronic text. In fact, his interest in hospitality stems from the contradictions that inhere within the concept. In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida explains that the Law of absolute hospitality shows itself in various everyday acts of hospitality. These acts are imperfect gestures of hospitality. Absolute hospitality is an unreachable ideal, and it is only through the various everyday gestures that fall short of this ideal that we can glimpse it. Derrida draws a distinction between an ideal (the Law) and our everyday practices (the laws) of hospitality:

It is as though hospitality were the impossible: as though the law of hospitality defined this very impossibility, as if it were only possible to transgress it, as though *the* law of absolute, unconditional, hyperbolic hospitality, as though the categorical imperative of hospitality commanded that we transgress all the laws (in the plural) of hospitality, namely, the conditions, the norms, the rights and the duties that are imposed on hosts and hostesses, on the men or women who give a welcome as well as the men or women who receive it. And vice versa, it is as though the laws (plural) of hospitality, in marking limits, powers, rights, and duties, consisted in challenging and transgressing *the* law of hospitality, the one that would command that the ‘new arrival’ be offered an unconditional welcome. (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 75-77)

Wikipedia’s structure (much like the structure of the Web) is suggestive of what Derrida calls the Law of hospitality—that is, it is designed to welcome all comers. Thus any

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<sup>7</sup> In many ways, this is Yochai Benkler’s concern in *The Wealth of Networks* when he discusses how academia has made it passé to discuss “the Internet revolution.” Benkler argues that this is in many ways a mistake due to the Web’s creation of “new opportunities for how we make and exchange information, knowledge and culture” (2). While I would agree that we need analysis of the ideals built into electronic structures, my analysis still assumes that reaching such an ideal is impossible. Benkler’s discussion often seems to suggest that such ideals are attainable and are causing radical changes in political and economic structures. Further, I am not entirely comfortable with his claim that the Web is allowing for “autonomous individuals” to act outside of traditional economic and political structures.

attempt to offer hospitality stems from this structure, but such attempts will always fall short of any “categorical imperative” of hospitality. Still, Wikipedia’s code of hospitality remains in place even after the inevitable perversions that happen at level of practice. Such perversions happen on a daily basis, and they are not avoidable.

The hospitality of Wikipedia and of the Web in general—the ease with which so many people can now publish indicates the hospitality built into the Web’s structure—does not guarantee the hospitality of Wikipedians. Chapter four’s discussion of a Wikipedia “cabal” that sometimes expels those who won’t “get with the program” will provide plenty of evidence that Wikipedians are not always hospitable. As open as this text is structurally, in practice it still falls short of absolute hospitality. Thus, the distinction between the openness of Wikipedia at the technological and textual level and the practices of Wikipedians is an important one. Such a distinction draws a line between the Law (structure, code) and the laws (practice). The Law of hospitality makes a constant ethical demand, and the laws (rhetorical, political, and otherwise) are instituted as an attempt to answer this demand. Again, we can only catch glimpses of the impossible law of absolute hospitality in its inevitable perversions. For Derrida, this is evidence that the coupling of an unconditional law of hospitality and the imperfect attempt to enact that law create “a non-dialectizable antimony” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 77). The ethical practices of everyday life fall short of the Law of hospitality, and it is only through these small failures that we can glimpse the ethical imperative of hospitality. It is for this reason that Derrida draws a distinction between “the unconditional law of hospitality” and “the conditional laws of a right to hospitality”:

It is a question of knowing how to transform and improve the law, and of knowing if this improvement is possible within an historical space which takes place *between* the Law of an unconditional hospitality, offered *a priori* to every other, to all newcomers, *whoever they may be*, and *the* conditional laws of a right to hospitality, without which *The* unconditional Law of hospitality would be in danger of remaining a pious and irresponsible desire, without form and without



potency, and of even being perverted at any moment. (*On Cosmopolitanism* 22-23, emphasis in original)

As we learned from the above discussion of Lessig, resting on the notion that Wikipedia is hospitable can than lead us toward the dangers of “pious and irresponsible desire.” This is often what we see at work when defenders of Wikipedia and other Web 2.0 technologies speak of democratizing information and distributed authority. Instead of such celebrations of hospitality, we can recognize that the Law and the laws never settle into a harmony. Such an approach recognizes that absolute hospitality is unreachable and that hospitality raises more questions than it answers.

Faced with the impossibility of the Law of hospitality—the ideal that demands absolute hospitality—we build what Derrida calls a history of hospitality. This history is a continuous series of misfires that fall short of the Law of hospitality. For the purposes of this study, we will align the Web’s code of hospitality with the Law, but it should be noted that even *that* code is a misfire. No set of practices can ever live up to this incessant, impossible law. But while the code itself will fall short of absolute hospitality, my focus in this study is on the history of misfires that sits in the gap between code and practice. Such misfires are not to be avoided. They are utterly unavoidable, and they remind us that we are continually falling short of the Law of hospitality. These imperfect enactments of Wikipedia’s code can be studied in an effort to understand how a history of ethics has been enacted and how far away from the Law that history strays. This project pursues such a line of questioning by addressing questions such as: How do hospitable texts function? What ethical assumptions are built into electronic texts? How do such assumptions get enacted or fail to get enacted? What are the ethical problems with and advantages of radically hospitable texts?

In the interest of avoiding irresponsible desire, this study explores the space between the Law and “the laws.” My primary aim is not to offer a defense of Wikipedia or to offer up Wikipedia as a particularly “kind” text (as we will see, this is often far from the case.) Instead, I aim to dissect the laws enacted by Wikipedians in the face of the Law of hospitality. As Derrida notes, the Law of hospitality demands a welcoming

gesture—a gesture that opens the door to both guests and parasites. In response to this imperative, we enact various laws (plural) in an attempt to distinguish guest from parasite. Derrida admits that this is a difficult task:

How can we distinguish between a guest and a parasite? In principle, the difference is straightforward, but for that you need a law; hospitality, reception, the welcome offered have to be submitted to a basic and limiting jurisdiction. Not all new arrivals are received as guests if they don't have the benefit of the right to hospitality or the right to asylum, etc. Without this right, a new arrival can only be introduced 'in my home,' in the host's 'at home,' as a parasite, a guest who is wrong, illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest. (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 59-61)

To draw lines between guest and parasite, we need laws.<sup>8</sup> We might view any structure that makes it possible for a parasite to enter as flawed, and many have argued as much with regard to Wikipedia. In fact, this is Wikipedia critic Andrew Orłowski's claim as he argues that "Wikipedia is a project whose failure is genetically programmed into its mechanisms"(Orłowski "There's No"). One response to the emergent code of Wikipedia is to shut down the possibility that a parasite might enter. However, such an approach may too quickly abandon the code of hospitality that has grounded Wikipedia since its inception. That hospitable code should neither be abandoned nor celebrated too earnestly. Instead, such code should be constantly re-examined.

Rhetoricians are particularly well equipped to conduct such re-examinations. The space between the Law and the laws is a space for rhetoric—it is the space for the negotiation and debate of "laws." Rhetorical study of such debates can keep us from too quickly dismissing constitutions such as Wikipedia's and can guard against the irresponsible desire of which Derrida warns. In the following chapters, we will look closely at the inevitable perversions of Wikipedia's hospitable code in an effort to

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Parasite*, Michel Serres brings this problem to the fore by noting that the French word *parasite* means three things: a biological parasite, a social parasite, and static. In addition, he notes that *hôte* can be translated as both host and guest in English. Serres puns accordingly, and these linguistic overlaps are very much a part of the problematic of hospitality.

understand what changes when more voices join our textual conversations. These rule changes—these laws—are constantly on the move and are constantly falling short of the Law. Each attempt to enact hospitality is still a move to filter out various others, and this makes such attempts inevitably inhospitable. Even the most inclusive text cannot escape this double bind. This difficulty does not leave us without recourse or plan of action. In fact, the very notion of an ideal hospitality is what keeps us from dismissing difficult questions or resting on any constitution that might be deemed “good enough.”

### **Tolerance: A Measured Form of Hospitality**

One response to the Law of hospitality comes in the form of tolerance, and it is an example of the “good enough” logic that concerns Derrida. In *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, Giovvanna Borradori explores (among other things) the difference between hospitality and tolerance. Borradori interviews Derrida and Jürgen Habermas about philosophy’s role after 9/11, and anyone familiar with the methods and assumptions of Derrida and Habermas might expect drastically different answers to such questions. In fact, Borradori counts herself among the majority of academics who were trained to think of Habermas and Derrida as diametrically opposed—Habermas a defender of the Enlightenment and Derrida a critic. However, Borradori argues that their differences are not as stark as some might expect:

In the face of these devastating perils [acts of terrorism], both Habermas and Derrida call for a planetary response involving the transition from classical international law, still anchored in the nineteenth-century model of the nation-state, to a new cosmopolitan order in which multilateral institutions and continental alliances would become the chief political actors. (xiv)

For Borradori, both Habermas and Derrida are Enlightenment thinkers, even if they take different approaches to certain Enlightenment concepts. And yet, even though Habermas and Derrida are both in search of a new cosmopolitan order, they are divided on how such an order might be structured. There are a number of important distinctions between the thought of Derrida and Habermas, but my focus here will be on their different

understandings of the concept of tolerance. In their discussions of tolerance, we can see two different approaches to a globalized and networked planetary culture. Whereas Habermas defends the Enlightenment notion of tolerance, Derrida argues that tolerance is too measured, too careful, and ultimately too intertwined with Christian morality to be considered the universal groundwork for a cosmopolitan order. Such qualifications make Derrida question an ethics of tolerance. He is concerned that tolerance might allow for an ethics that sees itself as “good enough” rather than striving for constant reexamination. In place of a framework of tolerance, Derrida argues that an understanding of hospitality offers a different ethical approach, one that is both more risky and less paternalistic.

For Derrida, tolerance says little more than “I am letting you be, you are not insufferable” (127). This gesture can too easily turn paternalistic, a turn that can make tolerance and intolerance two sides of the same coin. By claiming that “I” am letting “you” alone, I can very easily disregard you and all of your various arguments and positions. Such a move may very well keep the peace, but it also quickly lends itself to a hierarchical order—one that allows those in power to merely tolerate those who are not. Derrida argues that any choice to tolerate happens in the face of the Law of hospitality. Faced with the Law, we enact various laws that set certain filters regarding who can and cannot participate. This is not, in and of itself, wrong. However, to see tolerance as a ground from which to begin (a ground that serves as stable, steady, and unquestioned), is to rest on a cautious response to the Law of hospitality. Yet, Habermas offers an answer to Derrida’s critique of tolerance’s paternalism by arguing that in a participatory democracy, citizens grant mutual respect to one another. For Habermas, this puts everyone on equal ground: “Within a democratic community whose citizens reciprocally grant one another equal rights, no room is left for an authority allowed to one-sidedly determine the boundaries of what is to be tolerated” (41). For Habermas, the avoidance of any “one-sidedness” in a participatory democracy makes the concept of tolerance useful. He adds that mutual tolerance requires some standard by which different groups with different truths and different values can communicate, and for Habermas this standard can be found in a constitution:

Certainly, to tolerate other people's beliefs without accepting their truth, and to tolerate other ways of life without appreciating their intrinsic value as we do with regard to our own, requires a common standard. In the case of a democratic community, this common value base is found in the principles of the constitution.

(41)

Habermas is interested in building a foundation for the public sphere, and that foundation is rooted in tolerance as a way of moving closer to productive communication. We tolerate views that are different than our own, but we still need a common standard from which to begin the discussion. For Habermas, constitutions and common standards provide a foundation on which we can navigate situations of conflicting values.

But as Derrida and others note, concepts like tolerance are often framed in a way that benefits the one party, typically those with more power.<sup>9</sup> Rather than looking toward tolerance for a common ground of human communication, we can instead begin by examining the Law of hospitality and the laws that spring from it. Tolerance is among these laws, and it is not wrong or evil. But a constitution that sees tolerance as “good enough” may very well cause us to forget that tolerance is a filtering mechanism. If tolerance is invoked as a universal good, as a stance that is our ethical starting point, we run the risk of forgetting that tolerance is always a response to the Law of absolute hospitality. The filter of tolerance follows the collisions made possible by a constitution of hospitality. There is no question that building and writing laws is necessary work, but without a study of the Law we run the risk of either “irresponsible desire” (utopia) or the “good enough” (stagnation) logic described above.

Without examining the code that sits beneath the constitutions we architect (the constitution of our constitutions), we run the risk of not glimpsing the horizons of what is

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<sup>9</sup> This is similar to a point Slavoj Žižek makes in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. Eager to point out the problems with liberal, pluralistic ideologies, Žižek argues that those excluded from the political process are not only the “enemy” (e.g., “the terrorists”) but also the Rwandan, Bosnian, or Afghan “who [is] on the receiving end of the humanitarian help...the one who is deprived of his or her full humanity being taken care of in a very patronizing way” (91). The argument here is not that humanitarian aid is wrong but that it relies on a paternalistic impulse. That impulse is, in many ways, enabled by the mode of tolerance.

possible. This constitution of constitutions both limits and enables the kinds of ethical codes we build. The limiting and enabling dimensions of hospitality are rooted in risk, and in the case of Wikipedia that risk is made possible by a hospitable text that radically disseminates its invitation to a broad spectrum of writers. As Derrida argues in *Of Hospitality*, absolute hospitality asks no questions and makes no demands:

absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 25)

As we will see, Wikipedia is often criticized for not asking for names. While I will be questioning the possibility of anonymity in any online space (including Wikipedia), it is still worth noting that Wikipedia's policy with regard to anonymity is a major target for critics. This portion of Wikipedia's code gestures toward the Law of hospitality that Derrida describes, and it is the portion that draws (arguably) the greatest fire from critics. Yet, even Wikipedia falls short of absolute hospitality. In fact, if absolute hospitality seems unrealistic and impossible, this is because it is. If one considers this discussion of absolute hospitality in terms of something that one practices, it is impossible. Welcoming the absolute other without pact, opening the door without asking "Who's there?" is a tall order. In fact, we might argue that this never actually happens. However, at the level of code and constitution, Wikipedia makes an attempt to demand this kind of ethic—to welcome any and all others. The actions of Wikipedians may fall short of this demand, but the demand remains nonetheless.

### **Structures of Tolerance and Hospitality**

The hospitable text's tendency to become a discourse magnet makes it a bit of a curiosity for us since we are used to particular methods of filtering and consuming texts. Further, its tendency to allow more voices into the conversation regardless of any choice

on the part of the reader or writer means that a structure of tolerance is no longer the only answer to the demand of hospitality. The assumption of tolerance is that some filtering mechanism (for instance, an editor) chooses who or what can enter. The hospitable text makes things noisier and messier by allowing infinite writers to contribute. It is up to disciplines such as rhetoric to examine this situation (or, predicament) of hospitality and attempt to understand new the practices that emerge as a response to this predicament.

Wikipedia's structure offers hospitality to both readers and writers, but such an offer is not always welcomed. In fact, these invitations cause many to turn away. That is, critics of Wikipedia often turn away when faced with the "edit this page" link, a link that serves as a reminder that millions are offered entrance to the text. Rather than enter the text, critics often flee, and this flight happens in reaction to a hospitable text that is composed via a radically distributed process. There is no way of knowing for certain who has been in the text before me or who will visit after. Thus, given the choice to enter the text or create a brand new one (in the form of published critiques or, sometimes, in the form of rivaling encyclopedia projects), these critics often choose the latter.

Wikipedians will often insist that critics fix the errors that they find: "If something is wrong, fix it." The assumption here is that all should react to the hospitable text in the same way—by editing and fixing the text, by joining the noise. This is not exactly the same argument I am offering. I am not necessarily encouraging critics to enter the text and fix it, and I am not arguing that the response to turn away is wrong. Instead, I believe the recoil of these wiki-critics indicates a discomfort that is entirely understandable given how certain terms are redefined in a Web of hospitable texts. Community is redefined as something other than conscious collaboration between knowing participants. Instead, readers and writers of the hospitable text find themselves collaborating with an unknown group of others who may or may not share their goals and values. Intellectual property is redefined in a space that reminds us that tracing any text's origins is difficult, if not impossible. In a space where textual origins are called into question, how does one know who "the author" is? And this lack of an origin also means that responsibility is redefined. Such changes disrupt certain assumptions, and these disruptions can cause

critics of Wikipedia to be disturbed by a text that serves as a constant reminder of the instability of texts, authors, and communities.

The impulse to turn away from the hospitable text is rooted in a logic of tolerance. This terminology might seem a bit confusing. How is the decision to reject Wikipedia a tolerant one? It would seem that the critiques of Wikipedia that we will read later in this chapter and throughout this study are anything but tolerant. When Robert McHenry likens Wikipedia to a dirty public restroom, it seems odd to refer to such statements as tolerant. However, my discussion of tolerance, like my discussion of hospitality, is about structure rather than content. That is, critics turn away from the invitation of the hospitable text, remove themselves from it, place themselves outside of (or, sometimes more appropriately, *above*) the text, and attempt to critique from without. Such a response owes much to the apparatus of print, an apparatus that encourages authors to answer texts with a brand new text. One rival project of Wikipedia takes such an approach. Wikipedia co-founder Larry Sanger launched Citizendium in March 2007, an open content encyclopedia project that attempts to be a more authoritative source than Wikipedia. This encyclopedia project is taken up in detail in chapter three, but I would like to mention one choice by the Citizendium community in order to demonstrate the logic of tolerance that I am tracing out. At first, Citizendium was to be a fork of Wikipedia. Forking (a term taken from the open source computer programming community) takes an existing project in a new direction. Forking mirrors the “go, go, go!” ethic mentioned above—those with different ideas are encouraged rework the project. However, instead of forking, Citizendium chose to begin anew. That is, the Citizendium community avoids using Wikipedia content. In fact, Citizendium recommends to writers that they start their articles “from scratch” rather than edit existing content on Wikipedia.

Such attempts to start from scratch are linked to particular notions of authorship and intellectual property that the hospitable text calls into question, and chapter three examines how Wikipedia and Citizendium differ on this issue. For the time being, the point I would like to make is that the attempt to start anew is linked to a structure of



tolerance in which one text says to another: “I am letting you be.” The structure of tolerance, as I have noted above, lays the groundwork for one party to be placed above another. This is what we see play out between Wikipedia and Citizendium as Citizendium bills itself as “Wikipedia for grown-ups” (“Cz: The Author Role”). Here is where we can note the trappings of tolerance. Citizendium is not seeking to replace or destroy Wikipedia, but it does claim to be a more “grown up” community. It is as if Citizendium is speaking to Wikipedia: “I, Citizendium, will tolerate you, Wikipedia, even though you are a petulant child. I will not look to destroy you. I will instead start a new, more grown up project.” While the Citizendium community has some harsh words—some *intolerant* words—for Wikipedia, the structure of the text itself says “I am letting you be, you are not insufferable.” The Citizendium project is not an attempt to obliterate Wikipedia, and it is not even an attempt to improve upon Wikipedia. Instead, it chooses to “start from scratch.” This “new start” means that Citizendium can tolerantly let Wikipedia be, but it also means that Citizendium can claim the paternalistic high ground.

This shift from structures of tolerance to structures of hospitality is not necessarily a radical break with regard to notions of authorship, intellectual property, and community. While Wikipedia does rework some of these concepts, it is not creating this problem anew. This is what Avital Ronell reminds us of in *The Telephone Book*—that our technologies, while prompting new inflections of being, do not create new structures of being. They expose the problems, questions, and structures that have always been there:

What does it mean to answer the telephone, to make oneself answerable to it in a situation whose gestural syntax already means yes, even if the affirmation should find itself followed by a question mark: Yes? No matter how you cut it, on either side of the line, there is no such thing as a free call. Hence the interrogative inflection of a yes that finds itself accepting charges. (5)

As Ronell explains, the moment I pick up the phone, I am already saying “Yes.” I am already opening to others who have not yet introduced themselves. This is yet another scene of technological hospitality. What does it mean that we are always on call? What

does it mean when we take calls without deciding to? Ronell puts these questions to us to show that the telephone did not create a situation in which we are constantly answering calls from the other. Rather, she argues that these are questions that have always existed. The telephone is a technological response to a pre-existing condition. In ways similar to the telephone, Wikipedia reminds us that texts continually call out to us, and it does so in a particularly radical way. Wikipedia, by calling to both readers and *writers*, makes for a much noisier textual conversation. Wikipedia and other electronic texts do not create a crisis in literacy or intellectual property; they merely respond to these issues in a new way. All texts, including Wikipedia, put up filters. However, Web texts put up different kinds of filters. They melt into one another, copy one another, and spread virally.

When confronted with the structural welcome of the hospitable text, many critics (led by the logic of tolerance) turn away from the text and create a new one. This approach has created a cottage industry of Web 2.0 naysayers. However, such a response always comes in the face of a hospitable structure. The logic of tolerance encourages new texts, and those texts will be linked together and put into conversation with one another. It is not as if the tolerant text is a discrete unity, sealed off from others. However, one need only read the “Criticism of Wikipedia” page to see how Wikipedia’s hospitality creates for a unique situation—critics find their texts drawn into Wikipedia’s textual magnet (albeit through the backdoor.) Given the distinction between structures of tolerance and hospitality that I have begun to trace out here, we can recognize that these critics are responding in a tolerant mode. And in a Web of hospitable texts, attempts at tolerant texts are thwarted. In such spaces, the invitation to write is radically disseminated by the “edit this page” link even to those who make it very clear that they do not want to join the conversation. An understanding of hospitable structures recognizes that all writers are already caught up in a Web of hospitality. New texts will always be necessary, and the publication of various critiques of Wikipedia is an entirely necessary and valid practice. This is why I will insist that responses via structures of tolerance—responses that attempt to institute a brand new text—are not “wrong.” However, I will insist that the hospitable Web frustrates any attempt to remain “outside

of” the text. The best way to understand such frustration is to take a closer look at how Wikipedia’s hospitable code deals with critique.

### **Wiki-critics and the Discourse Magnet**

The messiness of Wikipedia has opened it up to a number of critiques. As Wikipedia has grown, Sanger and others have continually critiqued it for being inaccurate, poorly-written, and irresponsible. Tom Panelas, director of corporate communications at Britannica, argues that Wikipedia is rife with inaccuracies and bad writing. He suggests that “they need a good editor” (Giles). Andrew Orłowski compares Wikipedia to another project—an online futures exchange that attempts to predict terrorist attacks. Users of what Orłowski calls a “terror casino” can invest in futures to predict catastrophic events. The project was an attempt to rely on “collective intelligence” to predict (and possibly prevent) such events. Orłowski argues that both Wikipedia and this futures exchange are flawed in similar ways: “What do these seemingly disparate projects have in common? The idea that you can vote for the truth” (Orłowski "Nature Mag"). In a blog post entitled “The Amoralism of Web 2.0,” Nicholas Carr argues that Wikipedia is an example of “quasi-religious longing” on the Web that has little respect for expertise or truth: “The promoters of Web 2.0 venerate the amateur and distrust the professional. We see it in their unalloyed praise of Wikipedia, and we see it in their worship of open-source software and myriad other examples of democratic creativity” (Carr "The Amoralism"). For Carr, the religiosity of Web rhetorics (and defenders of Wikipedia) makes for a lack of objectivity. The underlying assumptions of all of these critiques seem to revolve around inaccuracy and a lack of objectivity.

Carr’s discussion of religiosity (one that I revisit in chapter four) brings us to the critique of Wikipedia that hits closest to home for scholars and teachers of rhetoric and writing. Robert McHenry, former editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, calls Wikipedia “the faith-based encyclopedia” (McHenry). For McHenry, those lauding Wikipedia put too much faith in a collaborative process that “is forever open to the uninformed or semiliterate meddler.” McHenry takes issue with the faith that “some

unspecified quasi-Darwinian process will assure that those writings and editings by contributors of greatest expertise will survive.” Such critiques raise a fair question: Will the mess and noise of Wikipedia actually result in an accurate, useful encyclopedia? This question is an open one, but regardless of the end product Wikipedia’s structure can still serve as an example of how some key terms in rhetorical theory are being reworked online and offline. Such a structure allows more voices into the conversation, and this means that it should be of great interest to rhetoricians. Wikipedia’s welcoming gesture is offered to a broad range of writers, and that is exactly what most offends its critics. This brings us to McHenry’s link between Wikipedia and contemporary composition pedagogy:

The combination of prolificacy and inattention to accuracy that characterizes this process is highly suggestive of the modern pedagogic technique known as ‘journaling.’ For decades, (following, we are probably meant to assume, some breakthrough research at a school of education somewhere) young students have been not merely encouraged but required to fill pages of their notebooks with writing. Not stories, nor essays, nor any other defined genre of writing; just writing. The writing is judged solely on bulk: So many pages are required per week or semester, but the writing on those pages need not be grammatical or even intelligible. Even the ‘talented and gifted’ program at my own sons’ school employed journaling as a principal activity, merely raising the quota over that of standard classrooms. It may well be that the practice of journaling in the schools, along with the acceptance of ‘creative spelling’ as a form of personal expression not to be repressed, underlies much of the success of Wikipedia. (McHenry)

McHenry goes on to critique the accuracy and prose style of the Wikipedia entry for Alexander Hamilton, and he ends his evaluation with a stroke of the red pen: “All these arguments aside, the article is what might be expected of a high school student, and at that it would be a C paper at best” (McHenry).

McHenry offers no specific reference when discussing the “modern pedagogic technique known as ‘journaling,’” but we could associate his critique with texts such as

Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*. While many scholars have questions about techniques of free writing, journaling, or expressivist rhetorics, there is something larger at stake here. In his critique of Wikipedia, McHenry specifically points to the teaching of writing. He traces the massive amounts of text on Wikipedia to writing pedagogies that in his view focus on volume rather than quality. One might say he has *blamed* teachers of rhetoric and writing for Wikipedia's collection of C papers. From the quote above, we can gather that McHenry is looking for writing that is refined and focused, something less sprawling, something clean and finite. He presents the half-formed texts produced by Wikipedians as evidence of failed pedagogy. We can also gather that McHenry understands texts as stable and as easily traceable to an origin (that is, to an author.) For McHenry, the encyclopedist, a published work is stable and is the result of a controlled process of filtering and vetting.

Wikipedia offers a model that clashes with McHenry's idea of what an encyclopedia should be. Wikipedia's hospitality presents problems for McHenry. In fact, Wikipedia is so inclusive, that even its greatest detractors enter the conversation regardless of their intention to do so. McHenry's critique is an example of this. When examining the Alexander Hamilton article as part of his critique, McHenry points out the confusion surrounding Hamilton's birth date. As McHenry notes, this date is debated by historians, and at the time he published his critique the Wikipedia entry reflected this confusion without specifically commenting on it. At points the article uses 1755 and at other points it uses 1757: "there is some uncertainty as to the year, whether it be 1755 or 1757. Hamilton himself used, and most contemporary biographers prefer, the latter year; a reference work ought at least to note the issue" (McHenry). Two things are worth noting here: 1) this part of the article has since been edited, in large part due to McHenry's critique; 2) McHenry seemingly made no attempt to correct the problem himself (if he did, he makes no mention of it in his article). Though McHenry did not edit the entry, his critique did not go unnoticed. His article is mentioned no fewer than 15 times on the "discussion" page for the Hamilton article (a place where Wikipedians debate what should or should not be included in an article), and his critique has been

taken up by those editing the entry ("Talk:Alexander"). Wikipedia's structure offered McHenry the opportunity to participate in the virtual-textual community, and he declined. Instead, he penned an essay for *TCS Daily*. At first glance, we might say that McHenry succeeded in remaining outside of the text. However, his critique did result in edits to the Alexander Hamilton page, and a number of pages within Wikipedia now link to his editorial. His attempt to remain outside of Wikipedia was ultimately frustrated by a code of hospitality.

McHenry's critique of Wikipedia is a critique of writing that emerges in a rough state—writing that is published prior to anyone determining whether it makes sense. McHenry is also asking that writing be situated within a “defined genre of writing” and that it be “intelligible.” His ideal writer carefully crafts and transmits a message. All of these assumptions about writing and the rhetorical situation are challenged by Wikipedia's structure. In fact, we might say that Wikipedia does not so much challenge these assumptions as it exposes them as somewhat fictional. That is, Wikipedia's structure does not create a new writing situation. It merely reminds us that all writing situations are shot through with complexity. In McHenry's ideal writing scenario, communication is fairly straightforward—the author conveys information to an audience in a way that more or less works in the way the author intended. Yet, the very fact that McHenry's article resulted in changes to the Alexander Hamilton article displays how writing can exceed intention. Was McHenry's primary goal to create a more accurate Wikipedia article? We cannot be sure. Yet, regardless of his intention, McHenry's piece was welcomed by Wikipedia and resulted in an improved article.

Faced with McHenry's dismissive position that Wikipedia is inaccurate, poorly-written, and a reflection of debased composition pedagogy, Wikipedia's code does not react with exclusion. Rather, due to its hospitable code, McHenry is brought into the text. McHenry's parasitic text is added to the cacophony that he has just critiqued, and he is not the only critic that suffers such a fate. All of the critiques mentioned in this chapter are drawn in by Wikipedia's textual magnet. Some are referenced in the Wikipedia article entitled “Wikipedia,” and others are included on a page called “Criticism of

Wikipedia.” Like it or not, critics of Wikipedia are pulled into the text. Ironically, they become part of the problem that they are attempting to critique. Additionally, McHenry’s inclusion in Wikipedia is not limited to his “contribution” to the Hamilton article. The day after McHenry’s piece appeared in *TCS Daily*, the “Robert McHenry” Wikipedia article was created. Currently, the article is 1200 words long and contains 25 footnotes. But the welcoming gesture that brought McHenry into the text should not be read as an inherently friendly one. In chapter two, we will see how a number of public figures have dealt with their Wikipedia articles and how Wikipedia has developed a special “Biographies of Living Person’s” policy. Many have not taken kindly to being pulled into the textual magnet that is Wikipedia, but this is yet another example of the hospitality of Wikipedia’s structure. These hostage situations are evidence that Wikipedia’s hospitality is not always seen as a good thing.

Once again, it is important here to distinguish between how Wikipedia operates as a text and how individual Wikipedians approach dissenting voices. While the text of Wikipedia acts as a discourse magnet that pulls in texts from various angles, Wikipedians themselves can often be as dismissive as McHenry. One vocal opponent of Wikipedia, Daniel Brandt, notes that Wikipedians have referred to him as “totally batshit insane,” a “dickhead,” and a “paranoid fruitcake” (Brandt). According to Sanger, a number of subject matter experts who did not “suffer fools gladly” have found themselves in frustrating edit wars (Wikipedians’ term for a furious back-and-forth editing battle amongst writers) with those who questioned their claims of expertise (“The Early” 324). There is a great deal of debate amongst Wikipedians about the role of experts in the writing of articles, and Sanger argues that the Wikipedia community suffers from an “anti-elitism” and that “disrespect of expertise is tolerated” (“Why Wikipedia”). Wikipedia is not a utopian community in which everyone gets a say and all are treated with respect. Still, it is important to note that issues such as “anti-elitism” are openly debated on Wikipedia—on its discussion pages about articles, its pages that document policies, and in various other publicly available discussions. This penchant for debate

means that Wikipedia pulls in detractors. However, as I mention above, it can also mean that people are pulled into the text against their will.

Beyond his concern that the writing is poor, that the articles are inaccurate, and that this text relies on the “faith” that articles will eventually evolve to a useful state, McHenry’s true complaint is that he doesn’t know who authors Wikipedia entries. The “edit this page” link that invites him in (an invitation that he attempts to resist but that pulls him in nonetheless) serves as a reminder that anyone can be a Wikipedian. We see his concern about authorship at the end of his editorial when he likens Wikipedia to a public restroom:

The user who visits Wikipedia to learn about some subject, to confirm some matter of fact, is rather in the position of a visitor to a public restroom. It may be obviously dirty, so that he knows to exercise great care, or it may seem fairly clean, so that he may be lulled into a false sense of security. What he certainly does not know is who has used the facilities before him.

As former editor-in-chief of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, McHenry knows “better than most what is involved in assessing an encyclopedia.” He even recognizes that editing an encyclopedia is an inexact science: “it can’t be done in any thoroughgoing way. The job is just too big.” Despite these concessions, McHenry is still not convinced that an opening of the process—an opening that welcomes a wide range of writers with a structure of hospitality—is the best way to approach such a task. His discomfort with the process is linked to not knowing “who has used the facilities before him.” McHenry’s concerns are linked to the hospitable text’s welcoming of a steady stream of writers. Who has written? Who will write? These are difficult questions, and there is reason to be suspicious of such a space. But there is also the possibility that hospitable texts offer a new way of understanding how a text with fewer filters operates.

Too often, the first half of the portmanteau “Wikipedia” is forgotten. We should question whether Wikipedia fits neatly in the category of “encyclopedia” or whether, at least in some ways, it is something entirely new. Wikipedia participates in a genre called “encyclopedia,” but it sits uneasily at the edge of this genre. Certain approaches to



Wikipedia are likely to find Wikipedia lacking and not measuring up to “Truth.” For instance, McHenry asserts that Wikipedia “approach[es] truth asymptotically.” Here, I would not disagree, but I am not certain that there is any other way to approach truth. In fact I see this approach to truth as a reason to focus on the rhetorical assumptions underlying the hospitable text. McHenry is not alone in defining truth this way. Sanger’s discomfort with Wikipedia’s “Neutral Point of View” (NPOV) policy reveals a position similar to McHenry’s. The NPOV policy asks that Wikipedia writers make every attempt to avoid bias, but the very name of the policy bothers Sanger: “I confess I don’t much like this name for the policy because it implies that to write neutrally, or without bias, is actually to express a point of view, and, as the definite article is used, a *single* point of view at that” (“The Early” 321). Sanger argues here that a “neutral” piece of writing does not express a point of view. As with McHenry, his discomfort is with contingency and debate. Yet, for the rhetorician, such contingency becomes an opportunity for analysis rather than a weakness of the text. I have my own reservations about the NPOV policy, but they stem from a different concern. For me (and many others in our discipline), the notion that anyone can write from a position of neutrality is a fiction. This is why rhetoric offers us a useful lens through which to view the workings of hospitable texts. Rather than attempting to write from a place of neutrality, I see Wikipedians as entering into unending debates and discussions about everything from baseball to Palestine to Immanuel Kant.

### **Telling the Stories of Wikipedia’s Code**

By telling the stories of various Wikipedia controversies, each of the following chapters examines a portion of Wikipedia’s constitution. In chapter two, I discuss Wikipedia’s Biography of Living Person’s (BLP) policy. This policy takes steps to treat the articles of living persons carefully. For legal and ethical reasons, Wikipedia’s rules attempt to prevent libelous information from making its way into articles about living people. At least in part, this policy stems from complaints waged by the subjects of articles that Wikipedia’s information is untrue, inflammatory, or libelous. By examining

this portion of Wikipedia's code, I open up questions about agency—a topic of much debate in contemporary rhetorical thought. When the subject of a Wikipedia article attempts to have that article removed (or, at the very least, edited to their satisfaction), that subject is assuming a certain level of control over what is written about them. This control has always been difficult—we have never been in charge of our own “stories.” However, new media infrastructures that allow more writers to publish more texts have brought this longstanding problem into focus. How can hospitable texts change the way we think about the control anyone has over their persona? Who writes me into existence? Do I have the ability to control that writing? Wikipedia reminds us that the writer is simultaneously active (writing) and passive (written). This fact becomes disturbingly clear when the subject of a BLP attempts to enter a conversation about her-self. By examining some of the stories of BLP subjects who attempt to intervene in the writing of their “self,” chapter two explores how the complexities of agency are brought to light in textual spaces like Wikipedia.

In chapter three, we will see how Wikipedia upsets some traditional notions of intellectual property that rely on the linking of a text with an author-origin. Rather than allowing Wikipedians to rest on an *ethos* of expertise, this community's constitution calls for an *ethos* of citation. By forcing writers to cite sources and refrain from any kind of assertion of expertise, Wikipedia's constitution attempts to keep the textual conversation moving. My discussion of intellectual property focuses on the story of Essjay, a Wikipedian who claimed to be something he was not, and on Citizendium, an open-content encyclopedia project that attempts to give experts an editorial role. By tracing out how Wikipedia deals with textual origins, I explain how the hospitable text reworks certain ideas of intellectual property. Further, by grounding my discussion of intellectual property in the distinction between situated and constructed *ethos*, I show how rhetorical theory can have a great deal to say about such debates. As more writers join electronic texts, it becomes even more necessary for rhetoricians to enter discussions about authorship, ownership, and textual origins. We have a number of tools (many dating

back to ancient rhetorical theory) that can refocus debates about intellectual property, debates that often get mired in accusations of “piracy” or “theft.”

Chapter four explores how Wikipedia forces us to reconsider our definitions of community. Whereas rhetoric has long been viewed as a way of building communities, the discipline has not always been considered that community happens above and beyond the conscious choice to “get together” or collaborate. Thanks to the work of hacker Virgil Griffith, Wikipedia’s “community” has come more clearly into focus. Griffith’s Wikiscanner tool allows users to track particular edits to particular IP addresses and locations. Various political candidates, corporations, and government entities are part of the political community, and this makes for strange collaborations. As these various entities collide in the textual space of Wikipedia, they will have colluded. These colliding collusions force us to rethink community as something beyond conscious collaboration. The discipline’s discussions of community are typically focused on communion—a coming together that relies upon a common purpose. But Wikipedia’s messy community shows us that conversations focused on communion skip past the importance of community. Wikipedia’s various visitors, parasites, and hit-and-run writers expose community to us in all of its mess and complexity, and this offers us a way to rethink our disciplinary assumptions about collaboration.

The hospitable structure of Wikipedia allows a broad range of writers to visit the text, setting the stage for the conversations that happen amongst Wikipedians in articles and discussion pages. This structure gives place to writers and invites them inside. The code of Wikipedia forces us to confront a different kind of relation between readers and texts. It poses problems for readers and writers who are accustomed to texts that are seemingly more stable. However, for decades literary and rhetorical critics have been reminding us that no text is stable, that no author is the origin of a text, and that no community can fully purge its various parasites. Instead, texts are weavings of texts, agents, writers, and collaborators. They are constantly on the move—they cite one another and they draw upon a commons of cultural material. Still, texts like Wikipedia do expose this textual instability in a striking way. Any time we read a Wikipedia article,

it is possible that we are already consulting a dated source. The “edit this page” link at the top of each article reminds us that someone else may very well be updating the page that we are reading. The article that we are hoping to rely upon for information might be moving *right now*. This constant motion drives many to call for an overhaul of Wikipedia’s constitution. This response is entirely understandable and possibly even justified. However, my wager is that Wikipedia offers us something more than a digital whipping boy. Instead of determining how Wikipedia’s constitution can be revised to fit our current understandings of writing and textuality, we might look closely at its emerging (and emergent) constitution as a way of rethinking some concepts that have long grounded rhetorical scholarship. Rather than viewing Wikipedia’s code as a threat to current modes of thinking, we can view it as a signal that notions of writing, intellectual property, agency, and community are changing faster than we might care to admit.

## Chapter II

### Ghostly Writing and Biographies of Living Persons

Sportswriter Jay Mariotti is known for verbally lambasting athletes and coaches. He has had well-publicized feuds with Chicago White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen and White Sox announcer Ken “Hawk” Harrelson. Mariotti is also featured on ESPN’s *Around the Horn*, a television show that gives journalists turned celebrities a platform to loudly debate the day’s sports topics. This attacking style has long been Mariotti’s specialty, and one colleague traces it back to his days as a writer in Denver: “He hadn’t been in Denver for six months...and he was calling [Denver Broncos Hall-of-Fame quarterback] John Elway a greedy punk...That’s how he works. He attacks” (Morrissey qtd. in Johnson). One might assume that Mariotti has thick skin, but when his aggressive style has drawn criticism he has not always taken it well. After being criticized by a Denver talk show host, Mariotti sent a “venomous” letter, something he later regretted (Johnson). And as Mariotti’s celebrity has increased, he has drawn more criticism. In fact, the rise of sports blogs has meant that such criticism is coming from a number of new angles. One fairly popular sports blog goes by the name *Fire Jay Mariotti*, and a website called *Jay the Joke* describes its mission this way: “Jay the Joke is dedicated to unifying true fans of all Chicago sports through their shared contempt of the daily offerings from Jay Mariotti” (“Jay the Joke”). Mariotti has made his share of enemies, digital and otherwise.<sup>10</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Wikipedia article for Mariotti has drawn the attention of such enemies. This most likely did not surprise Mariotti, who has even been known to encourage his critics: “Take your shots at me...all you’re doing is making me more

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<sup>10</sup> In August 2008, Mariotti resigned as a columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Mariotti joined AOL as a national writer after seeing the role that websites and blogs played in the covering of the Beijing Olympics. He told the Chicago Tribune that the future of journalism “sadly is not in newspapers” (Kirk).

famous” (Johnson). But much like when Larry Sanger initiated the Wikipedia project by encouraging others to humor him, post an article, and “ignore all rules,” Mariotti eventually realized that his gesture of “bring it on” welcomed a seemingly infinite number of people to begin publishing critiques of him and his work. These detractors play a role in making him “more famous,” but fame is not easily controlled. This is where Wikipedia’s structure of hospitality becomes central to the stories of Mariotti and others who have run up against the Biographies of Living Persons (BLP) policy. As Wikipedia’s code of hospitality invites more digital writers to contribute to articles, it becomes clear how “up for grabs” anyone’s persona really is.

The October 2, 2006 version of Wikipedia’s “Jay Mariotti” article can be traced almost directly to his brash, bring-it-on style. The article began with a section called “style of writing” that focused on his “gloomy” discussion of 2005 White Sox (a team that went on to win the World Series). A cursory read reveals that contributors to the Mariotti article were mostly concerned with his penchant for criticizing Chicago teams even when those teams were experiencing success. Mariotti’s approach does not typically play well with rabid Chicago sports fans, and the Wikipedia article reflects this aversion to Mariotti’s brash writings. The section on Mariotti’s style was followed by discussions of some of Mariotti’s feuds with other journalists (Tony Kornheiser and Woody Paige), and nearly all of this information is provided without any links to source information. The article also linked to the aforementioned *Jay the Joke*. The content of the article and its questionable references meant that it did not meet Wikipedia’s Neutral Point of View (NPOV) standard, and this caused Mariotti to request that something be done. Following Wikipedia policy, Mariotti (or someone writing on his behalf) submitted a request that the article be changed. While we don’t know the exact nature of his request, we can probably surmise that he asked that unsourced information and links to sites like *Jay the Joke* be removed.

Mariotti’s request spotlights the strategic negotiations inherent in the inscription of a persona, any persona. Whether they are attempting to manage what appears on a Facebook page (Facebook friends are increasingly inscribing each other in unpredictable

ways) or trying to control what pops up in a vanity Google search, Web denizens consistently intervene in a process that they can never completely control: the writing of their “own” identity. Mariotti intervenes in the process of his inscription by asking that certain changes be made, and yet, he is simultaneously written and over-written by all the various contributors to his BLP. Mariotti’s BLP saga is particularly interesting considering that he is both a journalist (information filter) and a celebrity (information commodity) coming to grips with a new media environment in which the categories “writer” and “celebrity” are shifting. The hospitable Web changes a number of dynamics by extending the invitation to write to an infinite number of writers, and Mariotti’s confrontation with his own Wikipedia BLP exposes the limits of his ability to control how he is represented.<sup>11</sup> Mariotti’s BLP becomes a flash point when he challenges his critics to “bring it on.” Had he uttered his “take your shots at me” quote 20 years ago, his colleagues would have had ample opportunity to attack him. Other columnists could have published critiques, and other television talking heads could have answered Mariotti’s brash challenge. His readers, on the other hand, would have most likely been limited to the “Letters to the Editor” section of magazines and newspapers. A hospitable Web has made Mariotti’s readers into writers, and this shift intensifies the scene of identity inscription.

The Web’s hospitable structure turns the subject of a BLP into a kind of ghost: simultaneously excluded from the conversation by Wikipedia’s Conflict of Interest (COI) policies and welcomed by Wikipedia’s hospitable structure, s/he is both an active participant in and passive product of the writing process. Autobiographical writing is discouraged on Wikipedia, and yet subjects end up editing their BLPs both directly and indirectly, haunting the discussions from which, technically, they have been excluded. There are occasions, for example, in which a BLP subject complains about her BLP in another forum (on another website or in another publication) and ends up prompting

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<sup>11</sup> While I will speak of the BLP subject’s “own BLP” throughout this chapter, it is important to remember that this grammatical “trap” is a bit misleading. Biographies (in the pages of Wikipedia or elsewhere) do not belong to anyone. In fact, autobiographical writing does not even address this problem in any final way. Though we may write portions of our “own” stories, we do not *own* them.

Wikipedians to correct the article accordingly. Pushed to the margins by COI policies and (simultaneously, contradictorily) welcomed by Wikipedia's hospitable structure, BLP subjects become ghostly writers who often find that they have (sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally) contributed to their BLPs.

To further complicate things, this process of writing identities happens in an environment that radically alters our understanding of who or what deserves a Wikipedia article. While Mariotti might have been included in a sports encyclopedia, it is difficult to see him being included in a traditional print encyclopedia, one that includes articles about Albert Einstein and Herbert Hoover. Some Wikipedians have proposed a "dead tree standard" that would determine "notability" based upon whether a person is included in a print encyclopedia, but contributors routinely write articles (or, at least debate articles) about people who would never be included in a print encyclopedia. In fact, some subjects of BLPs would fly under the radar of most traditional media outlets. Just as it expands the possible pool of authors and editors, Wikipedia expands the possible pool of "notable" people. This expanded pool is, in many ways, the result of a text that does not have any physical space restrictions. Wikipedians often remind one another that "wiki is not paper," meaning that the editing process is not driven by physical constraints but rather by definitions of what is "notable" or "encyclopedic." When we consider that the text describing (or, perhaps, creating) such celebrities is written by various "anonymous" authors and that this text can be changed at any time, we begin to realize the difference between being "famous" and "internet famous."<sup>12</sup>

Shifts in the threshold of celebrity and in the definition of "the writer" are part of a new media environment that changes how human attention is allocated. While previous regimes of attention might have been reliant on "star systems" that dictated whom or what we paid attention to, our current environment radically distributes attention. There

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<sup>12</sup> The difference between being "famous" and "internet famous" is exemplified by a course taught by Jamie Wilkinson, Evan Roth, and James Powderly at The Parsons New School for Design entitled "Internet Famous." Students in this course were tasked with attracting as many eyeballs to their work as possible. For more information, see course website: <http://internetfamo.us>



are still *stars*, but the proliferation of media channels means that those stars can no longer claim the same monopoly on human attention.<sup>13</sup> In this way, the hospitable Web exposes what Richard Lanham dubs a new “economics of attention” in which human attention is a scarce commodity. As Lanham rightly notes, the label “information economy” is not entirely accurate. Economics is the study of scarce resources, and information is far from scarce in our current moment. Instead, the scarce resource is human attention. For Lanham, this means that the rhetorical canon of style becomes a central concern for those hoping to garner human attention. In *The Economics of Attention*, Lanham describes the strategies of figures such as Warhol and Duchamp (people he dubs “attention economists”) to show how the use of style can be a way of cutting through the clutter and attracting attention.

In many ways, Lanham’s account of the importance of style in a shifting attention economy is persuasive, and he offers a useful discussion of how one might manipulate and attract attention or strategically massage the process of identity formation. This massaging happens in the BLP process. However, when we consider all of the complications of the BLP, we are forced to question whether Lanham’s account is overly optimistic. While the subjects of BLPs use strategies to shape the Wikipedia article that will to some extent define their online existence, it’s not always entirely clear whether those strategies play out according to intentions. As I have noted, BLP subjects often shape Wikipedia articles in circuitous ways: instead of clicking “edit this page,” they enter through a side door or back door left open by the constitution of hospitality that grounds Wikipedia and the Web. As we saw in chapter one, Robert McHenry’s critique of Wikipedia was eventually incorporated into the text of Wikipedia itself, and when writers publish articles of complaint about their own BLPs, Wikipedians often respond in a similar way by adjusting those BLPs. These situations indicate the limits of examining our shifting economics of attention only in terms of how a digital rhetor (or “attention

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<sup>13</sup> The point I am making here is similar to Chris Anderson’s argument in *The Long Tail* when he discusses how our previous economy of “hits” (blockbuster movies, gold records, and other “big cultural buckets”) is transforming into an economy of “niches.” Anderson’s long tail indicates that “the hits now compete with an infinite number of niche markets, of any size” (5).

economist”) consciously seeks out attention. A fuller discussion of these situations would have to account for a broader range of other factors.

Lanham’s discussion of the attention economy is indicative of how rhetoricians typically discuss rhetorical agency. He is focused on the triumphant attention economist whom he attempts to use as an example of how to be a successful rhetor. What Wikipedia’s BLP process exposes, however, is that “success” involves a complex ecological dynamic that no rhetor, no matter how savvy, could fully master. This is not to say that the rhetor (digital or otherwise) has no way of producing effects. Agency remains operative within a much larger and more complex matrix of relations and intentions, which are, I would argue, at play in any rhetorical situation. So while Lanham’s approach is a useful one as we think about an environment that makes continuous demands on human attention, it leaves out those situations in which attention has not necessarily been sought out. His discussion of new media and new structures of attention aligns itself with a long and proud tradition in our discipline that places the rhetor at the center of the drama, dictating the flow of a rhetorical situation. Wikipedia’s BLP process offers a more complex picture in which the strategies deployed by the rhetor are not necessarily the only (or even the most important) factors, highlighting the fact that the intentions of the attention economist who slyly attracts eyeballs and manages an identity can only account for part of the story. Some are pulled into the spotlight—even if they are not attempting to attract eyeballs. And even those who choose the spotlight are put into a situation that reminds them that their identity is the result of various complicated compositional forces.

What is the role of the rhetor’s will or intention in a given rhetorical situation? Who or what is in control of a rhetorical situation? These questions have long driven discussions within the discipline of rhetoric and outside of it, and the Web’s structure of hospitality forces us to revisit these questions. Hospitable texts allow us to follow how agency operates and circulates through various rhetorical situations. Opening up textual discussions to various rhetors, the hospitable text makes it difficult to know who or what is controlling the writing process. This complication has always been with us. We have

always been simultaneously writing and written, and we have never been able to track down the source of rhetorical effects in any final way. But texts such as Wikipedia raise these questions in extreme ways. An analysis of the construction of BLPs indicates that reducing rhetorical agency to the conscious choice of the “attention economist” tells only a small portion of the story. A rhetor’s text circulates to contexts and audiences over and beyond those s/he has chosen. As texts gain collaborators, it becomes unclear who has contributed what to a particular text. The BLP serves as a paradigmatic case of how the writing of both texts and identities is the result of a complex rhetorical process in which any rhetor is simultaneously writing and written.

Rhetorical theory continues to grapple with the question of agency. Lanham’s approach is representative of how a large portion of the discipline approaches this question. Hospitable texts, however, force us to rethink any definition of agency that situates it primarily in a conscious, coherent subject. Some rhetoric scholars express concern that this problematizing of agency leaves us with no clear sense of how a rhetor might effect change. And yet, an analysis of the complications of controlling one’s “own” biography demonstrates that the rhetor is simultaneously in and out of control. In the case of the BLP, a number of writers are deciding how a subject will be portrayed, but this does not mean that this subject has no control over the situation. It means instead that the compositional process of a text/self is a complex one and that agency is not limited to the production of *intended* effects.

### **Wikipedia’s BLP Policy**

Wikipedia’s code of hospitality raises the stakes of BLP articles. Various writers are invited to help write the identity of a BLP subject, and neither the BLP nor its writers are vetted in traditional ways. In fact, the BLP genre probably receives the greatest deal of attention, attention that seems to be merited. Statistics compiled in March 2008 found that 13,908 BLPs lacked sources altogether and that 13,740 contained unsourced information (Pieniasek "More on the BLP"). As Wikipedia’s documentation of BLP procedures indicates, a BLP requires a careful approach:

Wikipedia is an international, top-ten website, which means that material we publish about living people can affect their lives and the lives of their families, colleagues, and friends. Biographical material must therefore be written with strict adherence to our content policies. ("Wikipedia: Biographies")

Jimmy Wales is particularly vocal on this point, reminding Wikipedians that “real people are involved, and they can be hurt by [their] words” (Wales "Zero Information").

Wikipedia’s official policy asks Wikipedians to “do no harm” and it insists that “BLPs must be written conservatively, with regard for the subject’s privacy” ("Wikipedia: Biographies"). A conservative BLP makes sure that all information is sourced and errs on the side of caution. A brief BLP is better than one that includes information that cannot be linked to credible, verifiable sources. While those who participate in creating and enforcing Wikipedia hope that all articles will follow the community’s guidelines, there is an explicit recognition that the BLP is its own animal.

As we will see in chapters three and four, allowing for the anonymity of Wikipedians is both a founding assumption of this virtual-textual community and a point of contention amongst both insiders and outsiders. While no Wikipedia is completely anonymous (users can be tracked by the IP address or username attached to each edit), Wikipedia does not require users to provide “real life” identities. But Larry Pieniazek, who discusses Wikipedia policies on his blog, represents a group of Wikipedians who argue for dropping the anonymity policy and linking Wikipedia edits with real life identities. When considering whether the “anyone can edit” tenet should be changed, Larry Pieniazek is clearly conflicted. He believes that such a change “goes against the early spirit” of the project, but he also believes that Wikipedia has grown too large to ignore its BLP responsibilities:

Simply put, the reason is that Wikipedia, and the Wikimedia Foundation have become too big. As the projects become more and more important, higher and higher ranked, more and more turned to, the stakes for accuracy are higher than ever before, with no end to this growth in significance in sight. The project

participants, and the projects, have a greater responsibility than when this was a toy site. (Pieniazek "More on Anonymity")

Pieniazek recognizes that this is a significant shift in Wikipedia policy, but the growth of the project leads him to the conclusion that “anonymous” or “pseudonymous” editing is no longer tenable: “So... it pains me to say it, but I think the only answer is real names. Real names allow the reasonable care defense, and allow transfer of liability.”<sup>14</sup> This has become a big enough problem to prompt Wikipedians such as Pieniazek to question one of the founding assumptions of this virtual-textual space. These Wikipedians express concern about the BLP policy and Wikipedians’ larger responsibilities to those outside of the community. To this point, Wikipedia has not yet changed its policy with regard to anonymity, but discussions about this policy are ongoing. Those discussions are often linked to BLP controversies, and to the recognition that Wikipedia’s growing influence (its ability to attract more attention from multiple writers) requires constant vigilance with regard to biographies.

Those concerned about Wikipedia policies seem to understand what is at stake in conversations about BLPs. Whereas Wikipedians may take an approach of “eventualism” (the idea that articles are a constant work in progress) toward an article about a building or a place, many also recognize the danger of such an approach when it comes to a BLP: “While a strategy of eventualism may apply to other subject areas, badly written biographies of living persons should be stubbed [severely edited so that only verifiable information is included] or deleted” (“Wikipedia: Biographies”). As Wales argues, these issues are not unique to BLPs, but they are particularly magnified when it comes to “real people.” A “citation needed” tag in an article about a landmark or a novel might be tolerated (even though such practices are always discouraged), but this practice is considered to be much more dangerous when it comes to BLPs:

There seems to be a terrible bias among some editors that some sort of random speculative ‘I heard it somewhere’ pseudo information is to be tagged with a

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<sup>14</sup> The issue of forcing Wikipedians to use “real names” is taken up in the next chapter as I discuss the fuzzy textual origins of the hospitable Web.

‘needs a cite’ tag. Wrong. It should be removed, aggressively, unless it can be sourced. This is true of all information, but it is particularly true of negative information about living persons. (Wales "Zero Information")

Even the category under which a BLP is placed can have wide-ranging consequences. In this sense, Wikipedians recognize that tagging an article with a descriptor is a performative utterance that does some important work. Placing someone in the wrong category can have big consequences, so Wikipedia policy states that “category tags regarding religious beliefs and sexual orientation should not be used unless...the subject publicly self-identifies with the belief or orientation in question...[and] the subject’s beliefs or sexual orientation are relevant to the subject’s notable activities or public life, according to reliable published sources” (“Wikipedia: Categorization”). A category tag is much more than a mere descriptor.<sup>15</sup>

These problems often lead the subjects of BLPs to take charge and write about themselves. Such autobiographical writing is frowned upon by the constitution of Wikipedia since it opens the door to “unconscious bias” and, according to the Wikipedia Arbitration committee, immature behavior:

For those who either have or might have an article about themselves it is a temptation, especially if plainly wrong, or strongly negative information is included, to become involved in questions regarding their own article. This can open the door to rather immature behavior and loss of dignity. (“Wikipedia: Biographies”)

Many Wikipedians urge their cohorts to be understanding in such cases, and they point to the Wikipedia rule of “don’t bite the newbies” to encourage Wikipedians to display understanding for those unfamiliar with Wikipedia policies. Still, contributing to one’s own BLP is “strongly discouraged, unless your writing has been approved by other editors in the community” (“Wikipedia:Autobiography”). Autobiographical writing is

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<sup>15</sup> I have written about the performativity of tags in more detail elsewhere. See: “Speech Hacks” *The Computer Culture Reader*. Eds. Judd Ruggill, Joseph Chaney, & Ken McAllister. Newcastle, UK.: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008.

discouraged because it is “*difficult* to write a neutral, verifiable autobiography” (“Wikipedia:Autobiography”). Instead, subjects of BLPs are asked to email the Wikimedia foundation with questions or concerns about an article.

The policy seems quite clear: avoid editing your own BLP. Even those portions of the policy which suggest that certain limited editing of one’s own BLP is acceptable still mention the pitfalls of such edits. So it might seem surprising that Wikipedia’s documentation also includes a discussion of managing your biography: “Managing your biography on Wikipedia can be a daunting process at first, for newcomers to the encyclopedia – and more so if your biography turns out to initially be a poor quality one, or problematic” (“Wikipedia:Biographies of Living Persons/Help”). Wikipedia’s documentation recommends that managing one’s biography should start with a visit to the “Biographical Articles Noticeboard.” Here, the subject of a BLP can post their concerns and ask that they be addressed. Another option is to email Wikipedia’s OTRS (Open Source Ticket Request System) system. The OTRS system is a way for Wikipedians to “organize, handle, and respond to e-mails sent to Wikipedia and the Wikimedia Foundation” (“Wikipedia: Otrs”). OTRS volunteers respond to various requests, including those submitted by people concerned about BLPs. Regardless of how one chooses to respond, the important point with regard to this discussion is that there are various ways for the subject of a BLP to influence the writing process. In Wikipedia’s policy pages, this is called “managing your biography,” and these guidelines suggest that the subject of a BLP should “correct the article only in ways that any reasonable person can agree is fair, and always drop a note on the ‘discussion’ page to explain that you are the subject and you have corrected this or that, for whatever reason” (“Wikipedia: Biographies”). While policies such as “No Autobiography” attempt to exclude the subject of a BLP, Wikipedia’s structure encourages the subject to enter the fray.

Acknowledging the constant possibility that the subject of a BLP can enter the textual conversation, Wikipedia policy provides guidelines to that subject. These guidelines stem from the gap between Wikipedia’s hospitable structure (which invites any writer) and its policies (which put limits on who can or can’t edit). This gap between

structure (Law) and policies (laws) renders the subject of a BLP a kind of ghost. Unclear of whether s/he is present to the writing situation or not, the BLP subject is asked to stay away and (simultaneously) provided with suggestions and strategies. The BLP subject can (and often does) participate in the article, but such autobiographical writing is only part of the rhetorical situation. This puts the BLP subject face-to-face with the often unanswerable question of who is writing his or her identity. The curious position of the BLP subject provides some interesting reminders about the nature of rhetorical agency in any situation, and Wikipedia's suggestions to those wanting to manage their BLP recognize the curious position of the BLP subject:

People who are visiting Wikipedia about an article they are involved in face a difficulty. They are not 'neutral' on that article, and therefore their editing is also not necessarily neutral. They also lack experience in what may be achieved, and how to achieve it. This can lead to serious misunderstandings or even 'blocking' of the account if they try to edit improperly. In such cases it is by far better to stay calm if you can, seek help, discuss openly with editors, *and allow those experienced in article writing to help you.* ("Wikipedia: Biographies", emphasis in original)

This policy page suggests that the subject of a BLP should take a deep breath, relax, and ask for help from someone more experienced with these issues. But such reassurances are not always comforting to those who are faced with an inaccurate or libelous Wikipedia article. Both welcomed and excluded from the textual conversation, the subject of a BLP often haunts them from the outside/inside.

### **The Séance of Jay Mariotti**

The ghostly (un)presence of the subject of a BLP was directly felt during the editing of the "Jay Mariotti" article, and the story of this article provides one example of how the subject of a BLP can "manage" a biography. The discussion page for the Jay Mariotti article (every Wikipedia article includes a discussion page where writers can discuss problems or disagreements) chronicles a conversation about "bias" and various



other problems with this BLP ("Talk: Jay Mariotti"). On this page, Wikipedians sparred with Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales about how much control the subject of a BLP should have over the article. By following this discussion, we can get a good sense for what is at stake in the various discussions that Wikipedians have about biographies and the role of the subject in the composition of a BLP. This story begins when Mariotti complains about the article via the OTRS system. By examining this discussion we can see Mariotti's odd position as a ghostly contributor to his BLP. This haunting offers us a way to understand how Wikipedia exposes some of the complications of tracking how agency operates.

### **August 31, 2006**

A Wikipedian named ErikNY asks why the Mariotti article has been deleted.

### **September 20**

A Wikipedian named Can't Sleep, Clown Will Eat Me (from this point forward, this user will be referred to as Can't Sleep) responds that the article was deleted due to the BLP policy but that s/he has some questions about the validity of the deletion. For that reason, Can't Sleep restores the article and all of its previous edits, asking that everyone "do their very best to diligently watch over this article and immediately removed [sic] any unsourced material which creeps in."

### **October 2**

Wikipedian David.Monniaux asks that the article not be restored because an OTRS complaint has been submitted. David.Monniaux argues that Mariotti has followed proper procedure and that the article should not be restored. Can't Sleep responds to David.Monniaux that "deleting all 250 previous edits is not how we respond to OTRS complaints."

#### **October 4**

At this point, Wales steps in to explain why the article and all of its edits should be deleted:

Completely deleting all 250 previous edits is precisely what we should be doing in such cases, as well as banning all the users who inserted the nonsense. There is simply no excuse for such behavior. People who do things like this are not welcome at Wikipedia.

While Wales' makes an attempt to police Wikipedia's boundaries by claiming that those who insert "nonsense" are not welcome, we should note that the hospitable constitution of Wikipedia does *welcome* such writers. The issue is not whether they are welcome but, rather, what Wikipedians decide to do *after* such writers have been welcomed.

#### **October 6**

Can't Sleep responds that he is "troubled" by Wales' response since some of previous versions of the Mariotti article were not flawed:

While I agree wholeheartedly that we should ban anyone who inserts libellous [*sic*] vandalism into an article, *it is more complicated than that*. What should we be doing when an article contains a high degree of salvageable history? Virtually every article on Wikipedia about a controversial figure has some degree of vandalism, and I disagree that in those cases we should be deleting the entire histories of said articles. Can you please clarify what you mean by this? (emphasis in original)

Wales responds that Mariotti has complained about the article and that "there is no need to quibble in such cases." He adds that the community should "nuke the whole thing and start over" in order to avoid the tedium of parsing which edits are worthwhile and which are not. In addition, Wales seems to be content to delete this article and allow for a cooling off process: "If we had to do without an article about this guy for a year or more, it is no big loss." Can't Sleep disagrees and argues that this would be a "great loss" and

that “nuking extensive edit histories under these circumstances is way too drastic and a bad precedent to set.”

### **October 17**

A Wikipedian named Aplomado adds that s/he is concerned about nuking an entire article (another Wikipedian echoes this concern on June 26, 2007). Aplomado also expresses concern that one contribution to the Mariotti discussion page (posted by someone with the IP address 67.39.168.91) might have actually been written by Mariotti. The post by 67.39.168.91 suggests that there is a good deal of “bias” in the article, and Aplomado wonders whether this is “the busybody [Mariotti] himself.” Another Wikipedian tracks the IP address to Bloomington, IN and concludes that it’s highly unlikely that the writer in question is Mariotti. Nonetheless, this brief exchange indicates that Mariotti continues to haunt this discussion. Whether or not this user is Mariotti, Aplomado’s concern is based on the constant possibility that any one of these Wikipedians (*including* Aplomado) could be Mariotti.

Wikipedians Fan-1967 and Vidor have an exchange regarding how much control the subject of a BLP can or should have over Wikipedia articles. Vidor is concerned with the perception (or reality) that “Wikipedia answers to Jay Mariotti,” but Fan-1967 quickly adds that BLP policy allows the subject of an article to ask that any unsourced information be removed. Another Wikipedian named Zzz345zzz notes that Mariotti is not the target of criticism by chance, and that he has in many ways encouraged his critics: “The same guy who once said ‘Take your shots at me, all you are doing is making me more famous.’ Got his article taken down. This shot must have hurt.” This Mariotti quote is correctly attributed to a feature story published in *Chicago Magazine*.

### **October 21**

A Wikipedian named David Peterson comes to Wales’ defense. S/he agrees that allowing Mariotti to police his own article could set a bad precedent but urges Can’t Sleep and

others to “consider also that if the ostensible subject of an entry is the target of highly motivated negative sockpuppets [Wikipedians who hide behind false identities and often violate conflict of interest policies], what does Wikipedia gain by preserving [sockpuppets’] handiwork?”

### **October 25**

In response to Vidor’s concerns that Wikipedia was bowing to pressure from Mariotti, Wales makes his final argument in favor of “nuking” the article:

Wikipedia does not let the subjects of articles dictate content, but that’s a completely red herring argument here. The point is, Wikipedia does not let vicious trolls with an axe to grind post unverifiable vitriole [*sic*] where a neutral biography should be. What we have now is a bit short [at this point in time, the article had been reduced to three sentences], but it is at least respectable. I hope that it will be expanded soon by sensible people, and that all the viciousness be kept out.

### **October 26**

JKChesky echoes the point made by Zzz345zzz that Mariotti is a “hypocrite”:

On [the ESPN television show] Around the Horn on 10/26 Mariotti says ‘If you criticize people, you have to be ready to take criticism. I know that!’ when discussing Tiki Barbar’s [*sic*] comments about Michael Irvin.

Though the bulk of this conversation happened in October 2006, some Wikipedians continued to drop in on the Jay Mariotti talk page after this time period to voice their discontent. In March 2008, a Wikipedia identified only by the IP address 198.123.41.42 remarks that he was disappointed to see Wikipedia “pander to some guy for no reason” and threatens to stop contributing to Wikipedia. There is also a brief exchange in which one anonymous Wikipedia suggests mentioning that Mariotti is Jewish and another answering that “just because he is a liar that is hated by many people and has a big nose

doesn't mean hes [*sic*] a jew [*sic*]." While it is not central to this chapter, we should keep such remarks in mind when hearing arguments about Wikipedia's utopian mode of textual production. One reason I use the term hospitality is that it avoids such utopian rhetorics. Hospitality raises difficult (and often unanswerable) ethical questions; it does not posit that the openness of digital spaces is necessarily a good thing. Wikipedia is not inherently utopian, democratic, or egalitarian, but it does welcome a broad range of writers (including anti-Semites and other nefarious writers).

Throughout this discussion, there is a great deal of resistance to Wales' argument that the community should "nuke the whole thing and start over." This resistance is linked to Wikipedia's constitutional penchant for textual noise. The encyclopedia that "anyone can edit" attempts to archive all edits and discussions instead of "nuking" anything. This is largely due to Wikipedia's process of publishing and then editing (a process that in many ways reverses the process of print publication). This penchant for noise can result in conversations getting bogged down in minutia and can make for a number of problems with BLPs. But allowing for noise also prevents conversations from being too easily stopped or shut down. This seems to be the larger concern of the Wikipedians discussing the Mariotti article. They are concerned that Mariotti himself is single-handedly closing down discussion about the article. As we will see in chapter three, Wikipedia's structure encourages the exact opposite of "nuking the whole thing and starting over" by operating under an ethic that assumes any text to be a collection of citational utterances. While Wales wants to manage the messy and complex process of fixing the Mariotti article by "nuking it," many in the community are hoping to remain faithful to a constitution that encourages a "mess" and guards against the urge to start over from scratch. They are also worried that allowing the subject of a BLP to dictate the writing process sets a bad precedent.

In this case, Wales argues for Wikipedia's archival structure to be put on hold (he says the older edits of the Mariotti article should be deleted) in the face of BLP problems—problems that might mean a lawsuit and that affect "real people." This question of "nuking it" and starting from scratch has been raised with regard to another

BLP controversy involving a sports figure. In February 2007, professional golfer Fuzzy Zoeller sued Josef Silny and Associates, Inc. for \$15,000 for defamation, publication of information that cast Zoeller in a false light, and intentional infliction of emotional distress. Someone using a computer at Silny and Associates added the following information to the Wikipedia article about Zoeller:

Later [Zoeller] went public with his alcoholism and prescription drug addiction, explaining that at the time he made those statements, he was ‘in the process of polishing off a fifth of Jack [Daniels] after popping a handful of vicodin pills’. He further detailed the violent nature of his disease, recalling how he’d viscerously [*sic*] beat his wife Dianne and their four children while under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol. He also admitted feigning a ruptured spinal disc in 1985 so as to be prescribed a multitude of prescription medication. He has since sought professional help and mended his fractured familial relationships. In May 2006, [Zoeller] said in an interview with Golf Digest magazine that he hadn’t beaten his wife in nearly five years. ("Golfer Sues" 3)

Since section 230 of the Communications Decency Act prevented Zoeller from suing Wikipedia, he tracked the edit to its source.<sup>16</sup> Zoeller’s attorney explained the situation this way: “Courts have clearly said you have to go after the source of the information... The Zoeller family wants to take a stand to put a stop to this. Otherwise, we’re all just victims of the Internet vandals out there. They ought not to be able to act with impunity” ("Zoeller Wants"). The lawsuit alleged that the defendant (Silny and Associates) had “published the false and libelous statements with knowledge of their falsity, negligently, or with reckless disregard of their truth or falsity” (4). It also claimed that these statements “directly or proximately caused injury to the Plaintiff, including damage to his reputation, mental anguish, loss of income in the past and earning capacity in the future” (4). Further, Zoeller argued that when read by a “reasonable reader” the statements would cast him “in a false light, i.e., other than as he is” and that the

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<sup>16</sup> I deal with Section 230 in more detail during chapter 4. This same law came into play during the controversy surrounding the Wikipedia article for John Seigenthaler.

statements “constituted major representations of his character, history, activities, and beliefs” (5).<sup>17</sup>

Zoeller dropped his lawsuit in 2007, but on the discussion page for the Zoeller article we can see that the Wikipedia constitution asserts itself again. When the offending edits are removed from the article’s history, many editors complain. A Wikipedian identified only by an IP address objected to the Wikipedia administrator’s quick trigger:

If you look at the edit histories of these two accounts, I think it’s clear...that Fuzzy is suing the right entity in the Josef Silny firm. However...if the admin with ‘oversight’ privileges had just given the community a summary of which edits were being deleted from history, we wouldn’t have had this speculation [that the article was being controlled by Zoeller]. Another knee-jerk response to an important legal issue...Sorry I was such a pain; but it could have been avoided with a more careful explanation from the deleting admin. ("Talk: Fuzzy Zoeller").

While this case is slightly different from the Mariotti case in that only certain edits were deleted, we can still see in this reaction by the Wikipedia community a wariness about hasty responses to problems, BLP-related or otherwise. This Wikipedian is clearly concerned with the legal risks brought about by Wikipedia’s constitution of hospitality, but he also argues against any “knee-jerk” reactions that delete all revisions of a BLP in the face of legal attack from the BLP subject. There is recognition amongst many who edit Wikipedia that BLPs require careful discussion. But such careful discussion puts the subject in the strange position of haunting the textual conversation. Welcomed by

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<sup>17</sup> Zoeller is no stranger to controversy. In 1997, he made remarks about Tiger Woods that many considered to be racist. When asked about Woods’ dominating performance in the Masters that year, Zoeller mused whether the multiracial golfer would serve fried chicken or collard greens at the Masters Champions dinner ("Golfer Says"). Zoeller is known as one of the Professional Golf Association’s wildest players, and once claimed that his chronic back would only cause problems if “only if the bars run out of vodka and drug stores stop selling Advil” (Zoeller qtd. in Kindred). This is not to say that the remarks in the Wikipedia article were true. There is no evidence whatsoever that Zoeller has abused his wife or children or abused prescription drugs. But we might note that the lawsuit’s argument that the Wikipedia article would paint Zoeller in a false light for any “reasonable reader” is entirely accurate, but for a reason that Zoeller and his attorney might not be so willing to admit. The problem with these comments is that a reasonable reader—especially one that knows Zoeller’s history—might actually believe them.

Wikipedia's structure but held at arm's length by Wikipedia policies, the subject of a BLP is kept from ever completely steering the conversation. However, the subject is never completely excluded either. Keeping the BLP subject as ghost is a way to remain ambivalent rather than taking a clean stand one way or another. This constantly moving text never settles, and it is this impulse that grounds Wikipedia's ambivalence toward the BLP subject. This clearly raises disturbing questions for those who are slandered or defamed.

### **Timothy Noah's Ghostly Writings**

The problems with BLPs expose the longstanding complications of tracking rhetorical agency. These problems are brought into relief in a shifting environment that has us questioning certain assumptions about writing in our emerging attention economy. The structure of Wikipedia and the ghostly writing that it invites force us to rethink a number of assumptions about writing and editing processes. This becomes especially clear when we see how writers who are accustomed to traditional models confront (or are confronted by) Wikipedia. With this in mind, we can turn to the complications of journalist Timothy Noah's BLP. We get a glimpse of Noah's view of Wikipedia when he describes contributors as "readers": "Wikipedia, as you probably know, is an online, multilingual encyclopedia whose entries are written and edited by readers around the world" (Noah). Later in his piece he refers to those who contribute to Wikipedia as "daily visitors." Noah's word choice is important here. He is a professional writer, and by describing Wikipedia editors as "readers" or "visitors," Noah is able to maintain a clear distinction between what Wikipedians do and what he does. When it comes to certain kinds of writing, this distinction is an important one. Noah's training and credentials set him apart from many writers on the Web, and his contributions to *Slate* are clearly not the same as the writings of Wikipedians. However, in many ways, the Web's structure means that professionals and amateurs often collide (and, as we will see in chapter four, collaborate). While the distinction between professional and amateur is an important one, Noah's distinction is more about an attempt to hold apart the roles of



reader and writer. This distinction crumbles a bit when it comes to a hospitable text that turns readers into writers and blurs the two roles into one another.

And if we grant that Wikipedia editors are writers (not readers or visitors), it becomes clearer why the subject of a BLP is in such an awkward position. An infinite number of writers collaborate (or, conspire) to create a BLP that will largely frame the Google searches of millions of Web denizens. The subject of a BLP is not powerless to act, but s/he is also not at the helm. This can leave the BLP subject vulnerable, and this vulnerability shows up for us explicitly when Noah conflates his BLP and his “self”: “this ongoing experiment in Web-based collaboration maintains volunteer gatekeepers, and one of them has whisked me (or, rather, the entry *describing* me) under the insulting rubric, ‘Wikipedia articles with topics of unclear importance’” (Noah). As Noah confronts a text that attempts to exclude an article about him, we see an interesting slippage. For a moment, Noah’s BLP is no longer a piece of writing about him. *It is* him: “...has whisked me (or, rather, the entry *describing* me).” This serves as a reminder that the stakes of conversations about BLPs are high. The discussion here is one about texts, but those texts, in a certain sense, are *selves*. Noah goes on to note a number of other articles that await “deletion review” and describes this status in terms of a “digital limbo” that he will “surely flunk.” In Noah’s words, he was cruising through Wikipedia’s textual space when “some notability cop cruised past [his] bio and pulled [him] over.”

Noah’s piece is largely a discussion of Wikipedia’s “notability” requirement, something that continues to spark discussion within the community and outside of it. This fight is between deletionists (those who police Wikipedia’s content with a strict definition of who and what is “notable”) and inclusionists (those who argue that Wikipedia’s lack of physical space constraints make strict notability requirements unnecessary). Noah discusses the notability in terms of Veblen’s work regarding social status. Citing Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Noah sees those policing the notability border as limiting “entry to the club”:

[Veblen's] extended sociological essay argues that the pursuit of status based on outmoded social codes takes precedence over, and frequently undermines, the rational pursuit of wealth and, more broadly, common sense. Hierarchical distinctions among people and things remain in force not because they retain practical value, but because they have become pleasurable in themselves.

Wikipedia's stubborn enforcement of its notability standard suggests Veblen was right. We limit entry to the club not because we need to, but because we want to.

(Noah)

Noah's discussion here is in many ways persuasive. Wikipedia is not a print publication, and this means that the notability requirement has little to do with creating a manageable volume. Instead, "society's love affair with invidious distinction" is largely what drives who (or what) is in or out. The notability requirement is also linked to the legacy of print. Wikipedia is very much a part of that legacy as its articles are discussed in terms of "pages" and are organized with outlines and subheadings. Wikipedia's structure is novel in that it invites more authors to contribute, but its content is very similar to that of a print encyclopedia. But Noah's discussion of the Wikipedia popularity contest and our quest for "distinction" is also reflected in his own writing. The exigency for his article about Wikipedia is his experience of being "marked for deletion." He says he never "harbored an ambition to be listed in Wikipedia" but that seeing the article flattered him. He even made some small changes to correct inaccuracies. It was during one visit to check the accuracy of the article that Noah noticed he'd been marked for deletion like a "tree marked with orange spray paint for the city arborist to uproot."

Noah hopes to point out the contradictions inherent in the urge to delete articles based on a constructed and largely arbitrary notability requirement. We might argue that he was also hoping to save his article from deletion, but this is less clear. Many of his remarks about being "evicted" could be read as attempts to keep things light and feign shock and disappointment. Yet, regardless of intent, Noah's article in *Slate* resulted in the editing of the Noah BLP and its eventual rescue from the "orange spray paint." Noah's article was read by Wikipedians, and this resulted in the Noah article being

granted a “stay of execution.” Within five hours of Noah’s *Slate* article being published, he posted an update. It is worth citing this update in its entirety:

I didn’t bargain on Wikipedia being such a highly sensitive instrument. Immediately after this article was posted (and therefore well before most people had a chance to read it), a [Wikipedian] granted my entry a stay of execution with respect to ‘notability.’ Delighted as I am to be elevated once again to the company of Nicolaus Copernicus, Igor Stravinsky, and Melvin ‘Slappy’ White, can the dividing line between eminence and obscurity really be the authorship of a single magazine article about Wikipedia? I note with interest that Stacy Schiff, author of the excellent *New Yorker* article cited above, failed to impress Wikipedia’s arbiters of notability by winning the Pulitzer Prize in biography, writing several other well-regarded books, and receiving fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. It wasn’t until she wrote her Wikipedia piece that she became sufficiently notable to be written up in Wikipedia. I presume the [Wikipedians] will debate this point and others with respect to my entry, and that I can expect to be re-tagged for removal and untagged ad infinitum over the coming days as they hash it out. I’ll follow future developments...with interest. In the meantime, I hope it isn’t lost on readers that *my aim was not to reinstate myself* but rather to argue against Wikipedia’s ‘notability’ standard itself and to use it as a newfangled illustration of our society’s love affair with invidious distinction. (Noah, emphasis added)

Noah points out that his goal was not to be “reinstated,” but rather to call the notability requirement into question. Still, the eyeballs of Wikipedia found their way to his article in *Slate*, and (due to the hospitable structure of Wikipedia and the Web) Noah’s article was revisited, revised, and rescued from limbo. His notability did not change, but his access to a significant media outlet meant that he was able to marshal the attention of Wikipedians.

Rhetorical situations have never been cleanly defined or clearly separable, no matter how carefully authors, editors, or publishing houses have attempted to carve out

audiences. But a Web of hospitable texts brings this fact into relief as texts move from one rhetorical situation to another, having effects that no one could have predicted. While Noah is bothered that his *Slate* article about Wikipedia is all that earned him a “stay of execution,” we might also read his “update” as a recognition that he has edited the Wikipedia article about him in a roundabout way. Rather than allowing Noah to edit this article directly, Wikipedia policy regarding BLP attempts to exclude him from the conversation. When clicking “edit this page,” he is permitted to participate but only in a superficial way (by fact-checking or changing information that any “reasonable” Wikipedian might change). However, this portion of Wikipedia’s policy still can’t contend with its underlying code of hospitality—a code that invites Noah’s *Slate* article to the conversation regardless of any attempt by Wikipedia policies to filter him and leave him outside of the conversation. Noah’s ghostly writing circulates between rhetorical situations regardless of his intentions.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Attention Economy or the Intention Economy?**

Noah did not “bargain on Wikipedia being such a highly sensitive instrument,” and this seems to be linked to his reliance on an older attention economy—one that did not so continuously remind writers that texts circulate in wildly unpredictable ways. The dizzying nature of overlapping and clashing rhetorical situations has led many to describe our current climate in terms of “information overload.” Lanham’s aforementioned *The Economics of Attention* discusses the information economy by focusing on what he sees as a scarce resource—human attention. Scarcity of attention means that our focus has shifted to style because “attracting attention is what style is all about” (xi). If style has moved to the center, Lanham argues that the “arts and letters” take on new significance. Whereas prior economies were based on the exchange of physical goods, our emerging economy is based on how we talk about those physical goods. Thus, as the economy

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<sup>18</sup> A number of journalists, including Marshall Poe and Brian Williams, have written about their BLP experiences, but such narratives are not confined to journalists. Wikipedia critic Daniel Brandt has ongoing battles with Wikipedians who attempt to create an article about him as has critic Seth Finkelstein.

moves from “stuff” (physical goods) to “fluff” (what we say or think about those physical goods) disciplines like rhetoric begin to carry more weight:

In an economy of stuff, the disciplines that govern extracting material from the earth’s crust and making stuff out of it naturally stand at the center...The arts and letters, however vital we all agree them to be, are peripheral. But in an attention economy, the two change places. (xii)

Lanham argues that the arts and letters’ can move from the periphery to the center and that rhetoric—more specifically, style—become essential in the attention economy. As more texts demand more attention, style becomes a way to attract more eyeballs.

Lanham’s focus is on those who he believes perfected the art of attracting attention. By studying the work of Duchamp, Warhol, and others, Lanham examines artistic movements that signaled a shift from “stuff” to “fluff.” Rather than sculpting monuments, Duchamp’s readymades took existing objects and put them in new contexts. Rather than painting landscapes, Warhol’s paintings put soup cans in art galleries. These artists were less concerned about making things than they were with garnering attention—attracting eyeballs. For this reason, these artists are Lanham’s models for how one might learn to attract attention in the midst of textual cacophony. As Lanham notes, eyeballs are the “coin of the realm” on the Web:

If as one sometimes reads, Internet companies spend 75 percent of their money on marketing, this only makes sense in a world where stuff has given way to fluff. It should not surprise us that the dominant discipline, the economics that matters in this new theater, is design. (17)

Lanham’s project correctly points out the significance of rhetorical studies (and, more broadly, the liberal arts) in the new economy. However, by focusing on these eccentric and successful “attention economists,” Lanham may only be telling one part of the story. Warhol, Duchamp, the Dadaists, and the Futurists were all looking for attention, and they marshaled eyeballs by seeking to game an economy of human attention. But how does such a discussion help us understand those moments where we are not seeking out attention or looking to attract eyeballs? Does Lanham’s discussion offer a way to think

through the moments where digital rhetors recognize that they have never been able to completely game the system of human attention? While the discipline of rhetoric should be looking to explain its relevance in an economy of fluff, we might question whether a focus on the triumphant attention economist narrowly defines rhetoric's role in our current cultural moment. Rather than limiting a discussion of rhetoric to the strategies of the attention economist, we might be better served to expand the discussion and attempt to account for more of the forces at work (regardless of whether these forces are controlled by the attention economist).

Lanham's focus on the art of design and on the crafting of a style is in line with the larger disciplinary project of rhetoric, a discipline that tends to discuss agency by using examples of "success" or "control." By showing how Warhol and others attracted human attention, Lanham offers a method for those attempting to attract eyeballs ("the coin of the realm") in an attention economy. However, Lanham's discussion does not necessarily address those situations in which we are reminded that we are not in control—the situations in which it becomes startlingly clear how much a subject is simultaneously writing and written. Lanham anticipates my argument, and he offers a somewhat dismissive answer to the question of intentionality and the conscious, self-contained rhetor:

Talking about an artist's intention has been forbidden in aesthetic circles for a long time, and more recently, the very idea of a creating artist has been dismissed as a Romantic delusion. But economists, so far as I know, are still permitted to have intentions and purposes. They are still permitted to teach lessons about human behavior. (63)

It's unclear whether Lanham is being flippant. And we cannot be sure whether he is indeed hostile to critics who question "intentions and purposes." Either way, his statement oversimplifies important critiques about the intentionality of rhetors, designers, artists, or anyone else. Everyone has intentions (they are *permitted* to have intentions, in Lanham's words) and many times those intentions come to fruition, but focusing on these instances at the expense of situations where things are not so clear can tend to leave aside

a number of important questions. In much rhetorical scholarship, the focus has been on discussing agency in terms of controlling a text and attempting to persuade. By supplementing these discussions with the analysis of situations in which agency is very clearly more complicated, we can ask different questions about agency.

Lanham is right that the current attention economy calls for a rethinking of how human attention is distributed. But rather than focusing only on the marshalling of eyeballs and the strategies at the disposal of the attention economist, rhetoricians should also be considering those situations where it becomes apparent that the writer is simultaneously addressor and addressee. In many ways, this emerging attention economy is what caused Mariotti so many problems. When Mariotti is called a hypocrite for taking a “bring it on” stance and then attempting to control what is said about him in a BLP, we see an attention economist in a clash with a constitution of hospitality that invites a massive number of writers to say whatever they please. This is an attention economist at odds with a shifting attention economy. Someone like Mariotti has less control on a hospitable Web that invites more writers to join the conversation about who Mariotti is and what kind of person or journalist he might be. Further, this isn’t just a problem for celebrities or journalists. As the definition of celebrity shifts, a growing number of people will have to contend with this shifting attention economy. The shifting line of celebrity and the shifting categories of “author” or “publication” mean that rhetoricians (and other scholars) will need to continue to explore theories of agency that address both situations in which one attempts to garner attention and situations where attention is gained regardless of intention.

### **Agencies Beyond the Rhetor**

This need for a broader conversation about agency is apparent when we consider how closely rhetorical theory and rhetorical pedagogy are tied to the idea of a conscious, controlling rhetor. Andrea Lunsford, Gerard Hauser, and others have referred to rhetoric’s “birthright” of civic education: “Capacitating students to be competent citizens is our birthright. It has been ours since antiquity. Modern education has stripped us of it.

We need to reclaim it” (Hauser qtd. in Leff and Lunsford 55). Many in the discipline see rhetoric’s main role in terms of studying and teaching the practical strategies used by the rhetor. By this view, the rhetorician (or pedagogue) provides a student with the tools to persuade. This is a large part of the rhetorical tradition. However, the previous discussion of the BLP shows us that the tools used by a rhetor, the intentions of that rhetor, and the immediate rhetorical situation are only a part of the story. Texts circulate beyond their immediate rhetorical situation. The subjects of BLPs find that they are attention magnets whether or not they have attempted to attract that attention. That is, there are a number of rhetorical forces at work in any situation, and the BLP provides a particularly poignant example of this. For this reason, the hospitable Web offers an opportunity to better account for how agency circulates through rhetorical situations. Such an approach does not deprive the rhetor of agency, but it does insist that human agents are not the sole purveyors of rhetorical effects. Intentionally or not, Mariotti and Noah participated in the writing of Wikipedia articles. And whether these attention economists desired the attention or not, a growing number of digital authors helped to write them into existence.

But regardless of the complexities that I have indicated throughout this discussion of the BLP (complexities that are present in *any* rhetorical situation), the discipline has tended to focus on a narrow set of questions with regard to agency. One of the most heated discussions to come out of the 2003 Association of Rhetorical Societies meeting (a gathering for those in Speech Communication and English departments) focused on rhetorical agency. The projects of “the posts” (postmodernism, poststructuralism, post-Marxism, etc.) continue to question how rhetoricians theorize agency, whether one can “have” agency, how language itself has agency, and what kind of control a rhetor can exercise over her text. If psychoanalysis and poststructuralism have questioned whether one is always in control of their “self” and if unconscious desires enter into any rhetorical situation, should we expand rhetoric’s discussions beyond the intentions of the speaker/writer? What of the unconscious desires of an audience? If an increasingly complex global situation makes it nearly impossible to trace each of the consequences of



my actions, does this not bring to the surface longstanding questions about whether I am responsible for only those things I have intended? Questions like these tend to complicate things when it comes to rhetorical agency. Such questions do not indicate that a rhetor cannot get things done in the world, but they do indicate that there is a broad range of rhetorical effects stemming from any given rhetorical situation, both intended and unintended.

In her report on the ARS discussion, Cheryl Geisler argues that work in new media can offer a way toward a “major rethinking” of the concept of rhetorical agency. She uses her own work on personal digital assistants as an example of this:

My own work on personal digital assistants...has lead [*sic*] me to explore the kind of agency being exercised when a rhetor uses a text such as a ‘to-do list’ to get herself to do something—like folding laundry—that she cannot manage to do otherwise. Here rhetor and audience appear to occupy a subject position *strategically fragmented* in order to get work done. This fragmentation of agency, I have suggested, is made possible by a combination of the culture of systematic management, the affordances of literate technologies, and the *strategic choice* of the rhetor who is conscious of what she is ‘doing’ to herself. (“How Ought” 11, emphasis added)

Geisler’s mention of how agency is “strategically fragmented” and her interest in the “strategic choice” of the rhetor show us that her discussion of rhetorical agency is focused on how human subjects successfully negotiate the rhetorical situation. This approach situates the rhetor at the center of the rhetorical situation. While discussing the strategic ways one can “fragment” a self admits a certain amount of complexity to a discussion of rhetorical agency, a careful reading of Wikipedia and agency shows how new media environments can present rhetoricians with a fuller picture of how agency circulates. Specifically, the BLP and its various controversies show us how strategies are confounded and how the subject of a BLP is simultaneously writing (subject of discourse) and written (object of discourse).

Though their focus is not on new media, this is also the suggestion of Christian Lundberg and Joshua Gunn, authors of a response to Geisler's report. They argue that rhetoricians' discussions of agency often conflate the ideas of "agent" and "agency," and that theories that consider agency as something one can possess tend to disregard the complexity of rhetorical situations. Rather than reducing rhetorical agency to a conscious, self-contained, intentional rhetor, Lundberg and Gunn argue for an understanding of the rhetorical situation in terms of "hospitality," and the trope they choose to explain this framework is the Ouija board.<sup>19</sup> The Ouija board séance troubles any attempt to pin down agency. When the parties to the séance place their hands on the planchette and ask "Are there any communications?" there is no clear cut way of determining who or what is communicating. The Ouija Board metaphor opens up the possibility that any number of agents—living or dead, conscious or unconscious, animate or inanimate—might be moving the planchette, and Lundberg and Gunn urge rhetoricians to be more open to the idea that something or someone other than the conscious rhetor

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<sup>19</sup> I should note that Lundberg and Gunn's discussion of hospitality is different from my own. They are concerned with the "inhospitable" gestures of attributing too much agency to any one factor in the Ouija Board game. One can attempt to attribute agency to the dead or the living, the conscious or the unconscious, or one can even pack up the game and go home, but: "each of these options seems mildly inhospitable (none more so than packing up your Ouija board and going home). The idea that the game is solely played out among the living is Inhospitable toward the spirits who may wish to join the living in communion; the idea that the spirits 'possess' the body of one or more people at the table is inhospitable toward the participation of the living subject who is dispossessed. Finally, the ratio seems a hospitable compromise, but also contains the inherent inhospitality of specifying just how much influence living and dead subjects are allowed to have on the play ('sorry dead spirit, my turn to move the planchette')" (85, emphasis in original). This use of the term "hospitality" is partially in line with my own project. As I have discussed in previous chapters, any gesture of hospitality is inherently inhospitable. Wikipedia is grounded by a constitution of hospitality, but any enactment of that hospitality is a filtering mechanism and will inevitably mean that certain writers are excluded. This is the very problem noted by Lundberg and Gunn with "the ratio" that attempts to draw lines between who/what is in charge of the rhetorical situation. But while Lundberg and Gunn urge a more "hospitable" approach by rhetoricians, my discussion focuses more on a structure of hospitality that grounds certain electronic texts and forces us to revisit some key terms in rhetorical scholarship. While Lundberg and Gunn recognize the hospitable structure I am examining and while their metaphor of the Ouija Board maps almost perfectly onto the digital writing situation, my analysis stops short of any discussion of what "should" be done in terms of taking a "more hospitable" stance. I happen to agree with much of what they argue with regard to hospitality, but the ethical questions I am raising through this study of Wikipedia (and the hospitable Web, more generally) are less a prescription than a description. The changes I discuss here are already happening, and if there is a "should" involved in my discussion it is this: we should recognize that the rules of our rhetorical games continue to shift in a space of hospitable texts.

might be at play in a given rhetorical situation. This metaphor is particularly useful when thinking of the BLP controversies mentioned above. Simultaneously excluded and welcomed to the writing situation, the subject of a BLP is a ghost visiting the complex séance in which his or her persona is written. These subjects help to write their persona, but it is never entirely clear who is in charge.

But this willingness to consider a broader range of factors has led many to question whether the postmodern view strips the rhetor of the ability to act. Michael Leff, in the same issue of *RSQ* that contains Geisler's summary, expresses concern that the postmodern critique of agency is a "dangerous" and radical break with tradition. Leff aligns the postmodern turn in rhetorical theory with a move toward "interpretation." This move has decoupled rhetoric from its "birthright" of creating citizens who could effect change. Leff grants that this move to interpretation had its positive effects: "it opened space for serious inquiry into linguistic action as it occurred in concrete situations (something that had been difficult to justify or explain under the regime of foundationalism)" (62). But Leff also notes that "there was a rub": "The dominant strand of postmodern theory denied traditional assumptions about the nature of human subjects and their intentions, and...this critique of agency has become so potent that it has left very little of the concept in tact [*sic*]" (62). For Leff, scholarship that questions whether agency is situated only or mainly within the rhetor is irresponsible:

It is possible, of course, to declare that rhetoric should break entirely with tradition, toss concerns about agency into the trash heap of obsolete ideologies, and go about the business of interpretation without any qualms of conscience. This option, however, proves to have limited appeal. In the first place, it is dangerous. Teachers of writing and speaking can pursue an unrestrained deconstruction of the agency of speakers and writers only at the risk of theorizing themselves out of their jobs. Secondly, qualms of conscience—perhaps even of collective consciousness—assert themselves. (62)

Leff is concerned that the questioning (the “deconstruction”) of the agency of speakers and writers leaves us with no usable concept of agency. By this line of thinking, postmodernism leaves us without any theory of how to effect change in the world.

But Lundberg and Gunn argue that most theorists under the umbrella term of “postmodernism” would agree that rhetors produce effects:

None of these critics of a commonsense doctrine of agency deny that the subject or representations of the subject exert significant effects, nor do they deny the subject a kind of social effectivity or agency. (Lundberg and Gunn 87)

By this they mean that rhetors speak and/or write and that those speeches and texts have effects. The three theorists they use as exemplars of “postmodernism” (Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida) never argue that anyone should “give up” on being agents, and Lundberg and Gunn never suggest this either. Indeed, my own discussion of Wikipedia’s BLP controversies indicates the many ways BLP subjects (consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally) participate in the BLP process. A questioning of agency (like the one I perform in this chapter) is not a destruction of human agency. It is an attempt to account for all kinds of agency (human and otherwise). Still, echoing Leff’s concerns about “qualms of conscience,” Geisler suggests that certain rhetoricians are willing to “abandon social mission, give up the goal of being efficacious in the world” (“How Ought” 16). As Lundberg and Gunn suggest, one is hard pressed to find a theorist, rhetorical or otherwise, who would make such an argument. Even after having an opportunity to read Lundberg and Gunn’s response, Geisler maintains her position that the postmodern line of questioning (specifically, Lundberg and Gunn’s Ouija Board metaphor) exposes the postmodern rhetor’s “lack of rhetorical efficacy”:

Gunn and Lundberg suggest that no post-modernist ever seriously entertained the idea that ‘rhetors do not produce effects.’ Whether they consider themselves post-modernists, I cannot say, but the lack of rhetorical efficacy seems to be just the possibility that their Ouija Board metaphor invites us to consider. (“Teaching” 108)

Geisler sees Lundberg and Gunn's critique as dangerous, and she is concerned that it strips the rhetor of efficacy.

Geisler argues that the Ouija Board invites us to consider the possibility of the lack of rhetorical efficacy. But there is a difference between inviting us to consider this possibility and "giv[ing] up the goal of being efficacious in the world." Lundberg and Gunn do not deny that the rhetor can act or have an effect. Rather, they argue that persuasion and efficacy are not necessarily situated in the speaker or writer and that persuasion may result from a complex interplay of agents, agencies, and contexts. Does this open up "the possibility" of "the lack of rhetorical efficacy"? Yes. But it is difficult to see how rhetoricians can afford to disregard such possibilities. Accounts of the rhetorical situation that suggest a complex circulation of agency do not necessarily mean that the rhetor lacks rhetorical efficacy. Instead, they simply acknowledge that the rhetor's strategies may not be the central force in a given rhetorical situation.

### **The "obviously educable"**

If we begin from the idea that agency is not situated in a human agent—that it is more complex than this, that it shifts amongst various agents (human and otherwise), that it works us over in ways that we can never completely understand—then agency ceases being something of "substance" that we can "have." Further, this definition of agency challenges the notion that responsibility is somehow confined to the actions and intentions of the human agent. If multiple agencies are at work in any rhetorical situation, who or what is responsible for a particular rhetorical effect? Such questions might invite some incredulous responses. As we have seen, many scholars ask whether such an approach means that a rhetor is not responsible for his or her actions. But this is not at all what I am arguing, nor is it what Lundberg and Gunn argue. I am suggesting that the rhetor is responsible for much, much more. If my text or my actions happen amid the complexity of multiple agencies, can I in good conscience only consider my own intentions as the zone of my responsibility? Does this approach account for enough?

It seems necessary to account for this complexity in any theory of agency, as well as in any responsible pedagogy. This question of pedagogy seems to be one of Geisler's main concerns when grappling with the Ouija Board metaphor. Geisler argues that the humanist model offers "comfort" when considering rhetorical pedagogy:

I would suggest that one of the comforts of the traditional model of humanist agent was its close link between the mission of rhetoric and the concept of the rhetorical agent. Specifically, a rhetorical agent seen to make choices among the available means of persuasion is an agent rhetoricians can educate to make the best choices. The post-modern agent is not so obviously educable and, if not educable, what agency do we as rhetoricians have? ("How Ought" 15)

However, one might ask the following questions: Is "comfort" a universal value of rhetorical studies? Might we view a rhetorical education as a continual project of discomfort, of disrupting the "obvious," of troubling what seems most evident? Is any model that addresses the "obviously educable" really an educational model at all?<sup>20</sup>

Geisler discusses her own classroom and her experience teaching proposal writing to students. She explains that often students do not feel empowered to seize the planchette: "most think they have nothing to offer, no ideas worth proposing, no one interested in hearing their proposals, no credibility in putting a proposal forward" ("Teaching" 111).

For this reason, Geisler sees the pedagogue's job as, at least in part, one of recruitment:

Looking at the Ouija Board player, minimally I think we could say that we don't know whether, if you don't put your hands on the Ouija board, it won't move. By extension, we can say to the potential rhetor: I don't know whether if you engage with this rhetorical situation, you will succeed in the way you intend. *But we do*

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<sup>20</sup> Diane Davis cites Lévinas to remind us that actual learning (if it's truly *learning*) is a kind of trauma: "Levinas describes learning quite differently: if it's really learning, then it is necessarily a trauma, a shattering of 'self' and 'world,' not an appropriation but an experience of deappropriation and alteration from which there is no return. Learning, in Levinas's lexicon, takes place via an encounter with the other, who, in addressing me, exceeds my thematizing powers and 'brings me more than I can contain'" ("Addressing Alterity" 199).

*know that if you don't engage, nothing will happen.* ("Teaching" 111, emphasis added)

It is this last statement that a discussion of hospitable texts allows us to question. If we walk away from the table, can we guarantee that the planchette will not move? What Geisler most likely means when she says “if you don’t engage, nothing will happen” is that nothing that the rhetor *intends* will happen—and even this is up for debate. But simply walking away from the rhetorical situation does not mean that the situation stops. Walking away might make the rhetor feel as if s/he is no longer answerable for what happens in a particular situation, but walking away does not mean that the rhetor is unaffected or off the hook. And it does not mean that s/he is no longer responsible. The rhetorical situations I have examined in this chapter demonstrate that walking away from the game does not necessarily mean that the rhetor is unaffected, that the rhetor is not effecting rhetorical change.

As Wikipedians negotiate and write my BLP, I can attempt to control that conversation or walk away. However, walking away does not guarantee that nothing happens. Further, I can attempt to discuss the BLP in another context, as a number of journalists have attempted to do. Some journalists, frustrated with an unwieldy crowd writing their BLP, publish a response in a separate place. In essence, this would mean rejecting one rhetorical situation and entering into another. However, the hospitable code of Wikipedia (and of the Web in general) makes it difficult to separate rhetorical situations. So, when Timothy Noah writes of his Wikipedia BLP in the pages of *Slate*, his concerns are eventually taken up by Wikipedians. One might even say that Noah edits his own entry circuitously. Geisler’s statement that “we do know that if you don’t engage, nothing will happen” is based on a definition of agency that is firmly rooted in the conscious, controlling rhetor and in a clearly definable rhetorical situation. But such a statement does not account for a number of messier realities. In Geisler’s terms, it does not square with “the facts on the ground” (“How Ought” 16). The hospitable code of the Web shows us that walking away from the game does not mean that the question of

rhetorical agency has been answered. This is one more case of the Web exposing and amplifying a predicament that is far from new.

In many BLP controversies, the subject is at the mercy of those composing a Wikipedia article about them. However, we have also seen that no one is ever completely excluded from the BLP conversation. Due to Wikipedia's hospitable structure, any number of people (including the subject of the BLP) can edit the text directly or indirectly. Because of this structure, it is never clear who is writing. Put another way, we never have a good sense of who has moved the planchette. Ascribing the movement of the planchette in any final way simplifies a very complex process. Geisler is justified in her concern that a troubling of the humanist agent might result in students (and others) "walking away" from the rhetorical situation. However, a discussion of how the hospitable Web melts together various rhetorical situations, troubles any conception of agency that considers only the intent of the rhetor, and invites infinite digital rhetors to infinite conversations, serves to remind us that walking away from any situation does not absolve a rhetor of responsibility. Reducing the question of responsibility to the conscious choices of the rhetor does not account for the various ways that the subject is an effect of discourse (as the subject of a BLP is an effect of the writings of various Wikipedians) and the various ways that a text can enter rhetorical situations that the rhetor has not chosen (as various journalists have found upon addressing their BLPs in print).

Upon examining cases where the subject of a BLP is written into existence, we should stop to consider whether rhetoricians have considered all angles of rhetorical agency in our emerging "attention economy." Warhol did all he could to attract attention. He learned to play a game that earned him much more than 15 minutes of fame. But with a Web that invites more writers, we are forced to recognize that the rhetor is written at the same time that s/he writes. When the hospitable Web reminds us of this ongoing process of inscription, it is also reminding us that rhetorical agency is something much more than the strategies employed to persuade. Beyond a mere tool used by the rhetor, something that we "grant" to the "subaltern," or a conscious negotiation of various possibilities,



rhetorical agency circulates among texts, contexts, writers, and readers. In this chapter, I have examined a number of situations where it is difficult to determine who is calling the shots. It is easy to dismiss this process of inscription until we are reminded of it, and the hospitable Web serves as this kind of reminder. These situations remind us that agency has never been a clear cut question of a conscious, self-contained rhetor gauging a situation or an audience and making adjustments. And as electronic texts continue to welcome more writers and bleed into one another, it will become more and more difficult to convince ourselves that we have accounted for all the factors in play.

Recognizing this fact doesn't neuter the rhetor, it merely keeps that rhetor from thinking s/he has accounted for everything. Our theories and pedagogies (as if these two can ever be separated) need to account for how agency circulates and shifts across and between rhetorical situations. And if rhetoric is truly to have a role in an emerging attention economy, a more complete theory of agency will be required. As we have seen, Wikipedia's hospitable structure thwarts the attempts made by Wikipedians to cleanly exclude subjects from writing (about) themselves. Examining such situations does not force us to the conclusion that the rhetor is powerless. Instead, it marks the limit of human agency and attempts to account for all the complexities of a rhetorical situation. The rhetor can "get things done" and effect change. Very few would argue that intention is non-existent. It's not a matter of intention disappearing. Rather, it's a matter of intention being only one part of the equation.

### Chapter III

#### Anonymity Trouble: Textual Origins and Intellectual Property

The July 31, 2006 issue of *The New Yorker* featured a piece by Stacy Schiff on Wikipedia. As part of the piece, Schiff interviewed a Wikipedia bureaucrat named “Essjay.”<sup>21</sup> Essjay was this Wikipedian’s username—like many others he chose to use a pseudonym. In Essjay’s case, he claimed he did this because he “he routinely received death threats.” Schiff’s story details Essjay’s online and offline credentials:

One regular on the site is a user known as Essjay, who holds a Ph.D. in theology and a degree in canon law and has written or contributed to sixteen thousand entries. A tenured professor of religion at a private university, Essjay made his first edit in February, 2005. Initially, he contributed to articles in his field—on the penitential rite, transubstantiation, the papal tiara. Soon he was spending fourteen hours a day on the site, though he was careful to keep his online life a secret from his colleagues and friends. (To his knowledge, he has never met another Wikipedian, and he will not be attending Wikimania, the second international gathering of the encyclopedia’s contributors, which will take place in early August in Boston.) (Schiff)

Schiff also noted that Essjay was a member of the Wikipedia mediation committee and had the ability to trace user IP addresses. By all accounts, Essjay was a model Wikipedian who had been acknowledged by others within the community for his work. His Wikipedia user page showed several barnstars—awards that Wikipedians give to one another for diligent work.

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<sup>21</sup> Wikipedians fall into four basic categories: Stewards, Bureaucrats, Administrators (sometimes called “sysops”), and Editors. Stewards wield the most power and are able to add or remove privileges of other users, delete edits, and determine a user’s IP address with a function called “checkuser.” Bureaucrats fall next on the pecking order. Some Bureaucrats can use the “checkuser” function—Essjay had this type of access—but, by and large, Bureaucrats are able to perform functions such as promoting other users or renaming accounts. Administrators have a number of privileges, including the ability to lock pages that are prone to vandalism block certain users. Finally, anyone who contributes to Wikipedia is an Editor. Editors are able to edit pages that aren’t locked, and they are not required to have a user account.

Regardless of Essjay's hard work on Wikipedia articles, his credentials turned out to be fraudulent. Nearly five months after the piece in *The New Yorker* was published, Daniel Brandt—an outspoken critic of Wikipedia and founder of the watchdog site Wikipedia-watch.org—told *The New Yorker* that Essjay was actually Ryan Jordan. Jordan was not, in fact, a professor. Brandt knew this because Jordan had recently been hired by Wikia (a for-profit company started by Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales) and had posted an online profile stating that he was 24 years old. The profile made no mention of graduate degrees. Jordan's ability to maintain this constructed identity while rising to an influential position within the Wikipedia community stems from one of the central tenets of the Wikipedia constitution— anonymity. Users are allowed to remain “anonymous.” I use scare quotes because Jordan was not really anonymous. Rather, he created another identity that would help him navigate the virtual-textual community of Wikipedia. Thus, these edits were not written anonymously—they were written by Essjay. Further, even those Wikipedians who do not register for a username can still be traced to an IP address (an IP address is included next to each edit on Wikipedia). In many ways, anonymity on Wikipedia (or on the Web in general) is a fiction.

For many, this discussion of Essjay's anonymity might seem an odd one in a chapter that is supposed to be about intellectual property. One might assume that a discussion of Wikipedia and intellectual property would begin by taking on plagiarism. With good reason, plagiarism has been the focus of a great deal of rhetoric and composition's discussion about intellectual property. As writing technologies proliferate, tracking down the authenticity of texts continues to be a problem. Rebecca Moore Howard's work is a paradigmatic example of this strand of scholarship. She asks us to rethink the punitive nature of our plagiarism policies, and she describes many plagiarism cases as misunderstandings about what writing is. For Howard, all writing involves “patchwriting,” a process of imitation and mimeses. Much of what we do as writers is “erasing the trail” of patchwriting: “Erasing the trail is not a matter of hiding guilty evidence; it's a matter of good prose style. When the trail is obvious, we call it

plagiarism; when it is erased, we call it synthesis or even original writing” (7). Writing instructors, Howard argues, often fail to see that their own writing participates in trail erasure.

While I will not be taking on plagiarism directly, Howard’s concept of patchwriting does point toward the central question of this chapter—the question of textual origins. In a sense, discussions about plagiarism and digital copyright stem from this question: What is the origin of a text? Policies, such as those of Wikipedia, that allow for a certain kind of anonymity make it particularly difficult to trace the origins of text. I say a “certain kind” of anonymity because, as I have noted above, Wikipedia edits are not really anonymous. Some identity or IP address is linked to each edit. Still, critics of Wikipedia complain that anyone can anonymously edit Wikipedia, and what these critics mean is that Wikipedians cannot always be linked to “real life” (RL) identities. That is, Wikipedian identities are virtual identities built for a virtual reality (VR). Many critiques of Wikipedia are based on the assumption that RL identities afford more credibility than VR identities. As we will see, this controversy about anonymity can also be framed in terms of *ethos*—that is, in terms of the identity that one constructs in the course of writing and arguing. Regardless of its problems, I will retain the word “anonymity” at points in this chapter since it is a term that grounds so many critiques of Wikipedia. When I use this term, I am using it in the sense that critics use it. For these critics, even those who construct a VR identity are anonymous because that identity does not necessarily line up with an RL identity.

In a space where VR identity is only loosely connected to RL identity, *ethos* becomes increasingly important. This is Alan Liu’s argument in *The Laws of Cool* when he notes that our current cultural moment calls for an “*ethos* of the unknown” (72). For Liu, at the precise moment that Web denizens might feel the need to claim a stable identity, the carpet has been pulled from beneath them. The postmodern condition has questioned the stable subject and identity politics, forcing us to look to different ways of thinking about solidarity and identity. The information economy requires a solidarity

based on something other than identity, and Liu asks how we can deal with this situation “without being nostalgic for foreclosed group and class identities in a manner that would inauthentically mime the great fundamentalist, nationalist, and ethnic reactionisms of people of the world *excluded* from ‘knowledge?’” (70). Liu’s provisional answer is that we need an “*ethos* of the unknown” that embraces a different kind of solidarity, one based upon finitude rather than essence. He points to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy to explain: “‘We’ are no more than this transient moment when we have nothing more in common—as Jean-Luc Nancy might say in his *Inoperative Community*—than our finitude, our extinction, our ‘death’” (69). Following Liu, we might say that RL identity no longer serves as the proper groundwork for our actions on the Web (and, possibly, offline.) Does such a predicament leave us in the lurch? I don’t believe so. Instead of falling, as Liu would put it, “inauthentically” into traditional ways of understanding identities and texts, we are better served by understanding how *ethos* allows us to write and argue in a Web of hospitable texts. Identities based on essence are ill-equipped for the life of a “knowledge worker”—an *ethos* of the unknown is a better fit.<sup>22</sup>

As Liu explains, *ethos* is not identity but is instead “the inchoate coming-to-be or basis of identity” (71). This “coming-to-be” means that attaching a stable identity to a text becomes extremely difficult. If Liu is right that information work requires a rethinking of identity via *ethos*, then Wikipedia offers a prime example. Wikipedia deals with the identity of a rhetor in a complicated way, and an analysis of how it deals with different types of *ethos* provides us with a useful way of understanding how the Web deals with textual origins. With regard to Wikipedia, we can make use of the distinction between the situated and invented dimensions of *ethos*. One’s situated *ethos* precedes his or her text. It is tied to a reputation that has been built up over time, and it has to do with the various ethical or moral attributes assigned to particular human bodies. So, along

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<sup>22</sup> In *Inessential Solidarity*, D. Diane Davis also argues for a rethinking of community via Nancy’s theories. Davis questions a number of assumptions regarding community and identity, including the notions that persuasion only happens because of some intentional action by a subject and that “the figure of the subject remains the absolute ground for community” (“Inessential Solidarity” 6-7). (“Inessential Solidarity”)

with the reputation that a rhetor builds within a community, one's race, gender, and class can be part of a situated *ethos*. In addition to situated *ethos*, a rhetor is able to construct *ethos* within a speech or text. Through the use of certain strategies such as appearing unbiased, fair, and knowledgeable, a rhetor can *build* an *ethos*. This latter form is called "invented" or "constructed" *ethos*, and in a space like Wikipedia it is often built with a collection of citations.

Rather than relying on a situated *ethos* of expertise, Wikipedians are asked to rely on an invented *ethos* by citing other texts. Situated *ethos* does have a place in Wikipedia. Many Wikipedians build up reputations within the community, and this means that they enter any dispute or discussion with a certain amount of situated *ethos*. It is also important to note that the trail of citations required by Wikipedia's constitution does in fact lead to printed texts that have undergone traditional vetting processes—to texts that are ostensibly written by experts. That is, expertise itself is not banned from Wikipedia by its citational ethic. Rather it is the use of the RL expertise of the *Wikipedian* that is not supposed to be in play. Instead of pointing to "me" or "my expertise," the Wikipedia constitution asks that I point outward to a verifiable source. As I edit Wikipedia, any attempt to invoke my own situated *ethos* operates in opposition to Wikipedia's constitution.

To further complicate things, the Web makes it difficult to hold situated and invented *ethos* apart. That is, in many situations, digital rhetors *invent* their *situated ethos*, and Essjay is a perfect example of this. By presenting himself as a credentialed theologian, Essjay was able to invent a situated *ethos*. I am not arguing that the traditional concerns of situated *ethos* (such as race, class, and gender) disappear online. Such utopian arguments were prevalent in the early days of the Web, and in the previous decade they have been modified and corrected. What I am arguing is that *ethos* is a bit more malleable on the Web. In the following discussion of Wikipedia and textual origins, we will see how *ethos* and intellectual property are intertwined in the digital commons. Whereas RL might allow a writer to rely on reputation and expertise via a

situated *ethos*, VR changes the rules of the (rhetorical) game. These rule changes stem from a constitution of hospitality that no longer considers RL identities to be sufficient when tracing textual origins.

Those who believe that Wikipedia does not allow for a responsible tracing of textual origins (and thus does not credit a responsible party) are assuming that the tracing of texts to the proper RL identity is a relatively unproblematic (and a more ethical) way of grounding a text. This chapter will question this assumption. Indeed, one of the primary critiques of Wikipedia is that it allows for anonymous edits and offers no way of verifying credentials or identities. Critics call these policies irresponsible, and they suggest that Wikipedia could avoid a number of scandals by developing a system by which editors identify themselves:

If Wikipedia would simply require editors to identify themselves, so much of [its problems] would go away. Yes, there would still be issues. An IP address still provides a certain pseudonymity. But this is certainly a better situation than [*sic*] the one we have now. (Metz "Truth, Anonymity")

It should be noted that this suggestion comes from a publication, *The Register*, which continually criticizes Wikipedia's policies. Nonetheless, Cade Metz moves beyond mere critique to offer a possible solution to Wikipedia's anonymity problem—he recommends a policy that would require writers to identify themselves. The question then becomes: Would such a policy of eliminating (or, at the very least, reducing) anonymity make Wikipedia a more ethical space?

This is the claim of Larry Sanger, a co-founder of Wikipedia. Sanger's new project—Citizendium—is an open-content encyclopedia that requires writers to provide their RL identities. Sanger's contention is that such a policy makes for a more accurate, more mature, and more ethical open-content encyclopedia. In an essay entitled "The New Politics of Knowledge," Sanger argues that communities like Wikipedia wield a great deal of power and must now consider the far-reaching ramifications of their policies. As Wikipedia monopolizes more prime real estate atop Google search results,

Sanger believes that the community needs to recognize that its internal governance has immense external ramifications. Pointing to situations where governments have regulated online environments—such as the U.S. government intervening to make sure that MySpace is not a haven for sexual predators—Sanger worries that governments might eventually see fit to intervene in projects like Wikipedia:

I think cyber-polities can generally regulate themselves. But communities with poor internal governance may well incur some necessary correction by governments, if they violate copyright on a massive scale or if they permit, irresponsibly, a pattern of libel. Why should this be disturbing to me?

Government intervention is perhaps all right when we are talking about child molesters on MySpace; but when we are talking about projects to sum up what is known, that is when more serious issues of free speech enter in. ("The New")

Sanger's essay points to *Citizendium* as a potential answer to the shortcomings of Wikipedia. By seeking out experts and by requiring contributors to prove their RL identities, Sanger hopes to avoid the pitfalls of Wikipedia's less stringent policies. He also believes that digital communities should do all they can to avoid government intervention.

Though we might argue that Sanger's discussion of government intervention offers an unrealistic doomsday scenario, his larger point is well taken. "Cyber-polities" like Wikipedia wield a great deal of power, and this means that such communities will need to consider the far-reaching consequences of their policies. However, we might also question the ramifications of the changes that Sanger and Metz suggest. On their face, policies banning or severely limiting anonymity seem to make complete sense and seem to be a more ethical way of building an encyclopedia. Yet, we might also question the ethical implications of requiring documentation of one's RL identity via credentials. If Wikipedia has been built upon a code of hospitality—a code that allows the stranger to arrive without asking her name—we might want to consider whether that code is in place for certain practical and ethical reasons. That is, the continued resistance by Wikipedia to



policies that would require writers to provide RL identities may stem from something more than the idiosyncrasies of a community that has not yet “grown up” (Sanger calls his project Wikipedia for “grownups”). It is important to note that, much of the time, the resistance I speak of comes from *Wikipedia* and not from *Wikipedians*. Many members of this community do argue for keeping the anonymity policy in place, but the actions of editors like Essjay who invent a situated *ethos* of RL expertise show that not all Wikipedians are able to adhere to Wikipedia’s constitution. It is the code of Wikipedia that offers resistance as critics question policies regarding anonymity. But why? What might be the reasons for such a code and its resistance to change?

My discussion of Wikipedia and textual origins is an attempt to address this question. In this chapter, I analyze Wikipedia’s anonymity policy by examining the controversy surrounding Essjay’s false credentials and by discussing Sanger’s Citizendium project. By studying the anonymity policy built into Wikipedia’s constitution, we can open up some new questions about intellectual property. If intellectual property is a search for the origins of a text, then Wikipedia’s code makes this search particularly difficult. What are the ethical implications of this policy? Further, what would be the ethical implications of ending such a policy and requiring RL identities? This chapter explores this part of Wikipedia’s hospitable code—its willingness to welcome the other without demanding an RL name or identity. What we find when parsing this portion of Wikipedia’s code is that a number of critiques of Wikipedia stem from a misunderstanding of the constitution of hospitality underlying the text. Rather than grounding rhetorical exchange in RL identities and credentials by allowing Wikipedians to rely on a situated *ethos* of expertise, the ethical code of Wikipedia grounds discussion in an invented *ethos* that is constructed through a chain of citations. Instead of allowing conversation to hit a brick wall due to an invocation of RL expertise (an invocation that attempts to link a text with an origin), Wikipedia requires a citation. This is not to say that Wikipedia’s code always dictates practice. Wikipedians themselves often do rely on expertise, and this tendency indicates how difficult it is to

abide by Wikipedia's code of citation. In a space where the RL expertise of the Wikipedian is not supposed to be in play, certain Wikipedians have still invented an *ethos* of expertise to slow down (or shut down) conversation.

But such uses of expertise do not change the fact that Wikipedia's code takes a novel approach to intellectual property and textual origins. In the textual space of Wikipedia, the origin of an utterance is not situated in the writer but rather in the sources s/he is citing. In discussions about what should or should not be included in a Wikipedia article, the identity of the writer (whether they are an expert or not) matters less than the quality of the citation. Thus, Wikipedia's policy with regard to anonymity is designed to guard against stopping the conversation with some version of the statement "because I said so." This policy is grounded in a shifting notion of intellectual property—one that does not situate ownership within the author. By revisiting the Essay controversy and by comparing Wikipedia to Citizendium—a project that takes a decidedly different approach to these issues—this chapter will ask: How does our understanding of intellectual property shift in a space that makes it difficult to link texts with origins?

### **Linking Texts with Origins**

In *How To Do Things With Words*, J.L. Austin examines "ordinary" language in an attempt to determine the differences between performative utterances—language that performs a kind of action—and constative utterances—language that merely describes existing reality. In the course of his examination, Austin works through a number of possible ways in which to draw a line between these two kinds of speech-acts, and in the end he determines that the boundary (if it exists) is fuzzy. Austin can be seen as following in the tradition of Gorgias and others who view language as institutive, and he names this aspect of language "the performative." Austin's work allowed other theorists to rethink the speech-act situation. Derrida's extension of Austin's speech-act theory includes the notion of citationality, an idea that becomes particularly useful when considering digital texts:

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. (*Limited Inc* 12)

For Derrida, there is no “original” utterance—there are only citations of previous utterances. A Wikipedia article is a perfect example of such citationality. The article itself does not reside in any one author, and this is not only because it is the result of collaboration but also because it is a quilt of various other texts. Further, *Encyclopedia Britannica* articles are not immune from such citationality. Regardless of its status as an authoritative source written by experts, Britannica cobbles together various citations in the interest of creating a new text. This new text is not an origin and its author is not “the Author.” Rather, both are part of a “nexus of temporal horizons” (Butler 14).<sup>23</sup>

If all speech acts are citational, then tracing any utterance to an origin becomes problematic. Attaching a name or identity to any utterance (written or spoken) is only a provisional, after-the-fact gesture that attempts to manage the complexity of linguistic exchange. In light of these discussions of the speech act, we can view the concept of intellectual property as an attempt to link an utterance with an origin (and, often, to compensate that origin accordingly). The ownership of a text can only happen after we determine the owner. In terms of copyright law, that owner is either the origin of the text (author, artist, musician) or an entity that has purchased the rights to that text. However, citationality complicates these notions, and the Web brings such complications to light. In a space of citational and textual overdrive where texts are sampled, mashed up,

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<sup>23</sup> Others have followed Derrida in blurring the line between rhetor and text. For instance, Judith Butler argues that the redeployment of a term like “queer” suggests that speech-acts do not emit from an utterance origin. Rather, they participate in “a ritual chain of resignifications”: “The revaluation of terms such as ‘queer’ suggest that speech can be ‘returned’ to its speaker in a different form, that it can be cited against its originary purposes, and perform a reversal of effects...this suggests that the changeable power of such terms marks a kind of discursive performativity that is not a discrete series of speech acts, but a ritual chain of resignifications whose origin and end remain unfixed and unfixable. In this sense, an ‘act’ is not a momentary happening, but a certain nexus of temporal horizons, the condensation of an iterability that exceeds the moment it occasions” (14). For Butler, the speaker or writer is not a discrete entity that acts as a point of origin, but is instead a discursive nexus.

cobbled together, and circulated at staggering speeds, linking texts with origins becomes difficult. The Web has not created this situation, but it has made it more visible.

Citatoriality is not confined to digital texts—all texts are, in some sense, mashups; however, the Web draws attention to these sticky issues in a particularly profound way.

This does not mean that traditional copyright is “dead” or that we can no longer compensate artists and writers for their work. Clearly, we can and do continue to make attempts to link texts with authors in some provisional way. However, in the case of Wikipedia, linking utterances with origins becomes extremely difficult. This virtual-textual community remains committed to allowing “anonymous” edits. The constitution of Wikipedia (and, in many ways, the Web more generally) is grounded in a certain kind of anonymity. Wikipedia—the text of Wikipedia, not the Wikipedians themselves—does not care about one’s RL situated *ethos*. That is, there is little stock put in RL credentials. Instead, the focus is on an invented *ethos* that gains its strength from VR identities and from a trail of citations. Situated *ethos* does not disappear in this virtual-textual community. In fact, an invented *ethos* that remains faithful to Wikipedia’s ethic of citatoriality can serve to help someone build a situated *ethos*. Those Wikipedians who spend hours writing and editing articles invent a situated *ethos*, but that situated *ethos* (if it is to remain true to the constitution of Wikipedia) would not make use of RL credentials to drive, guide, or stop discussion. An ethic of citatoriality and conversation prevents the Wikipedian from making claims about his or her RL expertise. What are we to make of the reticence of Wikipedia’s code with regard to RL and situated *ethos*? We might find some possible answers to this question by taking a closer look at a situation in which Wikipedia’s stance on anonymity became scandalous.

### **Anonymity Trouble**

We can now return to the story that opened this chapter—a story that tells us a great deal about Wikipedia’s constitution with regard to *ethos*, textual origins, and intellectual property. While Daniel Brandt was largely responsible for the “outing” of

Essjay as a fraud with his letter to *The New Yorker*, others had noticed this inconsistency as well. A fellow Wikipedian posed this question to Essjay on his Wikipedia “User Talk” page (a page on which Wikipedians provide personal information):

Essjay, I'm kinda puzzled. Your Wikia profile says that you're 24 years old, work as a Community Manager for Wikia, and used to be employed by a Fortune 200 company. But your Wikibooks profile says you're over 30 and currently work as a Theology professor. Is the Wikia profile someone else? I hope you can shed some light on this matter. ("User Talk: Essjay")

Jordan responded that he had, in fact, created a fake persona for Wikipedia to avoid “the attention of an unsavory element.”<sup>24</sup> He claimed that stalkers often made death threats to high profile Wikipedians, and that rather than worry about such threats he had created the “Essjay” identity. Yet, for Jordan, this fake identity was not necessarily a way of hiding something. In fact, it was just the opposite. Jordan claims that those Wikipedians who attempted to hide their identity would inevitably let a detail slip, allowing others to find out their RL identity. Rather than having to carefully guard personal information, he created a new persona. In his mind, this allowed him to avoid paranoia of maintaining complete anonymity:

I decided to be myself, to never hide my personality, to always be who I am, but to utilize disinformation with regard to what I consider unimportant details: age, location, occupation, etc. As a result, I've made many strong friendships here, because I've always been the person I am, but the stalkers have spent the last two years searching for middle-aged college professors with the initials ‘SJ’ (which are, by the way, my initials) who live in the Northeast; I never had to worry that anything I said would lead back to me, because the areas they focused on, the unimportant statistical information, was a cover. ("User Talk: Essjay")

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<sup>24</sup> We should note that things get muddled when we attempt to draw a line between “Essjay” and “Ryan Jordan.” Going forward, I will use the name “Jordan” to refer to the Wikia employee and “Essjay” to refer to the Wikipedian. This allows me to manage complexity, but it also serves to smooth over a productive question: Where does Jordan end? Where does Essjay begin?

He goes on to say that he thought stalkers “were the only people who actually believed the story” and that a glance at his edits should have made it clear that he was not a theologian: “most everybody who is particularly close to me knew it was a cover.” That is, Jordan built this situated ethos of expertise for “outsiders” and “stalkers.” Jordan believed that those Wikipedians who dealt with Essjay on a regular basis did not believe that he held such credentials.

After he was hired by Wikia, Jordan revealed his RL identity to Wales and others within the company, and this raised no problems for his new employers. For Essjay and others in the Wikipedia community, this truly was not a major event. He describes the reactions of those he talked to after the “came out”:

Nothing really has changed any; I'm still the person everybody has known for the past two years, I just have a different job. I've never been disingenuous in my interactions with others: I've always been myself, and have every intention to continue being myself, people just know a bit more about what I look like and where I live now. Of the dozens of people I've talked to since I “came out,” all have been happy to have a face to associate with the person they know, have understood the need to be protected, and have no doubts that nothing has changed about the person they have come to know. I don't expect anyone who knows me to feel any different. ("User Talk: Essjay")

This reaction held true for many Wikipedia insiders. This is revealed in the nonchalant reaction of Dev920, the Wikipedian who initially raised the question to Essjay: “That makes a lot of sense. I didn't think you had the time to be everything you said you were. :) Thanks for taking the time to write such a lengthy reply, and congratulations on getting the job at Wikia!” ("User Talk: Essjay").

But this kind of understanding response seems to have been confined only to certain contributors. Upon receiving information from Brandt about Jordan’s true identity, *The New Yorker* published an editorial note:

Essjay was recommended to Ms. Schiff as a source by a member of Wikipedia's management team because of his respected position within the Wikipedia community. He was willing to describe his work as a Wikipedia administrator but would not identify himself other than by confirming the biographical details that appeared on his user page. At the time of publication, neither we nor Wikipedia knew Essjay's real name. (Schiff)

The Editorial Note closes with a quote from Wales: "I regard it as a pseudonym and I don't really have a problem with it." Such reactions were baffling to bloggers and other commentators: "The reaction from Wiki devotees to this scandal is bizarre to outsiders. Jordan pointed the finger at the *New Yorker* for not being wise to his game. Others attacked Brandt—a popular Wiki pastime" (King). However, as time wore on, a number of Wikipedians expressed their displeasure with Essjay's charade. A "Request For Comments" page—"an informal, lightweight process for requesting outside input, consensus building, and dispute resolution, with respect to article content, user conduct, and Wikipedia policy and guidelines" ("Wikipedia: Requests")—shows hundreds of responses by Wikipedians, many of whom were upset with Essjay's conduct. A straw poll initiated around the same time shows a range of opinions on the matter ("Straw Poll").

Within days of the publication of *The New Yorker's* editorial note, even Wales was having second thoughts: "When I last spoke to *The New Yorker* about the fact that a prominent Wikipedia community member had lied about his credentials, I misjudged the issue. It was not O.K. for Mr. Jordan, or Essjay, to lie to a reporter, even to protect his identity" (Schiff).<sup>25</sup> Wales asked Jordan to step down from Wikipedia. He did, and he also resigned from his position at Wikia. The pressure of media attention (the story was covered by many major media outlets) had forced Wales to change his tune. In a clash between Wikipedia's policy with regard to the RL expertise of Wikipedians and some

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<sup>25</sup> Jordan's suspect behavior was not confined to this claim of false credentials. He also claimed that Schiff offered to compensate him for his time—an ethical no-no for journalists. Schiff denied this (Lih).

conventional understandings of authorship and textual origins, Wikipedia's policies are (at least temporarily) pushed into the background. This seems to provide evidence that Wikipedia's approach to textual origins is not yet quite in line with popular notions of intellectual property.

In the wake of this controversy, both Wikipedians and the community's critics began to dig through some of Essjay's edits and contributions. In doing so, many found that Essjay spent most of his time "ensuring that the encyclopedia was as free as possible of vandalism and drawn-out editing fights" (Cohen). Wales made similar claims, and pointed out that Essjay was a very likable Wikipedian:

He spent most of his time reverting vandalism, mediating disputes and was always a very kind and loving and thoughtful person who, you know, anytime people were having a dispute it was always good to see Essjay show up because he was quite good at getting all parties on the same track. (Wales qtd. in Williams)

Yet, Essjay's claim that he had "never been disingenuous" turned out to be somewhat disingenuous. In certain situations, Essjay used a particular identity—that is, the situated *ethos* of a credentialed professor—to guide discussion or claim expertise. One such instance involved Essjay's contribution to the article for "Imprimatur." By following edits on the discussion page for this article, we can see how Essjay violated Wikipedia's constitution. He did this by using situated *ethos* to guide a discussion about Catholic doctrine.

An Imprimatur is an approval issued by a bishop of the Catholic Church that "assures the reader that nothing therein is contrary to Catholic faith or morals" ("Imprimatur"). From March 28, 2005 through September 2, 2005, the discussion page for Wikipedia's "Imprimatur" article shows an exchange between Essjay and other Wikipedians:



### **March 28, 2005**

A user notes a problem with the article:

The explanations of Imprimatur and *Nihil Obstat* presented here are confused.

The following Web page apparently gets it right:

<http://www.kensmen.com/catholic/imprimatur.html>

### **March 29**

A day later, this same user adds a more specific discussion of the problems with this article and asks for help editing the article:

More specifically, the current article seems to reverse the roles of imprimatur and *nihil obstat*. It would probably be more accurate to write, “While the *nihil obstat* certifies there is no moral or doctrinal error, the imprimatur is an express permission from the bishop for the text to be printed.” (That is, the censor does the legwork, then the bishop confers his authority on the censor's decision.)

In addition, *nihil obstat* is better translated “nothing hinders” [publishing the reviewed work].

I would edit the actual Imprimatur article directly, if I trusted my ability to do so successfully. There are MANY rules and conventions I have not learned!

### **April 12**

Essjay enters the discussion arguing that the article is correct as is and cites *Catholicism for Dummies*, a text that he claims he often requires for his students:

I do not believe this to be correct. An individual bishop has no power outside his diocese to forbid anything to be printed, thus he cannot offer a *nihil obstat*, only an imprimatur, which certifies that the text is free from moral error....Unless of course he is the Bishop of Rome. However, the censor, who is an agent of the

Roman Curia/Holy See may certainly place a text on the “blacklist” of heretical publications. I believe the entry to be correct as it reads, and I offer as my reference the text “Catholicism for Dummies” by Trigilio (Ph.D./Th.D.) and Brighenti (Ph.D.). The text offers a *Nihil Obstat* from the Rev. Daniel J. Mahan, STB, STL, Censor Librorum, and an Imprimatur from the Rev. Msgr. Joseph F. Schaedel, Vicar General. This is a text I often require for my students, and I would hang my own Ph.D. on it's [*sic*] credibility.

### **April 21**

Another Wikipedian enters the discussion and also claims that the article is flawed: “Imprimatur translates as ‘let it be printed’. I think this text is the wrong way round, too.”

### **April 23**

A third Wikipedian agrees with the first two and makes changes to the article: “The text is totally the wrong way round. I'm changing it.”

### **April 25**

Essjay backtracks, saying that he has consulted with “the Curia”—an official ruling body of the Roman Catholic Church—and admits that he was at least partially wrong:

After consulting with the Curia, I amend my above-comments. Imprimatur is a permission to print, about this I was incorrect. However, it can only be issued by a bishop. *Nihil obstat* is a certification that no error exists, and is issued by the censor.

### **September 2**

More than four months after Essjay's partial retraction, another Wikipedian updates the article and adds this comment to the discussion page:

I've updated this document significantly; I work for a Catholic book publisher as well as for the bishop of the local diocese, and have worked to get the imprimatur on several books -- no offense to "Catholicism for Dummies," but it was definitely unclear (a Ph.D. doesn't necessarily mean someone understands Catholic practices very well...) ;)

This final jab—"a Ph.D. doesn't necessarily mean someone understands Catholic practices very well"—might be taken by some as evidence of Wikipedia's hostility to expertise. However, in this particular case, the expert is not really an expert, and healthy skepticism has made for a more accurate article. This skepticism has made for a fruitful rhetorical exchange. Further, this exchange shows us that in a contest between an invocation of Essjay's RL expertise and Wikipedia's code of anonymity—a code that does not allow expert writers to easily rest on authority and forces anyone to provide a citation—anonymity wins the day. Wikipedia's code means that, in this particular situation, Essjay's claim of expertise (regardless of its fraudulence) fails to stop the discussion. Wikipedians disregard his claim of situated *ethos* (one that relies on false credentials) and focus on the invented *ethos* of Essjay and others as they provide citations and sources in order to better the article. All of this happens regardless of Essjay's attempts to halt discussion with a claim of expertise. It is also worth noting that the September 2 comment was posted by a user (identified only by the IP address 206.172.186.144) who had made only four edits to Wikipedia, all of which involved content pertaining to Catholic Doctrine. As we will see later in this chapter, such "hit and run" Wikipedians are responsible for a great deal of Wikipedia's content.

One more use of false credentials by Essjay is worth noting—a letter that he sent to professors who told students not to cite Wikipedia.<sup>26</sup> Essjay explains his letter: "I've contacted a few professors after other Wikipedians have pointed out that the instructor

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<sup>26</sup> This page was deleted from Wikipedia due to its "Right to disappear" policy, however the letter is archived at two other websites: Wikitruth and Webcite. Of course, it can also be found at the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>), a site that reminds us that a Web text can never truly disappear.

made the ‘Wikipedia is not a reliable source’ argument to students who were, in fact, Wikipedians [*sic*]” (“Wikipedia:Administrators”). He goes on to say that when he was head of his department he would have wanted to know about a professor making such remarks, and he suggests that a student confronted by such a professor “make an appointment with the department head/dean/provost post haste.” The entire text of Essjay’s letter is worth citing:

Dear Prof. \*Name removed\*:

I am an administrator of the online encyclopedia project Wikipedia. I am also a tenured professor of theology; feel free to have a look at my Wikipedia userpage (linked below) to gain an idea of my background and credentials.

I am contacting you because I was contacted by one of your students concerning an email you sent to one of your classes. In your email, you indicated to them that Wikipedia was not to be considered an authoritative source; I completely agree with you that Wikipedia, alone, should not be considered authoritative. However, I am sure that you would agree with me that first and foremost, encyclopedias aren't intended to be college-level academic sources, and second, that no source should be considered authoritative without a secondary source to verify it.

Wikipedia is not intended as a stand-alone reference; it is imperative that information gleaned from Wikipedia be checked for accuracy, just as information gleaned from any other source. (I for one would not accept the authenticity of a given statement based on a single source; I expect my students to check their facts, regardless of where they originate.)

It is certainly none of my business whether you allow your students to cite Wikipedia, however, I find it very disturbing that you included the statement “it is

my understanding that anyone can put anything there, and it is not vetted for accuracy.” There are tens of thousands of contributors to our site (far more than to a traditional encyclopedia), and every change to the site is viewed by multiple individuals to determine its accuracy and insure that it is appropriate for inclusion. Well credentialed individuals (myself included) participate in the project in the hopes that our involvement will help to make Wikipedia a better source, and dispel the misconceptions held by the public. Studies conducted by independent (and credible) parties, including IBM (<http://researchweb.watson.ibm.com/history/index.htm>) verify that vandalism (deliberate insertion of inappropriate material) is generally corrected within five minutes, and that the accuracy level of Wikipedia approaches and often surpasses that of Britannica [*sic*].

Wikipedia has recently experienced some bad publicity over the John Seigenthaler Sr. affair (I know the issue extensively; I was the administrator who deleted the inappropriate revisions when Mr. Seigenthaler contacted our founder, Jimmy Wales); it is quite unfortunate that a relatively minor issue on a relatively minor figure has provided so much negative publicity. However, I urge you to reconsider your views on Wikipedia, as there is a dedicated corps of volunteers who work very hard to maintain the accuracy and integrity of Wikipedia. It is never the case that known incorrect information is allowed to remain in Wikipedia; we strive to provide a resource that is both accurate and expansive. As we approach one million articles (far more than any other encyclopedia could ever hope to attain) on the English Wikipedia alone (there are hundreds of thousands of articles in the projects that make up the Wikimedia Foundation in dozens of different languages), we prove ourselves as a resource like none ever known before.

Wikipedia is an excellent resource, one that can point your students in directions that they would not have otherwise considered. When used correctly (i.e., the information taken from the site is verified with a secondary source) Wikipedia is an invaluable and irreplaceable source. I hope that you will reconsider your view, and that if you find yourself so inclined, will join us in creating the greatest collection of knowledge known to man. Individuals like yourself--respected educators with advanced credentials--are an invaluable resource to Wikipedia, and I would be honored to see you join our ranks. Should you decide to do so, please drop by my discussion page and say hello.

Let me leave you with a quote from our founder, Jimmy Wales, which puts our mission into words with Jimmy's amazing ability for clarity:

‘Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing.’

Yours,

Essjay

("User: Essjay/Letter")

Seth Finkelstein, a computer programmer and blogger, argues that this letter is “fascinating” in that it reveals how Wikipedia “fundamentally runs by an extremely deceptive sort of social promise...by selling the heavy contributors on the dream, the illusion, that it'll give them the prestige of an academic (‘writing an encyclopedia’)” (Finkelstein "What the New Yorker Article Fraud Tells Us About Wikipedia"). Finkelstein believes that this delusion does little more than deceive Wikipedians while benefitting investors in companies like Wikia. He sees the letter as polite and “very nice” and “[t]he sort of thing written either by a slick con man who is cleverly utterly false, or a delusional personality who is playing a role so deeply as to believe it with every fiber of

his being” (Finkelstein "What the New Yorker"). I would agree with Finkelstein that, in retrospect, the letter reads as if Essjay has convinced himself that he is a credentialed academic.

However, what seems more interesting about this letter is that much of it is well-reasoned and well-argued. Essjay’s statements that encyclopedias are not “college-level academic sources,” that no source should be considered authoritative without some other source as verification, and that Wikipedia is not intended as a “stand-alone” reference are all valid. I find it difficult to argue with his statement that “[w]hen used correctly (i.e., the information taken from the site is verified with a secondary source) Wikipedia is an invaluable and irreplaceable source.” Yet, the fact remains that this entire defense of Wikipedia is framed by Essjay’s opening statement that he is a “tenured professor” and that the recipient of this letter should refer to Wikipedia for information about his “background and credentials.” These statements allow Essjay to gain purchase and firmly establish his situated *ethos* in a discussion from which he would otherwise be excluded. However, this situated *ethos* based on Essjay’s RL expertise violated the constitution of Wikipedia—a constitution that attempts to remain in the realm of an invented *ethos* based upon citations. Such a constitution situates intellectual property in a string of citations and footnotes rather than within the expert subject.

### **Essjay Fallout**

The Essjay controversy caused a great deal of public outcry. In a March 7, 2007 blog post, Andrew Keen compares Wikipedia’s dealings with Essjay to the Czechoslovakian communist party’s ability to make people vanish: “The communists, of course, were particularly adept at forgetting” (Keen). Keen argues that Wikipedia has done the same with Essjay: “Jimmy Wales fired loyal Jordan/Essjay and, all of a sudden, the kid/theologian is history. One minute he's everywhere and then he's nowhere...Now Wikipedia just says: RETIRED: This user is no longer active on Wikipedia” (Keen). Keen is an outspoken critic of communities like Wikipedia that valorize the amateur at

the expense of the expert. His book, *The Cult of the Amateur*, argues that blogs are destroying traditional journalism and that communities like Wikipedia are eliminating any hope of obtaining reliable information online.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, Keen (who presents himself as an authoritative source and a “professional” writer capable of doing research) is completely wrong when he claims that Wikipedia attempted to “disappear” Essjay. Some texts (such as the form letter that Essjay sent to professors) were deleted from the site, but had Keen done more investigating he would have realized that the Wikipedia community was obsessively discussing the controversy.

On March 2, 2007 (five days prior to Keen’s blog entry at ZDNet), a “request for comments” page had been initiated that would allow Wikipedians to discuss the Essjay controversy. On that same day, the “Essjay controversy” Wikipedia article was a mere “stub”—the name Wikipedia gives the brief chunk of text that initiates an article—but it existed. This first version of the article explained who Ryan Jordan was, referenced the article in *The New Yorker*, and explained that Jordan lacked the degrees he claimed to have (“Essjay Controversy”). And this was not the only space in which Wikipedians were discussing Essjay. There is a great deal of evidence that not all in the community thought Essjay’s transgression was minor, and many wanted to discuss the issue out in the open. These extensive conversations seem to conflict with Keen’s account that Wikipedia was looking to forget that Essjay ever existed. A piece by Noam Cohen in the *International Herald Tribune* reports that “[m]ounting anger was expressed in public forums like the user pages of Wales and Essjay” and that after some initial understanding responses by Wikipedia insiders, the sentiment eventually shifted: “the prevailing view was summarized in subject lines like Essjay Must Resign, and notes calling the actions by

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<sup>27</sup>A full engagement with this text and its many flawed arguments would require its own book-length project, and I can only hope that some of my arguments here act as answers to Keen’s flimsy claims. Others have found Keen’s text wanting as well. Lessig points out that Keen’s text “purports to be a book attacking the sloppiness, error and ignorance of the Internet” and is simultaneously “shot through with sloppiness, error and ignorance. It tells us that without institutions, and standards, to signal what we can trust (like the institution (Doubleday) that decided to print his book), we won't know what's true and what's false. But the book itself is riddled with falsity—from simple errors of fact, to gross misreadings of arguments, to the most basic errors of economics” (Lessig “Keen's”).



Jordan ‘plain and simple fraud’” (Cohen). Of course, it should not be forgotten that initial reactions were indeed less harsh, and that much outcry happened only after the story began to circulate widely. Sanger believes that this delayed reaction is less than desirable but that it at least “demonstrates that Wikipedia is in fact still constrained by the higher ethics of the larger and more mature world of which it is a part” (Sanger "One Last"). We will address Sanger’s various accusations of immaturity later in this chapter.

Nevertheless, some of the discussion happening in the wake of the Essjay scandal revolved around developing a policy by which Wikipedians would have to provide valid credentials. These were issues that had been raised before, but the community had been resistant to such a change. Wales himself pushed for this change, but the discussions and straw polls mentioned above resulted in no change of policy (Wales "User: Jimbo"). Regardless of arguments that Wikipedia needed a policy for validating credentials, Wikipedians like Misza13 continued to argue that “nobody cares about your credentials.” In response to pleas from academics that their degrees do in fact “mean something,” this Wikipedian expresses the citational ethic of Wikipedia succinctly:

As a qualified academic you should be at an advantaged position for finding external sources for articles. Use that! Make Wikipedia a better encyclopedia and everyone will be grateful...however, your credentials will not give you any upper hand in content disputes (unless of course you manage to find external sources backing up your claims, but how's that different from anyone else providing them?) ("User: Misza13")

If anything was going to persuade Wikipedia (the text) and Wikipedians (the writers) that a change in policy was necessary, one would think it would be the Essjay controversy. The Wikipedia community spent a great deal of time talking about Essjay and the issue of credentials, but in the end they did not change the policy. Why? Such reticence stems from Wikipedia’s devotion to its constitution of anonymity and its stance on which kinds of *ethos* should dictate conversation. This is not to say that the constitution is unchangeable, but it is to say that the ethic of citationality is very deeply ingrained.

The anonymity policy is stubborn for a reason—it is intricately tied to Wikipedia’s notions of intellectual property. On Wikipedia, the origin of an utterance is less important than the citational path provided by authors. In practice, this policy can fall short—one need only note the many “citation needed” links interspersed throughout Wikipedia articles. However, the underlying constitution of Wikipedia still attempts to keep Wikipedians from falling back on claims of RL expertise and the linking of text with origin. Rather than allowing anyone to stop the conversation by invoking a situated *ethos* of expertise (a move that is not well-suited for an interdisciplinary conversation that cannot be grounded in any one set of rhetorical assumptions), Wikipedia attempts to remain in the realm of invented *ethos* by demanding citations.

### **Advantages of Anonymity**

The Essay episode shows some of the problems that stem from Wikipedia’s code of anonymity; however, this portion of its constitution has also been responsible for the textual proliferation of Wikipedia. As I have argued in this chapter, Wikipedia’s anonymity policy is linked to its assumptions regarding textual origins and intellectual property. However, there are other reasons for such a policy. To understand some of the practical advantages of the anonymity policy, we can turn to discussions about who exactly writes Wikipedia articles. Jimmy Wales contends that Wikipedia is not some “emergent phenomenon—the wisdom of mobs, swarm intelligence, that sort of thing” (Wales qtd. in Swartz). Instead, Wales argues that Wikipedia is run by a tight-knit community “much like any traditional organization” (Swartz). However, Aaron Swartz has a different take on the situation. Swartz cites an informal study that Wales did to prove his theorem, a study in which Wales found that 50% of all Wikipedia edits were done by .7% of its users and that the most active 2% of users have completed 73.4% of all edits (Swartz). Such numbers suggest that Wales is right—a relatively small number of people do much of the work on Wikipedia. And Swartz does not argue with the accuracy of Wales’ numbers. In fact, Wikipedia’s status as an open source project means

that nearly anyone can access the same data and perform their own study. This is what Swartz, a web developer who studied briefly at Stanford University, decided to do. He wondered whether counting the number of characters a user contributes rather than the number of edits would paint a different picture.

In August 2006, Swartz set out to answer his question by studying the Wikipedia article on Alan Alda. While Wales claims that most edits from Wikipedia outsiders come in the form of vandalism or small changes to articles, Swartz found something very different: “Almost every time I saw a substantive edit, I found the user who had contributed it was not an active user of the site. They generally had made less than 50 edits (typically around 10), usually on related pages. Most never even bothered to create an account” (Swartz). Further, when he studied the article in terms of the number of characters contributed by particular users, he found that few of the top contributors to the “Alan Alda” article had even registered for accounts. He repeated this study with other articles and found similar results. Wales believes that most of the work comes from a relatively small circle of people, but Swartz’s study shows that

an outsider makes one edit to add a chunk of information, then insiders make several edits tweaking and reformatting it. In addition, insiders rack up thousands of edits doing things like changing the name of a category across the entire site—the kind of thing only insiders deeply care about. As a result, insiders account for the vast majority of the edits. But it's the outsiders who provide nearly all of the content. (Swartz)

Once we recognize that so much work is coming from “occasional contributors,” we can see the significance of Swartz’s study in terms of Wikipedia’s stubborn anonymity policy. The hospitable structure of Wikipedia—a structure that is in line with a policy that allows for anonymous edits—is directly responsible for the textual proliferation of Wikipedia. As Swartz notes, this hospitality is what has allowed Wikipedia to accumulate so much content—content that people continue to use regardless of continual concerns about quality:

If Wikipedia is written by occasional contributors, then growing it requires making it easier and more rewarding to contribute occasionally. Instead of trying to squeeze more work out of those who spend their life on Wikipedia, we need to broaden the base of those who contribute just a little bit. (Swartz)

Thus, with all of its problems, anonymity has been directly responsible for its growth and success. The constitution of this virtual-textual community is not a mistake. By allowing “hit and run” writers to contribute so much substantive content, Wikipedia has grown to be one of the world’s most popular sites of digital writing.

Beyond these practical reasons, we should also note the ethical assumptions of a code of hospitality—a code that allows for anonymity. Such a code allows more voices to join the conversation and draws a fuzzier line between inside and outside. It should be stressed that Wikipedia still has its boundaries—there are insiders and outsiders. However, the line between inside and outside is not necessarily drawn based upon expertise or on RL identities. Instead, the constitution of Wikipedia insists upon anonymity, and this sets the stage for a noisy, unwieldy text that frustrates those invested in traditional notions of intellectual property and ownership. Such noise makes finding textual origins difficult, if not impossible. It also means that, in many ways, Wikipedia breaks with a tradition of encyclopedias grounded in philosophical discourse. The textual noise of Wikipedia makes it a rhetorical project based in argument and contingency rather than a philosophical project grounded in certitude.

The rhetorical underpinnings of Wikipedia are especially interesting considering that it was a project initiated by philosophers. Sanger earned his Ph.D. in Philosophy at Ohio State University and Wales administered an Objectivist philosophy mailing list for many years. As we discovered in chapter one, Sanger and Wales established Wikipedia in January 2001 on a whim. Struggling with the a smart network of Nupedia—a textual structure based on linearity and the RL expertise of authors—Sanger instituted a dumb network that invited anyone willing to writer. The instant success of this hospitable

structure meant that Nupedia was abandoned, and this was something that Sanger lamented:

We always suspected that we would wind up scrapping our first attempts to design an editorial system, and that we would learn a great deal from those first attempts; and that's essentially what happened. But Nupedia could have evolved, and would have, had we continued working on it. (Sanger "The Early" 311)

Sanger believed that the Nupedia model of involving experts was a strong one, and he assumed that Wikipedia would eventually incorporate this model in some way. However, as the Wikipedia project grew, Sanger began to have second thoughts. A wiki-based encyclopedia addressed the shortage of content, but it created an entirely new set of problems by inviting a broad range of voices to the conversation. Such cacophony meant a loss of control for Sanger, and it eventually forced him to leave the Wikipedia project. In writings published after he left, Sanger has voiced his displeasure with the community's alleged "anti-elitism" (Sanger "Why Wikipedia").

Wikipedia eventually became too sprawling for Sanger, the philosopher, who grew to despise how debates were carried out in this virtual community:

On a wiki, contributions exist in perpetuity, as it were, or until they are deleted or radically changed. Consequently, anyone new to a discussion sees the first contribution first. So, whoever starts a new page for discussion also, to a great extent, sets the tone and agenda of the discussion. Moreover, nasty exchanges live on forever on a wiki, festering like an open wound, unless deliberately toned down afterward; if the same exchange takes place on a mailing list, it slips mercifully and quietly into the archives. ("The Early" 326)

Upon Wikipedia's shift from knowledge repository to a site of debate, Sanger got exceedingly uncomfortable with the community's direction. Debate called for shift away from dialectical exchange via email to rhetorical exchange via a wiki. Sanger's metaphor of "festering wounds" offers a particularly vivid image of Wikipedia articles—untraceable to an origin and always a site of debate.

Sanger was happy to have debate and conversation, but he didn't view it as part of the encyclopedic article. Instead, he believed it should happen in closed off spaces (like email lists) where particularly difficult opinions can disappear “mercifully and quietly.” In a quest for Truth, Sanger longed for a medium that allowed noise to be filtered. He hoped that debate would happen out of sight and behind the scenes, something that the Wikipedia’s structure resisted. A digital commons will often leave the “festering wounds” that bothered Sanger unbandaged. As a perpetually open conversation, it invites debate and disagreement. As much as we might object to Sanger vilifying the openness of a text like Wikipedia, such openness is not necessarily always a good thing. Festering wounds stink. Debates can devolve into flame wars, and libelous statements can live on unnoticed.<sup>28</sup> However, the move to bandage a wound can shut down discussion. Oftentimes, these shutdowns can happen when a situated *ethos* of the writer’s expertise serves to clean up a mess and assert the expert Wikipedian as textual origin. Such an assertion runs counter to Wikipedia’s constitution, a constitution that opts for fuzzy origins over clean (and fictitious) ones. It was this constitution that drove Sanger away from the messy and unwieldy text of Wikipedia and toward a virtual-textual community with a different kind of constitution.

### **Wikipedia and Citizendium**

Wikipedia is a massive digital commons that attempts to deal with the messy textual situation brought on by hospitality. It is operated by a non-profit organization called Wikimedia, but Wikimedia is not the owner of the text. Wikipedia is not owned in the same way a text like Britannica is owned. That is, no single entity can exercise rights over the content of Wikipedia. The Web itself is a commons as well, and this causes problems for many who attempt to bring the logic of copyright and property to digital spaces. Commons systems and property systems deal with issues of intellectual property

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<sup>28</sup> John Siegenthaler, former assistant to Robert Kennedy, was falsely implicated in Kennedy’s assassination by a Wikipedia vandal. This controversy is dealt with in more detail in chapter four.

and textual origins in different ways. When more voices are invited to the conversation, a digital commons demands citations while a property-based scheme will allow authors to act as the origin of a text. The constitution of the digital commons is not free of its problems, but it does introduce an entirely new set of questions by forcing us to rethink our traditional notions of intellectual property. This new stance toward intellectual property acknowledges the difficulties of linking texts with origins and recognizes that all knowledge comes from outside the writer/speaker—from other texts and other authors. While a property system is a permission culture in which we ask permission to remake cultural products, a commons is a free culture that encourages collaboration. In many ways, this free culture preserves the notion of property while also recognizing that all cultural products are part of an ongoing conversation.

We might be tempted to draw a line between commons and property systems with the notion of money, but money has very little to do with this difference. Lessig often cites free software advocate Richard Stallman’s statement that the “free” of free culture has little to do with free beer and much more to do with free speech. The differences between Wikipedia and Sanger’s Citizendium offer a good example of this. Citizendium, like Wikipedia, costs nothing. However, if we think of the relationship between the commons and property-based schemes as sitting at either end of a continuum, we would find Citizendium closer to the property end of that continuum. We can read Citizendium as one philosopher’s attempt to ground a “compendium of human knowledge” in the philosophical assumptions of truth and authority. Citizendium requires contributors to provide their real names and some proof of their RL identities. This, along with some of the other assumptions built into Citizendium’s code, indicates that it is a tolerant project rather than a hospitable one—one that welcomes the anonymous other in a more measured way.

In March 2007, Sanger launched Citizendium as a project that was originally intended to be a “fork” of Wikipedia. Forking is a term taken from the software development community to describe projects that fork off from their original. Because

projects like Wikipedia are open source, anyone can take the project in a different direction. The Spanish version of Wikipedia forked because of concerns that Wikipedia would eventually fund the project with advertisements.<sup>29</sup> Citizendium eventually abandoned the idea of forking in favor of starting from scratch and developing all of its own content. On its face, this appears to be an intolerant move. Bothered by the constitution of Wikipedia, Citizendium decided to establish a brand new text. Indeed, some of Sanger's remarks about the direction of Wikipedia seem very intolerant. However, we should also note that there is no move by Citizendium to rid the world of Wikipedia. Instead, Citizendium attempts to be a different kind of community one that bills itself as more "grownup" and more reliable. While statements made by Sanger and other Citizendium "citizens" may seem intolerant, at the level of code and constitution Citizendium is an example of the logic of tolerance. In the mode of tolerance, the writer starts from scratch. This writer's text will be linked to other texts via networks of intertextuality, but this does not change the fact that the creation of a new text is a tolerant reaction. This reaction becomes difficult to maintain in any absolute sense when dealing with electronic texts, and we will see this when we examine Citizendium's policy regarding incorporating Wikipedia content into the "citizen's compendium." The line between what belongs to Wikipedia and what belongs to Citizendium is tenuous at best. However, the decision to create a new project rather than a fork does assume the ability to pull these texts apart and draw definite lines.

Citizendium is similar to Wikipedia in certain ways—it is an "open wiki project" and a "free" encyclopedia. However, it also draws particular lines between itself and Wikipedia by claiming to be more reliable. In fact, Citizendium devotes an entire page to the ways in which it is different from Wikipedia. Among the many differences this page lays out, this community explains that it has editors, respects expertise, and doesn't use "zillions of acronyms" ("We Aren't"). In addition to these differences, it has different

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<sup>29</sup> Advertising is something that the Wikipedia community has continued to resist; however, a partner project called Veropedia is driven by advertising revenue. Veropedia is seeks to verify Wikipedia content: "to collect the best of Wikipedia's content, clean it up, vet it, and save it for all time" ("Veropedia Faq").



policies regarding copyright. Up until December 2007, Citizendium had not yet decided on a license dictating how its work could be used or reused: “This is still under discussion, but will be either the GFDL, CC-by-sa, or CC-by-nc-sa” (“We Aren't”). The GFDL license is the license that Wikipedia uses, and the two Creative Commons licenses that were under consideration by Citizendium are “Attribution-Share Alike” licenses. These are licenses that require anyone reusing the content to attribute it to Citizendium and to release any derivative texts under this same license. Note that none of these licenses are in the realm of “copyright.” For all of its differences with Wikipedia, Citizendium is still very much dedicated to the copyleft notion of free content—content that can be reused and redistributed by others. In December 2007, Citizendium chose a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike license that would allow for commercial uses of its content. As Sanger notes, the problem of commercial use was “an issue on which ‘Citizens’ were evenly divided” (Sanger “Our Gift”).<sup>30</sup>

If both Wikipedia and Citizendium are situated firmly in the tradition of “copyleft,” what is the difference between the two? Are they both part of the digital commons? The answer here is complicated. Citizendium is a commons in aggregate. That is, no one person owns the rights to the community or its text. However, this commons sits upon a property-based scheme by linking text to RL identities. Wikipedia doesn’t ground intellectual property in the expert Wikipedian. Rather, it grounds intellectual property in citations and sources. Instead of allowing writers to point to credentials, Wikipedia asks them to point to verifiable sources. Thus, while it does allow for a messier system of anonymous edits, it grounds knowledge in an invented *ethos* based on citation. In essence, Wikipedia (the constitution, not the writers) does not care about the writer’s RL credentials. It cares about citations, about the texts that one points

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<sup>30</sup> We should also note that a great deal of content was developed for Citizendium prior to this decision being made. We might argue that this indicates how important an intellectual property policy is to Citizendium’s founders. Apparently, this was not a decision they have taken lightly. Still, that the text began without a copyleft policy indicates that community members were left wondering how the text would be licensed. All of the content residing on Citizendium prior to this license being instituted was retroactively licensed; meaning that, for a time, contributor content was in a state of limbo.

to as they construct an article. If one cares to use their own credentials as one of these texts—that is, to *cite* their credentials—when writing an article, it will most likely be considered as one text among many others rather than as “The Text” that buoys the credibility of a given writer. These two communities deal with the origins of texts very differently.

The property scheme leanings of Citizendium can be seen in a couple of places. First, prior to adoption of a Creative Commons license, Citizendium contributors had to “give to the Citizendium Foundation a non-exclusive right to relicense their work. This allows the Citizendium Foundation to be the sole entity that licenses the entire Citizendium corpus” (“We Aren't”). Giving a sole entity (the Citizendium Foundation) the ability to license the text seems to push against the commons-based notion that no one person or entity can exercise property rights. Further, Citizendium has put a number of restrictions in place that prevent anonymous users from contributing. By tying content directly to RL identities—those signing up for Citizendium accounts are asked for their “real name,” handles or monikers are not allowed—Citizendium looks to connect texts with their origins. A framework of “property” is what influences Sanger's many critiques of Wikipedia as a celebration of amateurism, and it is what drives his rival project. This distinction between commons-based and property-based logics has little to do with money—it has to do with how these two virtual-textual communities conceive of the origins of a text.

Citizendium is a project rooted in tolerance, a more measured form of hospitality. Wikipedia's hospitality is measured and cautious in certain ways, as well. For instance, articles are often locked to anonymous edits due to vandalism, and Wikipedians have ongoing debates about articles that meet the “notability” requirement. However, it is quite different than the model of Citizendium. Contributors to Sanger's encyclopedia must send an email including their “real name,” an endorsement of Citizendium’s “Statement of Fundamental Policies,” and a 100-500 word biography. In addition, it is considered “helpful” if potential authors provide web links establishing their identity and

if they send an email from “non-free e mail address that bears [his or her] name” (“Join”). The use of such policies leads Citizendium to differentiate itself from “that other community” and to identify as a more grown up text: “Several people, independently, have said that we're ‘Wikipedia for grown-ups.’ That's because we require real names, at least a brief (and accurate) bio, and the contributor's agreement to follow our ‘Statement of Fundamental Policies’ (“Cz: The Author Role”). These policies put Citizendium *above* Wikipedia:

Citizendium will have a set of persons of mature judgment specially empowered to enforce rules, called (at least tentatively) ‘constables.’ The enforcement of project rules--up to and including the ejection of participants from the project--is to be carried out using common sense and leniency while following ‘the rule of law.’ (“Cz: Fundamentals”)

The constables will exercise “mature judgment,” especially when “ejecting” authors. The implication here is that Wikipedia allows for a great deal of juvenile behavior. Indeed, a view of the Wikipedia article on “Sex” on October 11, 2007 would have revealed two lines of text: “A boy whos [*sic*] name is Jon will put you on cloud 9 and will be good with his fingers and tongue. I have a nosebleed.” Obviously, this is juvenile behavior. However, considering Sanger’s comments about “festering wounds” and his concerns about Wikipedia’s “anti-expertise bias,” we might wonder whether rhetorical exchange might be included in this category of juvenile behavior. In fact, a remark in Sanger’s dissertation, *Epistemic Circularity*, provides evidence that this may be the case. Sanger’s dissertation aims to provide a solution to the problem of meta-justification: “Very roughly, how are standards of justification themselves ultimately justified?” His solution to this problem is concise and telling:

The core intuition behind my solution is this: it is silly to ask that we use reason to support the claims of reason's reliability, or to think that anything important is established thereby...we can take reason's reliability for granted, and there is nothing whatever wrong with such a move. (Sanger "Epistemic")

Sanger, the driving force behind Citizendium, has little patience for nagging questions, and in his dissertation he dismisses questions about “the claims of reason’s reliability” as “silly.” Citizendium’s “grown up” policies may very well provide easier ways of tracking edits, but the question of whether they are more responsible—a claim that Sanger himself makes—is an open one. What are the ethical implications of throwing out the rhetorical baby with the “juvenile” bath water? That is, do Citizendium’s policies—policies that work to attach texts to particular origins—serve to stop debate and conversation? Is it truly a “citizen’s compendium” if this is the case?

Yet, the point here is not that these requirements are unfair or even inhospitable. Any filter is a step away from hospitality and toward tolerance, and even Wikipedia is unable to avoid this. While Wikipedia allows “anonymous” edits, the development of a tool that tracks edits to physical locations through the use of IP addresses is an indication that Web anonymity is a myth.<sup>31</sup> But the requirements Citizendium has established are different from what is required of a Wikipedian. The point here is that Citizendium is attempting to be something much different, and in doing so it is adopting something closer to the logic of “property” than the logic of a “commons.” By making sure that people provide their RL identities, Citizendium hopes to attach each utterance to an origin, to link up texts with authors, and to rely on a situated ethos of the writer’s RL expertise. Citizendium articles are the result of collaboration in much the same way that Wikipedia is, and for this reason it is still much different than Britannica. However, the desire to create something more stable also means that the results of this particular wiki are different from those of Wikipedia.

Citizendium’s dealings with Wikipedia content are telling as well in that it encourages its writers not to incorporate Wikipedia content. Instead, it asks that they “start over from scratch.” Citizendium offers tips for those wanting to edit a Wikipedia

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<sup>31</sup> A tool called Wikiscanner developed by Virgil Griffith traces individual Wikipedia edits to particular IP addresses. The tool has exposed Wikipedians at Fox News, the Vatican, Wal-Mart, and other high power institutions. This should give us pause when claiming that Wikipedia is run by “amateurs.” No, these edits were not done by professional Encyclopedists, but they were most likely done by professional public relations personnel. This is called “whitewashing,” and it is dealt with in chapter four.

article. It offers these tips in the interest of once more differentiating between Citizendium and Wikipedia: “To the extent that Wikipedia articles themselves encode a navel-gazing, user-unfriendly culture that we want to reject, we absolutely must revise these articles entirely—or start over from scratch” (“How to Convert”). What are the advantages of starting over from scratch? Citizendium offers a number of reasons including the poor writing and inaccuracy of Wikipedia articles, the constraints of dealing with structure of a pre-existing article, the more enjoyable experience of writing your own article, and avoidance of using the GFDL. This desire to start over from scratch shows the same impulse we saw in Citizendium’s decision to not be a “fork” project of Wikipedia. Rather than dealing with a fluid text that does not rest firmly on RL identities, Citizendium chooses the tolerant route by originating a brand new text. Just as the requirement of “real names,” is an attempt by Citizendium to link an author with a text, this advice to “start over from scratch” attempts to place a stable platform under author.

### **Delivery Platforms and Origins**

After the Essjay scandal broke, Wikipedia critic Nicholas Carr asked an apt question: “If credentials don't matter, why bother faking them?” (Carr “Essjay Disrobed”). What was the purpose of Essjay’s faked credentials in a space that does not require (or, as some might put it, in a space that does not *respect*) expertise? The assertion of credentials (along with the Citizendium policy of starting “from scratch”) serves to place a platform or origin under the rhetor. This platform is particularly comforting in a space that continually pulls the rug out from underneath any rhetor who attempts to rely on a situated *ethos* based on credentials. We might also address this question of platforms by returning to one of our points of departure—Derrida’s speech-act theory.

At one moment during Austin’s analysis of the speech-act, he makes a telling observation. In his search for a definition of the performative, he finds that he is unable

to grasp that definition and hold on to it: “I must explain again that we are floundering here. To feel the firm ground of prejudice slipping away is exhilarating, but brings its revenges” (61). Derrida links this mention of “slipping away” with Austin’s search for the utterance origin. He argues that while Austin takes pains to test countless linguistic possibilities in search of a definition of performative language, he never questions whether any utterance (spoken or written) can be tied to a subject. For Austin, the speaking subject is the “utterance-origin” (*Limited Inc* 19). In a departure from Austin, Derrida questions whether any utterance can be traced so unproblematically to the speaking or writing subject: “Austin [does] not doubt that the source of an oral utterance in the present indicative active is *present* to the utterance [*énonciation*] and its statement [*énoncé*]” (*Limited Inc* 19). For Derrida, psychoanalysis and poststructuralism—theoretical approaches that attend to the unconscious and the affective—force us to at least entertain the idea that we do not always say what we mean and mean what we say.

It is not difficult to see why Austin would make such a move. In an attempt to understand the speech-act, Austin eventually abandons the “exhilaration” of not knowing the origin of an utterance. In fact, to avoid certain “revenges” he slides a platform under the utterance-origin in the form of a self-present, conscious, speaking or writing subject. This is the move we have noticed in our discussions of *Essjay* and *Citizendium*—a move that posits an expert as the origin of knowledge. The grounding of an utterance in the speaking or writing subject is completely understandable—we do it every day. However, such platforms are fictions that cover over the citationality of any utterance. For rhetoricians, the platform that we slide underneath most utterances can be linked with the canon of delivery. In the ancient rhetorical tradition, delivery focused on bodily performance in oral presentation. But more recently delivery has found its way into rhetorical scholarship and, more specifically, new media scholarship. Shifting notions of intellectual property and textual origins are closely tied to this resurgent interest in delivery. Cynthia Haynes' linking of delivery to the “platform of being” most elegantly traces out the connection between the fifth canon and intellectual property:

the crux (cru/cifi/x) of this rhetorical canon is no longer, in my view, concerned with oral delivery, or even delivery of discourse. If delivery was classically concerned with the 'how' of discourse rather than the 'what,' it seems to me that 'how' begins with a platform from which one speaks or writes. Most primordially, that platform is Being. Put time into play, and that platform is Becoming...Put technology into play, and that platform is a quaquaversal (Being and Becoming going in all directions at once). The notion of platform also implicates code, economy, politics, and mobility, among other things. (Haynes)

Rather than standing on firm ground and projecting forth (spoken or written texts), the digital writer deals with a situation in which being and becoming are “going in all directions at once.” If I can no longer stand on the platform of being (essence), I am forced to recognize that there is no platform beneath my feet. I am forced to recognize the tenuous relationship between me and my text, and this forces any writer to admit that claiming the position of origin is problematic. The question then becomes: What now? Are we to do away with all of our notions of intellectual property and authorship? These questions can tend to ignore that many on the Web are finding ways to move forward, create texts, and rethink traditional notions of intellectual property. Spaces such as Wikipedia are embracing the hospitable nature of texts, authors, and communities in ways that answer the question of “What now?”

And Wikipedia is not the only place where we can view such an embrace. Danielle DeVoss and James Porter have encouraged writing instructors to consider the “Napster moment” as emblematic of a new ethic of delivery, one that is situated within the hacker ethic, Pekka Himanen’s answer to Max Weber’s Protestant work ethic. Rather than considering work as a calling or a duty, the hacker ethic stresses passion and creativity. Most importantly, the hacker ethic is based on collaboration and citation. In this sense, theorists have linked the hacker ethic to the academy since it emphasizes an ongoing conversation that encourages citation. DeVoss and Porter link the Napster music

downloading controversy to this ethic by exploring how electronic texts are changing the canon of delivery:

as writing teachers we need to see the Napster moment—and the writing practice at the center of it, filesharing—in terms of the rhetorical and economic dynamics of digital publishing, and especially in the context of public battles about copyright and intellectual property and...that digital filesharing forms the basis for a new ethic of digital delivery, an ethic that should lead us to reconsider our policies regarding plagiarism and that, in general, we should consider when developing digital composition pedagogies. (180)

DeVoss and Porter call Napster a “crisis in delivery” and point to it as an example of a paradigm shift in digital delivery: “it represents a paradigm shift: from an older view of writing as alphabetic text on paper, intended for print distribution, to an emergent and ill-understood view of writing as weaving digital media for distribution across networked spaces for various audiences engaged in different types of reading” (179). Hospitable texts are a part of this shift in delivery.

Recent attempts to resuscitate or redefine the fifth canon can be linked to a shift in our notion of intellectual property—a shift exposed, though not created, by the Web. This shift changes the ways we can think about delivery, textual origins, and intellectual property. As the Web continues to remind us of the dotted line that connects utterance with origin, we are being forced to rethink what it means to create, transmit, and claim ownership of writing. The question now becomes: How does hospitality allow us to rethink delivery and intellectual property? What form does this new ethic of delivery take? In many instances, we avoid these questions by reinstating traditional answers to new, complex questions. Essayjay’s use of a situated *ethos* based upon expertise and credentials provides one example of this. Credentials slide a platform under the speaker and stop the debate—grounding resolution primarily in the speaking or writing subject. Citizendium’s request for RL identities is a way of placing an author behind or inside of the text—even if that text is a fragment and only part of a larger textual collaboration.



This happens in the name of a hermeneutic mode, a mode that conceives of the textual relation as a face-to-face relationship, and it is an attempt to conceive of the reader-text relationship as a one-on-one relationship. But electronic texts—in this case both Wikipedia and Citizendium—continually expose the problems with this conception of the textual relationship. There is cacophonous chorus that sits behind any utterance (spoken or written).

This infinite number of authors means that we are left without any “firm ground of prejudice” in the form of an utterance-origin. In the face of this problem, we assert an identity. This is one explanation of Jordan’s decision to construct the identity of Essjay. As we have noted, Jordan was not really anonymous. Though Essjay was a fiction, it was indeed an identity. His ability to rely on this identity shows that Wikipedia has not necessarily escaped relying on a situated *ethos* of RL identity. However, the code of Wikipedia and its relationship to anonymity and textual origins means that an “expert” like Essjay can always be questioned. This ability to question stems from Wikipedia’s decision to link intellectual property to citations rather than to individual Wikipedians. This decision means that Wikipedia aims to remain in the realm of an invented *ethos* built through the citation of other texts rather than a situated *ethos* based upon a Wikipedian’s expertise and credentials.

Judgment becomes supremely important when a text focuses on citations rather than utterance-origins. Perhaps judgment should have been more important even prior to the electronic text, but the fact remains that the Web’s more extreme separation of utterance from origin means that we can shift our rhetorical lens away from a platform of delivery (grounded in the expert subject or “genius” author) and toward an understanding of the citational nature of all speech-acts. Which citations are better than others? This is a question that rhetoricians are equipped to address. Searches for origins will continually fail, and this is not a cause for concern. Abandoning the search for origins means we can shift our focus to the textual chain presented by any speaker or writer. With this shift, the argument is about the validity of the textual chain and not necessarily about the

Wikipedian's expertise (though, we should note that a certain level of expertise will allow Wikipedians to point to the most useful citations). It should be noted that Wikipedia's constitution does not do away with appeals to expertise. By demanding citations, it still is very much interested in authoritative information. However, Wikipedia's shift of expertise away from a situated *ethos* of the expert Wikipedian and toward an invented *ethos* of citation ensures that the conversation *keeps going*.

Critics argue that anonymity is Wikipedia's most serious problem. But we could also argue that the anonymity policy is an attempt by Wikipedia to avoid some of the pitfalls of invocations of expertise. Wales asserts that "it's always inappropriate to try to win an argument by flashing your credentials...and even more so if those credentials are inaccurate" (Bergstein). If we follow this line of thinking, the anonymity policy is not the problem Wikipedia should address. Instead, the problem stems from a continued devotion to certain reading and writing practices—practices that sometimes allow us to shut down conversation by flashing a diploma. The Essay episode tells us that Wikipedia's larger problem was Essay's assertion of expertise—an assertion that allowed for a kind of citational laziness. The statement "I have a PhD" is an appeal to textual information (a diploma), and that text should be confirmed like another text. However, rather than appeals to credentials, Wikipedia asks that writers point to a textual chain that is verifiable and out in the open.

The policy of anonymity and its resistance to any Wikipedian's assertion of RL expertise forces digital readers and writers to dig farther down—below any writer's claim of expertise. Yes, having to constantly provide citations is tedious, especially when dealing with knowledge that has become implicit for a particular discipline. However, Wikipedia is an interdisciplinary space, and its anonymity policy has the potential to stop anyone (expert, amateur, or faker) from stopping the conversation by pointing to credentials. Citizendium attempts to fix this problem by linking RL identities with edits. If Citizendium can overcome the problem that Swartz points out, that textual production in a space like Wikipedia is often driven by "hit and run" writers, a solution of

credentialed writers might be a practical one. But what are the ethical assumptions of such a solution? What is Citizendium's code? Citizendium's code is grounded in tolerance, and it is much closer to an Enlightenment project as it requires the linking of texts with authors. This policy with regards to intellectual property is not necessarily wrong or less ethical, but it does apply some of our received reading and writing practices to a space that calls for a rethinking of those practices. Further, it seems more likely to shut down certain types of rhetorical exchange—particularly exchanges between experts and non-experts.

It is once again important to remember that Wikipedia's code does not always dictate practice. *Essjay* is a perfect example of this. Regardless of the code of Wikipedia, many continue to point to credentials as a way to slow down the light-speed exchanges that happen in digital writing spaces. These attempts to slow things down are entirely understandable, and they are difficult to abandon. But they link texts with origins in ways that do not always fully recognize that there is no such clean link. The inquiries of various Wikipedia gadflies might be malicious and irrelevant, but Wikipedia's code asks us to consider the ethical implications of silencing even the most irritating of "wikitrolls" (Wikipedians whose main goal is to nag, delay, and slow down the process of knowledge production). Wikipedia's hospitable structure means that a broad range of people can edit the text, and this structure is responsible for the astronomical growth of the text. This structure also allows for an ethics of textual noise. However, hospitality also opens the door for editors like *Essjay* who claim to be something they are not. Requiring experts to prove who they are is one way of addressing this problem, but it is a solution grounded in firm platforms of delivery that trace textual origins back to a single rhetor. Wikipedia offers a different solution by grounding knowledge in the ever-shifting terrain of citation rather than in the expert subject.

*Essjay* used his false identity so he could settle certain disputes, but in settling these disputes did he stop the conversation? Did his claim of expertise serve to stop the process of thinking? The discussion about *Essjay* often comes back to ethics: Is it not

wrong to claim something that you are not? Further, is the ability for Wikipedians to remain anonymous an ethical policy? However, we might turn this discussion in another direction: What are the ethics of claiming expertise? How ethical is it to point to credentials? These questions might seem bizarre, particularly coming from an academic, and I should reiterate—expertise is necessary and experts are necessary. I am not arguing for Keen’s “cult of the amateur.” But I do have questions about expertise and *ethos*. If expertise is used to posit the speaker/writer as textual origin and stop conversation in its tracks, is this ethical? Should we change the rules of the game by sliding away from hospitality and towards tolerance and by sliding a platform under the speaker/writer? Or, should we recognize that there is a different way to deal with expertise on/in a hospitable text? This different way requires a rethinking of textual origins and of the ownership of any utterance. By resisting the temptation to claim the status of “origin,” Wikipedia shows writers a different way to understand intellectual property in a space of hospitable texts.

## Chapter IV

### Colliding Collusions

On May 26, 2005, the following text was added to Wikipedia's article for John Seigenthaler, Sr.:

John Seigenthaler Sr. was the assistant to Attorney General Robert Kennedy in the early 1960s. For a short time, he was thought to have been directly involved in the Kennedy assassinations of both John, and his brother, Bobby. Nothing was ever proven. John Seigenthaler moved to the Soviet Union in 1972, and returned to the United States in 1984. He started one of the country's largest public relations firms shortly thereafter. ("John Siegenthaler" 29)

Of these five sentences, only the first was accurate. Seigenthaler had indeed worked for Robert Kennedy in the 1960s. However, he was never implicated in the assassination of Robert or John Kennedy, had never moved to the Soviet Union, and was not the founder of a public relations firm (Thomas, Seigenthaler's older brother, founded Seigenthaler Public Relations). In late September 2005, Seigenthaler learned of the faulty Wikipedia article from his friend Victor Johnson, who suggested that Seigenthaler "sue the s.o.b. who wrote it" (Seigenthaler). Soon after, another friend of Seigenthaler's took matters into his own hands by deleting the Wikipedia article and replacing it with text from another website (Newton). That information was eventually removed by Wikipedians because of copyright violations and a new biography (excluding the five sentences mentioned above) was posted. However, the archive of previous edits (one that accompanies every Wikipedia article) still contained the false and libelous information. To remedy this, Seigenthaler contacted Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales who dispatched a Wikipedia editor named Essjay (who, as we know, was later to become the center of a separate scandal) to remove the false information from the archives.

Seigenthaler responded to the escapade with an op-ed in *USA Today*. He noted that Wikipedia was not the only website listing him as being involved in the Kennedy

assassinations. A number of mirror sites like Answers.com and Reference.com automatically copy text from Wikipedia “never checking whether it is false or factual” (Seigenthaler). The entire ordeal reminded Seigenthaler of his mother’s advice about gossip:

When I was a child, my mother lectured me on the evils of ‘gossip.’ She held a feather pillow and said, ‘If I tear this open, the feathers will fly to the four winds, and I could never get them back in the pillow. That’s how it is when you spread mean things about people’...For me, that pillow is a metaphor for Wikipedia.  
(Seigenthaler)

In his attempts to chase down the feathers let out by Wikipedia, Seigenthaler found that federal laws make it difficult to trace responsibility to Wikipedia or its writers. Suing “the s.o.b. that wrote it” was not a simple task. This is largely due to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which states that “no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider” (Communications Decency Act). Since the Internet Service Provider through which Seigenthaler’s defamer accessed the Internet was not to be considered the “publisher” of the comments, it could not be sued by Seigenthaler. The ISP was not required to release the user’s identity. Further, Wikipedia itself falls under the umbrella of protection provided by Section 230 and is also not considered to be a “publisher” of content. Such protections meant that Seigenthaler’s only legal recourse was to file a “John Doe” lawsuit in hopes of obtaining a subpoena and tracking down the offending writer, but he was told that he would most likely lose such a suit.

All of this caused Seigenthaler to throw up his hands. In his view, the government was protecting the wrong people: “And so we live in a universe of new media with phenomenal opportunities for worldwide communications and research — but populated by volunteer vandals with poison-pen intellects. Congress has enabled them and protects them” (Seigenthaler). Though Section 230 remains in place, Wikipedia did

make some changes in the wake of the Seigenthaler incident. Soon after this controversy, Wikipedia stopped allowing anonymous users to create new articles. However, “anons” are still permitted to edit articles, something that Wales said was essential to the project:

Notice that anons can still edit. I am a firm believer in the validity of allowing anons to edit. Most anon edits are good, and done ‘on impulse’. We would [lose] most of the good edits from anons if we did not allow anon edits, but we would probably not lose most of the vandalistic anon edits. So the net effect of forbidding anon edits would likely be negative. (Wales "Experiment")<sup>32</sup>

Regardless of the continual possibility that libelous information could be added to a Wikipedia article, the shift in policy did not exclude anons. Wikipedia’s reaction to this controversy indicates that its constitution is somewhat flexible, but it also gestures toward the portion of that constitution that has not (thus far) been dislodged. Wikipedia’s structure of hospitality has remained in place, and this means that “anons” are part of the community. Remaining hospitable to “anons” or any number of other political entities, corporations, and governmental organizations, Wikipedia makes it difficult to trace responsibility or to define the “who” of the Wikipedia.

In chapter three, we saw how Wikipedia raises interesting questions about textual origins and intellectual property, and in this chapter we will see how the various collisions that happen in the pages of Wikipedia open up questions about one of rhetoric’s longstanding key terms—community. Community is often defined in terms of shared goals and purposes, and this definition of community is typically what drives critiques of Wikipedia. These critiques often charge “Wikipedians” with having flawed notions of what an encyclopedia is or should be, and they assert that the “Wikipedian” has little regard for what is true or ethical. However, Wikipedia’s hospitable code welcomes “anons” to edit alongside anyone else who chooses to click “edit this page,”

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<sup>32</sup> This issue of anonymity is taken up in detail in chapter three as I argue that true anonymity on Wikipedia (and on the Web) is largely a myth. All Wikipedians can be tracked via their IP address. Those that register for a username are harder to track (the username and not the IP address are attached to each edit), but it is still possible.

and this indicates that certain ethical assumptions are built into this textual space. In the pages of Wikipedia, an infinite number of agendas collide, and these collisions become collusions. Regardless of whether or not Wikipedians have chosen to pursue the same agenda, the text will have been a collaboration amongst various competing (and sometimes conflicting) purposes. Given its hospitable structure, defining a single purpose or agenda for Wikipedia or “the Wikipedian” becomes difficult. This opens up an important question: Is Wikipedia deserving of the label community?

I would offer a provisional answer of “yes” to this question, but only if it involves reorienting some traditional understandings of community. In this chapter, I argue that Wikipedia exposes community. This is very different from describing Wikipedia as a community. My hope is that a careful discussion of Wikipedia’s hospitable structure will allow for a rethinking of the question of community. Wikipedia is not a collection of writers working toward a common purpose. In fact, as we will see, Wikipedia plays host to various, disparate writers and agendas. Its hospitable structure allows for continual collisions, and these collisions serve as a reminder that rhetors are exposed to and in community with collaborators regardless of whether that rhetor has signed a pact or agreed to all of the various agendas at play. This exposedness is a relation, one that is not necessarily about conscious choice, and it is this relation that exposes community. Rather than showing us a space in which digital writers work together toward a common purpose, Wikipedia shows us a situation in which various colliding agendas will have colluded. While the discipline of rhetoric (along with other disciplines) has focused on how groups work toward shared goals, I argue that this is best described as communion or fusion and not community. If communion reflects a coherent project, then community is brought to light by a constant process of un-working that disrupts this urge to cohere.

For the purposes of this chapter, conscious collaboration will fall into the category of communion and not community. And it is my hope that the following discussion of how community is distinct from communion will persuade rhetoricians to rethink some of our traditional notions and definitions of community. Wikipedia offers us a fairly



extreme case of what I am calling community in that it is difficult to see any sort of shared bond or common purpose amongst Wikipedians. Wikipedians enter this hospitable text with infinite agendas. Some are trying to build a better encyclopedia and others are just there to joke around. Thus, the community of Wikipedia is not so much a “project” as it is a predicament—one that causes problems both for those critiquing Wikipedia and for those who participate in its composition. Far from being something we “build,” this notion of community is something we experience. This exposition serves as a reminder that we do not always choose our communities or our collaborators and that collusions emerge out of various colliding texts, purposes, and agendas. These collusions are not necessarily the result of the conscious choices of Wikipedians. Instead, Wikipedia shows how various (often competing) agendas *will have been* a collaboration.

This kind of collaboration is what frustrated Seigenthaler’s attempts to track down the responsible author of those five sentences. Given a vast array writers and purposes, one is hard-pressed to find “the author.” Further, it is nearly impossible to determine whether all members of this community are responsible for such actions. Given that Wikipedia’s hospitable structure welcomes various writers regardless of identity or rhetorical purpose, is every Wikipedian responsible for the actions of their fellow collaborators? If community happens over and beyond any intention to “get together,” how might this change the way we define responsibility? These are difficult questions, and they stem from my attempt to revisit what we mean by the term “community.” Wikipedia is not a “new” kind of community, but it does remind us of what is left out of any discussion that defines community only in terms of communion or in terms of shared identities and purposes. There is a continual process of undoing that complicates the push to cleanly or clearly define the shared purpose of communities, and Wikipedia reminds us of this problem.

As we will see, Wikipedia’s hospitable structure creates problems for those attempting to critique it. But it also creates problems for those Wikipedians hoping to clearly define the project. These problems became especially apparent during the

Seigenthaler controversy. But before we delve into the Seigenthaler affair in more detail, I would like to explain how Wikipedia's hospitable structure can help us re-examine and rethink the term "community." The discussion that follows will expose the textual complexity of Wikipedia in the interest of revisiting the question of community. First, we will see how Wikipedia is defined via a process of negation, a process that makes clear how difficult it is to explain what Wikipedia "is." Next, I argue that Wikipedia's hospitable structure invites collision and that such collisions expose the problems with conflating the *community* with *communion*. I then return to the story that opened this chapter. In returning to the Seigenthaler controversy, I examine how Wikipedia's hospitable code not only exposes community in all of its complexity but also exposes some difficulties of defining and understanding issues of responsibility.

The chapter closes with a discussion of how the lessons and stories of Wikipedia can allow rhetoricians to rethink traditional notions of community. The various purposes and agendas that are invited to Wikipedia indicate that proximity—a proximity that puts writers into relation with one another prior to or regardless of conscious choice—can be the basis for rethinking community. This rethinking forces us to confront a notion of community that is more about conscription than subscription. Wikipedians may not agree with the agendas of their fellow collaborators, but this does not change the fact that they often will have collaborated with other digital writers beyond (or regardless of) any conscious choice. This rethinking of community means a broader and deeper understanding of the rhetorical forces at play in collaborative efforts. Rhetoric has long been understood as a way to *build* community, but this chapter aims to redefine community as something more than communion or fusion in an effort to account for the complexity of community and collaboration. This complexity is at work in any community, and a hospitable text like Wikipedia exposes that complexity.

## **Negation: What Wikipedia Isn't**

The difficulties of defining the Wikipedia community in any final way are reflected in some of its internal discussions. Wikipedia's meta-wiki—a space used for documentation of policies—defines the Wikipedia community in this way:

The essence of community is encoded in the word itself: *come-ye-into-unity*. At the essential level, community occurs anytime two or more people come into harmony (not necessarily agreement) around any subject. Community arises as a function of interest and participation. At some point beyond two participants, a community is actually a community of communities. In a larger sense, the Wikipedia community includes all casual and/or anonymous editors, ideological supporters, current readers and even *potential* readers of all the language versions of Wikipedia-the-encyclopedia. This covers a majority of the Earth's human population, but it's probably important to remember every once in a while that very, very many people have a stake in the content of the encyclopedia and the direction of the project. ("The Wikipedia Community", emphasis in original)

The tensions within this definition show how difficult it is to define any community. On the one hand, it invokes words like “unity” and “harmony,” and it claims that the Wikipedia community revolves around mutual “interest and participation.” On the other hand, it insists that harmony does not entail agreement, and it also acknowledges the broad scope of the Wikipedia community by claiming that all “potential readers” can be considered part of the community. This push/pull effect is what drives any community as it attempts to define itself—as it attempts to construct an inside against an outside.

However, the latter part of this quotation points toward the hospitable structure that is the focus of this project. This is a structure that, in theory, welcomes “a majority of the Earth's human population.” (We should note that the digital divide is still a real problem and that most studies estimate that only about 20% of the earth's population has access to the Internet. However, gaps in technology access do not change the fact that Wikipedia's structure welcomes a much broader range of voices to the discussion than most other

texts.) The hospitality of Wikipedia (and of the Web) means that it would be difficult for the most active Wikipedians to completely drown out the “casual and/or anonymous readers.”

Any push to define Wikipedia as a coherent encyclopedia or a coherent community is constantly disrupted by competing and conflicting interests, and these disruptions can be traced back to Wikipedia’s structure. The constant murmur of hit-and-run Wikipedians makes for a noisy text, and it makes it extremely difficult to define what Wikipedia “is.” For this reason Wikipedians have developed an extensive page entitled “What Wikipedia is not.” The page lists a number of things that Wikipedia is not. Included in this list of “nots” are: a dictionary, a place to publish original research, a soapbox, a blog, a social networking site, or a textbook. In his discussion of Wikipedia’s BLP policy, Jimmy Wales insists that Wikipedia is “not tabloid journalism,” and this phrase is repeated numerous times in Wikipedia policy pages (Wales "Zero Information"). This procedure of negation is largely due to a structure of hospitality that makes it difficult to define this virtual-textual community on the basis of a shared set of goals. And if a community always resists communion by unworking the drive toward unity, wholeness, and shared purposes, then defining responsibility becomes just as difficult. If a group states a shared purpose, it is much easier to see how each member of that group is implicated and responsible for that group’s actions. But if I enter Wikipedia “just for fun” or if I correct a comma splice, have I agreed to become part of the Wikipedia community? Have I subscribed to any kind of Wikipedia statement of purpose?

This is much more difficult to swallow. But if community does not rely on communal bonds and is instead the result of collisions that result in collusions, then responsibility becomes something much broader. Rather than thinking of responsibility only in terms of conscious choice, we might instead consider that the question of responsibility is always an open one. Wikipedia’s hospitable structure makes it extremely difficult to define who the Wikipedian is. As we will see throughout this

chapter, various companies and political entities are part of the Wikipedia community. This structure means that Wikipedians are linked to agendas that they may not have chosen. Without the firm ground of a shared purpose, any community faces difficult questions with regard to responsibility. Am I responsible for my fellow community member's heinous (racist, sexist, classist, etc.) viewpoints? This is the question that Wikipedia raises in an extreme way. By inviting writers regardless of identity or credentials, this text plays host to competing interests and agendas. Wikipedians will have collaborated with various others regardless of whether or not they have chosen to do so. Thus, defining a responsible party becomes difficult. This is a problem with any community in that no group can ever perfectly commune or bond. However, Wikipedia reminds us of this predicament in a particularly striking way.

The question of responsibility is often raised with regard to Wikipedia, but it is not the only virtual-textual community to face such questions. In fact, other wikis raise these questions as well. A website called Wikileaks offers whistleblowers the ability to post documents and information that might otherwise be suppressed. Its structure is, like Wikipedia's, hospitable. Opponents of the site see it as little more than a way for disgruntled employees to vent, and they express concern that it lacks accountability. Recently, this question has been brought before the courts. When an employee of the Swiss bank Julius Baer released company documents through Wikileaks, the bank brought suit. In February 2008, U.S. District Judge Jeffrey White ordered a permanent injunction in efforts to shut down the site, but the order was largely ineffectual. As a *New York Times* article explains, "the order had the effect of locking the front door to the Wikileaks.org site — a largely ineffectual action that kept back doors to the site, and several copies of it, available to sophisticated Web users who knew where to look" (Liptak). The ruling revealed that the plaintiff and the judge "did not understand how the domain system works or how quickly Web communities will move to counter actions they see as hostile to free speech online" (Liptak). Much like Wikipedia, Wikileaks is

difficult to define or understand, and these difficulties are the result of a hospitable structure.

This lack of understanding became even more evident when Judge White reversed his ruling less than two weeks later. Sensitive to the public outcry surrounding the permanent injunction (many argued that White had trampled the First Amendment), White spent four hours in an oral argument explaining his ruling and his subsequent reversal (Claburn). In reading his remarks, it is easy to see that White did not know what to make of Wikileaks: “Whatever this entity is, it has not filed a response” (Glater "Wikileaks Ruling"). New York Times blogger Jonathan Glater did not know what to make of it either:

Traditional entities, like companies and individuals, have citizenship status that can determine when they are subject to a particular court's jurisdiction. But what is Wikileaks, which has not been represented by a lawyer throughout these proceedings? (Glater "Wikileaks Ruling")

White also expressed regret that he had to reverse the ruling: “We live in an age...when people can do some good things and people can do some terrible things without accountability necessarily in a court of law” (Glater "Judge Says"). Faced with a text and a community that resists any easy description, those discussing Wikileaks are at a loss when speaking of issues of responsibility and community.

Hospitable texts raise the question of responsibility in troubling ways, and Judge White’s concerns about the accountability of those who do “terrible things” (concerns that should remind us of Seigenthaler’s discussion of “poison pen intellects”) offer an example of this. Faced with an amorphous text that is written by an amorphous collection of writers, it becomes difficult to pin down responsible parties. As White eventually realized, shutting down sites such as Wikileaks is not a viable judicial option when one considers precedents of free expression and First Amendment rights. In addition, the hospitality of the Web made the injunction technologically impossible. Closing the front door did not disable the hospitable structure of Wikileaks, and mirror

sites proved that the front door of many web texts is little more than a symbol. The permanent injunction was not a solution but rather a knee-jerk response to a complex problem. Creating scapegoats is also not a viable way of tracking responsibility. Such scapegoats smooth over the complicated and contradictory compositional process of hospitable texts. By raising all of these difficult questions, the wiki structure presents us with a way to re-examine our notion of community. The structure of the hospitable text continually undercuts any attempt to understand community in terms of a coherent entity or project. This radically changes the question of responsibility.

Wikipedia's community is just as confounding as that of Wikileaks. Thanks to a tool called Wikiscanner that tracks the locations of computers used to edit Wikipedia, we know that computers at Wal-Mart, the Vatican, and Fox News are being operated by Wikipedians. Wikiscanner provides a continual reminder that the community exposed by Wikipedia is difficult to understand or define and that it relies on the constant collision of competing agendas and interests. Many of these Wikipedians attempt to clean up unfortunate information in Wikipedia articles through a process called "whitewashing."<sup>33</sup> By whitewashing a Wikipedia article, editors excise the negative and accentuate the positives. In 2007, various media outlets reported that Microsoft offered to pay a blogger to correct "inaccuracies" in Wikipedia articles about the company. A spokesperson for Microsoft believed that these inaccuracies "were heavily written by people at IBM," and Microsoft hoped to correct such inaccuracies by hiring a third party ("Microsoft Violates"). Wikipedia's constitution discourages such edits in its "Conflict of Interest" policy, but there are no strict rules: "If you do write an article on an area in which you are personally involved, be sure to write in a neutral tone and cite reliable, third-party

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<sup>33</sup> Similar problems are arising in the blogosphere as phony grassroots blogs—what many call "Astroturf" blogs—are being used by corporate interests as a way to show that "the people" support their initiatives. One such Astroturf initiative is a website called *Hands Off the Internet* that claims to be "a nationwide coalition of Internet users" concerned with overregulation of the Internet. However, the site lists a number of "member organizations" including AT&T, American Conservative Union, 3M, and Cinergy Communications. This hardly seems like a collection of "internet users," but the site presents itself as a grassroots movement. Astroturf groups make it difficult to discern the bloggers from the corporate shells, and they are yet another example of how the hospitable Web welcomes even the most fraudulent of rhetors.

published sources, and beware of unintentional bias” (“Wikipedia: Conflict”). In cases of whitewashing, perpetrators do not reveal themselves as having a conflict of interest and they usually make no attempt to meet Wikipedia’s neutral point of view (NPOV) requirement. Such PR writing runs counter to Wikipedia’s constitution:

Editing in the interests of public relations is particularly frowned upon. This includes, but is not limited to, edits made by public relations departments of corporations; or of other public or private for-profit or not-for-profit organizations; or by professional editors paid to edit a Wikipedia article with the *sole intent* of improving that organization's image. (“Wikipedia: Conflict”, emphasis in original)

Yet this policy becomes even more complicated when considering Wikipedia’s hospitable structure—a structure that welcomes vandals and whitewashers. Wikipedia’s structure welcomes an infinite number of writers while its policies simultaneously ban certain writers from contributing. Such ambivalence means that we can never be sure which agendas are driving Wikipedia’s various textual conversations.

Eric Haas of the Rockridge Institute think tank explains one instance of whitewashing when he describes how a computer at Wal-Mart was used to change the wording of a passage about the company’s wage practices. Initially, the article read this way:

As with many US retailers, Wal-Mart experiences a high rate of employee turnover (approximately 50% of employees leave every year, according to the company). *Wages at Wal-Mart are about 20% less than at other retail stores.* Founder Sam Walton once argued that his company should be exempt from the minimum wage. (Haas, emphasis in original)

After a computer at Wal-Mart was used to edit the entry, the company’s wage practices seemed less stingy:

As with many US retailers, Wal-Mart experiences a high rate of employee turnover (approximately 50% of employees leave every year, according to the



company). *The average wage at Wal-Mart is almost double the federal minimum wage* (Wal-Mart). However, founder Sam Walton once argued that his company should be exempt from the minimum wage. (Haas, emphasis in original)

Haas points out that both statements about Wal-Mart's wages are "basically true." The second version of this passage, however, was done in the spirit of whitewashing—it is an attempt to make Wal-Mart sound more worker-friendly. While the Rockridge Institute for which Haas writes describes itself as "progressive" and can thus probably be labeled as left leaning, the whitewashing of Wikipedia articles hardly divides down partisan lines. Haas' focus may be the whitewashing of the Wal-Mart article, but the editor of this page joins Wikipedians at the FBI who removed aerial and satellite images of the U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay and Wikipedians at CIA computers who edited an entry on the U.S. invasion of Iraq (Mikkelsen). A number of government agencies and companies—the EPA, Diebold, the U.S. Department of Justice—are part of the Wikipedia community. Not all of the edits coming from these entities should be considered "whitewashing," but the mere possibility, for instance, that the Democratic National Committee and the Republican National Committee can collide and collude in this space should remind us how the hospitable text scrambles our very understanding of community.

As a mouthpiece—or, in Internet parlance, a "sockpuppet"—such corporate and governmental Wikipedians will often offer little more than public relations spin. However, we should remember that sockpuppets are not confined to the Web. As I write this, bloggers and political commentators are reacting to a *New York Times* story exposing a number of military analysts as sockpuppets for the Bush White House. These analysts appeared to be presenting expert analysis to various media outlets; however, many had connections to military contractors (meaning that they were benefitting financially from the invasion of Iraq) and were receiving direction from the White House regarding how to sell the Iraq war. In short, these military "analysts" became sockpuppets. Retired Green Beret and former Fox News analyst Robert Bevelacqua admits as much: "It was them [the Bush administration] saying, 'We need to stick our

hands up your back and move your mouth for you” (Barstow). Such episodes remind us of one of the central arguments of this project: The Web is not always creating new problems; rather, it is often exposing questions and problems that have been with us for quite some time.

The important point with regard to hospitable texts and digital rhetorics is that sockpuppets and whitewashers are welcomed because of Wikipedia’s constitution of hospitality. This constitution presents problems for those critiquing Wikipedia and for those working on the project, and these problems can serve as important reminders that community is always the result of colliding collusions. Thus, Wikipedia presents us with community in all of its noise and mess, and this means that we can rethink our online and offline communities. Wikipedia’s constitution may offer a gesture of hospitality that other texts and communities do not, but it also raises questions that we can take to other rhetorical situations. One reaction to whitewashing and sockpuppetry on Wikipedia is to bemoan a lack of authenticity. But scholars of rhetoric and composition might approach things differently by thinking through how Wikipedia allows us to better understand the complexity of community and, in turn, rethink issues of responsibility when considering collaborative texts. The moment we begin to picture the “Wikipedian,” we are forced to consider how that image squares with the edits performed by the CIA or the Vatican. That is, we are forced to reconsider who or what sits inside of/behind a text. There are dangers in making certain assumptions about “the Wikipedian.”

### **Collision: Wikipedia’s Sausage Factory**

Regardless of the difficulties of defining the Wikipedian or the Wikipedia community, a number of critics speak of Wikipedians as though they are part of a close-knit group. In addition, many Wikipedia insiders speak of the project as coherent. Such arguments can tend to assume that Wikipedians have communed or bonded in the interest of some shared purpose. Critics often worry about what they call the Wikipedia “cabal”—an inner circle that exerts a great deal of control over the text. In chapter three,

we examined Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales' argument that the existence of this inner circle is evidence that Wikipedia is not an "emergent phenomenon." Rather, Wales argues, Wikipedia is driven by a devoted group of Wikipedians. Thus, even Wikipedia's most staunch proponent seems to view it as a coherent, unified project. And while Wales thinks that this inner circle of Wikipedians can be a good thing, a number of critics believe that it seeks to jettison anyone who does not join the group in lock step. When stories of a "secret mailing list" of Wikipedia insiders circulated in 2007, many saw evidence that Wikipedia was not democratic or egalitarian. Reports surfaced that one Wikipedia editor used this secret list to drum up support and eventually remove another editor. The exiled editor was reinstated 75 minutes later, but the existence of this secret email list still provided evidence that Wikipedia's openness is far from utopian (Metz "Secret Mailing List"). At first glance, the existence of a cabal might seem to work against the notion of hospitable texts that I am developing. It would be difficult to describe such an inner circle as "hospitable," especially if it removes anyone who doesn't conform. However, my argument is that Wikipedia's code is hospitable, regardless of some of the practices of Wikipedians. The conversation here is an ethical one to be sure, but it is not a prescription of an ethical program. It is a discussion of how a hospitable structure raises important and difficult ethical questions. That structure means that Wikipedia plays host to various agendas, and this situation forces us to re-examine how we think about communities.

If a group of Wikipedians is attempting to lock things down and control the text, this is happening as a reaction to the hospitable structure of Wikipedia. Faced with a sprawling textual conversation, this inner circle attempts to lock things down. Such a reaction shows the difficulties of hospitality and the very real possibility that those facing the riskiness and mess of a broader textual conversation will react by filtering and silencing outsiders. The secret mailing list scandal offers evidence of an attempt to commune, and this means that it is *not* a reflection of the Wikipedia community. Only one slice of the Wikipedia community participates in the inner circle, and this is reason

enough to question whether the cabal is a reflection of the Wikipedia project. Given that anyone from the “anon” to the CIA operative is editing Wikipedia, the cabal’s attempts to control who is in or who is out do not change the fact that Wikipedia is a collaboration among various colliding digital writers. The cabal can be seen as a reaction to the hospitable structure’s willingness to welcome a broad range of digital writers, but it also has not (yet) succeeded in turning the Wikipedia community into a communal project of fusion. And this is because Wikipedia’s structure of hospitality has remained stubbornly in place. This structure means that Wikipedia’s textual conversation is a messy one. Seth Finkelstein paints one of the more apt portraits of this mess when he describes it as a sausage factory:

Wikipedia is frequently touted as a marvel of collaboration, a model of peer production. But it may be more instructive as a laboratory of pathologies of social interaction. While perhaps—like sausages—it’s better not to see the product being made, any familiarity with how Wikipedia operates should give rise to enormous skepticism about its alleged example of harmonious collective action. (Finkelstein "Inside, Wikipedia")

Finkelstein’s point is well taken. Wikipedia is anything but harmonious. It would be difficult for any text with such a hospitable structure to be harmonious. But it is this disharmony that exposes the community of Wikipedia. Whether or not Wikipedia should be touted as a “marvel of collaboration” is debatable, and the debate very much depends upon your definition of “collaboration.” If by collaboration, one thinks of a group working together toward a common goal, then Wikipedia does not always comply with such a definition. However, if we instead define community as a predicament exposed by the collisions of competing purposes, then Wikipedia isn’t a marvel at all. Instead, it is a particularly visible example of the collisions of community.

Because its inner-workings are apparent, Wikipedia forces us to confront how any community works. It may not be pretty or harmonious (or appetizing), but it is in fact a reminder that community is very different from communion. The “marvel” here is that of

a structure that welcomes a broad range of voices to the conversation, continually thwarts any move to complete the circuit of communion in any final way, and still manages to present a collaborative text. This might very well be a marvel of collaboration, but only inasmuch as every community is a marvel. In fact, a closer look at the Wikipedia cabal shows that even the inner circle of active Wikipedians reflects the question of community. Even that inner circle is always at the mercy of various colliding purposes. Remarks from one former member of Wikipedia's Arbitration Committee (ArbCom), Kelly Martin, make this apparent:

The problem with Wikipedia is that, for so many in the project, it's no longer about the encyclopedia... The problem is that Wikipedia's community has defined itself not in terms of the encyclopedia it is supposedly producing, but instead of the people it venerates and the people it abhors. (Martin qtd. in Metz "Secret Mailing List")

Martin frames these processes of veneration and abhorrence as “the problem with Wikipedia,” but we might instead understand these processes as the very exposition of community. Some Wikipedians are there to create a better encyclopedia and others are there to “venerate” or “abhor.” These processes are not obstacles to be overcome. They are the situations that expose community to us. These various cross-purposes gesture toward Finkelstein's metaphor of sausage making, and they provide the fertile ground from which collaborations emerge.

Both proponents and opponents run up against the problem of collisions. Finkelstein sees these inner-workings as ugly, messy, unappetizing, and as proof that Wikipedia is anything but a “marvel of collaboration”; Martin sees them as an obstacle that keeps the project from heading in the right direction. But both of these perspectives can tend to miss the point that these messy processes expose all of the various problematics of community. Collisions expose community to us by reminding us that various agendas are at work. Just as the risk introduced by Wikipedia's structure makes it difficult to name, describe, or understand, that same structure makes it difficult to

envision any kind of textual endpoint. Wikipedia is not likely to culminate in textual or communal coherence—a coherence that would result in a “whole” text or a “whole” community. Still, critics and acolytes attribute a collective intelligence to Wikipedia and other Web 2.0 technologies that, while imperfect, is conceived as something that is (or should be) working toward perfection. This line of thinking is very much connected to the assumptions that Wikipedia is written by a coherent collective that shares a certain set of goals. Factual and stylistic imperfections have led critics such as Tom Panelas, director of corporate communications at Britannica, to argue that Wikipedia is rife with inaccuracies and bad writing. But what kind of text is Wikipedia building toward? In answering this question, many Wikipedia advocates and Web 2.0 acolytes fall back on the notion of a single coherent text. That is, rather than accepting that the predicament of community exposes a resistance to cohesion, they argue that the text will one day become One. Within the Wikipedia community, this position could be described as “eventualist.” A Wikipedia eventualist “focuses on the *eventual* value of Wikipedia in the long-term rather than the *immediate* value” (“Eventualism - Meta”).

The argument that the text is leading to an eventual transcendent point of perfection leads critics like Andrew Carr to argue that Wikipedia is an example of “quasi-religious longing,” and that such longing wrongly introduces morality into discussions of Web technologies. In some ways, Carr’s argument becomes difficult to refute as he cites the transcendent musings of Kevin Kelly, founding executive editor of *Wired* magazine. Kelly’s discussion of “The Machine” does indeed discuss how the Web is proceeding toward a transcendent (transcendental?) whole:

We look back on those pivotal eras and wonder what it would have been like to be alive then. Confucius, Zoroaster, Buddha, and the latter Jewish patriarchs lived in the same historical era, an inflection point known as the axial age of religion... Three thousand years from now, when keen minds review the past, I believe that our ancient time, here at the cusp of the third millennium, will be seen as another such era. In the years roughly coincidental with the Netscape IPO,

humans began animating inert objects with tiny slivers of intelligence, connecting them into a global field, and linking their own minds into a *single thing*... Weaving nerves out of glass and radio waves, our species began wiring up all regions, all processes, all facts and notions into a grand network... The Machine provided a new way of thinking (perfect search, total recall) and a new mind for an old species. It was the Beginning. (Kelly, emphasis added)

Kelly's discussions of "a single thing" and "The Machine," present some clear evidence of the religiosity that Carr is critiquing. Rather than recognizing that the Web is noisy and resistant to any final cohesion, Kelly argues that the "hive mind" will eventually become whole. He posits "The Machine" as "the Beginning." It is not difficult to see what Carr is critiquing here.

Carr claims that he is not against transcendence, though this assertion seems to be at least partially tongue-in-cheek: "I'm all for seeking transcendence, whether it's by going to church or living in a hut in the woods or sitting at the feet of the Maharishi or gazing into the glittering pixels of an LCD screen." Nonetheless, Carr does have problems with the lack of objectivity that accompanies rhetorics such as Kelly's:

My problem is this: When we view the Web in religious terms, when we imbue it with our personal yearning for transcendence, we can no longer see it objectively. [If we take such a view], we have to look at the Internet as a moral force, not as a simple collection of inanimate hardware and software. (Carr "The Amoralism", emphasis added)

Carr is right here in one sense—in their yearning for transcendence, the acolytes miss something. Though, I wouldn't say it is objectivity that such champions of the Web miss. Rather, they forget the importance of the structure of hospitality that sits beneath many Web technologies. Utopian arguments like Kelly's posit something "after the mess" when the collective intelligence hits its target and the communal body perfectly excretes its various others. To this point in the history of the Web, we have yet to see such perfection, and this is because the Web is grounded by a constitution of hospitality. No

community can rest on a perfect circuit of communal fusion, and the hospitable structure of the Web exposes this fact. Once again, Wikipedia reminds us of what has always been. By inviting an infinite number of rhetors, Wikipedia exposes the difficulty of ever cleanly defining a community in terms of shared purposes or goals. A constant reworking and unworking of any teleological endpoint for Kelly's "Machine" means that the conversation keeps going. Once we understand this, we get a better sense of why Wikipedia continues to be such an unwieldy text. Constantly undercutting any textual endpoint or communal fusion, the hospitable text continually invites disruption. Both Kelly and Carr push this unworking to the side in the interest of a transcendent whole. For Kelly, such wholeness is inevitable and desired, and for Carr the lack of wholeness represents the failure of Web 2.0 technologies:

[Wikipedia has] been around for nearly five years and has been worked over by many thousands of diligent contributors...When will the great Wikipedia get good? Or is 'good' an old-fashioned concept that doesn't apply to emergent phenomena like communal on-line encyclopedias? (Carr "The Amoralism")

Regardless of the differing tacks of their arguments, both proponent and critic fall into the same trap of discussing a whole text, and this line of argument is very much linked to the desire to posit a whole Wikipedia community based upon a shared purpose.

Wikipedia is accused of incoherence, messiness, and inaccuracy. It is accused of not making sense, of not providing reliable information. Simultaneously, Wikipedians are often described as a coherent community, one that shares certain immature, amateurish character traits. What might these contradictory critiques tell us about the very notion of community? What kind of community is Wikipedia? In some ways, Wikipedia's inner circle is a reflection of what we typically think a community is. This group is accused of expelling those who do not share the goals of the cabal. However, as we have seen, even the cabal cannot agree on what *the* purpose of Wikipedia is. This lack of consensus is a problem in any community, and it becomes apparent when we examine the hospitable text. The structure of the text (its code) is built to allow for



competing agendas and purposes. This frustrates Kevin Kelly's Machine as much as it frustrates Carr's desire for a "good" or "old-fashioned" encyclopedia or Kelly Martin's vision of what Wikipedia should be. In this space, there is no final version just as there is no easily definable purpose. This fact is frustrating if we are in search of something coherent. But if we reorient our definition of community by drawing important distinctions between communion and community, Wikipedia can be an instructive exposition of the complexity of community.

### **Responsibility: Who Wrote Those Five Sentences?**

We can now return to the anecdote that opened this chapter to examine how this complicated digital space can make for disturbing situations. In the wake of the Seigenthaler controversy, Andrew Orlowski offered an argument in the same vein as those discussed in the previous section. Orlowski posited a "hive mind" as the engine of Wikipedia, and he claimed that this hive mind was asleep at the wheel:

The 'Hive Mind', or 'collective intelligence' that we're told will 'self-correct' such goofs [as the Seigenthaler article errors] is simply absent when it's needed.

The only people operating the levers of the man behind the Hive Mind curtain, it seems, are the Wikipedians. (Orlowski "There's No")

The ideal hive mind described by Orlowski would be a coherent one that corrects errors and culminates in a clean final product. But in his view, there is no "collective intelligence" working here. Instead, Wikipedia is driven by "Wikipedians." Without a clear, coherent, concerted effort driving the project (that is, without a "mind" at the controls), Orlowski sees Wikipedians as amateurish and misguided. But who are the Wikipedians? As we have seen, defining the Wikipedian is difficult due to a hospitable code that does not ask for identification or credentials. When we do pull back the curtain, who/what is it that we see? It is not a perfectly unified "mind"—instead it is a complex and messy process of composition and an exposition of community. The hospitality of Wikipedia might very well create a mess, but that mess allows us an occasion to rethink

traditional definitions of community, definitions that only account for our conscious efforts to commune. Without a unified purpose, Orlowski reasons, it is not surprising that Wikipedia is unreliable and open to vandals and whitewashers. Yet what Orlowski sees as a drawback is the very thing that allows Wikipedia to expose community in all of its risk and possibility.

But such risk and possibility makes the question of responsibility a difficult one. If a hospitable text invites colliding purposes that eventually result in collusions, then are individual Wikipedians responsible for all the various (sometimes nefarious) actions of their fellow digital writers? Orlowski argues that Wikipedians too often pass the buck when it comes to the question of responsibility. He argues that Wikipedians offered two responses in the wake of the Seigenthaler episode: 1) that no source, Wikipedia included, should be considered the final word on any topic and 2) that Seigenthaler should have corrected the article himself: “The blame goes here, the blame goes there—the blame goes anywhere, except Wikipedia itself. If there's a problem—well, the user must be stupid!” (Orlowski "There's No") As for the response that Wikipedia, like most other sources is not to be fully trusted, Orlowski wonders whether such a view requires a constant skepticism bordering on paranoia: “Only a paranoiac, or a mad person, can sustain this level of defensiveness for any length of time” (Orlowski "There's No").<sup>34</sup> He

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<sup>34</sup> Orlowski’s discussion of paranoia should remind us of Lacan’s discussions of paranoid knowledge and the gaze. For Lacan, the gaze is a “seeing, to which I am subjected in an original way” (72). In the act of my looking, I recognize that I am being looked at: “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (72). In addition to Orlowski’s critique, Robert McHenry’s critique (dealt with in chapter one) also reveals this recognition that we are watched from anywhere and everywhere. When McHenry, a former editor-in-chief of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, likens Wikipedia to a risky restroom situation, we see the gaze at work in online spaces. The “edit this page” link at the top of every Wikipedia article serves as a constant reminder of the gaze. As I edit a Wikipedia page, I recognize that I am being seen from anywhere and everywhere. Under the gaze and in the face of a fragmented text that refuses to be still and whole, many critics turn away and look for an opportunity to assert an “I.” This turning away provides a fictional comfort that he has averted the gaze for the time being. The “Edit This Page” link begs readers to intervene right then and there, and it indicates that both reader and text are infinitely exposed. Lacan’s notion of a subject constantly looking to reassert its wholeness gives us one way to understand the continued critiques of electronic texts—texts that remind us always and everywhere that we are not whole. I would like to thank Joshua Gunn for helping me think through the implications of the gaze and paranoid knowledge with regard to Wikipedia and other electronic texts. In fact, Gunn even coined a term—“wikinoia”—that encapsulates this process nicely.

argues that the second defense—that Seigenthaler should have edited the entry himself—demonstrates that “failure...[is] genetically programmed into [Wikipedia’s] mechanisms”:

So Wikipedia's second defense rests heavily on the assumption that everyone in the whole world is participating, watching, and writing at every moment of the day...a failure to pay attention represents negligence on the part of the complainer. Seigenthaler, the argument goes, was clearly being an idiot when he failed to notice that day's piece of web graffiti. Instead of taking his dog for a walk, or composing an email to his grandchildren, he should have been paying ceaseless attention to...his Wikipedia biography. (Orlowski "There's No")

As for Orlowski, he is not interested in joining the Wikipedia party: “I can't speak for you, but I have better things to do.” Orlowski raises an important question: Who is responsible for Wikipedia? And he ends up without a clear-cut answer. He blames “the Wikipedian.” But we have seen all the various problems of defining the Wikipedian or her purposes. At the end of the day, Orlowski only knows that he himself is not responsible—he has better things to do.

Others have addressed the question of responsibility on Wikipedia in a similar way. When *Wired* blogger Thomas Goetz complained of complicated prose in certain Wikipedia science entries, Wikipedians asked why he didn't edit the entries himself. He responded in much the same way that Orlowski did: "Sorry, that's not my job" (Goetz). He explained that he only edits when the article is within his areas of expertise:

I do edit when it's something I know about (I've lent a hand to entries on the Replacements, Queen Elizabeth, Petrarch, and metabolic syndrome, among others). But when I look to Wikipedia to learn about something—ie [*sic*], when I use it as a reference, not as a 'project'—I use it to understand a topic, not to help create the resource. You wouldn't want the ignorant likes of me editing those entries, anyway, right?(Goetz)

Goetz's argument seems fair enough. He's a journalist with a Master's degree in Public Health, and this means he may not know how to edit the entry on "Epigenetics."<sup>35</sup> So, we are still left with the question asked by Seigenthaler and Orłowski: Who is responsible for Wikipedia? If Goetz is not responsible for articles that are outside of his areas of expertise, and if Orłowski has "better things to do," who is responsible? Should experts shoulder the responsibility? Wikipedia's insistence on welcoming both experts and amateurs would seemingly prevent us from pinning responsibility only on expert Wikipedians. The question of responsibility on Wikipedia is a difficult one because of the hospitable code that founds the text. But these difficulties of responsibility are not merely the concern of people such as John Seigenthaler who attempt to seek out the author of false or libelous information. These questions are also sticky ones for the Wikipedia community. Are those Wikipedians who aim to build a better encyclopedia to be held responsible for the actions of vandals? Neither of these groups—the "encyclopedists" nor the "vandals"—chose one another. Nonetheless, they will have been collaborators, and this muddies the waters when it comes to questions of responsibility.

But these questions can only be addressed adequately if we reorient our notion of community. The Wikipedian who says "If you have a problem, then edit!" offers an inadequate and simplistic answer to the complicated question of responsibility. In the Seigenthaler case, this amounts to blaming the victim. But this response is similar to that of the critic who says that "Wikipedians" (a signifier that, as this chapter unfolds, is slowly emptying of any clear meaning) are irresponsible. Neither critic nor acolyte adequately addresses the complexities of responsibility and community. If we attempt to examine community in all of its complexities and complications, then the question of responsibility is just that—a question. It is one that frustrates anyone hoping for a clean answer. Thus, when Orłowski paints a picture of the person responsible for the

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<sup>35</sup>We should note the range of Goetz's expertise here as it ranges from *The Replacements* to Petrarch. We should pause over this for a moment to recognize that determining whether one is "expert enough" to edit a Wikipedia article is not always clear cut.

Seigenthaler hijinks, that picture is driven by his understanding of the Wikipedia community as a coherent and communal project. Orłowski ascribes a clear identity and agenda to the Wikipedian: “a picture of the body behind the ‘Hive Mind’ of ‘collective intelligence’ begins to take shape. He's 14, he's got acne, he's got a lot of problems with authority...and he's got an encyclopedia on dar interweb [*sic*]” (Orłowski "There's No"). He argues that Wikipedia is “tightly controlled by a 14-year-old you've never heard of, who has risen to the top of the social backstabbing by seeing off rival 'editors,' by forming cliques and drinking huge amounts of Red Bull.” And even if Orłowski goes on to admit that this is “just one possibility” and that “*anyone* can hijack a Wikipedia article,” he seems to be convinced enough of this image to rely upon it in his various critiques (Orłowski qtd. in Metz "Truth, Anonymity"). And Orłowski is not alone in this definition of the responsible party. When speaking to a newspaper reporter about the Seigenthaler incident and the problems of Wikipedia, critic Daniel Brandt paints the same picture: “And a lot of them, they're not only anonymous, but they're teenagers...They get these little ego trips, and they're very irresponsible” (Brandt qtd. in Chasnoff). Brandt, as we will see, played an important role in the Seigenthaler controversy.

The image of the teenage troublemaker is a popular one that has its roots in the efforts to track down hackers in the 1990s.<sup>36</sup> And this image still circulates as commentators envision Web denizens. In recent years, that image has taken on a new trait: pajamas. Bloggers have created the portmanteau “pajamahadeen” to describe those that act as gadflies for traditional media outlets. The term was created in response to remarks from a CBS News executive vice president. This executive was speaking of the role of bloggers during a controversy involving CBS coverage of George W. Bush’s military service. CBS relied on faulty documents to report that George W. Bush had avoided his military duties, and it was bloggers who carefully dissected the documents and discovered problems with them. This CBS executive was attempting to draw a distinct line between the professional reporter and the blogger: “You couldn't have a

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<sup>36</sup> Bruce Sterling’s *The Hacker Crackdown* offers a detailed account of such crusades.

starker contrast between the multiple layers of check and balances [at CBS], and a guy sitting in his living room in his pajamas writing” (Lieberman). Descriptions of the blogger, the hacker, the Wikipedian all grasp at an image, a way of picturing those that cause trouble. Such portrayals ignore the fact that a broad range of digital writers is publishing content on the Web. They can be professional reporters who maintain blogs, public relations professionals playing the spin game, or pajama-clad bloggers. Reducing all textual production on the Web to a bunch of teenagers is a miscalculation, one that fails to recognize that community (online and offline) is not so easily defined.

But in the Seigenthaler controversy, we do not have to rely on the portraits painted by Orlowski, Brandt, or a CBS executive to determine who the responsible party was. And this is because the writer of those five false sentences came forward. The responsible party was 38 year-old Brian Chase, who added the text from a computer at Rush Delivery, his place of employment. Brandt tracked the five sentences to Rush Delivery by doing some sleuthing and tracing the IP address attached to the Wikipedia edit. Brandt has been a vocal opponent of Wikipedia, has critiqued the Wikipedia cabal, and has repeatedly thwarted efforts to include a “Daniel Brandt” article in Wikipedia. Brandt’s detective work—work that led Seigenthaler to call Brandt a “genius”—led Chase to apologize to Seigenthaler. (For his part, Brandt was modest and claimed that he “got really lucky” (Chasnoff).) In his apology to Seigenthaler, Chase explained that he thought Wikipedia was a “joke encyclopedia,” and he did not figure that anyone would take those five sentences seriously.

There are conflicting reports, but we know that Chase either resigned from his position at Rush Delivery or was fired due to the bad publicity the Seigenthaler controversy brought the company.<sup>37</sup> In any case, Chase’s job was spared, largely because Seigenthaler intervened. Seigenthaler spoke to Rush Delivery on behalf of Chase, and

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<sup>37</sup> An article by Brian Buchanan at the First Amendment Center’s website reported that Chase was fired and that Seigenthaler interceded to get his job back (Buchanan). *USA Today* reported that Chase resigned and that Seigenthaler asked Rush Delivery not to accept the resignation (Page). Regardless of whether Chase was fired or resigned, the important point here is that Seigenthaler intervened on Chase’s behalf.

this would seem a surprising intervention given the anger that infuses Seigenthaler's *USA Today* op-ed: "I have no idea whose sick mind conceived the false, malicious 'biography' that appeared under my name for 132 days on *Wikipedia*, the popular, on-line, free encyclopedia whose authors are unknown and virtually untraceable" (Seigenthaler). But Seigenthaler was not the only one to have a change of heart upon learning of Chase's identity. Brandt also sympathized with Chase's plight. In an interview after the Seigenthaler affair, Brandt describes Chase as a victim:

And when this poor guy is trying to send out his resume, and he never gets called back from interviews, how do you know that the people aren't Googling him when they get his resume and saying, 'Well, he did this thing.' The permanence becomes invasion of privacy even more so than getting your name in the newspaper. (Brandt qtd. in Terdiman)

Brandt's mission to track down the origin of the five sentences is replaced with concern for the actual author. Upon learning who Chase was, Brandt's tone softens, and he begins to worry about Chase's privacy rights. Given the opportunity to hold Chase responsible, these critics turn their critique in another direction—toward "Wikipedia." Faced with the *actual* body responsible for this libelous information, these critics continue to rely on the identity they attribute to Wikipedia, and Chase doesn't fit the bill. When Chase is found to be 38 (rather than 14) and to be wearing business casual rather than pajamas, these critics of Wikipedia don't know exactly what to do. Chase's body leaves them lacking the expected scapegoat.

Wikipedia insiders attempting to build a collective of devotees and Wikipedia outsiders who hope to pin responsibility on "the Wikipedian" both fall prey to a thinking of Wikipedia as "a single thing." But this thinking cannot account for all the complexities of community, online or offline. The Web is a space where collisions continually disrupt communal bonds, and it is for this reason that it exposes community. The Web's hospitable texts are exposing what gets left out when we understand community as something based on shared purposes. A big part of what gets left out when

we conflate community with communion is the question of responsibility. As the story of Brian Chase makes clear, the intersecting questions of responsibility and community are not easily answered. However, that these questions are difficult should not leave us with the feeling that we have no way to answer them. With a better understanding of what the hospitable structure of Wikipedia means for our traditional notions of community, we can at least begin to provide better answers to these complicated (and sometimes disturbing) questions.

### **Collusion: Exposing Community**

In the mid-1980s, Jean-Luc Nancy saw an opportune moment for reopening the question of community, and this moment was defined, at least in part, by changes in communication technology. Nancy argued that certain technological changes would allow for a rethinking of community, but he was insistent that such a re-thinking was not yet happening:

The emergence and our increasing consciousness of decolonized communities has not profoundly modified this state of affairs, nor has today's growth of unprecedented forms of being-in-common—through channels of information as well as through what is called the 'multiracial society'—triggered any genuine renewal of the question of community. (22)

In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy argued that community was still being theorized in terms of various essentialisms and nationalisms. But Nancy's renewal of the question of community involved a radical redefinition of the very word "community." For Nancy, community is not fusion or communion, and it does not involve a coherent group built around an essential identity or shared project. Instead, Nancy's "community" is a "being-in-common": "The community that becomes a *single* thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader...) necessarily loses the *in* of being-*in*-common. Or, it loses the *with* or the *together* that defines it" (xxxix). In place of communion, Nancy attempts to redefine community through a thinking of communication, but the communication he has in mind



is much more than the clean exchange of information. Far from a “sender-receiver” model of communication, Nancy is thinking about exposedness to others: “communication is not a bond...it consists in the appearance of the *between* as such: you *and* I (between us)—a formula in which the *and* does not imply juxtaposition, but exposition” (29). Juxtaposition would imply two discrete “subjects” prior to communication, but Nancy argues that communication “co-appears” or “compears” prior to any subject engaging in communication. This compearance happens among “singularities” rather than “subjects.” Subjects purport to have an inside and an outside, and a subject claims to be “enclosed in a form” (29). But, for Nancy, prior to any assertion of subjectivity, there is singularity. Singularity has no inside or outside but only exists *as* exposedness. This means that before we can even consider the sender, the receiver, or the message, we have to consider that “singularity is exposed to the outside” and that “by virtue of this position or this primordial structure, it is at once detached, distinguished, and communitarian” (29). The primordial structure that Nancy sees means that one does not create community. Rather, “one experiences or is constituted by it” (31). In this exposedness to others, singularity experiences community, and we are reminded of this exposedness in the collisions that happen on a daily basis.

When we enter the Web of hospitable texts, we are reminded of our exposedness to others in a particularly extreme way. A hospitable structure that welcomes various others regardless of qualifications or identity sets up a situation in which writers are exposed to others and in which writers are collaborating with others regardless of any choice. Digital (and analog) writers find themselves in community with others regardless of whether or not they have chosen all of the agendas at work in that community, and this muddies the waters with regard to the question of responsibility. Is the digital writer responsible for the actions of those with which s/he is unknowingly collaborating? Answering with a simple “no,” would reduce responsibility to conscious decisions and would overly simplify a difficult question. Answering it with a yes means that nothing is simple and that responsibility extends beyond the limits of what communities a rhetor

chooses (insofar as s/he can choose such a thing). Wikipedia exposes the murkiness of these questions of responsibility and community. Members of the Wikipedia community cannot easily claim that the hit-and-run editor or vandal is not a member of the community. The hospitable structure that defines this virtual-textual community makes the vandal part of the community regardless of any attempt at communion, coherence, or common purpose. While the devoted Wikipedian might hope to be creating an accurate resource that avoids the libelous and the scandalous, that same devotee finds herself in community with “anons.”

Prior to the decision to “team up,” these digital writers experience an exposedness that serves as a constant reminder that, as Nancy puts it, “one never works alone, one never writes alone” (73). The collisions that happen in such a space serve as a reminder of exposedness. But far from being roadblocks or obstacles to community, these collisions expose community. This is not the community we are always accustomed to thinking about. This is not a community that one chooses. It is not communion or fusion or a bond, and it does not always involve shared goals or coherent projects. Instead, it is a community that happens to us (and that gives us to be) regardless of choice. Traditional notions of community often only account for attempts to fuse in the name of shared aims and goals. But any attempt to commune is nagged by the murmur of various colliding purposes. These murmurs stem from the presence of infinite purposes, purposes that expose what Nancy calls “being-in-common.”

Virtual-textual communities invite contradictory purposes, and for this reason they are ideal sites for anyone (rhetorician or otherwise) interested in how community (un)works. These spaces remind us of the impossibility of communing or bonding in any final way. But it is important to remember that spaces like Wikipedia are not creating a new “problem” of community. Rather, they are exposing a longstanding problem with any traditional notion of community that considers communion and fusion to be final and complete. In this way, Wikipedia also reminds us that, as Nancy argues, we need a “renewal of the question of community.” Various discussions of Web 2.0 have focused

on how collaboration can be more effective and efficient.<sup>38</sup> This is definitely one of the things the Web affords us—a way of collaborating on shared purposes or projects. However, in the interest of renewing the question of community, we might also consider that some Web structures continually disrupt such communal efforts and that such disruption is not only an obstacle. While we might view Wikipedia’s unwieldy structure as a roadblock to communion, we might also view it as an exposition of community. A lack of coherence can be both good and bad, but the most important point to understand is that Wikipedia exposes community (in all its peril and promise) to us. The continual undercutting of a coherent program or project is both what sustains community and what forces its continual (self) re-examination. As the complications of community play out on the Web, rhetoricians are reminded that we need tools and concepts for analyzing community in all of its complexity. There is no “Wikipedian” behind the curtain, at least not in the sense in which this metonym is often used. And there is no “end point” at which Wikipedia will become a great encyclopedia. Wikipedia’s structure frustrates any attempt to understand this text or community in terms of coherence.

As texts like Wikipedia provide a hospitable code that welcomes more voices to the conversation, Web denizens find themselves in communities that they have not necessarily chosen. Regardless of whether this is a good or bad thing, rhetoricians should look to somehow account for the complications of community, particularly as we confront a globalized, networked world. Regardless of the fact that Wikipedia is edited by a vast array of digital writers with conflicting and competing interests, many critics

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<sup>38</sup>Clay Shirky’s *Here Comes Everybody* is just one example of a text that focuses on how the Web allows for better and more robust collaboration. But even Shirky sees value in discussing the collaboration that happens regardless of intention. Shirky argues that any group undertaking (online or offline) can be considered in terms of a three-rung ladder. Each rung requires more and more coordination. The first rung is sharing, in which users knowingly or unknowingly share information with no specific plan for the end result. The second rung is cooperation, which requires more energy and coordination than sharing. The third rung is collective action, which “requires a group of people to commit themselves to undertaking a particular effort together, and to do so in a way that makes the decision of the group binding on the individual members.” While the focus of Shirky’s book seems to be on the latter two rungs, I am most interested in the first. How does collaboration happen at the level of sharing, particularly when that sharing does not happen in the interest of any agreed upon goal or project?

ascribe an essential identity to the Wikipedian. The impulse by critics to create a scapegoat is entirely understandable given the often-advanced definition of community as a group of writer/rhetors working toward a common goal. However, the hospitable text forces us to reopen the question of community. Wikipedians attempting to institute a communal project based upon a shared goal or purpose are constantly working alongside hit-and-run editors who fix comma mistakes, PR firms hoping to clean up articles, and politicians hoping to spin articles in a certain direction. Regardless of how much the inner circle of Wikipedians attempts to consolidate power and regardless of critics' description of Wikipedia as a coherent text or community, the very existence of this broad range of writers constantly undoes any attempt to envision a stable community of "Wikipedians."

### **Proximity: Rhetorics of Community**

In "Writing as Travel, or Rhetoric on the Road," Gregory Clark argues for an understanding of community that avoids metaphors of territory such as "common ground" or "discourse communities." In place of stable ground or the well-defined group, Clark puts forth the metaphor of travel. For Clark, this means that communities can be built on the shared experience of travelling. Rather than setting up camp and staking out territory, travelers continue to move. Travelers share the experience of learning new things, and they compare maps with one another. However, for Clark, merely running into one another is not enough to build community. Travelers must share something more:

In my experience what motivates rhetorical exchanges is a need for at least some measure of 'mutual identification and reciprocity'—even if it is solely pragmatic and even unsavory—that can bind writer and reader together temporarily in a common cause, if not for some sort of 'final shared ends.' In a rhetorical sense, there has to be more commonality than proximity to enable constructive discursive exchange. (13)

For Clark, mere proximity is not enough. Some shared “commonality” is necessary to motivate rhetorical exchange. So, while Clark is hesitant to think of travelers as staking out territory, he is not ready to give up the sense of common purpose that grounds his notion of community. For Clark, shared experience, common purpose, or “final shared ends” are the groundwork for community.<sup>39</sup> This understanding of community works well when conceiving of the rhetorical situation as something we choose and when conceiving of community as cohering around a common purpose. But when we are faced with the structure of hospitality that grounds some of the virtual-textual communities of the Web, we are reminded that community is much more than conscious choice. Given Nancy’s rethinking of the question of community, the choice to commune can be situated in the realm of communion or fusion and not community.

The hospitable code of the Web means that people working at cross-purposes often collide, and these collisions often result in collusions. That is, on the Web you may very well end up sleeping with the enemy. This is not a new problem. In fact, any attempt at communion is always troubled by forces that prevent fusion, and those forces offer an exposition of *community*. Community is this unworking of the drive to a common purpose. Digital rhetors find themselves in proximity to various arguments and texts, and this should serve as a reminder that we do not always choose our collaborators.

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<sup>39</sup>Clark is one of many in rhetoric and composition who have addressed the question of community. Joseph Harris is also concerned with any notion of community that is stable, and he is even more skeptical than Clark of the danger that a community becomes exclusionary. This is why Harris asks rhetoricians to guard against the “communal” forces that often trigger communities: “we need a vocabulary that will allow us to talk about certain forces as social rather than communal, as involving power but not always consent” (21). Harris is wary of a communion and consensus, and this is because of all the terrible things that can happen in the push to such communion. But while Harris worries about defining community in terms of the “communal,” he also attempts to reserve the term “community” for a “specific and material view of community” that is reserved for “the workings of specific and local groups” (20). This guarding of the term “community” for the local and for a “specific and material” seems to fall short of Harris’ initial goal of guarding against the urge to define community in terms of the “communal.” My own discussion of Wikipedia and the hospitable Web should raise serious questions for any definition of community that is confined to “specific or local groups.” Why is the “global” or the “non-local” gathering not a “community”? Why do we need “other words” for these kinds of forces? Reserving the term “community” for the local, specific groups seems to lead us back toward communion. What makes a community “specific” or “local” if not a shared purpose around which that community can commune. The definitions of community put forth by these rhetoricians and others are often confined to the realm of conscious choice.

If community is exposed by proximity to others, then the formation of communal bonds serves as an attempt to recover from what we might call the trauma of community. Thus, we might question Clark's argument that "there has to be more commonality than proximity to enable constructive discursive exchange." Clark may move a bit too quickly beyond "proximity" in his discussion of community. What can we make of the proximity and, thus, the community that happen regardless of any conscious attempt at discursive exchange? Wikipedia is a space in which certain digital writers are collaborating without ever aiming at "constructive discursive exchange." These writers find themselves in proximity to one another regardless of any "mutual identification and reciprocity." Often, Wikipedians are not even aware of various others with whom they are collaborating. Yet these writers are colluding nonetheless. Clark's focus is on the "pragmatic encounters," but what can rhetoricians have to say about the proximity that we do not necessarily choose? What does this proximity tell us about community? A reframing of the question of community can radically expand our discipline's dealings with community and allow us to account for more than just the "building" or "maintenance" of coherent groups based on shared agendas and identifications.

My argument is not that everyone should be invited to join the discussion or that our structures should be more hospitable. Rather, my argument is that various others are already present, disrupting any push to bond or commune. And this is not a problem unique to Wikipedia. This notion of community can offer a deeper understanding of community to all rhetoricians, considering the discipline's long tradition of worrying about the dangers of exclusion, dangers that are often forgotten in the push toward communion.<sup>40</sup> But the community exposed by hospitable structures does not make for a utopia. While some might describe Wikipedia as democratic and egalitarian, such

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<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Burke's rhetorical analysis of Hitler is a paradigmatic example of the discipline's concern with the violence of exclusion. Burke reminds us of how the desire for unity can mean that an unknown other is often demonized and transformed into a scapegoat: "the yearning for unity is so great that people are always willing to meet you halfway if you will give it to them by fiat, flat statement, regardless of the facts" (*Philosophy* 205-6). Here Burke reminds us that uncertainty serves as an especially effective ingredient for this desire to unify, and we can see this same desire playing out in critiques of Wikipedia.

descriptions ignore the real and complicated inner workings of any text that opens the textual floodgates. Wikipedia's utility for rhetoricians is not that it offers a space with fewer rules. As we have seen in earlier chapters, there is a constitution that grounds Wikipedia (even if it was not necessarily written from the top down). Instead spaces like Wikipedia provide rhetoricians with a radical reminder of the difficulties of community regardless of any attempt to institute a top-down constitution. Like any community, Wikipedia is constantly undoing itself.

If enemies and strangers can collaborate (however unwillingly) it is because community (in Nancy's sense and in the sense I have been using it in this chapter) happens prior to any attempt to circle the wagons. This notion of community is brought into relief by the Web's structure, a structure that welcomes others with a gesture of hospitality. Understanding community in this way allows us to see that collaboration in the name of a common goal always happens in the face of competing interests and colliding identities. This is not a community based on "difference." As I argued in chapter one, the hospitality of the Web most likely calls for something beyond tolerance. As Derrida argues, tolerance is preferable to intolerance, but it may not go far enough. A framework of hospitality allows us to think beyond the acceptance of difference or the search for "common ground." Instead, the community I speak of is exposed by the very collisions that happen every day on Wikipedia, on the Web, and in our daily lives. These collisions mean that every attempt to focus the goals of a community will be up against a constant force of undoing and unworking.

The communal project is not always evil, but it can be extremely limiting. Re-visiting the question of community in terms of our proximity to others can help us articulate how the discipline might re-work traditional notions of community. Rhetoric and persuasion have been understood as ways to "build" community, but this chapter has asked that we see such building as only one small part of the story of community. By speaking of community in all of its mess and complexity, rhetoricians can have a larger role in understanding how community works online and offline and how a structure of

hospitality (one that grounds the Web and a globalized economy) might change the way we understand collaboration. Community is a mess, but it's a mess that will have been a collaboration, regardless of how clumsy the process is. These collaborations raise important questions about the risk and possibility of community. Recognizing our exposedness to others can keep us from reducing discussions of community to communion. As Nancy notes,

the thinking of community as essence...is in effect the closure of the political. Such a thinking constitutes closure because it assigns to community a *common being*, whereas community is a matter of something quite different, namely, of existence inasmuch as it is *in common*, but without letting itself be absorbed into a common substance. Being *in common* has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be exposed. Being *in common* means, to the contrary, *no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this* (narcissistic) 'lack of identity.' (xxxviii)

For Nancy, what "we" share is our finitude, our "infinite lack of infinite identity." No single identity or purpose can encapsulate a group or collectivity, and if the members of a group share anything at all it is the lack of any easily defined identity or any shared purpose. The Web points us toward such "being *in common*" by placing us in community with others regardless of identity, facing toward others regardless of choice, and side-by-side others regardless of any shared "project." Wikipedia provides a particularly useful case study for such "being *in common*."

Throughout this chapter, we have seen a number of different visions of what Wikipedia "is." Upon learning of the problems with the Seigenthaler Wikipedia article, some editors leapt into action to fix the problems. These Wikipedians have a particular vision of what Wikipedia should be, a vision that is at odds with Brian Chase's view of Wikipedia as nothing more than a "joke." Beyond exposing the collision between these two visions of Wikipedia's purpose, the Seigenthaler controversy also raises the question



of responsibility: Who is responsible for this article and its libelous content? Can we confine responsibility to the author who posted this information? Are all Wikipedians responsible for the actions of those who think Wikipedia is a “joke”? How easily are vandals separated from the “serious” Wikipedians? Regardless of which vision of the project contributors subscribe to, all of these competing authors and agendas result in the collaboration that is Wikipedia. These digital writers may not have chosen to “gang up” with various others, but that does not completely absolve them of their responsibility. At the end of the day, they will have collaborated with an infinite number of Wikipedians. The Web does not create this situation, but it does expose it. By inviting a wide variety of voices to its textual conversation, Wikipedia’s “community” is something more (and other) than a collection of writers working toward a common goal, and it is this peculiar trait that made it so difficult to track down the responsible party in the Seigenthaler controversy.

The question of responsibility is an important one, and the constitution of Wikipedia (not to mention U.S. law) has made it difficult to track down the writers responsible for some of the false or libelous information included in its text. In a space that plays host to various agendas, how do we define the community and, in turn, how do we define responsibility? My discussion of Wikipedia presents an explanation of how a structure of hospitality that invites anonymous others can expose some longstanding problems with some traditional definitions of community and responsibility. Our definitions of these terms are too often reduced to conscious choice, and a discussion of hospitality exposes the problems with such a reduction. The search for a responsible party in a space like Wikipedia is frustrating. Some Wikipedia insiders have sloughed off the question of responsibility too quickly, and certain critics have too quickly decided that the Wikipedian is responsible. But such approaches miss the complexity of community. The question that has nagged us throughout this chapter still nags, and it will have to remain an open one if we are to carefully revisit the question of community:

Who is the Wikipedian? How one answers this question says a great deal about how they understand community online and offline.

## Coda

### Wikipedia as Courseware

Full disclosure: My father works for Blackboard, the educational software company. I offer this bit of information because many in the academy (particularly those involved with new media) have an axe to grind with Blackboard. At conferences and in conversations with my colleagues, I hear a great deal about Blackboard's inflexibility, its wonky interface, and the difficulties of using a system that is often chosen by administrators (and others who are too far removed from the classroom). This often puts me in an awkward position—I can't help but think of dear old Dad as Blackboard gets burned at the stake over and over again. Indeed, I do not defend blackboard in these discussions. I agree with many of these complaints, and I have played an active part in many of these bitch sessions. But beyond mentioning the deep problems with any software that attempts a one-size-fits-all approach, I wonder whether this approach to courseware is indicative of how the academy often falls short of a meaningful engagement with the Web and new media. Instead of building, using, or even complaining about courseware—software built solely for the classroom—I wonder if we might be better served to examine the existing structures outside of the academy.

Blackboard is a convenient scapegoat, but as Kenneth Burke reminds us, any scapegoat involves “the use of a sacrificial receptacle for the ritual unburdening of one's sins” (*Permanence* 16). How is a Blackboard a reflection of our own sins? From a certain angle, Blackboard serves as a reminder that the academy can end to focus on the nuts and bolts of teaching tools (digital or otherwise) at the expense of reflection on those tools. This seems to be the biggest problem with Blackboard: it offers a number of useful *teaching* tools but it does not necessarily offer a space for *pedagogical* reflection. Sealed off by student logins and proprietary software licenses, Blackboard is tied very directly to the classroom. This can serve to cut the classroom off from the rest of the world.

In the words of open source and free software commentator Eric Raymond, I wonder if Blackboard is a symptom of a larger problem: Have we have been too focused on building cathedrals and not focused enough on observing and entering the bazaar? Raymond speaks of the cathedrals of proprietary software—software that is built by bands of “mages” and never released before it’s finished, and he describes open source software as the bazaar (21). The bazaar offers a messier collaborative environment where design happens amongst a broader range of people. Fragments of ideas are offered to the community in their rough stages, and a number of these fragments are aggregated in a cacophonous compositional process. Raymond explains how the bazaar, much like Wikipedia, flips the publication process by releasing material before it is fully formed or revised: “It’s fairly clear that one cannot code from the ground up in bazaar style. One can test, debug and improve in bazaar style, but it would be very hard to *originate* a project in bazaar mode” (47). Blackboard’s software fits Raymond’s cathedral model. It protects its proprietary code, and it has pursued litigation against competitors (and when litigation has not worked, it has bought out those competitors). But its structure finds its roots in the cathedral as well. Much of what students and teachers do in Blackboard (or in other courseware platforms) is sealed off from the world, protected by passwords and logins, and tied directly to the classroom. The four walls that delineate the physical space of the classroom are recreated in Blackboard as it is difficult to connect to the outside world. Those without the proper permissions are excluded from the conversation. This inflexibility is largely due to our traditional conception of courseware as a tool for teaching. But what if we asked for more of our courseware? What if we helped to cultivate courseware that allowed for both teaching tools and theoretical reflection?

It may come as a surprise that Wikipedia’s early roots were in courseware. In 1999, free software guru Richard Stallman began composing an essay entitled “The Free Universal Encyclopedia and Learning Resource.” Stallman believes that his essay “had some influence in the development of Wikipedia,” but it is not entirely clear whether this piece was the impetus for Nupedia and Wikipedia (Stallman "Spain, Frankfurt"). Wales

claims to have not seen Stallman's essay when proposing the Nupedia project, but Marshall Poe points out that many of Stallman's ideas found their way to both projects (Poe). If the preceding pages have had any influence on the reader at all, we will be able to pass over these attempts to assign an origin to the idea of a free, open source encyclopedia without too much anxiety. The trail of citations, in this case and others, is difficult (if not impossible) to track down in any thoroughgoing way.<sup>41</sup> The more important point is that Stallman's essay explicitly calls out (to) educators and students:

As education moves on-line and is increasingly commercialized, teachers are in danger of losing even the right to make their work freely available to the public. Some universities have tried to claim ownership over on-line materials produced by teachers, to turn it into commercial 'courseware' with restricted use. Meanwhile, other universities have outsourced their on-line services to corporations, some of which claim to own all materials posted on the university web sites. It will be up to professors to resist this tendency. (Stallman "The Free")

Stallman's challenge to educators does not stop there. His piece lays out a constitution for a "Free Universal Encyclopedia and Learning Resource," in the form of a number of questions. One of his first questions asks: "Who will write the Encyclopedia?" His answer is telling:

In principle, anyone is welcome to write articles for the encyclopedia. But as we reach out for people to help, the most promising places to look are among teachers and students. Teachers generally like to teach, and writing an article a year for the encyclopedia would be an enjoyable change from their classroom

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<sup>41</sup> The issue of attribution seems to have been of little concern to Stallman. The website that served as an early (and brief) home to his free encyclopedia encouraged people to contribute to Nupedia and Wikipedia: "Just as we were starting a project, GNUpedia, to develop a free encyclopedia, the Nupedia encyclopedia project adopted the GNU Free Documentation License and thus became a free commercial project. So we decided to merge GNUpedia project into Nupedia. Now, the Wikipedia encyclopedia project has adopted the philosophy of Nupedia and taken it even further. We encourage you to visit and contribute to the site" ("The Free Universal").

duties. For students, a major school paper could become an encyclopedia article, if done especially well. (Stallman "The Free")

Stallman's prophetic essay lays a great deal of the groundwork for a free encyclopedia project. He mentions the hospitable structure that eventually defined Wikipedia by noting that anyone should be able to edit the text, but he also mentions other principles that eventually found their way to Wikipedia. He believed that perfecting this resource would take a long time, that it would require the aggregation of a number of small edits rather than the creation of fully formed articles, and that the text should be published under a license that would allow for the free use and distribution of the content.<sup>42</sup>

However, his mention of students and teachers seems to stand out as something that has not necessarily been realized in the Wikipedia project. Throughout his essay, Stallman uses the terms "encyclopedia" and "learning source" interchangeably, and he assumes quite matter-of-factly that academics would play a large role in the project.

But Wikipedia's relationship with the academy has been extremely conflicted. A number of scholars and teachers have participated in the Wikipedia project, and educators have started to use the composition of Wikipedia articles as a teaching moment. Nicole Pratt, an International Relations lecturer at the University of East Anglia is but one example of this. In one course, she evaluated her graduate students by examining how well they edited various Wikipedia articles (MacLeod). Pratt is not alone, and I have used such assignments as well. But this does not necessarily represent the only (or even the majority) academic opinion of Wikipedia. A cursory view of various scholarly blogs and publications reveals disdain for the encyclopedia "anyone can edit." One example of

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<sup>42</sup> Stallman also wanted to ensure that the project recognized the practices of peer review in various disciplines: "In fields such as science, engineering, and history, there are formal standards of peer review. We should encourage authors of articles and courses to seek peer review, both through existing formal scholarly mechanisms, and through the informal mechanism of asking respected names in the field for permission to cite their endorsement in the article or course." I would be remiss if I did not at least make mention of Stallman's omission of English, Rhetoric, and a number of other fields from this list of disciplines that have "formal standards of peer review."

this is a *Chronicle of Higher Education* blog post by Emory University's Mark Bauerlein, who offers a critique not only of Wikipedia but also of the students who use it. Bauerlein's concern is with students who cite and mimic Wikipedia's "featureless" prose in essays about *Moby Dick* (Bauerlein). But as much as Bauerlein's article is a representation of the academic paranoias surrounding Wikipedia, it is the comments posted by his readers that reveal the true depth of this antagonism. One commenter notes that "Students...aren't reading anything else other than Wikipedia! Heck, did they even read *Moby Dick* before writing their paper on it?" (TM). Another is concerned with the "teenagers" in charge of Wikipedia (a refrain we also heard in chapter four): "Question authority all you want, but questioning the authority of a 12 year old anonymous 'administrator' in Wikiputia will get you banned from the site quicker than you can say Jimbo Kliquette" (Awbrey). Some academics celebrate Wikipedia; others condemn it. But this epideictic praise/blame goes round and round at the expense of thinking through how Wikipedia might offer us a space for theoretical reflection.

Beyond a celebratory participation in Wikipedia or the proclamation of doomsday scenarios, there is another way for rhetoricians (and academics more generally) to engage with Wikipedia. That engagement can treat Wikipedia as *courseware*, but only if this term is radically refigured. First, rethinking Wikipedia as courseware would not confine it to a tool for teaching or to a space for deploying certain classroom practices. Classrooms have never been able to claim ownership over learning—learning has always happened both inside and outside of the classroom's four walls. And the Web is reminding us of this fact in a fairly extreme way. If learning will have happened in various spaces, this should serve as a reminder that classroom practices (teaching) are always supplemented by reflection on those practices (pedagogy). This is not new. But if we have always known that there is no teaching practice that does not imply some pedagogy, why has our courseware limited opportunities for pedagogical reflection? This brings us to a second way of considering Wikipedia as courseware: Wikipedia exposes the emerging rhetorical practices that are being put to use on the Web. By examining the

foundations of this text and the rules by which contributors operate, we can begin to better understand these emerging practices. This requires stepping out of the cathedral and into the bazaar.

In the previous four chapters, I have offered my case for rethinking some of the key terms of rhetorical scholarship, and I have done so by using Wikipedia as a paradigmatic example of the hospitable text. I have followed this path because I believe we can view Wikipedia as a microcosm of our shifting rhetorical landscape. These shifts are happening both online and offline. As we are continuously reminded that others will arrive (solicited or not) into our nations through porous borders, into our homes through ever-expanding media channels, and sometimes even into our own “personal space,” we are forced to consider the practices we are developing in response to the arrival of various others. My hope is that a rethinking of our daily collisions through the lens of hospitality offers a way to examine existing rhetorical structures and our responses to those structures. Wikipedia is but one example of a structure of hospitality, but its 2.8 million articles are evidence that it is an important and thriving textual space. If examined at the level of structure, Wikipedia can be a new kind of courseware: courseware that emerges through the interplay of disciplinary practices the practices emerging in the various textual spaces that surround us and courseware that includes both tools for teaching and a space for pedagogical reflection.

In 1999, Stallman knew that the Web offered any number of fantastic commercial opportunities, and he knew that educators would need an answer for corporate approaches to courseware:

Conventional non-free encyclopedias published by companies such as Microsoft will surely be made available on the web, sooner or later—but you will probably have to pay to read an article, and you surely won't be allowed to redistribute them. If we are content with knowledge as a commodity, accessible only through a computerized bureaucracy, we can simply let companies provide it.



Until very recently, Microsoft's encyclopedia, *Encarta*, has been available for purchase. *Encarta* was a read-only encyclopedia, though it did recently offer readers a way to make recommendations to its articles. Still, in many ways it was a poor fit for the read-write Web, and in March 2009 Microsoft announced that it was discontinuing the service. The company's explanation for this move shows its recognition of various shifts in how people access information:

Encarta has been a popular product around the world for many years. However, the category of traditional encyclopedias and reference material has changed. People today seek and consume information in considerably different ways than in years past. As part of Microsoft's goal to deliver the most effective and engaging resources for today's consumer, it has made the decision to exit the Encarta business. Microsoft's vision is that everyone around the world needs to have access to quality education, and we believe that we can use what we've learned and assets we've accrued with offerings like Encarta to develop future technology solutions. In doing so, we feel strongly that we are making the right investments that will help make our vision a reality. ("Important Notice")

I cannot say for sure if contemporary courseware will go the way of Encarta. For my dad's sake, I guess I'm hoping that the landing is a bit softer for Blackboard. But regardless of who or what survives these shifts, it is important to note the shifts that are happening and to attempt to adjust to them.

Stallman's essay was in many ways a call to teachers and students to write "The Free Universal Encyclopedia and Learning Resource," and "Hospitable Texts" is one answer to that call. My close examination of Wikipedia's structure offers rhetoricians a way to think through contemporary infrastructural shifts and to understand Wikipedia (and other hospitable texts) as a new kind of courseware. This next generation of courseware should not only be about new (and "cool") widgets. Situated inside/outside the classroom, the courseware to come can be about the nuts and bolts of everyday

rhetorical practices *and* about the ability to reflect on the theoretical implications of those practices.

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