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## The death of Wikipedia

**May 24, 2006**

Wikipedia, the encyclopedia that "anyone can edit," was a nice experiment in the "democratization" of publishing, but it didn't quite work out. Wikipedia is dead. It died the way the pure products of idealism always do, slowly and quietly and largely in secret, through the corrosive process of compromise.

There was a time when, indeed, pretty much anyone could edit pretty much anything on Wikipedia. But, as eWeek's Steven Vaughan-Nichols recently observed, "Wikipedia hasn't been a real 'wiki' where anyone can write and edit for quite a while now." A few months ago, in the wake of controversies about the quality and reliability of the free encyclopedia's content, the Wikipedian powers-that-be - its "administrators" - abandoned the work's founding ideal of being the "ULTIMATE 'open' format" and tightened the restrictions on editing. In addition to banning some contributors from the site, the administrators adopted an "official policy" of what they called, in good Orwellian fashion, "semi-protection" to prevent "vandals" (also known as people) from messing with their open encyclopedia. Here's how they explained the policy:

Semi-protection of a page prevents unregistered editors and editors with very new accounts from editing that page. "Very new" is currently defined as four days. A page can be temporarily semi-protected by an administrator in response to vandalism, or to stop banned users with dynamic IPs from editing pages.

Semi-protection should normally not be used as a purely pre-emptive measure against the threat or probability of vandalism before any such vandalism occurs, such as when certain pages suddenly become high profile due to current events or being linked from a high-traffic website. In the case of one or two static IP vandals hitting a page, blocking the vandals may be a better option than semi-protection. It is also not an appropriate solution to regular content disputes since it may restrict some editors and not others. However, certain pages with a history of vandalism and other problems may be semi-protected on a pre-emptive, continuous basis.

Ideals always expire in clotted, bureaucratic prose. It distances the killer from the killing.

The end came last Friday. That's when Wikipedia's founder, Jimmy Wales, proposed "that we eliminate the requirement that semi-protected articles have to announce themselves as such to the general public." The "general public," you see, is now an entity separate and distinct from those who actually control the creation of Wikipedia. As Vaughan-Nichols says, "And the difference between Wikipedia and a conventionally edited publication is what exactly?"

Given that Wikipedia has been, and continues to be, the poster child for the brave new world of democratic, "citizen" media, where quality naturally "emerges" from the myriad contributions of a crowd, it's worth quoting Wales's epitaph for Wikipedia at length:

Semi-protection seems to be a great success in many cases. I think that it should be extended, but carefully, in a couple of key ways.

1. It seems that some very high profile articles like [[George W. Bush]] are destined to be semi-protected all the time or nearly all the time. I support continued occasional experimentation by anyone who wants to take the responsibility of guarding it, but it seems likely to me that we will keep such articles semi-protected almost continuously. If that is true, then the template at the time is misleading and scary and distracting to readers. I propose that we eliminate the requirement that semi-protected articles have to announce themselves as such to the general public. They can be categorized as necessary, of course, so that editors who take an interest in making sure things are not excessively semi-protected can do so, but there seems to me to be little benefit in announcing it to the entire world in such a confusing fashion.

2. A great many minor bios of slightly well known but controversial individuals are subject to POV [point-of-view] pushing trolling, including vandalism, and it seems likely that in such cases, not enough people have these on their personal watchlists to police them as well as we would like. Semi-protection would at least eliminate the drive-by nonsense that we see so often.

The basic concept here is that semi-protection has proven to be a valuable tool, with very broad community support, which gives good editors more time to deal with serious issues because there is less random vandalism. Because the threshold to editing is still quite low for anyone who seriously wants to join the dialogue in an adult, NPOV [neutral point of view], responsible manner, I do not find any reason to hold back on some extended use of it.

Where once we had a commitment to open democracy, we now have a commitment to "making sure things are not excessively semi-protected." Where once we had a commune, we now have a gated community, "policed" by "good editors." So let's pause and shed a tear for the old Wikipedia, the true Wikipedia. Rest in peace, dear child. You are now beyond the reach of vandals.

CORRECTION: Jimmy Wales informs me that in fact there was never a time when "anyone could edit anything on Wikipedia," as I originally wrote. "There have always been restrictions on editing," he says. I guess I made the mistake, as others may have as well, of taking literally Wikipedia's slogan that it is "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit." I apologize for my error. I have revised two sentences in the second paragraph to correct it.

UPDATE: More [here](#).

Posted by nick at May 24, 2006 09:12 AM

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## Comments

So vandalism = democracy? That's like saying that giving the police force (wikipedians) handcuffs (semi-protection) is the same as stomping out the right to free speech. Wouldn't you agree that it's not the tools that limit free speech but how they are used? Declaring Wikipedia dead seems a bit premature.

Posted by: [bering](#) at May 24, 2006 09:40 AM

Nicolas -  
gah - I can't tell which cheek, if either, you have your tongue in.

While the term semi-protected shows Wales et al cringing from what needed to be done, it does not seem like an extreme compromise at all. Requiring one to have an ID registered for 4 days before he can begin editing, and that vandals can be banned from the site, is not really a retreat from open editing. You can edit. I can edit. While allowing vandals is a retreat from building an encyclopedia of any reliability at all.