Chapter 7
Ethos [edit]:
Procedural Rhetoric and the Wikipedia Project

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the credibility of Wikipedia from a rhetorical point of view, using ethos, one of Aristotle’s original modes of persuasion, to assess the community behind the content of the site’s articles. To do so, the author adapts a newer perspective from video game studies, procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007), to provide a means with which to analyze the site’s community-created rules, which he argues, operates symbiotically with a unified body of editors to shape what the reader sees. By considering Wikipedia within the encyclopedia genre, and by looking beyond the surface content to the archived and easily accessible sets of rules and user data, those who must make decisions about why, how, and to what extent they should use and/or trust the site—or permit it to be used under their purview—may be able to avoid the mire of evaluating constantly evolving pseudonymous documents for factuality.

INTRODUCTION
In 2001 Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger launched Wikipedia to act as a testing ground, or sandbox, to supplement Nupedia, their online encyclopedia. Nupedia attempted to create a gift economy in which experts would write articles for a free, open resource that would take advantage of the spatial and temporal advantages of the Web. Wikipedia exploded with activity, quickly overshadowing and then obsoleting its predecessor. In the years that followed, Wikipedia has grown to be one of the most popular websites in the world, surpassing all other nonprofit organizations, encyclopedias, news sites, educational institutions, and other traditional sources of information. In fact the only names above Wikipedia at the time of writing, as reported by Alexa Internet’s list of most visited websites, are Google, Facebook, YouTube, Yahoo, and Baidu (“Wikipedia.org,”
Clearly a special case, Wikipedia has had a dramatic influence not just on popular culture and the Internet, but on the ways in which we think about how knowledge is produced and consumed.

Despite its weight as a cultural force—and, of course, because of it—Wikipedia has also attracted sharp criticism from diverse groups of stakeholders in many sectors of the information economy. Journalists scoff at it as an accurate source, educators ban it outright from classrooms, and late night talk show hosts use it as fodder for their opening monologues. An easy way to indirectly question someone’s claim today has become to ask if he or she “read it on Wikipedia.”

The issue of credibility is central to critical discourse around Wikipedia, as well as to the nature of the site itself. What is an encyclopedia, after all, without trustworthy entries? Certainly the Encyclopaedia Britannica would not have been able to maintain its place as the gold standard for summarized knowledge for so long without the reverence earned through a long history of strict standards for content (Kafker & Loveland, 2009; Kogan, 1958). When the common comparison is made between Britannica and Wikipedia, the former is often treated as truth itself, as if it, unlike Wikipedia, had not been written by real and fallible humans.

A good deal of research has been conducted about the factual accuracy of the content of Wikipedia’s articles, with mostly positive results (Andrews, 2007; Booth, 2007; Matthews, 2005; Read, 2006; Rosenzweig, 2006). In fact, a 2005 study conducted for Nature (Giles, 2005) found that it was very close in accuracy to Britannica—especially impressive findings considering Wikipedia’s exponentially larger database and ability to rapidly improve (all errors noted in the study were fixed within days of its publication). Useful as these assessments are, they nonetheless conceal, omit, or otherwise marginalize what is both the site’s greatest strength and most glaring weakness: Wikipedia is not static and is not gated; anybody can change almost anything at any time. The text analyzed for a study at one moment could the next day have been improved upon or deleted and replaced with misinformation or random expletives. Edits like the latter (“vandalism”) are typically obvious and quickly removed, but the volatility such changes demonstrate clearly problematizes methods traditionally used to evaluate websites as sources of information, such as those discussed in the next section.

The question then becomes how one might assess the credibility of a dynamic, open access encyclopedia without relying on traditional, empirical evaluations of content. The exigence this creates is clear: Wikipedia is ubiquitous, accessible, and popular, and there are diverse groups of stakeholders in many sectors of the information economy who must make decisions about its use. To err on the side of caution by abstaining or forbidding its use without proper investigation foolishly writes off a tremendous potential for learning from its unquestionably vast stores of information.

Above all else, an encyclopedia must persuade its potential user that it is trustworthy. Just as a speaker communicates credibility through more than just the words contained in his or her speech, so does a wiki. A rhetorical perspective thus seems a fitting approach. In particular, I will focus on ethos, one of Aristotle’s original modes of persuasion, to look at the pseudonymous community behind the content. I will also adapt a newer perspective, procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007), to provide means with which to analyze the site’s community-created rules as well as the coded, technological rules that together shape what the reader sees. By looking through these lenses, we can understand Wikipedia’s credibility through its community of editors and the complex system of norms and rules that guide how the content comes to be, rather than by wrestling with the messy uncertainty inherent in evaluations of articles themselves.