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Wikipedia community grapples with changes

by Daniel Terdiman

When it comes to Wikipedia, the "free encyclopedia that anyone can edit," any kind of structural change is a very big deal.

That's why the current plan for a new rule that would require an editor's approval before any edits to articles about living persons go live is a very big deal. As **reported** in The New York Times on Monday, that new system is expected to be implemented sometime soon, though it will most likely initially be a trial that will affect only a limited number of articles.
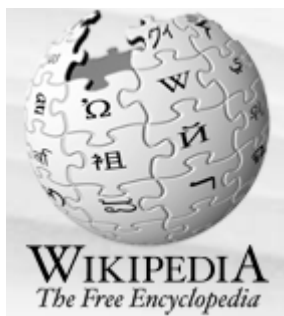
This week, much of the movers and shakers in the Wikipedia community are in Buenos Aires, Argentina, for the annual Wikimedia conference. There, the breaking news is that the Omidyar Network has agreed to donate $2 million to the Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit that runs Wikipedia, in exchange for a seat on the foundation's board of trustees.

But surely, the real question being asked in Buenos Aires is: can Wikipedia survive changes to its fundamental nature as a user-generated site that grants nearly unfettered rights to just about anyone? The quick answer? Almost certainly.

The move to require editors' approval before edits go live was hatched three years ago, as CNET News **reported first** at the time. Back then, the idea was one that was going to be tested out on the German Wikipedia site as a way of seeing how to fix problems with vandalism that were increasingly creeping up. It was thought that if the test was successful in Germany, the same system could then be rolled out on the English version.

One of the ideas behind that proposal, Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales said at the time, was to theoretically make it possible for the English site's front page to be opened up to the public for the first time in years. It had long been locked to public editing because of the danger of

vandalism that would be extremely public.

Subsequently, the changes, known as "flagged revisions," have been implemented on the German site, and now all article edits must be approved before going live. According to Andrew Lih, the author of "The Wikipedia Revolution," the German experiment has proved successful, giving proponents of rolling the system out for the much larger English site a lot of ammunition.

BLP articles

Perhaps as a way of managing the utter freak-out that would likely occur if German-style changes were made to the English site, the only proposal on the table being taken seriously right now is one that would mandate editors' approval for changes made to articles about living persons--articles known as "BLP," or "biographies of living persons."

Still, according to Lih, BLP articles have "been a real pain in the neck for Wikipedians to patrol and control," and have resulted in some of the worst scandals involving the free encyclopedia, particularly vandalized articles about Sens. Ted Kennedy and Robert Byrd, and the entertainer Sinbad, all of whom were purported to have died.

Unlike the originally proposed "flagged revisions" changes, the "**flagged protection and patrolled revisions**" modifications would only apply to BLP articles.

Will this be enough to satisfy many of Wikipedia's critics--those who, like Eric Goldman, an associate professor at Santa Clara University's law school, think that the encyclopedia faces self-destruction without a much stricter way to control what the public can do on the site.

That's not known yet. But those critics definitely feel strongly that Wikipedia has outgrown its initial mandate, that of being a site that anyone can edit anytime they want.

Wikipedia's English-language site will likely soon require an editor's approval before edits to articles about living persons can go live.
(Credit: Wikipedia)

"I think free editability is Wikipedia's Achilles' heel," Goldman wrote recently in **an article** titled "Wikipedia's labor squeeze and its consequences." "Wikipedia attracts vandals and spammers who edit entries for unproductive purposes. Thus far, Wikipedia's volunteer editors have successfully defended against these threats, but future success is not guaranteed. First, as Wikipedia's popularity increases, so does its appeal to vandals and spammers, which also increases the volume of malicious edits. Second, over time, Wikipedia's current editors will turn over, and I believe various obstacles--including Wikipedia's reliance on contributors who are not seeking cash or credit--hinder the recruitment of replacements. This dynamic will create a labor squeeze because more anti-threat work will be borne by a reduced number of committed editors."

Probably the most famous scandal in Wikipedia's history--the so-called **Seigenthaler incident**, in which a then-anonymous editor in late 2005 modified the article about writer and journalist John Seigenthaler to indicate that he might have been involved in the assassination of U.S. president John F. Kennedy--resulted in one of the site's biggest changes to date. That change, which took place not long after the Seigenthaler episode, required users to register before they could edit articles. Previously, anyone could do it any time.

And did Wikipedia collapse as a result? Hardly. If anything, it has only flourished. Today, the English-language site has more than 3 million articles and is regularly one of the top 10 most visited sites on the Internet.

By comparison, it certainly is a big step to require editors' approval before edits to BLP articles go live, but of course, even that change wouldn't mean that edits would be invisible to the public. In fact, given the way wikis work, even unapproved edits would still be readily available to anyone who looks in an article's history, Lih said.

That fact might help assuage the concerns of those **who worry** about the new rules and still want there to be a record of any edits, whether publicly-viewable or not.

To Goldman, implementing flagged protection, as the system to be tested is known, is a step in the right direction, but hardly enough to keep vandals from doing their business.

"Flagged protection and patrolled revisions are...consistent with the current assessment that Wikipedia has avoided significant incursions on free editability," Goldman wrote, before continuing that "more dramatic technological measures are inevitable."

In fact, Goldman continued, most of the barriers to bad behavior on Wikipedia are social rather than technological. He argued that most new articles are quickly deleted by editors, and that most edits to articles are just as quickly reverted to the previous versions. Yet he

concludes that this is not enough, and that over time, as editors move on and become hard to replace, the barriers may well go away.

But within the Wikipedia community, there appears to be a lot of sentiment that something like flagged protection is necessary. The test will certainly provide evidence as to whether such a system works, but for now, according to Lih, the momentum is on the side of those wanting at least some change.

"I would say the (real news is that) rather than seeing this as a lockdown of general articles--which it isn't--this has been developed as an alternative to full protection and semi-protection," Lih said. "It is an 'opening up' of sorts of...articles than have had to be locked down for awhile. So rather than semi-protection--newbies and anonymous people cannot edit--and full protection--only admins--this allows for these 'problem' articles to be re-opened up for editing, but providing a checking, or 'flagging' system to allow those edits to be screened."

Further, Lih doesn't think that the proposed changes are likely to go beyond BLP articles, at least not anytime soon.

"The intent (of the) proposal, and I have to think that people will be faithful to that original premise," Lih said, "is that BLP was the motivation, and that the list of currently protected and semi-protected articles is the starting point, and straying too far off that path will be discouraged."

Daniel Terdiman is a staff writer at CNET News covering games, Net culture, and everything in between. E-mail Daniel.