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Folklore and the Internet

Trevor J. Blank

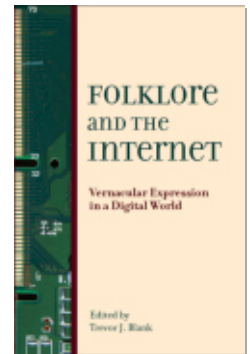
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Chapter 5

Epistemology, the Sociology of Knowledge, and the *Wikipedia* Userbox Controversy

WILLIAM WESTERMAN

All knowledge is folk knowledge. Whether we are concerned with the scientific findings by a Nobel laureate published in an academic journal, the report of the destructive power of a hurricane reported in a local newspaper, gossip about a neighbor spread via the rumor mill, or a local legend, all knowledge is produced within the communication conventions of a particular community and disseminated in ways that are acceptable or trustworthy to a degree held customary by that same group. The Nobel laureate is published through a process of peer-review, a form of group approval, and speaks to other specialists who read that scientific journal. The local newspaper reports as quickly as possible on the storm's damage and its effects to readers who are familiar with a particular locale and who may know the affected individuals. The rumor mill circulates among people who know one another, if not first hand, then separated by no more than two or three degrees. What distinguishes these forms of knowledge is not, as most academics outside the field of folkloristics¹ would argue, a level of accuracy and truth or the professionally trained academic expertise involved in their production, but the verifiability of the statements, the strength of the evidence, and the transparency with which such knowledge is generated.

This is what makes the field of folkloristics epistemologically radical: not that we folklorists reject in a postmodern way the notion of a

single “truth,” but that we see all forms of knowledge communication as essentially similar, including our own, and the degrees of “truth” and of “belief” are questions which, while relevant, are measured along different axes.² All communication, then, whether academic or interpersonal, exists in the contexts of groups of insiders, usually a smaller set than the set of outsiders in the world at large. Knowledge can be conveyed among groups of insiders (for example, ophthalmologists speaking to other ophthalmologists at a medical conference who have a shared methodology and body of knowledge in the field), or it can be produced by insiders for the consumption of those outside of that particular world (such as doctors writing a health column in a newspaper or website). Folklorists, then, judge validity not on the basis of academic prestige or credentials—again, including our own—but on verifiability, trustworthiness, honesty, use-value, transparency, context, and a range of other criteria we have not yet fully articulated. This is why bias bothers us so little. We know it is there, in everyone, because everyone is a member of some groups (class, gender, educational level, region, and so on) and not others. In the advancement of knowledge, the issue that can be useful beyond group borders is how to filter for bias, since bias is adjunct to knowledge, like white on rice.

Specifically, this chapter concerns knowledge construction and community formation among the editors of the largest encyclopedia the world has ever known, the *Wikipedia* project. If indeed individuals who share at least one common factor become part of a folk group, then it follows that those who contribute to a common Internet-based project, such as *Wikipedia*, will share their own folk traditions. That such contributors would develop folklore content consisting of folk speech, argot, and customs is a given.

What makes *Wikipedia* more interesting—like social networking sites (which its editors adamantly assert it is not³)—is the formation of a large group of editors and writers and, within that, smaller communities organized around interest areas or administrative tasks. But what is most significant is that a mutually understood system of knowledge production has emerged within a few years, along with an evolving epistemology—or epistemological methodology—that is shaped by the community and that has been archived in the continually-being-edited pages of the site. This provides contemporary corroborating evidence for Steven Shapin’s observation that

what we know about the world is arrived at, sustained, and recognized through collective action . . . no single individual can constitute

knowledge; all the individual can do is offer claims, with evidence, arguments, and inducements, to the community for its assessment. Knowledge is the result of the community's evaluations and actions . . . Since the acts of knowledge-making and knowledge-protecting capture so much of communal life, communities may be effectively described through their economies of truth. (1995, 6)⁴

We cannot be present at the earliest editorial meetings of the *Oxford English Dictionary* or the *Encyclopedia Britannica* except through historical reconstruction,⁵ but we can observe and eavesdrop on the conversations among groups of otherwise total strangers across the globe who have come together to collaboratively produce an encyclopedia that will eventually dwarf the aforementioned two projects. To pick up on a question asked by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett over ten years ago, "What is produced socially when strangers communicate instantaneously with one another across vast distances with little or no prospect of ever meeting face to face?" (1996, 23), I ask, What happens not only when those strangers communicate, but when they try to write an encyclopedia together?

Within five short years—time being drastically foreshortened as it has been throughout the development of the Internet—not only was there a functioning argot, a community code of behavior, and organized subgroups within the larger community, there was also a discussion of how to handle bias and political affiliation in the project itself. Even more specifically, this debate revolved around the right of contributors to post their political and social affiliations in the form of little graphic banners, called *userboxes*, in their own biographical profiles. The community's aesthetic—that is, establishing what comprises quality in the crafting of explanatory articles—was openly debated. This became a fascinating folk discourse on how bias shapes scholarship. All of these shared behaviors, from slang to aesthetics to ethics, are of central concern to folklorists and are key to developing a sociology of knowledge construction.

Wikipedia is an online, Internet-based encyclopedia that was launched on 15 January 2001 by founders Jimmy Wales (sometimes referred to in the community as "Jimbo" Wales) and Larry Sanger as an open-source encyclopedia, a medium that the Internet can accommodate but printed matter effectively cannot ("Wikipedia"). The idea of a *wiki*—originally a term from the Hawai'ian language meaning "quick"—is that anyone with an Internet connection can enter the site and have the ability to change its content through its existing programming language ("Wiki"). This builds on the relatively new tradition of *open-source* software (such as, most famously, Linux), meaning anyone can have access to changing the code, because the program is not covered by typical legalistic

conceptions of exclusive intellectual property, and such changes are usually made by volunteers working in community.⁶ In other words, anyone at any time can use a computer to change, delete, or add text to, in this case, any entry in the encyclopedia, or even create a new entry. The computer technology to do this has only been available since 1995 (“History of Wikis”). This is what is and remains radically different about *Wikipedia* relative to the history of print encyclopaediae. It is remarkable that to this day many of the users of *Wikipedia* are unaware that anyone can edit or change the information written therein.⁷

As of 1 April 2008, *Wikipedia* consisted of 10 million articles in over 250 languages, including 2.3 million entries in the English-language edition, and more than 50,000 entries in each of 31 other languages, including two artificial languages, Esperanto and Volapük.⁸ There are also additional websites in the *Wikipedia* family, including dictionary sites, news sites, and media sites. The media sites, such as Mediawiki.org, provide free software packages and templates for people to start their own wiki projects, including their own encyclopedias. So, for example, in addition to the Punjabi-language *Wikipedia* (<http://pa.wikipedia.org/>) which at 300 articles is relatively small,⁹ there is also SikhiWiki, which bills itself as an English-language “Encyclomedia of the Sikhs” (“you don’t have to be a scholar, a pundit or a gyani to contribute”), with nearly 4,000 articles thus far.¹⁰ This chapter chiefly concerns a debate that took place during the editing of the English-language and German-language *Wikipedias*, but some of these other sources may be referred to in the notes.

For anyone who uses the Internet, *Wikipedia* is well known because the major search engines will refer any user to it among the top hits they offer. The English-language edition receives hundreds of thousands if not millions of hits daily. In February 2008, for example, the Main Page was accessed 136 million times, while “Barack Obama” was viewed 2.25 million times and “Hillary Clinton” a mere 475,000 (“Wikipedia Article Traffic Statistics”). As of September 2006, the last month for which English-language statistics were maintained, there were over 43,000 contributors (also known as writers or editors, but within the group known as *Wikipedians*), making at least five edits per month (“Wikipedia Statistics”), out of more than 6 million registered users worldwide (which includes individuals using duplicate names). In addition, there are approximately 1,500 editors elected to have additional administrative privileges, known as *admins* (or, alternatively, *sysops*—system operators), an important part of the system of social organization of this knowledge community (“Wikipedia: Administrators”; “Wikipedia: Special Statistics”).

A brief overview of what *Wikipedia* sites look like and how they function is necessary in order to understand the debate featured here.¹¹ One who accesses a *Wikipedia* article page sees black print in a sans serif font on a white background. This background is surrounded on the top and left-hand sides with a grey background and the *Wikipedia* logo in the upper left-hand corner; there is also the pale silhouette of an open book spread across the top of the page. Words in the text that are hyperlinked are in blue, meaning a viewer can click on these terms and be taken to the article about that concept (the links are red if there is not yet a corresponding entry). For example, someone viewing the "Barack Obama" page can click on such terms as "Illinois," "Harvard Law School," or a related article, "United States Senate career of Barack Obama," and be taken to those pages. This is an article page, which is headed in large boldface type with the title of the article. All *Wikipedia* articles are alphabetized by the first word or name in the entry title.

Each such page has four tabs along the top, marked "article," "discussion," "edit this page," and "history."¹² Clicking on the "discussion" tab takes one to a page that may include commentary on the article itself, including evaluations by various editors who review other articles, questions or errors that need to be addressed, or criticisms of the articles or the work of the writers. The "edit" tab takes one to another sort of page, where the text of the article is now in an editable format, written in Courier font. Any reader can change this text, then can click on one tab which will present a preview in "article" format for viewing and proofreading or click on another to "Save page" in its new format. Hyperlinking in the text is activated by typing double brackets before and after the term.¹³ The "history" tab is a list of all changes and edits to the article since it was initially created, with each prior version available in an archived form; comparative views are possible, showing changes during a given period or between revisions.

Contrary to what many believe, the editing process is not unsigned and is rarely, if ever, truly anonymous.¹⁴ Editors can make changes either logged in to the system or not. If not logged in, the IP address of the computer from which the changes were made will be recorded; this is how changes have been traced back, for example, to a number of Congressional offices ("USA Congressional Staff Edits"). If one is logged in as a registered user, then the author's user name will be recorded. The user name, like an e-mail I.D., can be as real or as fanciful as one wants. Some are more obvious than others, or can be deduced. For example, User:Kbandersen and User:Sbronner¹⁵ who have edited the articles "Kurt Andersen" and "Simon J. Bronner," respectively, are likely, though not certainly, to be

Kurt Andersen and Simon J. Bronner themselves (“Revision History of Kurt Andersen”; “Revision History of Simon J. Bronner”). We know less about User:68.83.74.246, except that since thirteen of his sixteen edits are of the article “Simon J. Bronner” and the fourteenth is the addition of Bronner’s works to the article bibliography for “Folkloristics,” it is reasonable to assume (barring an IP search) that this too is Bronner himself, or perhaps a very devoted student (“User Contributions”). In theory, at least, this editing history will be accessible to scholars forever. On the other hand, the real name of User:Darwinek, an editor with an interest in African American culture, folklore, and history who had started hundreds of articles and currently is thirty-third on the list of most active Wikipedians (“Wikipedia: List of Wikipedians,” 2 April 2008)—including “American Folklife Center,” “Archive of Folk Culture,” “Alan Jabbour,” and “Sharpe James”—remains unknown. Every registered user gets a *user page* (“Wikipedia: User Page”), and if we are to believe User:Darwinek’s page, he is a student born in 1985, of Polish nationality, who resides somewhere in Central Europe (“User: Darwinek,” 6 October 2007).¹⁶

The anonymity, or pseudonymity factor, rankles scholars in much the same way that anonymity in folk arts could be used by fine arts scholars to demean the artistic value of craft. The situation is not completely analogous, but it is significant for folklorists. One of the critiques of the reliability of *Wikipedia* is that the academic credentials of the contributors can never really be known. Though there is a general guideline against posting original, unverifiable research on *Wikipedia*, and a strong, in fact growing, demand to cite all information posted to it, the possibility that an author could be a Harvard professor or a fourteen-year-old in a public library in Oshkosh¹⁷ bothers academic purists and makes the encyclopedia inherently unreliable. Of course, an entry in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is not innately reliable either, because any scholar writes with bias, and academic conventions and the hypereducated have their own biases as well, usually related to class. As a university lecturer, I can oppose the use of all general encyclopedias as unreliable sources. Where I do appreciate *Wikipedia*, particularly as a folklorist, is in the fact that peer review by the community will be almost instantaneous. The folk community in this case is self-defined; those who think, for example, they know something about Euclidian geometry are more likely to scrutinize an edit to the article on “orthants,” but in theory anyone could change the text to make it nonsensical or simply inaccurate. Where I am critical, though, is in knowing that the context of the author is elided, except to the extent that the author willingly and truthfully self-reports. Identity may not matter as much to folklorists as do the circumstances of knowledge production.

The question of accuracy becomes particularly charged when politics is involved. As one can well imagine, any entry on any aspect of current events, as well as historical events, is subject to political interpretation. So how, then, to write about the administration of George W. Bush? In a standard print encyclopedia, the author and a board of editors appointed by a publisher are given canonical authority to provide the interpretation that will become the standard until the next edition is published—if ever. In an online, open-source encyclopedia, such changes can take place minute by minute and can be made by anyone. On the other hand, because it is open source, anyone can *add* anything as well, and as long as this new material is documented by a reputable source, no one is going to object and argue that something should not be there. This is knowledge by accumulation and never needs to be edited for reasons of space. As a result, for example, *Wikipedia* has the most complete and easily accessible list of current and past detainees at Guantánamo Bay and the up-to-date status of their legal cases (“List of Guantánamo Bay Detainees”).¹⁸

At this point it is important to take a step back and consider the philosophy behind *Wikipedia* and its family of wikis. Without digressing into an abstract philosophical discussion of the open-source movement, several aspects of *Wikipedia*'s founding philosophy and structure need to be framed here for the reader who may be unfamiliar with them. First, with a few exceptions, the administrative structure of the enterprise is decentralized. Jimmy Wales, although acknowledged as the leader and thereby having some moral authority, does not maintain editorial control over the content or technological control over the hardware and software.¹⁹ His philosophy is what others describe as a form of intellectual libertarianism inspired by the work of Ayn Rand.²⁰ The resulting enterprise is decentralized, governed by a community of thousands of editors and a smaller set of admins, who together have developed and refined certain policies and guidelines (“Wikipedia: Policies and Guidelines”).²¹ Among these are the *five pillars*, or basic principles of the project (“Wikipedia: Five Pillars”),²² the second of which is a “neutral point of view,” abbreviated NPOV (a term used among Wikipedians as an adjective; conversely, an article, section, or sentence that is biased is “POV”) and codified by Jimbo Wales himself in April 2001 (“History of Wikipedia”). Through the policy guidelines, which have been adopted through consensus, community members are advised that in articles where there may be disagreement, “the policy is simply that we should *describe* disputes, not *engage* in them” (“Wikipedia: Neutral Point of View / FAQ”; emphasis in original).²³ An effective, self-referential example of this can be found in

a page responding to common objections surrounding *Wikipedia*, which lists multiple points of view in response to these objections (“Wikipedia: Replies to Common Objections”) and presents all as if each could legitimately be considered valid.

As mentioned above, each user is entitled to one user page,²⁴ which consists, as do the article pages, of a main page, a talk page, an editing page, and a history page, as well as any subpages for reference or future use, such as material for undeveloped articles or archived talk pages. Editors are requested to include only such biographical data as might be relevant to their *Wikipedia* work, not personal characteristics for the purposes of dating or other social networking (“Wikipedia: User Page”). *Wikipedia*’s own guideline on this, developed by consensus and in principle editable (but in fact locked as of the time of this writing), is to

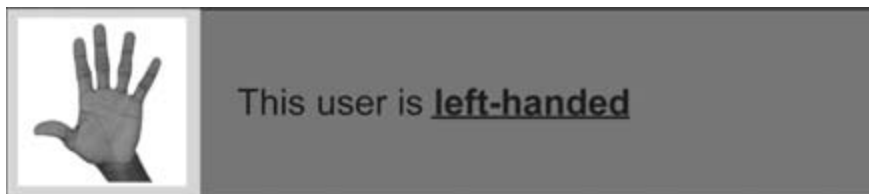
think of it as a way of organizing the work that you are doing on the articles in Wikipedia, and also a way of helping other editors to understand with whom they are working.

Some people add information about themselves as well, possibly including contact information (e-mail, instant messaging, etc.), a photograph, their real name, their location, information about their areas of expertise and interest, likes and dislikes, homepages, and so forth. (“Wikipedia: User Page”)

It is this added information that gave rise to the controversy concerning political allegiances.

This guideline does not make mention of *userboxes*, small (generally 45px by 238px) graphic banners, with the shape and proportion of bumper stickers,²⁵ created in HTML in the editing software and distributed by the copy-and-paste method through which much *Wikipedia* (and indeed open source in general) content and programming are propagated.





Copy-and-paste is greatly simplified by the use of *templates*, or programming shortcuts that are edited on one site and then reproduced in their shorter format through a process known as *transclusion*.²⁶ Thus, to choose a very neutral example, one user could type `{{user recorder}}` on his editing page, and a white userbox stating "This user plays the recorder" (underlined here to represent a hyperlink) would appear on his user page, along with a small photo of, in this case, a recorder (and the word itself is hyperlinked). Another user could see this, and she could go into the edit page of that first user's user page, copy `{{user recorder}}` onto her edit page, and the userbox would show up in her user page. Or she could go to the source of that template, change the program text to, say, saxophone, change the graphic image, and then paste that newly designed userbox code onto her page. All of this is folk transmission.

The first userboxes, known as *babel boxes*, were developed so that users could indicate what language(s) they could speak and, more importantly, write and edit in and at what level (indicated by a number from 0 to 5, plus native ability). This appears to have first been codified on the Wikimedia Commons site on 9 April 2005 ("Commons: Babel"),²⁷ with the native-English-speaker userbox already posted on the pages of over 540 *Wikipedia* users as of 29 March 2005 (the actual date of its creation is harder to uncover; see "Category: User En-N").

Having established the need to know what languages contributors speak, other userboxes with other affiliations developed, including those pertaining to hobbies, interests, locale, popular culture, sexual orientation, and political affiliation. In an abortive essay on the topic, User:MailerDiablo suggests the first variant from a babel box was proposed jokingly on 27 August 2005 ("User: Mailer Diablo"). Originally, when the first guideline page was created on 18 November 2005, userboxes were described by User:Cedrus-Libani in an almost lighthearted manner:

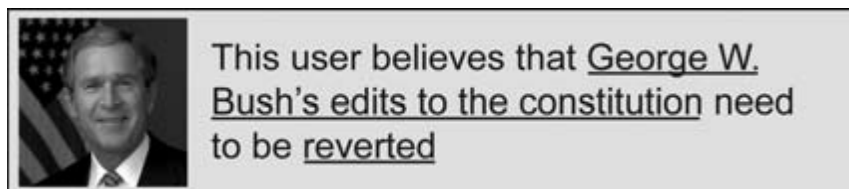
A userbox is a small coloured box which allow [*sic*] users to add small messages on their user page. It is an extension of the babel-boxes used for user's language abilities. Feel free to use these on your user page. The Wikimedia Commons has a large range of icons for use within boxes.

Common uses for boxes include user interests, user skills, technical information, Wikipedia activities, or just for fun. (“Wikipedia: Userboxes,” 18 November 2005)²⁸

The remainder of the page was filled with sample userboxes, none of which were political.

Over the next few years, registered users created hundreds of userboxes, as only a rudimentary knowledge of programming—which could really be picked up from copying, pasting, and adapting other code—is necessary to do so. They circulate as folklore; as one user noted: “Userboxes are so ‘unofficial’ and there are so many of them, anyone can create more, and some of them are disputed but still very difficult to delete” (“User: Rhanyeia”). Current categories for userboxes (“Wikipedia: Userboxes”) include languages spoken (including Klingon), programming languages, religion, interests (including sports, cars, favorite colors, foods, etc.), media and popular culture (including favorite books), locations, time zones, health, professions, military background, educational background, habits, handedness, even *Wikipedia* use (such as numbers of edits). A fair number of these are self-referential or even metafolkloristic, in the sense that they make use of in-jokes that would only be comprehensible to aficionados of the same television series, adherents to a particular religion, or experienced Wikipedians. So, for example, a userbox with a picture of Humphrey Bogart and the quotation “This user is the stuff that dreams are made of,” when clicked, redirects to the article for “The Maltese Falcon” (“User: Mtmelendez”).

A prime example of a political userbox whose meaning hinged on folklore—and one that proved so controversial that its template shortcut was deleted—had a small photo graphic of Bush on the left side of the box.



The meaning of this userbox depends on folk knowledge of multiple categories. The terminology is familiar to any Wikipedian; *reverting* is the term used to refer to going back to a prior version of an article when an unacceptable edit, most commonly vandalism, has been made (and it can be accomplished with a single click), and this article suggests that the U.S. Constitution has, under Bush, become some kind of wiki that

can be easily edited. (There's a subtle, implicit criticism here, too, that the Constitution is not being *amended*, which of course is part of civic practice, but that it is, like a wiki, being edited by a single, rogue user.) What gives this userbox such extra punch is that clicking on "edits to the constitution" would direct one to the article on the U.S.A. PATRIOT Act, while clicking on "reverted" does not lead to a *Wikipedia* policy page about reverting, as one might expect, but to the article titled "Movement to Impeach George W. Bush." Unfortunately, as with a few other pointed userboxes during the controversy, the template for this one was taken down for reasons of divisiveness. However, several users committed to userboxes and the free expression of political opinion rewrote their own code to produce this box, and then distributed that via Javascript and automated programs called *bots* ("Wikipedia: Bot Policy").²⁹

More complicated, self-referential userboxes concern those dealing with *Wikipedia* customs or, more controversially, with the very usage of userboxes. As of the writing of this chapter, there are over eighty-five userboxes on the official *Wikipedia* page containing userbox templates referring to userboxes and their use, which does not include other userboxes other users may have created on their own user pages ("Wikipedia: Userboxes/Userboxes"). New userboxes are also being created all the time ("Wikipedia: Userboxes/Userboxes"), and there are even new guidelines in order to improve their overall quality ("Wikipedia: WikiProject Userboxes"). In short, userboxes are distributed within the group via observation and imitation (in the form of copying); they make reference to in-group understandings of culture, including the subculture of *Wikipedia* itself; and they serve to mark off subcommunities within the overall larger Wikipedian community ("Wikipedia: WikiProject").³⁰ All these factors naturally are the stuff of folklore.

By early 2008, the policy governing userboxes had become more serious (thanks to 1,046 edits carried out by 300 different Wikipedians) and included the following proscriptions in the English-language *Wikipedia*:

Content restrictions

- All userboxes are governed by the civility policy.
- Userboxes **must not** include incivility or personal attacks.
- Userboxes **must not** be inflammatory or divisive.
- Wikipedia is not an appropriate place for propaganda, advocacy, or recruitment of any kind, commercial, political, religious, or otherwise, opinion pieces on current affairs or politics, self-promotion, or advertising.
- Simply: If content is not appropriate on a user page, it is not appropriate within userboxes.

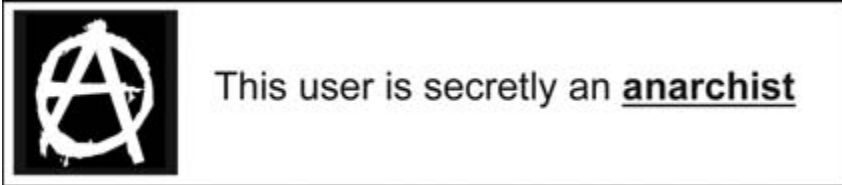
Potentially divisive words

- Avoid verbs which may be used to suggest negative comparison, and would thus be potentially divisive, such as:
believes, considers, favors, finds, knows, prefers, thinks, and wishes.
- Avoid negative verb phrases which can be potentially divisive, such as:
dislikes, despises, hates, loathes
- Also avoid compound sentences which are positive and negative, such as:
This user likes <noun phrase>, but does not like <another noun phrase>.
- Essentially: Express what you like, rather than what you don't like. Express who you are, rather than who you aren't. Express what you do, rather than what you don't. ("Wikipedia: Userboxes")

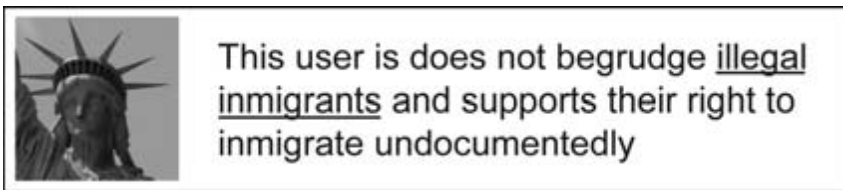
So what exactly happened to make the policy so much more restrictive and serious?

The answer is that during the period from late 2005 through early 2006, and coming to a head in February 2006 (when several admins unilaterally starting deleting templates for political userboxes), a debate arose on the English- and German-language *Wikipedias* concerning whether or not userboxes³¹ that espoused a particular political view could legitimately appear on a user page. The debate, known within the community as the "Userbox Wars," concerned the question of whether posting one's political beliefs on one's user page made that user's contributions more suspect for political bias. This represented an epistemological debate taking place among those who had assumed the mantle of writing an encyclopedia on a voluntary basis. About one policy there was consensus: that encyclopedia articles should reflect an NPOV, and that it was better to represent all sides of the debate and describe each one in as unbiased a way as possible. One can only begin to imagine how difficult this can be in articles such as those that describe the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or even the Armenian genocide. New users, those not yet socialized into the community, often do log on and record POV statements, particularly on hot-button topics such as illegal immigration. Thus the question arose during the project's early years of whether one's own personal political beliefs—or for that matter another social group membership, such as gender or sexual orientation—could be openly stated while contributing to articles that met the NPOV ideal.

In a way this comes back to a question posed by the British art critic John Berger in his famous television program and book, *Ways of Seeing*, in which he presents an image of a painting by Van Gogh and asks the reader if its meaning changes if the caption below were to read: “This is the last picture that Van Gogh painted before he killed himself” (1977, 27–28). With userboxes, the question was essentially—and it could just as well be asked of this or any article—would a reader’s opinion of its reliability or truthfulness be changed if there appeared a box at the end that said, “This author of this article is secretly an anarchist”?



Or, more directly, would an editor’s contribution to the article on, say, “Illegal Immigration,” be intellectually suspect if that contributor had the following userbox on his page?



For some reason, this was deemed an issue only if the userbox were posted at the end of an article or on the userpage of an editor. But if an author has a bumper sticker on her car (or if she marches in a demonstration), not only would no one know, but on the road the driver of the car would be equally anonymous. The issue then was only partly an issue of bias, and more significantly an issue of the *proximity* of that bias to the actual text of the article. The question implicitly being asked was whether one who is claiming partisanship elsewhere on the same website can be trusted to write prose that treats multiple points of view equitably.

There were two schools of thought that negotiated a compromise, although the compromise was more consistently implemented on the German page. On the one hand, there were those who felt that the point of an encyclopedia was to present knowledge without bias, and that allowing—or even encouraging—authors to state their political biases would inevitably produce not only more biased entries, but a less

credible encyclopedia overall. Such commentary on the talk pages read like this post by one of the most prominent of the anti-userbox camp:

Those buttons expressing beliefs or support for political [*sic*] or religious causes would be fit for a blog or forum, but this is neither. It's an encyclopedia, and those buttons threaten its identity. It doesn't matter what the community thinks, we must act in the interests of the encyclopedia at all times.—Tony Sidaway | Talk 10:34, 3 January 2006. (“User Talk: Tony Sidaway”)

Wales himself weighed in several times on the issue as being against userboxes, with his strongest statement coming on 20 February in a mis-sive from the top (such as it is, in a decentralized world):

I think it is somewhat problematic to have users pasting bits of cruft on their userpage which make them seem to be engaged in Wikipedia as activists for a particular POV. I think users should realize that having that sort of cruft on their userpage will quite rightly diminish other people's respect for you and your work. But, whatever, if people want to do it, I see no reason to get absolutely draconian about it. However.

The current situation with these things being in the main Template namespace, and promoted as if healthy and normal in the Wikipedia namespace, is that they are damaging to our culture. They are attracting the wrong sort of people, and giving newcomers the wrong idea of what it means to be a Wikipedian.

That's why they need to go. Not to censor people's self-expression, but to make it clear that *as a whole* the community considers these things to be divisive and inappropriate. (Wales 2006)

The other side, the pro-userbox people felt that by admitting to bias contributors can be held more accountable, and that it would be easy for the discerning reader to try to filter for that bias. In the most basic terms, that sentiment was expressed in this way by User:Imjustmatthew:

In terms of factionalism: A userbox is just a template for inserting Wiki markup quickly and synonymously across [*sic*] pages, it is no different than [*sic*] saying the same thing or writing the Wiki markup on your page itself. I do not believe that identifying yourself—your language, your passions, your beliefs—causes factionalism within a professional project. I do not read a person's user page before reading their edits, rather I read their edits and perhaps their user page. Even in disputes I do not think that we judge based upon who a user is. Understanding each other clearly, where we came from and what we believe, often makes it **much** easier to resolve

disputes. Many conflicts both in our day to day lives and globally would be much easier to resolve if the parties truly understood each other. (“Wikipedia Talk: Proposed Policy on Userboxes”; see also the archived talk pages that come before it)

This is the more conventional argument in favor of allowing userboxes.

But closer research among the archived materials reveals a second objection, related to the notion that it is better to reveal overt diversity of opinion: diversity is not only inevitable, it is ideal. Oddly enough, it was in the discussion of sometimes seemingly politically insignificant (yet eminently folkloric) userboxes that the pro-userbox faction most vocally expressed their rationale, going beyond the notion that individual POV reflected allowable diversity to suggest that the negotiation of difference in POV produces a stronger intellectual community. In the following discussion of whether or not to delete a userbox stating that the user did not believe in Santa Claus, which a user spuriously named User:Santa on Sleigh nominated for deletion, User:Ian¹³, located in the U.K., wrote the following on the debate page:

Userboxes are supposed to display a POV or an aspect of a user. They are designed for **userpages**, a place where users are supposed to tell people about themselves, and usually where POV is not taken into account since it is considered that a user can do what they want there, providing its [*sic*] not breaking any of the wiki laws . . . If userboxes are to be restricted to language only—then it destroys part of the culture of wikipedia, and I feel that would be a great regression in wikipedia status, as well as holding no full reasoning. Also, I feel the template is not POV in many aspects, it merely [*sic*] shows what the user believes: it does not say it is wrong, or that he [Santa Claus] doesn't exist. I feel this template's removal would do a great injustice to the wiki, and where would the line be drawn—would userboxes and babel [those userboxes that refer to language competence] be altogether removed, or would Wikipedia just lose its sence [*sic*] of community? Should this template be removed, it will only complicate the managment [*sic*] of userboxes (I for one certainly have enough [*sic*] to do) and members would be forced to use Template:Userbox to create the desired effect, or would Template:Userbox have to go, and users will have to waste even more of their encyclopedic writing time fiddling with div's—and yes that would lead to less server strain, but is it really worth it for that work and effort? Oh, and the nominator will have to be banned for a POV username, which is far more noticeable. I also notice how the nominator is using the Template:User Santa on their userpage—is this nomination to promote his/her point of view? Ian¹³_{ID:540053} 19:21, 28 December 2005 (UTC). (“Wikipedia: Templates for Deletion,” 31 December 2005)

This provoked the following metacommentary/conspiratorial dialogue on his talk page between Ian¹³ and User:Larix, a native Dutch speaker who was a self-described member of “Users in Defense of Userboxes and Individuality on Wikipedia” (“User: Larix”):

Free expression on user pages

Hi Ian! I saw your comment at [Wikipedia:Templates for deletion#Template:User_NoSanta](#) and thought you might be interested in this template {{[user freedom](#)}}. I made it since a growing number of users seems to be opposed to every possible form of free expression on user pages. Regards, Larix13:02, 31 December 2005 (UTC)

Oh cool, so we fight back their userbox removal with another userbox! That'll annoy them :D Ian¹³_{ID:540053} 13:45, 31 December 2005 (UTC)

It should illustrate a point :) Larix 14:02, 31 December 2005 (UTC)

And if they try and delete it, just say they are of the opposing *[sic]* point of view, and breaking [WP:POINT](#)³² sorted!

Ian¹³_{ID:540053} 14:04, 31 December 2005 (UTC)

So you're going to use it? :) Larix14:05, 31 December 2005 (UTC)

Do you mind if I shorten in abit *[sic]* / rephrase so it will be the average userbox size? Ian¹³_{ID:540053} 14:14, 31 December 2005 (UTC)

It depends on how you rephrase it—I'd like all the links to remain in there, if possible. Larix 14:18, 31 December 2005 (UTC)

Okay. I'll be bold³³ and give it a blast, it can always be reverted. Ian¹³_{ID:540053} 14:19, 31 December 2005 (UTC)

Hows *[sic]* that? It's only a tiny big bigger than normal now . . . Ian¹³_{ID:540053} 14:46, 31 December 2005 (UTC)

Perfect, many thanks! You just earned yourself a barnstar³⁴ :) If you don't mind, I'd like to contact you later about this as the dispute goes on. Larix14:53, 31 December 2005 (UTC)

No problem, and thanks! Where's this barnstar! :D. And yes, the userbox issue is becoming quite big. One *[sic]* the one side we have the [Userbox WikiProject](#) members, and on the other all those people opposed to liberty, humour and just plain userboxes. Ian¹³_{ID:540053} 14:58, 31 December 2005 (UTC)

There it is! (and we've got the people in religious or political categories on our side, too) Larix 15:02, 31 December 2005 (UTC). (“User Talk: Ian¹³”)

At an even deeper level, though, a few users objected to the proposed ban on userboxes out of an intellectual libertarianism. Some of the strongest rhetoric in the pro-userbox camp came from User:John Reid, who explained his position in extensive terms on 19 and 21 February 2006. What is noteworthy here is that his argument operates on several levels of both political and folkloric interest. He writes of the importance of protecting intellectual diversity within groups while staking out a libertarianism that is, in a way, diametrically opposed to that of Wales. User:John Reid's worldview is that more points of view, not the absence of any point of view, are valuable for community and democracy. In other words, libertarianism is not the absence of another political point of view, as Wales might suggest, but the possibility that all perspectives can be accommodated in a community:

It's human nature to form groups of all sizes and for all sorts of purposes. It's also our nature to *signify* our membership in groups by wearing and displaying symbols. Each of us tends to belong to more than one group and some groups themselves belong to larger ones; thus each of us bears many marks of membership.

Group purposes vary and are oftentimes at odds with other groups; sometimes they are destructive to all of us. Signs and symbols all are harmless in themselves; but people invest them with meaning, making them powerful. It is not possible to conceive of a human society that does not engage in group behavior or the display of symbols.

Every society suppresses subgroups that threaten the larger group; and so their symbols. It has occurred to many great leaders that their positions and agendas would be secure if only *all* competing groups and subgroups could be eliminated; and all symbols replaced with a single standard behind which all must march.

This political system is called *fascism*. John Reid 05:37, 19 February 2006 (UTC)

What, you didn't get the memo? Wikipedia is now under the direct control of the Wikipedia Fascist Directing Committee. Any expression of individuality is verboten. For these thugs, Wikipedia is everything, the Wikipedians are nothing.

MSTCrow 10:53, 19 February 2006 (UTC)

I have to agree that i see no point in this mass destruction of userboxes. Their [*sic*] is nothing wrong with them. I agree wikipedia should not be *my space* but userboxes just make it more enjoyable to have a user page and to display random

information regarding yourself. Isn't their [sic] such a thing as freedom of expression [sic] anymore or is Wikipedia the online China? Tutmosis 17:22, 19 February 2006 (UTC)


There's no need to raise the spooks of Goebbles [sic] &co here. Fascism is the technical term for a system of social organization that attempts to suppress all subgroups and their symbols and uphold a single group and symbol: *Fascism exalts the nation, state, or race as superior to the individuals, institutions, or groups composing it.* It's notable that fascist movements invariable [sic] concentrate heavily on *symbols*. So do other political movements; but fascists are remarkable for the degree to which they exclude *all* competing symbols.

I do not begin to suggest that anyone is in danger of brownshirts in the night. But it is clear that many UBX opponents feel their worst effect is to permit users to identify themselves as members of groups which are *not* The Group; to display symbols which are not The Symbol.³⁵ . . . John Reid 23:35, 21 February 2006 (UTC) ("Wikipedia Talk: Proposed Policy on Userboxes"; emphasis in original)

This led to the formation of several groups within *Wikipedia*, including the Users in Defense of Userboxes and Individuality on Wikipedia (UDUIW), founded by two Wikipedians who have since ceased to be active, and the Association of Inclusionist Wikipedians ("Association of Inclusionist Wikipedians").³⁶ It appears that such criticisms of userboxes and their unilateral deletion by some admins led some of the more libertarian Wikipedians to actually leave the community.

There is no way to do justice to the discussion between the two camps itself. It is voluminous as well as fascinating in people's attempts to protect their own position while working out a compromise. There have even been userboxes about the use of userboxes.




This user believes that only articles need reflect a NPOV, and that displaying political, religious, or other beliefs using userboxes and user categories should not be banned.



This user is interested in the belief that displaying userboxes does not divide the Wikipedia community but rather emphasises its diversity.

User:MailerDiablo provides a wonderful parody infobox (i.e., a sidebar), based on the {{Infobox Military Conflict}} template, summarizing the “Userbox Wars” as a *Wikipedia* article might address an actual battle.

Battle of Austerlitz	
Part of the War of the Third Coalition	
	
<i>Napoléon at the Battle of Austerlitz, by François Gérard</i>	
Date	December 2, 1805
Location	Austerlitz, Moravia
Result	Decisive French victory, effective end of the Third Coalition
Belligerents	
French Empire	Russian Empire Austrian Empire
Commanders	
Napoleon I	Alexander I Francis II
Strength	
65,000-75,000 ^[1]	73,000-85,000 ^[2]
Casualties and losses	
1,305 dead, 6,940 wounded, 573 captured, 1 standard lost ^[3]	15,000 dead or wounded 12,000 captured, 180 guns lost, 50 standards lost ^[3]
War of the Third Coalition [hide]	
Invasion of England - Cape Finisterre - Ulm Campaign Trafalgar - Caldiero - Amstetten - Cape Ortegal - Dürenstein - Schönggrabern - Austerlitz - Gaeta - Campo Tenese - Maida	

Battle of Austerlitz	
	
Date	<u>January 2008 to October 2006</u>
Location	<u>English Wikipedia</u>
Result	<u>German Usebox Solution</u>
Belligerents	
Anti Userbox Camp	Pro Userbox Camp
Sysop 1,  Sysop 2,  Sysop 3	Sysop A † Sysop B †, Sysop C
Sysops and some editors	Editors and some sysops
Few wounded, some missing, Exact unknown	Some dead, many wounded, Exact unknown.

The material is also compelling quite simply because the diction is so wrapped up in an argot that only experienced Wikipedians can follow without clicking on various hyperlinks that direct the reader to obscure policy and guideline pages. Here are a few examples:

I think (one of the few) positions which we can all agree on is that the level of contentiousness on this issue is unhealthy for the project. I'm sure both sides would like to see the divisiveness on this issue go away, but (perhaps not unexpectedly) each side wants the issue resolved on their own terms with minimal concessions. I've seen pro-userboxers who have argued that anti-userboxers want to take away their freedoms,³⁷ and that we wouldn't have all this dispute and disruption of the project if anti-userboxers would just leave userboxes alone, and instead focused on the encyclopedia. On the other hand,

some of the anti-userboxers (and I think Jimbo's note might be an example of this) argue that the existence of POV userboxes is what's fueling the conflict and causing much of the discord, and that removal of the POV boxes (either voluntary or compulsory) is what's needed to resolve this conflict . . . Of course, if both sides essentially argue, "Division is bad for the project. However, if we can put our disagreements aside and accept my position as the best one, then we can put this divisiveness behind us—wouldn't that be nice?", then we're probably not going to make much progress toward a solution or anything resembling consensus ;-). If the userboxer wars (if they can be so called) continue as is, I fear that the long-term status of userboxes will be unduly influenced by which side has the greater tolerance of incivility, the boldness to flaunt process³⁸ [*sic*] and to maintain reverts, and the willingness to hit the other side harder with the mop.³⁹ We cannot have a war of attrition⁴⁰ on Wikipedia, and so the userboxer conflict cannot be sustained in its current state. Ultimately, it won't be. . . — Jeff | (talk) | 10:11, 7 February 2006 (UTC)

Wikipedians need to have some identity. Jimbo's definition of a Wikipedian, just my impression, is someone who contributes a ton of information with no emotional leanings whatsoever. While Buddhists all over the world are celebrating this ideal, I just don't think it's a realistic goal. We're all living breathing human beings with thoughts, beliefs, opinions, passions, hopes and dreams firmly rooted in our personalities. We can't just ignore them. It's a physical impossibility. Humans are by nature POV. All we can do is turn the volume down on the POV and give it anger management. Denying users a certain level of individuality [*sic*] actually hurts the community in my opinion. It's like taking all the hollidays [*sic*] out the school year. Sure, the kids may learn more and retain more but they are also miserable. Stick the fun in there and work is of higher quality and they tend to care more. I think the same holds true for Wikipedia or any other community of human beings. —§HurricaneERIC§Damagesarchive 06:22, 19 February 2006 (UTC)

On the contrary, I would say, based on his comments on the wikien mailing list, that Jimbo is quite appreciative of the individual differences of Wikipedians. His concern, as I understand him, is the way in which userboxes are being used to express, not individual differences, but group solidarity for POV positions. —Donald Albury (Dalbury^(Talk)) 11:47, 19 February 2006 (UTC)

And he is, not to put too fine a point on it, wrong.
Voluntary disclosure of the POVs of as many editors as possible helps the encyclopedia maintain NPOV by

keeping biases in the open and therefore easily countered.
 Rogue 9 14:11, 23 February 2006 (UTC) (“Wikipedia Talk:
 Userboxes/Archive 4”)

Keep in mind that all the while this policy is being discussed, everyone involved is free to go online and make whatever edits he or she wants, whether it is deleting objectionable or divisive userboxes or making changes to the policy, until the policy gets hammered out to a point at which it is an acceptable compromise.

What ultimately happened was that the contentiousness of February died down, and by April, editors—those that remained—were having a more measured discussion about how to change the policy. In the interim, the German *Wikipedia* had come up with a solution, which editors on the English-language *Wikipedia* site noticed by the end of May. The solution basically allowed for userboxes, but their code and the templates could not be stored on common template space (within *Wikipedia*'s slice of cyberspace); instead they had to be stored on individual user pages. The final policy was written up, the editors created the necessary pages on their own, and a few offered postmortems, predictably filled with *Wikipedia* folk speech:

Created [Wikipedia:The German solution](#), go ahead and improve as you see fit . . . —Ashley Y 00:05, 1 June 2006 (UTC)

Mumble. This still seems to me to be not very much of a compromise . . . but, OTOH,⁴¹ if the existing userbox directory pages will be maintained and simply updated to point to the userboxes in user space, and the admins who have been deleting userboxes whenever they get half an excuse will not do so if the userbox in question is in user space (except for things that are obviously against some other policy—I'm not proposing to waive Wikipedia policy entirely for userboxes, and never have), then it might work. Without either of these two conditions, however, it's not a compromise—it's a total capitulation. Jay Maynard 01:08, 1 June 2006 (UTC)

It works like this: All “nonstandard” (i.e. almost all except Babel boxes) are migrated into userspace. Either a central repository is created or (more likely) individual users adopt them in their (to be created) userbox archive pages (which should [*sic*] be interlinked). They still can be used like templates, just that they are in userspace now and outside the encyclopedic content. Standard Wiki policy apply [*sic*] (i.e. [WP:NPA](#), [WP:CIVIL](#), etc.) but besides that they only have to follow [WP:USER](#)—i.e. they are allowed to be POV or controversial, [*sic*] and are not subject to T1 (T2) speedy-deletion rules. Check my (small) repository to see how it looks like (too tired to expand it right now) CharonX

[talk Userboxes](#) 02:06, 1 June 2006 (UTC). (“Wikipedia Talk: T1 and T2 debates”)⁴²

Those most invested in maintaining the idea of userboxes formed their own WikiProject—basically a team of editors devoted to writing and improving articles on related topics, such as WikiProject New Jersey, WikiProject Sociology, or even WikiProject Lace (“Wikipedia: WikiProject Council/Directory/Geographical/Americas”; “Wikipedia: WikiProject Council/Directory/Culture”). This new WikiProject, WikiProject Userboxes, “aims to organise, expand and improve all Wikipedia’s userboxes.” In the first two days it was formed, thirty-two users joined (“Wikipedia: WikiProject Userboxes”). A compromise seems to have been reached, and deletions are rare except in the case of openly divisive userboxes. However the controversy still smolders, and as recently as 4 November 2008, User:Ezhiki, an admin who self-identifies as “a male Russian American,” added the following banner, in boldface type and a bright yellow background across the top of the page “Wikipedia: Userboxes/Politics”:

When considering placement of any of the userboxes from this page on your user page, please consider avoiding the boxes that suggest your support for a secessionist movement (even if democratic or by democratic means), a pro-fascist or a pro-communist ideology, or proclaiming any polemical view not strictly related to Wikipedia and the editing process.

This recommendation aims to remove one instance of disputes about settling a precise line of division between allowed and non-allowed content in userspaces. Although you are not required to follow this recommendation, if you do follow, you will be part of a large group of people (one day encompassing, hopefully, the entire contingent of Wikipedia editors) that renounced posting similar content on their userpages for the sake of building a better environment. *By refusing to post such userboxes you in no way renounce your right to hold an opinion.* (“Wikipedia: Userboxes/Politics”; emphasis in original)⁴³

The war, then, is not yet over.

In the universe of wikis—at least that universe governed by Western Enlightenment ideals of neutral (if not objective) scholarship, as opposed to, say, theocratic ones—this kind of debate will arise again and again whenever a new encyclopedia project develops, because it is in the nature of wikis to define their own rules and guidelines and thus to define what is knowledge and what is opinion. In fact, the potential for this conflict has already been noticed on the aforementioned *SikhiWiki*, which has the following warning on its introductory page:

The basis of a WIKI is trust and respect for each other. The beauty of a good WIKI is that it is self-regulating and self-cleansing. You can post anything of value that you wish to contribute, but all contributions will need to be in good taste. If you want to stand on a soapbox and lecture, preach, advocate your personal or political view—this isn't the place to do that. If your stuff gets erased, that's probably why.

Those who want to use SikhiWIKI to advance their personal agenda will not be allowed to participate. (“SikhiWiki: Introduction”)

I suggest that as knowledge communities—which is what wikis are—grow, a debate over how to accommodate bias is inevitably revisited anew. The only reason the issue does not come up in printed works is that the ground rules have been established by the academic community long ago and are seldom challenged. But wikis operate under house rules, not ground rules, and the former must be determined through negotiation in every folk community. (In fact, cleverly, if one goes to the *Wikipedia* entry “House rules” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_rules), at the top of the page one finds a prefatory line indicating, “For guide lines on *Wikipedia*, see *Wikipedia: List of guidelines or Wikipedia: Policies and guidelines.*”)

What *Wikipedia* represents, and what can be seen even more specifically in the userbox controversy and the development of its policy, is the social activity of knowledge production and how a community of knowledge-producers jointly developed effective practice while schooling new members in the ways of the community.⁴⁴ In the simplest terms, Wikipedians qualify as a “folk group,” using Alan Dundes’s famous definition of this as “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one linking factor” (1973, 1). But how Wikipedians are a folk group is more richly illustrated in Dorothy Noyes’s contention that “group” emerges in the dialogue between a “community of the social imaginary that occasionally emerges in performance” (the group of registered Wikipedians themselves) and “the empirical network of interactions in which culture is created” (the activity of not only writing an encyclopedia but of formulating the policy and an epistemology of how that encyclopedia is to be created) (1995, 452). In this case, perhaps a more appropriate conception of the group would actually be what has been called a *wikiculture*, given that people’s membership, participation, entry into, and departure from the group and its negotiation process is ad hoc, without formal rules, and governed by no one.⁴⁵ In fact, Duke University professor Cathy N. Davidson (2007) goes one step further in a defense of *Wikipedia*, contending that *Wikipedia* is not just the thing itself, but the community that produces it—in other words, not only the product *and* the process, *but also* the producers.⁴⁶

Furthermore, I would go so far as to state that the construction of *Wikipedia* has given rise to an *occupational* folklife, following Robert McCarl's observation that "there are traditional ways of doing things in the workplace which workers themselves create, evaluate, and protect." He continues:

The *canon of work technique* refers to this body of informal knowledge used to get the job done; at the same time, it establishes a hierarchy of skilled workers based on their individual abilities to exhibit that knowledge. The canon of work technique is not a law or written set of rules but a standard that workers themselves create and control. (1986, 71–72; emphasis in original)

This is exactly what the worker bees of *Wikipedia*, editors and admins alike, have taken on for themselves. The compilation of this encyclopedia—not its content—is completely based on a semiformal knowledge of what makes a public reference work *work*—meaning what makes it "labor" (n.) as well as what makes it "tick" (v.). There may be an ever-evolving set of written "guidelines" (while the only "rules" are the five pillars), but these guidelines are unfixed, ever-changing, and not dictated by an authority with any more than a rudimentary ability to fire writers or quash contributions; the guidelines have been "created and controlled" by the workers themselves.⁴⁷ This is one of the ways in which the Wikimedia projects, in the words of the Wikimania 2008 theme itself, "change the shape of wisdom" ("Wikimania 2008 Main Page").

The philosophical problem of wikis is that they sustain themselves on the force of trust, and trust in wiki communities does not depend on academic credentials. Where *Wikipedia* is epistemologically most radical and most like folklore—and, to many, frightening—is in the de-centering of authority away from those *necessarily* having academic credentials and prestige and in the elevation of trust as a social basis for epistemology.⁴⁸ Both of these are concepts of interest to the folklorist, but until now only the former has generated any comment. Typically, though, as historian of science Steven Shapin points out, "much modern epistemology has systematically argued that legitimate knowledge is defined precisely by its rejection of trust" (1995, 16).⁴⁹

Some folklorists of the last quarter century working in the field of folk belief have openly questioned that rejection. In a series of articles that led to the development of belief scholarship within the field of folklore, David J. Hufford famously challenged scientific (or what he occasionally called "scientistic") ideology and its attempts to discredit folk knowledge and supernatural and folk medical-belief systems. As he observed, polemically (his term):

The academic world uses systems of ideas to explain and legitimate its practices. This includes not only those practices that are central to explicit academic goals, but also those that involve the special interests of academic individuals and guilds, although the rhetoric used primarily refers to a combination of academic goals and ‘the public good.’ . . . [T]he academic enterprise presents itself today as the basic source of authentic knowledge about what is useful and good, and even more fundamentally, about what is *real*. At the center of this assertion is the success of the physical sciences in recent centuries, especially as measured by their associated technologies, and the bonding of these activities to the universities. These developments account for a great deal of the academic world’s success in establishing its members as a methodological and epistemological elite . . . Today one’s claim to be modern and progressive is largely measured by the ability to establish connections with academic science . . .

The consequences of this hierarchy are partly political and involve the division of academic spoils, from salaries to prestige. But there are also profound consequences for the shape and direction of scholarship. (1983, 22–23; emphasis in original)

Fifteen years later Hufford again picks up this argument in ways that are more directly applicable to *Wikipedia*:

It is no accident, of course, that medical and scholarly views converge in a tendency to dismiss the knowledge claims of ordinary people. Both professional communities are faced with similar situations: each makes a claim to expert knowledge about the world, and alternative claims from nonexperts—whether informants or patients—are a potential threat to professional authority. (1998, 301)

Hufford then recommends a “methodological populism” that does not dismiss unofficial knowledges and explanations as *a priori* misguided and observes that in the history of medicine and science, “disagreements have often been rooted in inappropriate notions about the boundaries of expert knowledge and authority” (1998, 302). The issue here, then, is not that the writings of the self-appointed scholars of *Wikipedia* are more accurate, rather that the assumption that published, printed works by named, credentialed scholars are inherently more accurate, or are even remotely NPOV (if I may use that term). I argue that while the critics of *Wikipedia* draw the boundaries of expert knowledge in different places from where the contributors *might*, the folk process of defining expertise and accuracy while rooting out bias is a major —and growing —part of *Wikipedia* communication. This populism is an integral component of the ideology and practice of the open-source movement.⁵⁰

Theologian Rubén Rosario Rodríguez takes that a step further in a specific discussion of the Wikipedia, which, he observes, “has evolved organically into a cross-cultural, crosscontextual, interdisciplinary conversation that can help liberate epistemology—especially theological epistemology—from the stranglehold of Enlightenment foundationalism.” He compares the Wikipedia’s implicit critique of what counts as authority to the approach of Latin American liberation theology and its critical response to the official Church; both utilize “an interactive philosophy that nurtures community” (2007, 175, 176). Granted, Rosario Rodríguez is less concerned than Wikipedians with bias and neutrality because liberation theology calls on the church to show “a preferential option for the poor.” But in this context it is the interpretive and discussion-based form of theology which has taken place in the Christian base communities and grassroots communities that has its counterpart in Wikipedia’s challenge to “authoritarian” (his term) scholarly orthodoxy. This religion,

provides an alternative to the dominant epistemological perspective within the academy that is in many ways analogous to the organic, conversational epistemology embodied by the Wikipedia online community... This unique method of doing theology characteristic of Latino/a church communities, whereby theologians, pastors, and lay people (often in ecumenical conversation) gather together to reflect on the beliefs and practices of the people they serve, produces a theology that truly belongs to, and is validated by, the faith community. (Rodríguez 2007, 175–76)

For him, the potential exists for both religion and the Wikipedia to “liberate epistemology” in such a way that it can become “a more effective model for navigating differences in specific fields of knowledge—namely political, theological, and moral discourse.” (2007, 176)

Although Hufford himself largely confines the scope of his argument to defending claims of supernatural, religious, and medical belief, the critiques by both Hufford and Rosario Rodríguez are also applicable not only to political belief-systems but also to the process of a folk construction of encyclopedic knowledge. One reason for the harsh criticism of *Wikipedia* as failing to be legitimate and reliable has to do with the pervasive academic ideology about claims regarding knowledge construction. The critique also has to do with what counts as knowledge itself (or valid methodologies and sociologies of knowledge).⁵¹ Beyond (or within) that, *Wikipedia*’s self-critique in regard to userboxes hinges on whether editors who acknowledge their own political bias can jointly construct texts that are fair to multiple points of view.

Hufford's work in particular (1995c), influenced by the writings of Karl Mannheim (1952) and Paul Feyerabend (1988), among others, anticipated or perhaps paralleled the development of a field known as social epistemology that emerged in the late 1980s within the discipline of philosophy. I have neither the space nor the expertise to discuss the connection of folklore to social epistemology (and to the production of *Wikipedia*), except to say that at best this article is a prologue to that discussion, which I hope can follow. Nonetheless, what is relevant here is that only a few short years before a new knowledge industry exploded across the World Wide Web in the late 1990s, there emerged a field of inquiry that looks at the philosophical rules and social conditions under which the authority of scientific knowledge production is established. Specific critics, notably Steve Fuller, have observed that "a 'truly social epistemology' [is] an exercise in constitution-making" and that the question to be asked is, "How does one set up the forums for deciding science's research and teaching agenda, given the patently biased and otherwise limited nature of the participants?" (2002, xix). These are political and ethical questions that, in turn, anticipated the debates around knowledge (and I would add belief) provoked by the development of wikis as well as message boards.

Where Fuller's work is synchronous with Wales's vision is best expressed in Fuller's ingenious framework that "there are two ways of understanding the knowledge = power equation. One supposes that more knowledge helps *concentrate* power, the other that it helps *distribute* power" (2002, xix; emphasis in original). Fuller, who is largely an adherent of the latter view, cites the concentration of power that, for example, massive civil-engineering projects have historically abetted while appearing to benefit a public that foots the bill; at the same time, liberation theology has been criticized for distributing too much power and theological authority to lay people as opposed to the church hierarchy (2002, xix–xx). Yet wikis and open-source networks may prove to be equally powerful examples of the distributive power of knowledge (as long as there is open access to computers and the Internet—which, given the human history of literacy, access to technology, electricity, and education, is unlikely in practical terms).

But the potential of *Wikipedia* to distribute knowledge as power, and the fact that its creative structure is decentralized, and thus different from all prior encyclopedias, has not been lost on astute observers of the Internet phenomenon. One of the most eloquent analyses of the significance of this sociological/epistemological shift was posted by science-fiction novelist and blogger Cory Doctorow (and, in fact,

User:Doctorow) in response to a critique of *Wikipedia* as a form of collective-dominated “digital Maoism” in which the voices of individuals are lost behind a kind of groupthink that washes out their individual contributions (Lanier 2006) (a critique I find ironic, given the contentious nature of editors’ conflicting brands of libertarianism). In much the same way that folklore is often dismissed, the Lanier essay sneers: “The hive mind is for the most part stupid and boring. Why pay attention to it?” Doctorow (2006) counters that by looking at the significance of *Wikipedia* as an opus being organized in a structurally revolutionary way. One difference is that, unlike an edited work that speaks with one authoritative voice, the fact that *Wikipedia* is “free, brawling, universal, and instantaneous” means that it can be “a noble experiment in defining a protocol for organizing the individual efforts of disparate authors with conflicting agendas.” There are no gatekeepers, because “if you need to convince a gatekeeper that your contribution is worthy before you’re allowed to make it, you’d better hope the gatekeeper has superhuman prescience. (Gatekeepers don’t have superhuman prescience.) Historically, the best way to keep the important things rolling off the lines is to reduce the barriers to entry.”⁵² Thus *Wikipedia* is not Maoist, but at once communitarian, because it depends on the ability of individual scholars to negotiate their differences and come to an expansive consensus, and anarchistic, because there is no central powerful authority to prevent anyone from contributing. Doctorow also makes the point that *Wikipedia* must literally be read at different levels of discourse, much the way a folklorist reads a text within a tradition and a context:

if you want to really navigate the truth via Wikipedia, you have to dig into those “history” and “discuss” pages hanging off of every entry. That’s where the real action is, the tidily organized palimpsest of the flamewar that lurks beneath any definition of “truth.”

The *Britannica* tells you what dead white men agreed upon, Wikipedia tells you what live Internet users are fighting over.

The *Britannica* truth is an illusion, anyway. There’s more than one approach to any issue, and being able to see multiple versions of them, organized with argument and counterargument, will do a better job of equipping you to figure out which truth suits you best.

True, reading Wikipedia is a media literacy exercise. You need to acquire new skill-sets to parse out the palimpsest. That’s what makes it genuinely novel. Reading Wikipedia like *Britannica* stinks. Reading Wikipedia like Wikipedia is mind-opening. (Doctorow 2006)

I suggest that the userboxes were and remain among the most provocative catalysts in that intellectual negotiation. Ultimately, though, it is not

a folklorist but, of all people, the Silicon Valley bureau chief of *Forbes Magazine*, Quentin Hardy, who makes an important observation about *Wikipedia* and other Internet intellectual resources: “Our new tool for communication and computation may take us away from distinct individualism, and towards something closer to the tender nuance of folk art” (2006). This is true because, after all, the wisdom of folklore operates with that same decentralized logic. This is not lost on Doctorow, Hufford, Rosario Rodríguez, or Fuller, who realize that knowledge construction and belief are tightly bound up with questions of authority and authoritarianism and with a politics of expertise and the laity,⁵³ as well as with texts where some (or some parts) are spoken while others are submerged.

Growing out of this is the question of trust and whom we believe in our social network. The question of trust has long been implicit in folkloristics, but it is a concept we need to interrogate more deeply and politically. We talk about trust in fieldwork and about establishing trust so that we can believe that what an informant shares with us is somehow fuller, richer, and closer to what he or she honestly believes to be true.⁵⁴ We also talk about trust in folk knowledge networks, whether serious—as in the case of folk healing—or perhaps more fanciful, as in the “friend of a friend” in urban legends (Brunvand, 1990, 23ff). So the question of criteria for determining trust and verifiable knowledge is a particularly interesting one for encyclopedias, given that *Wikipedia* presents us with one that may be written by nonacademic experts (not a problem for folklorists) who are anonymous (the problem here for folklorists is that no context is provided).⁵⁵

But projects like *Wikipedia* force us to articulate a theory of trust. Philosopher Gloria Origgi, who agrees with Shapin, maintains: “Traditionally, epistemology had banned from genuine knowledge beliefs acquired by trusting others” (2004, 1). If so, then folk epistemology argues the contrary. Yet, Origgi points out, there are examples in social life when we defer to trusted authority—such as medical authority—and this has political implications:

Political philosophy is a source of insight for social epistemology. In political philosophy, trust is seen as a key component of the authority relation, in which a person desists from demanding justification of the thing she is being asked to do or to believe as a condition of her doing or believing. Something of this kind seems at play when the lay person blindly defers to a recognised authority, be it an expert, a “wise man” (or woman), or a religious leader. We are all familiar with such cases of blind deference. (2004, 3)

The fascinating asymmetry of *Wikipedia* is that millions of (mostly young) users defer to its authority, giving power to its political decentralization; (many) academics are skeptical or dismissive of its authority; while its thousands of writers and admins scramble to bolster its authority with footnotes, references, and independent verification, a process fostered only by their essential trust in one another as a community that is unified in its pursuit of mission.

Folklore, of course, is all about belief and trust. So the reliability (a loaded term in the field of social epistemology, deserving further discussion in a separate essay) of a source is everything. We have long known that the legend hinges on its believability,⁵⁶ as does alternative medicine.⁵⁷ Both function within systems of epistemology that are different from academic epistemology, but the fallacious assumption is that the folk system is, by definition, more flawed. The other ancillary logical fallacy here is that a person who maintains one epistemological belief system—in this case a political one—is unable to accommodate the possible validity or even the existence of others, and thus is incapable of representing specific and multiple points of view in ways that are at once persuasive and NPOV. That is full of paradox and possibility. But the essential optimism espoused by *Wikipedia* is that political power is broadened by the accumulation and dissemination of that knowledge, and that the most creative folk groups may be open and not exclusive.

Notes

Acknowledgments

My initial thinking about the culture of the *Wikipedia* benefited early on from conversations with Dorothy Noyes, Kathy Condon, and Lee Haring. I want to express my deep appreciation to David J. Hufford, whose approach has been so instrumental to my analysis here. I belatedly thank Susan Garfinkel, whose attempts to drag me, kicking and screaming, into cyberspace were fruitless (other than e-mail) until I discovered that the Wikimedia projects were for me the “killer app” of the Internet (although of course I recognize that they are not an application). I also want to thank Adam Krumnikl and Jessica Jinju Pottenger for helpful readings of the draft, Francisco Sáenz for his assistance with illustrations, Trevor J. Blank for his patience, Paolo Siroto and Jen Ross, and this volume’s anonymous reviewers for useful references, and finally Wayne Bivens-Tatum, Sandy Rosenstock, Audrey Welber, and Rubén Rosario Rodríguez for help in tracking down the latter’s article. All errors remain my own.

1. Throughout this chapter I am going to use the term *folkloristics* to refer to the discipline, in order to distinguish it from *folklore*, which will refer to the subject matter or the textual material itself.

2. In a fascinating and significant work-in-progress, anthropologist Rena Lederman has been writing on the subject of what counts for and as knowledge in different disciplines. Her claim is that disciplines are defined not only by the area of study, but more significantly by what counts as moral practice in the production of knowledge: “Whatever else they are, disciplines are moral orders. Disciplines constitute themselves in implicit and explicit dialogue, or contest, with one another (as well as with extra-disciplinary modes of knowing the world) not simply as substantively *distinctive* but also as *better* or *worse*, even proper or improper—that is, morally weighted—knowledges” (2004, 62; emphasis in original).
3. “Wikipedia: What Wikipedia Is Not.” See especially <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:NOT#SOCIALNET> (accessed 6 April 2008).
4. This is one of the best examples I have seen of a sociology of collective knowledge production.
5. One example is Simon Winchester’s (2003) study of the making of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
6. For further explanation, see Weber (2004). Folklore, of course, is by definition open source.
7. When I polled the ninety-four students who had been enrolled in my classes at Princeton University, 2006–2008, only two responded that they had ever edited entries, and some reported having “used” the encyclopedia while misunderstanding I was asking how many people had *written* or *edited* it.
8. There’s another article to be written on the impact that *Wikipedia* has had in the survival and revival of certain languages that do not have the status of official languages in their nations. It should be no surprise that there is a Basque version, for example, but the fact that the Catalan *Wikipedia* is the fifteenth largest worldwide as of this writing might be more noteworthy. Consider that there also exist a Galician *Wikipedia* (with 37,000 articles) and a Breton *Wikipedia* (20,000 articles), or the fact that in a little over two years, Piedmontese speakers have posted 15,000 articles (that’s an average of about nineteen articles per day, every day), and one gets an idea of the potential impact on relatively small but culturally-charged linguistic communities. Since by definition *Wikipedia* and its related family of wikis can be changed instantly, unless otherwise specified this article refers to the current version at the time of writing this chapter. Most, if not all, of the cited entries will have changed by the time this book is published. In some cases I am choosing to cite a particular past version of an article, especially because this chapter is mostly concerned with a historical debate that took place during the editing process. In those cases, I specify the date of the *version* (not my date of access) since that is an archived version and cannot be changed without record. I cite this version date so that any reader who is interested can go back and find the identical version to the one I cite, even if it has been revised and edited many times since.
9. Especially compared to such other South Asian languages as Newari and Telugu (40,000 articles each), Bishnupriya (23,000 articles), Hindi (over 18,500), Bengali and Marathi (17,000+ each), and Tamil (13,000+) as of 1 May 2008 (“List of Wikipedias”).

10. In fact, not only is it in English, but the contact telephone number for the administrator listed on the introductory page is a U.S. number with a New Mexico area code (“SikhiWiki Homepage” and “SikhiWiki: Introduction”).
11. Obviously this is an oversimplification, for reasons of space. There’s also a contradiction here. Those familiar with *Wikipedia* will find this superfluous, whereas those who are not interested probably will not read this, but I think it’s necessary to provide some of the basics, especially given that the editing process itself is not universally understood, even among all those who use it as a reference work.
12. Despite being open source, some pages can be temporarily “locked” if there has been a great deal of vandalism posted on them recently. In that case “edit this page” is replaced with “view source,” and only people with certain editing privileges may edit it. That is largely irrelevant to this article, except that the Obama example is, at the time of this writing, locked.
13. Thus, for example, “Barack Obama is a [[U.S.]] [[Senator]] from [[Illinois]]” would produce hyperlinked words leading to the articles for the United States, Illinois, and the U.S. Senate (in general, the U.S. Senate would have to be further specified in the editing stage by bracketing [[U.S. Senate]] and then perhaps showing onscreen only the word “Senate” by use of the typographic symbol “|” (referred to among Wikipedians as the *pipestem*): thus, [[U.S. Senate|Senate]] would produce the word “Senate” in blue in the article page, but clicking on that would redirect the viewer to the article “United States Senate.”
14. As stated in the *Wikipedia* article on “Pseudonymity” itself, “true anonymity requires unlinkability,” whereas there is a “continuum of unlinkability” on computer networks (and in literary circles)—from those contributions for which a user’s true identity can never be discerned to those that are thinly disguised or even openly known.
15. To distinguish users from articles, I am adopting and adapting the format of referring to editors’ user names as “User:—” for clarity’s sake.
16. His year of birth disappeared from the page after this date. He confirmed some of this to me in a personal communication, but noted that he removed his nationality from the page because people accused him of writing with bias.
17. One is tempted to add to this list, “a native in a rain forest, a Tierra del Fuegan, an Eskimo . . .” See, of course, Guare (1990).
18. The level of detail and investigation, despite *Wikipedia*’s reputation among its detractors, is astonishing. Ultimately, I predict, it will come to be appreciated for being an almanac of record that puts information in public hands. To see an astonishing example of detail related to current affairs, see the *Wikipedia* entry “Casio F91W.” No print encyclopedia or almanac could ever do anything like this, let alone keep it current.
19. A discussion of decentralized organizations, with specific reference to Wales and *Wikipedia*, can be found in Brafman and Beckstrom (2006). Their book is more of a leadership guide for businesses and organizations than an analysis of how *Wikipedia* works, but it is a useful introduction to this philosophy that points out its strengths, and it draws on an interview with Wales.

20. Wales himself rejects the term “libertarian” but acknowledges that other people see him this way. See Lamb (2005).
21. But see also “Wikipedia: Etiquette.”
22. See also “Wikipedia: Neutral Point of View.”
23. FAQ is an Internet abbreviation for “Frequently Asked Questions.”
24. For various reasons, some users have registered multiple identities, usually because they have been blocked under a previous user name for violating *Wikipedia* policy. Those who set up registered identities for the deliberate purpose of deception are known on *Wikipedia*, as elsewhere on the Internet, as *sockpuppets* (“Sockpuppet (Internet)”).
25. The similarity to bumper stickers may be intentional, and it is one of the grounds on which anti-userbox critics deride them as trivial. But bumper stickers are themselves folkloric, both in their content and in their positioning, and in the resultant dialogue and debate which may be carried out through the medium of stickers. Folklorist Hagar Salamon writes that bumper stickers are “arenas of complex covert and overt struggles between various groups representing competing political and even cosmological perspectives” (2001, 278). For a detailed analysis of this, see his full article.
26. For a fuller explanation, see “Wikipedia: Transclusion.”
27. The notes, though, indicate that this page was copied from the *Meta-Wiki* site.
28. As of 2008, this page has equivalents among *Wikipedias* in forty other languages, including Yiddish and Nahuatl.
29. For examples of the work and explanations among those who converted deleted userboxes into usable Javascript programming, see, for example, “User Talk: Ilmari Karonen/archive2.”
30. There were also interesting internal debates about the nature of community within *Wikipedia*. While this is a topic of folkloristic interest in and of itself, it goes beyond the scope of this chapter. But see “Wikipedia Talk: Esperanza.”
31. Partly because of the German *Wikipedia* connection, there was an attempt, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, to make the official English plural “userboxen,” along with a userbox campaigning for this change.
32. This links to the guideline “Wikipedia: Do Not Disrupt Wikipedia to Illustrate a Point.”
33. This does not specifically link, but it does refer to the guideline “Wikipedia: Be Bold,” which is not to be confused with “Wikipedia: Ignore All Rules” or “Wikipedia: If It Ain’t Broke, Don’t Fix It.”
34. An award that can be inserted by a sysop on the user page of a fellow *Wikipedia* user who has done something outstanding for the encyclopedia.
35. Here “The Group” refers to *Wikipedians*, as described on the page “Wikipedia: Wikipedians,” and “The Symbol” refers to the .png image of the *Wikipedia* logo.
36. While outside the scope of this chapter, there have also been other organizations (subcommunities) within *Wikipedia*, including the now-defunct *Esperanza* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Esperanza>) and *Concordia* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Concordia>).
37. This directs to “Wikipedia: Free Speech.”
38. This directs to “Wikipedia: Ignore All Rules,” a little-known but important libertarian-anarchist *Wikipedia* policy.

39. This directs to "Wikipedia: Administrators."
40. This redirects to "Attrition Warfare," an actual entry in the encyclopedia itself. It's a nice touch that in the middle of the debate, this experienced editor hyperlinks to an actual concept that some passing reader might want to delve into.
41. This stands for "on the other hand."
42. T1 and T2 are shorthand for two of the criteria under which editors are allowed to delete certain pages quickly.
43. As of 17 December 2008 it was still there. See also "User: Ezhiki."
44. Although here the discussion is on producing knowledge, and not epic songs, the process of group review and refinement is not that far afield from the Parry-Lord theory of epic composition and performance (see Lord 1960). Among others, Roger Abrahams, in a number of articles, discusses the role of the speech community, performers, and audiences in shaping public performance. While he is talking about performance *events*, his description is equally apt for the construction of an encyclopedia in this fashion. Specifically, he refers to "the intensity of involvement in common carried by the participants into the encounter [and] their special rule-regulated behaviors, their manner of coordinating and regularizing the activity" (1983, 160).
45. Wikiculture is the human chemical bond of the open-source age ("Wikiculture").
46. "Wikipedia is not just an encyclopedia. It is a knowledge community, uniting anonymous readers all over the world who edit and correct grammar, style, interpretations, and facts. It is a community devoted to a common good—the life of the intellect. Isn't that what we educators want to model for our students?" (Davidson 2007, B20).
47. There is also a self-referential and satirical understanding of these traditions, manifested in the page "Wikipedia: Wikipediholic" and diagnosed at "Wikipedia: Wikipediholism Test," but this is funny only when one has amassed experience in *Wikipedia* editing.
48. Some have argued that this reconfiguration of trust is not only necessary to the *Wikipedia* but is the basis for what has become known as "Web 2.0" (see Fichter 2006).
49. See also Trudy Govier, who describes the web of "contending double standards of trust and distrust" in the creation of knowledge (1997, viii).
50. See Noyes (2006, 51 n. 41) and Weber (2004).
51. By this I refer to our potential ability as folklorists to create entries on the field of folkloristics, to link these topics as equals to equivalent entries in other fields, and—most significantly—to place our own definitions, methods, and interpretations on a par alongside those of more widely recognized disciplines in an NPOV way and allow the reader to choose among these as if at an even freer marketplace of ideas. As I gushed elsewhere upon discovering this: "For once we have an opportunity as a field to script our own entries and insert them as part of the canon of academic discourse, without an outside editor or committee to stipulate our field is a minor discipline which cannot be included for reasons of space" (Westerman 2006, 7). This also means, however, being perpetually vigilant against POV demotions of

- folklore and oral literature as unimportant or trivial by other editors not versed in the field of folkloristics.
52. Doctorow also raises the issue of the GNU license, and the copyright/copyleft distinction, which are beyond the scope of this chapter, but these topics offer something to investigate further for those folklorists interested in intellectual property.
 53. See Fuller (2002, 77–87), as well as Rosario Rodríguez's (2007) discussion of liberation theology in this context.
 54. See, for example, Shopes (2003, 105).
 55. Trust is a question for social networks on the Internet. For openers, see Golbeck, Parsia, and Hendler (2003, 238–49).
 56. See Tangherlini (1990). I am happy to note that some in the field of social epistemology take the study of folklore seriously in this regard. See also Webb (2004).
 57. See, for example, Goldstein (2004) and O'Connor (1995).