

## Good Faith Scholarship

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**Date :** October 13, 2010

**Joseph Michael Reagle Jr.,** [Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia](#) (MIT Press, 2010).

There is a distinctive NYU School of Internet studies: philosophically careful, intellectually critical, rich in detail, and humanely empathetic. Its unofficial dean is [Helen “values in design” Nissenbaum](#); her colleagues and students have included [Siva Vaidhyanathan](#), [Michael Zimmer](#), [Gabriella Coleman](#), [Alexander Galloway](#), and [Gaia Bernstein](#). Almost none of them are lawyers (Seton Hall’s Bernstein being the notable exception), but their work speaks to those of us who are.

One of the most recent additions to the NYU School is [Joseph Reagle](#), who received his Ph.D. in Media, Culture, and Communications in 2008 and is now a fellow at Harvard’s Berkman Center. His new book, [Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia](#) (MIT Press, 2010) is an ethnography of Wikipedia, a modest, beautiful book that analyzes the site’s “good faith collaborative culture.” Reagle offers an extended reading of how this culture emerges from the interplay of ideology, technology, and social practice.

Why is Wikipedia’s culture so important? Nazis. [Godwin’s Law](#) (named after its author, [Mike Godwin](#), who is now Wikipedia’s general counsel) states, “As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches 1.” This commonplace of online discourse captures one of the hard facts about online collaboration: discussions in text-only online media have a centrifugal tendency toward unproductive, extreme positions. Wikipedia, in particular, also faces the problem of ideologically self-interested editing; Reagle leads with a case study of an incident in which members of [Stormfront](#) tried to shape Wikipedia’s coverage of the neo-Nazi movement, leading to substantive disputes over article content and even more fractious procedural disputes over how other Wikipedians should respond. In the face of these dissipative forces, collaborative culture holds Wikipedia together.

Reagle convincingly argues that there is a crucial link between Wikipedia’s core substantive commitment (“NPOV,” short for “Neutral Point of View”) and its core procedural commitment (“Assume Good Faith”). NPOV refuses to privilege any one version of “the truth” and thus requires articles to fairly present all sides. Assume Good Faith and its related norms of patience, civility, and humor, refuse to privilege any person. Everyone — even neo-Nazis — is welcome to edit. Open-mindedness, about arguments and about people, is thus central to Wikipedia’s culture.

The picture of Wikipedia that emerges is messy, contentious, and productive. Conflict is routine; NPOV and Assume Good Faith are sometimes honored only in the breach. Arguments over small matters like naming conventions may seem like a tremendous waste of energy. But this endless series of discursive crises, small and large, in fact keeps Wikipedians engaged in articulating — in producing — the spirit of collaboration. This point is consistent with Dave Hoffman and Salil Mehra’s conclusion in [Wikitruth Through Wikiorder](#) that Wikipedia’s arbitration system “functions not so much to resolve disputes and make peace between conflicting users, but to weed out problematic users while weeding potentially productive users back in to participate.” I would add that Reagle also shows why the arbitration system itself is of secondary importance in Wikipedia’s collaborative structure; the real work of holding it together and negotiating its meanings takes place on its Talk pages, mailing lists, and meetups.

The book’s central chapters deal with a twinned pair of threats to this open, good-faith model: that it will be too chaotic and that it will be too controlled. Observing Wikipedia’s anyone-can-edit ideals, some critics have worried that it will be overrun by vandals, trolls, sock puppeteers, and the just plain ignorant. Others fear that Wikipedia betrays those same

ideals by vesting too much control in a shadowy group of administrators led by Jimmy Wales, who have the software-based power to censor, revert, and bully. (One of Reagle's chapter epigraphs — [J.S.'s second law](#) — amusingly plays on this fear.) Eric Goldman, one of Wikipedia's most thoughtful academic critics, has [argued](#) that that excessive openness and excessive control are Wikipedia's Scylla and Charybdis, and questioned how long the channel between them will remain wide enough to be navigable. Reagle gives more cause for optimism; he shows how a self-produced culture of collaboration has so far enabled Wikipedia to resist both external threats and internal capture.

Two sections stand out as particularly astute. The first is Reagle's discussion of "neutrality" (building on his [previous work](#)), which explains how a term without a clear underlying meaning can still be an effective principle around which to organize a community. The second is his chapter on "encyclopedic anxiety," which demonstrates that much criticism (and more than a little praise) of Wikipedia is in fact unrelated to how it does or doesn't work. Instead, people project their hopes and fears onto reference works; concerns about Wikipedia's open editorial policies are arguably just another iteration of previous concerns about whether dictionaries should present the "is" or the "ought" of language. Reagle is too polite, though, to criticize even the deeply misguided: the whole book is suffused with a generous tolerance. For such a thoughtful analysis of Wikipedia's good-faith culture, that is very much as it should be.

Cite as: James Grimmelmann, *Good Faith Scholarship*, JOTWELL (October 13, 2010) (reviewing **Joseph Michael Reagle Jr., Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia** (MIT Press, 2010)), <http://cyber.jotwell.com/good-faith-scholarship/>.