

# Openness and Control

Preliminary project report "Grenzen der Bezahlung"  
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## The Project

The Project “Grenzen der Bezahlung” took place from January 1st, 2013 until December 31st, 2013. It was designed to **inspire a debate about Paid Editing on Wikipedia, educate Wikipedians about Paid Editing, do some research, bring together concerned stakeholders in these matters of fact and support Wikipedians in developing processes, tools and mechanisms to deal with Paid Editing** without having collateral damage in the fabric of the community.

The Project “Grenzen der Bezahlung” was an **experimental pilot** in many dimensions. It was one of at that time only two projects funded by the “Community-Projekt-Budget” of Wikimedia Deutschland which had **a paid staff member**. It was the first attempt to actively tackle a problem concerning the very foundations of the Wikipedia community and its project. It was the first attempt to do some inreach and some form of **active community management** by somebody being financially enumerated and at the same time part of the community itself.

The project was based on an **open concept**: the initial idea was to raise awareness about the topic, inform people and ask for their opinions. Out of these opinions the further way of action was meant to be wide open and mainly formed by listening to these opinions and going on a way the community wished. Out of these opinions, tools and mechanisms should be created to support the community dealing with Paid Editing in a way that the community wishes.

### **The project was started on these assumptions:**

- Paid Editing is a **perennial problem** in Wikipedia that lasts as long as Wikipedia has any public relevance. First attempts to use Wikipedia as promotional tool are almost as old as Wikipedia itself. But over the years there has been a steady increase of Wikipedia professionalization.

- This **professionalization of Wikipedia has many different faces**:

volunteer-professionalization showing itself in volunteer editors who have become more experienced, efficient and trained to do their tasks - increasing the hurdles for newbies. Wikimedia professionals acting and editing in Wikipedia, normally without touching the article name space. GLAM professionals whose participation is actively encouraged by many players in the movement. Professional accounts of businesses or political entities acting openly and transparently. Professional accounts of businesses or political entities editing anonymously and trying to cover themselves.

- All of these forms have their own kinds of problem. But probably **there will be forms more acceptable to the community** and forms less acceptable.

- **Prohibition and its enforcement are impossible.** What is possible, is steering and influencing Paid Editing into ways that are considered less harmful.

- Paid advocacy and Wikipedia quality control will be an **everlasting cat-and-mouse game.** The challenge is to make the cats effective without doing too much collateral damage

- For those willing to participate and respect the rules of Wikipedia, there has to be **a legal and community accepted way** to do so. Those people willing to abide to the rules of Wikipedia have to be enabled to do so.

## Activities - Online and Offline

The most important activities were:

Creation of a new real name account **Benutzer:Dirk Franke** solely designed for this project to allow full transparency and enable the community to observe step by step what was happening in this project.

Initiation and moderation of the **“WikiProjekt “Umgang mit bezahltem Schreiben”** in the Wikipedia, doing the day to day discussion and collection of materials. This project was ongoing and designed to outlast the Project “Grenzen der Bezahlung. “ While “Grenzen der Bezahlung” lasted only until December 31st 2013, the WikiProjekt “Umgang mit bezahltem Schreiben” still lasts. It was the main discussion hub, where I posted reports of the activities going on, conceptual work was done, it was where the main input happened and all the regulars of the project were standing by. In this project, 150 community members were active in discussions who did 1438 edits in total, while I did 420 edits on this project page.

The blog **grenzenderbezahlung.tumblr.com** was installed to document longer and more important developments.

Some limited and carefully controlled **public outreach** by speaking with the press and PR people. Mainly by speaking to PR professionals directly and visiting conferences. Initially more public outreach into the press was planned, but early on this proved to be difficult. No matter how differentiated press outreach was designed, the ensuing articles tended to be misunderstood by PR professionals as “PR in Wikipedia is feasible”. Therefore this was stopped early on in the project.

A formally non-binding survey on Wikipedia **Wikipedia:Umfragen/Bezahlte Benutzer** - inspired by the project and initiated by a community member. It lasted from **February 23 to April 17**, was developed by 36 people and 258 active community members voted. On the four options “Paid Editing is allowed under the same rules as Unpaid Editing”, “Paid Editing is allowed under some

special rules” and “Paid Editing is not allowed at all”, **157 community members (60,8%) wanted the same rights and duties for all editors**, 43 wanted no Paid Editing at all, 15 wanted a special rule set, 29 voted for “different opinions.”

A request for comment - initiated by the project: **Wikipedia:Meinungsbilder/Umgang mit bezahltem Schreiben** which lasted from **October 7 to October 21**. Supposed to be a binding decision by the the request for comment, but did not get the formal majority necessary for this, nevertheless the results were close to those of the non-binding survey. There were four options (1) Paid Editing is not allowed in Wikipedia at all (2) Paid Editors may only edit on discussion pages (3) Paid Editing is only allowed when done transparently and openly, no voting rights no rights on flagged revisions (4) Paid Editing is allowed using full transparency. While 91 community members were active in preparing this request for comment, 237 community members were able to cast a vote. **All proposals were voted down**. Main arguments were either that it would infringe on WP:ANON or at least that its enforcement would be stopped by **WP:ANON** and therefore the measures proposed could not be implemented.

Several **workshops throughout Germany** and Austria with 2 to 25 attendants, often with some expert guests introducing people to the concepts. These took place in **Vienna, Berlin, Frankfurt, Göttingen, Aachen, Freiburg, Essen** and happily I was able to attend also the **Munich** summer meetup to talk about Paid Editing. The resonance was varied, it showed that workshops prepared and wished for by the local community (e.g: Göttingen, Aachen) initiated long and differentiated discussions, while those that failed to stir up interest in their preparation (e.g. Essen, Frankfurt) were only poorly visited and did not yield significant results.

Attendance and several **talks on conferences**. These were varying in scope and subject. While the talk at the **Kommunikationskongress**, a conference of PR professionals, billed “Encyclopedia out of control. PR and Wikipedia” was straight to the subject, others such as the talk at **re:publica 13**, a general Web-conference had a more general topic about control and manipulation in Wikipedia. While the **Wikimania 2013** program committee rejected the Paid Editing talk, this could take place as part of the Wikimedia Deutschland side program, while the more broadly conceived panel with Melisa Parisi, Barbara Fischer, Deror Lin, Christophe Hemmer, Benjamin Mako Hil, and Dirk Franke “Wikipedia in 2022” - which of course also dealt with the topic had an evening spot at the main auditorium. The talk at **Wikicon 2013** was about the meta and inreach aspects of the project “Grenzen der Bezahlung” while the talk at the Wikimedia Deutschland Open Sunday focused on the meta aspects of the project as well as on the intricacies of Paid Editing on Wikipedia. Some congresses I attended mainly to listen and talk to people, for example the **NEXT Berlin** an professional internet congress in Berlin where I attended a workshop specifically for PR at Wikipedia or the **GLAM conference in London**.

## Results

Problems of dealing with Paid Editing are **problems of enforcement**. While the German legal framework almost completely forbids any kind of Paid Editing as covered - and therefore illegal -

advertising, this is almost never enforced. In the whole history of Wikipedia there has only one case been brought to court. In Wikipedia, discussions about Paid Editing and its regulations tend to focus on the **collateral damage which tracking of Paid Editing and enforcement of stricter rules would do to the community.** (General climate of distrust, end of anonymity.)

The amount of **Paid editing actually taking place is** steadily increasing and **widespread but mainly stays on a superficial level.** Paid Editors mostly edit only “close to home”, inserting links or edit directly regarding their products or companies. Only a very few editors are able to directly engage with the community or setting up the wider scene. While many PR agencies somehow manage to be able to offer some kind of Wikipedia service and most bigger companies are somehow active on Wikipedia, this is often only a byproduct and clearly stands in the shadow of other social media channels used by these companies.

Most **PR people are willing to listen to the Wikipedia community** and are willing to follow its guidelines. They are utterly confused though about what is expected of them.

The general attitude of Wikipedians towards Paid Editing can be described as **grudgingly tolerant.** There is a fundamental split inside the community between the people active and concerned about Paid Editing and the wider community. This split keeps the situation in a permanent stalemate and blocks any solution.

Paid Editing creates problems in two fronts: (1) almost all Paid Editing is in some kind or the other **Paid Advocacy** and in this generally non-neutral. (2) the co-existence between Paid Editors and volunteer Wikipedians creates frictions that could lead to **demotivation and reduced activity by volunteer Wikipedians.**

Wikipedians can be very **aggressive and unforgiving** towards professional engagement in any sense but hardly care about it on an abstract level.

PR professionals and other Paid Editors face the **same challenges all new editors face.** Due to cultural and stylistic differences between the cultural professions and Wikipedia, this challenges can increase.

## **Tools**

The **most important result are the people.** Several hundred Wikipedians have discussed, mostly on a rather high level, about Paid Editing, its different characteristics and its consequences for Wikipedia. So, although Paid Editing is a way to complex and difficult topic, there is a general, informed awareness of the problem, the discussion has become de-emotionalized and most of the dealings with this fact are handled in an everyday-like down to specific-action type.

**Two different surveys** by different people (one in the spring, one in the autumn) showed clearly that there is no majority for any kind of absolute prohibition. Both clearly showed that the German language community regards openness and anonymity clearly as more important than the possible problems with Paid Editing.

The “**WikiProjekt Umgang mit bezahltem Schreiben**” (“dealing with Paid Editing”) still exists. The big meta-debates have subsided there mostly, by now it is a matter-of-fact discussion room to discuss and act on specific cases.

The **verified accounts** have - once an almost unknown side-project for which not even a rule sided existed - have become widely used. The widespread use of verified accounts has led to the usage of some software tools like **Herding sheep** which can track all edits done by verified accounts.

**Knowledge in the PR community** about Wikipedia and its demands have grown. Several brochures published at the end of the year show a deep knowledge of Wikipedia and its workings and its demands.

**Public awareness** of this topic, and that Wikipedia and Wikipedians are aware of this problem. Several press releases have not only dealt with Wikipedia and manipulation but also with the ways, Wikipedia and the Wikipedians deal with them.

Several **brochures and materials** for PR people are in development but **could not be finished**, because it was impossible to find a comprehensive consensus version of the Wikipedians’ views and demands.

### **Lessons learned:**

- Planning and working together with the community can be exhausting, but most definitely is **totally amazing**.

- Doing **inreach** can work

- A **guided discussion** can help to de-emotionalize topics and to focus debates.

- If the topic is ongoing, it is helpful, to be **sustainable and think over the time of the project**.

- **Being paid** brings a host of opportunities but is difficult on legitimacy.

- Being **experimental in form and content at the same time** is difficult and tends to **overstrain** the community

- **Openness** is essential, too much openness can be critical.

- Also, this openness led to **severe underspending**. While the project was planned with all possibilities in mind and assuming that it would not be possible to recur outside help, both of these assumptions proved to be wrong. Wikimedia Deutschland was generally helpful and several of the planned more expensive activities proved to be not necessary.

- Community discussions tend to **vary between waterfall and a trickle**. It is almost impossible to sustain a consistent level.

- "Asking the community" can lead to **widely different answers depending on who is asked**. While all the project discussions with a limited number of very interested people constantly lead to a strong rejection of any kind of Paid Editing, the survey and the RfC with a wider audience of less involved people showed a strong rejection of this rejection and showed a more tolerant attitude. Combined, these lead to a community where the people which are actually active and engaged, stand outside of the wider community consensus. While they can't change the rules, the community as a whole cannot change the behaviour of the people active, leading to perennial internal strife and a sustained situation of low level conflict.

- **A wide level of participation** can increase knowledge and legitimacy, but it **may not necessarily be the most effective**. While any kind of obligatory transparency was voted down on a request for comment, there was no problem when this obligation was introduced by the Wikimedia Foundation several months later - interestingly the German community felt not even a need to discuss this anymore, but accepted it as a matter of fact. Also interestingly, this provision is written down in the rules, but not enforced at all by the German community.

## What to do now/ Paid Editing:

Paid Editing will exist as long as Wikipedia has relevant public outreach. Through the project "Grenzen der Bezahlung" public awareness has increased and the competences of Wikipedians have increased:

\* **binding guidelines for Paid Editors** - this will be extraordinarily difficult to achieve as long as the people caring for these guidelines and who are most interested in designing these, are a minority compared to the rest of the community. These guidelines need enough of a community consensus to be actively enforced in the German Wikipedia.

\* these guidelines have to be **brought to the knowledge of Paid Editors**. This can be done by Wikipedia rule pages but need to have more outreach: for example through more PR work, giving talks at conferences etc..

\* **minimum transparency standards for Paid Editing have to be defined and enforced**.

\* the “**unentgeltliche Beratung**” (**free counseling service**) by community members as developed since January 2014 by the “WikiProjekt Umgang mit bezahltem Schreiben” needs to be developed

## What to do now/ Inreach

The project “Grenzen der Bezahlung” was experimental and open. Although it proved that inreach can be done, it showed several ways of improvement.

Inreach in any form is watched closely by the community and **has to prove its legitimacy anew each day**. This is true for any new project doing inreach.

The double experimental nature (new format used to discuss a non-established topic) tended to confuse and overburden people. Follow up projects should either be innovative in design or in topic. Right now the “**Wiki-Dialogue**” attempts to introduce a new format for discussing established topics while trying to establish a new format so that new topics can be discussed there.

The line between being too open and being not participatory enough is a narrow one and most projects tend to miss out on participation. This project erred on the side of openness, being not clear enough on its role and the goals aimed for, as these goals were quite open at the beginning. In any ongoing Wiki-Dialogues, goals need **still be flexible but should also be clearly defined**.



## Budget

Item of expenditure	
Staff ( $\frac{3}{4}$ FTE, one year)	32.400 Euro
Travel expenses (Workshops, conferences, including Wikimania)	4984,98 Euro
Eight Workshops (room fees and catering)	1871,46
Office equipment, services (mainly translations)	1839,93
Hospitality expenses	45,.
Complete	41141,75

## Project related links:

- Wikipedia account: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benutzer:Dirk\\_Franke](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benutzer:Dirk_Franke)
- Its 1973 Edits: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spezial:Beitr%C3%A4ge/Dirk\\_Franke](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spezial:Beitr%C3%A4ge/Dirk_Franke)
- Wikipedia page about the project “Grenzen der Bezahlung”:  
[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Die\\_Grenzen\\_der\\_Bezahlung](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Die_Grenzen_der_Bezahlung)
- Blog: <http://grenzenderbezahlung.tumblr.com/>
- First report about the initial discussion:  
[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Die\\_Grenzen\\_der\\_Bezahlung/6\\_Wochen](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Die_Grenzen_der_Bezahlung/6_Wochen)
- Pictures taken for the projects:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Die\\_Grenzen\\_der\\_Bezahlung](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Die_Grenzen_der_Bezahlung)
- Wikipedias rules concerning Paid Editing:  
[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProjekt\\_Umgang\\_mit\\_bezahltem\\_Schreiben/Regeln](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProjekt_Umgang_mit_bezahltem_Schreiben/Regeln)
- Publicly known Cases  
[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProjekt\\_Umgang\\_mit\\_bezahltem\\_Schreiben/F%C3%A4lle](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProjekt_Umgang_mit_bezahltem_Schreiben/F%C3%A4lle)
- Paid Editing Research published until 2013:  
[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProjekt\\_Umgang\\_mit\\_bezahltem\\_Schreiben/Forschung](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProjekt_Umgang_mit_bezahltem_Schreiben/Forschung)

- The project in the press: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProjekt\\_Umgang\\_mit\\_bezahltem\\_Schreiben/Pressespiegel](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProjekt_Umgang_mit_bezahltem_Schreiben/Pressespiegel)
- Relevant discussions on the topic Paid Editing in 2013: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProjekt\\_Umgang\\_mit\\_bezahltem\\_Schreiben/Diskussionssammlung](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProjekt_Umgang_mit_bezahltem_Schreiben/Diskussionssammlung)
- Project proposal: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Community-Projektbudget/Grenzen>
- Verified Accounts on de.wp: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Benutzerverifizierung>
- Conference slides:
  - [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lexikon\\_ausser\\_Kontrolle\\_Pr%C3%A4sentation\\_zum\\_Kommunikationskongress.pdf](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lexikon_ausser_Kontrolle_Pr%C3%A4sentation_zum_Kommunikationskongress.pdf)
  - <http://prezi.com/zwwakjiqcb-o/open-sunday/>
  - <https://blog.wikimedia.org/2013/10/03/the-hidden-wikipedia-a-view-from-2022/>

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