

# The Free Encyclopedia: *Wikipedia and Jacques Rancière's philosophy of radical equality*

Matthew Curinga • Columbia University  
mxc1@columbia.edu



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**some people hate Wikipedia**

*The hive mind is for the most part stupid and boring.*

Jaron Lanier, Digital Maoism:  
The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism

*[Wikipedia is] the blind leading the blind –  
infinite monkeys providing infinite  
information for infinite readers, perpetuating  
the cycle of misinformation and ignorance*

*Andrew Keen, The cult of the amateur*

**some people love Wikipedia**

*Wikipedia has an obvious Gutenbergian potential. It is a free encyclopedia providing all the emancipatory potential of encyclopedias of the Enlightenment era*

*Suoranta & Vaden, Wikiworld*

*To Wikipedia, the one surprise that teaches  
more than everything here.*

Lawrence Lessig  
dedication in *Code 2.0*

**Why is Wikipedia important?**



*Neither utopia nor dystopia, the Internet is the expression of ourselves – through a specific code of communication, which we must understand if we want to change our reality.*

*Manuel Castells, The internet galaxy*

# A new form of production



**Lawrence Lessig**



**Yochai Benkler**



**Cass Sunstein**



**James Surowiecki**

# “Walt Disney” creativity

*[Creativity that] builds upon the culture around us and makes it something different*

Lawrence Lessig, *Free culture*

# From code to “information goods”

*I generalize from the phenomenon of free software to suggest characteristics that make large-scale collaborations in many information production fields sustainable and productive in the digitally networked environment without reliance either on markets or managerial hierarchy.*

Yochai Benkler, *Coase's penguin*

# Commons-based peer production

*the networked environment makes possible a new modality of organizing production: radically decentralized, collaborative, and nonproprietary*

Yochai Benkler, *Wealth of networks*

# Dispersed information

*four conditions that characterize wise crowds: diversity of opinion ..., independence ..., decentralization ..., and aggregation.*

*James Surowiecki, The wisdom of crowds*

*When people are willing to put their money where their mouth is, there is an increased likelihood that they will be right.*

*Cass Sunstein, Infotopia*

*We can build, or architect, or code cyberspace to protect values that we believe are fundamental. Or we can build, or architect, or code cyberspace to allow those values to disappear...*

*Code is never found; it is only ever made, and only ever made by us.*

Lawrence Lessig, Code 2.0

**what do we value in Wikipedia?**



# Wikipedia: the **free** encyclopedia

*Imagine a world in which every single person  
on the planet is given free access to the sum of  
all human knowledge.*

Jimmy Wales

**What does it mean to have a “free”  
encyclopedia?**

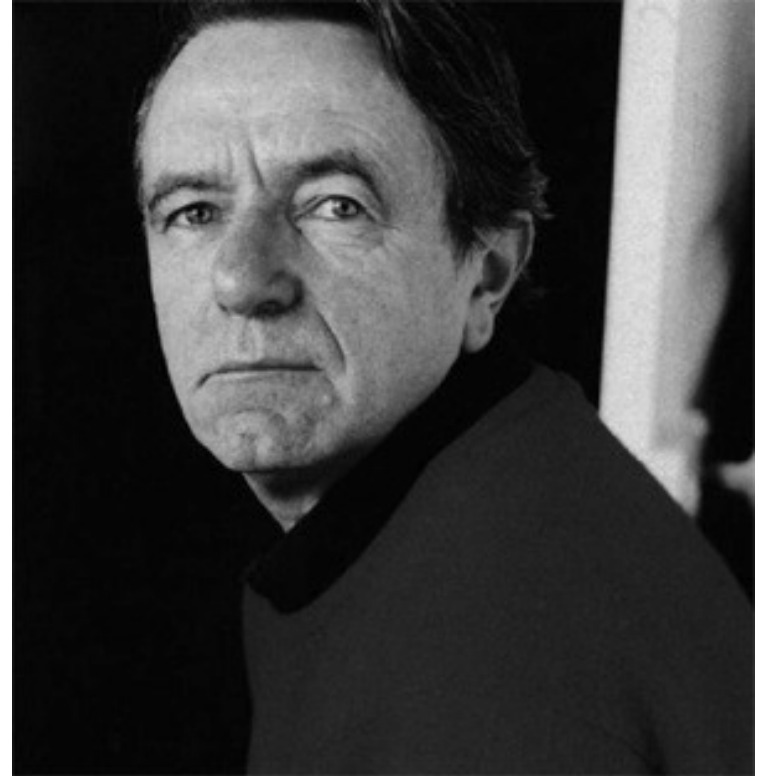
*I mean free as in speech, not free as in beer... When we talk about Wikipedia being a free encyclopedia, what we're really talking about is not the price that it takes to access it, but rather the freedom that you have to take it and adapt it and use it however you like.*

*Jimmy Wales, introduction to *The Wikipedia Revolution**

# Demanding freedom

*Egalitarian effects occur only through a forcing, that is, the instituting of a quarrel that challenges the incorporated, perceptible evidence of an inegalitarian logic. This quarrel is politics.*

Introducing disagreement



Jacques Rancière (1940-)

# Radical equality

*Equality is not a goal that governments and societies could succeed in reaching. ...  
Equality is a presupposition,  
an initial axiom—or it is nothing.*

The philosopher and his poor

# Radical equality

*It is true that we don't know that men are equal. We are saying that they might be. This is our opinion, and we are trying, along with those who think as we do, to verify it. But we know that this might is the very thing that makes a society of humans possible.*

The ignorant schoolmaster

# Emancipation

*Emancipation is the consciousness of that equality, of that reciprocity that alone, permits intelligence to be realized by verification: What stultifies the common people is not the lack of instruction, but the belief in the inferiority of their intelligence.*

The ignorant schoolmaster

# The political

*Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibility of time.*

The politics of aesthetics



# The sensible

*The partition of the sensible is the cutting-up of the world...This partition should be understood in the double sense of the word: on the one hand, that which separates and excludes; on the other, that which allows participation.*

Ten theses on politics

# The police

*Politics is specifically opposed to the police.  
... The police is not a social function but a  
symbolic constitution of the social. The  
essence of the police is neither repression  
nor even control over the living. Its essence is  
a certain manner of partitioning the sensible.*

Ten theses on politics

# Democracy

*Democracy is...a practice, ...the very same institutions of power may or may not be accompanied by a democratic life... The same institutional frameworks can either give rise to a democratic life, that is, a subjectivation of the gap between two ways of counting or accounting for the community, or operate simply as instruments for the reproduction of an oligarchic power.*

# Review

- Freedom is reached through action
- Assumption of equality must be starting point
- Politics changes social expectations
- “Sensible”: who speaks, where, and when
- “Police”: social force maintains status quo
- Democracy is a practice

# Ranci re and Wikipedia

**starting from equality**

*There's very, very little in the software that serves as rule enforcement. It's all about dialogue, it's all about conversation, it's all about humans making decisions. ... It's about leaving things open-ended, it's about trusting people, it's about encouraging people to do good*

*Jimmy Wales, in Wikipedia revolution*

**disrupting time and place**



*Can a social worker in Des Moines really be considered credible in arguing with a trained physicist over string theory?*

Andrew Keen, *Cult of the amateur*

# Verification of equality

- Knowledge is not static, it is *verified*
  - Talk pages
  - History
  - Diffs
- Invitation to edit, an invitation to action
  - Edit tab
  - “Anyone can edit”
  - “Be Bold” & “Ignore all rules”

# Wikipedia and “the police”

- Wikipedia policy
- Bots
- Wikitext
  - Templates
  - Info boxes

# What would happen:

- If we radically reduced the number of admins & bureaucrats?
- Eliminated all official policy or reduced it to one page?

# *Thank you!*

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