



## The impact of the Wikipedia Teahouse on new editor retention



Jonathan Morgan, Aaron Halfaker  
WMF Metrics & Activities  
December 3, 2015



Today I'm going to share a story with a happy ending. It's a true story about editor retention, collaboration, community health, about what it feels like to be a Wikipedia newbie, and about a place called the Teahouse. You're probably already familiar with the general background of this story. In order for Wikipedia to survive, a relatively small percentage of the people who read the encyclopedia need to try editing it, and a relatively small percentage of those people need to continue editing regularly for months or years. Unfortunately, while our readership has grown, the percentage of people who try to edit, and the percentage of those who go on to become Wikipedians, has been shrinking over the past 8 years. In part, this is because there is a steep learning curve to becoming an editor: you need to learn how to use the technology and how to play by the rules, both of which are rather idiosyncratic. Another reason is that new editors are increasingly having negative experiences when they try to participate. Their articles get deleted, their edits reverted, and their user talk pages rapidly fill up with stern warnings from people they've never met. Even good faith newcomers who are trying their best are likely to be reverted, warned, and even blocked for mistakes they probably didn't know they were making.



Welcome to the

# teahouse

A friendly place to help new editors become accustomed to Wikipedia culture, ask questions, and develop community relationships.

[Hosts are here to help](#) >>



Missionedit, Teahouse host

[Do you have a question about editing?](#)

[Guests, create a profile](#) >>

[Get answers](#) >>

Recent questions...

Hi. I sent in my article draft:kresten bjerg for review. He is more or less the only psychologist in denmark to talk about "domestic psychology", and has a lot of publications behind him. I have a source for everything i wrote, but it keeps getting declined. Do you have any ideas to solve that matter? BR Magnus bjerg (talk) 11:01 pm, Yesterday (UTC-8)

Find the answer [here](#)

[...see another question](#)

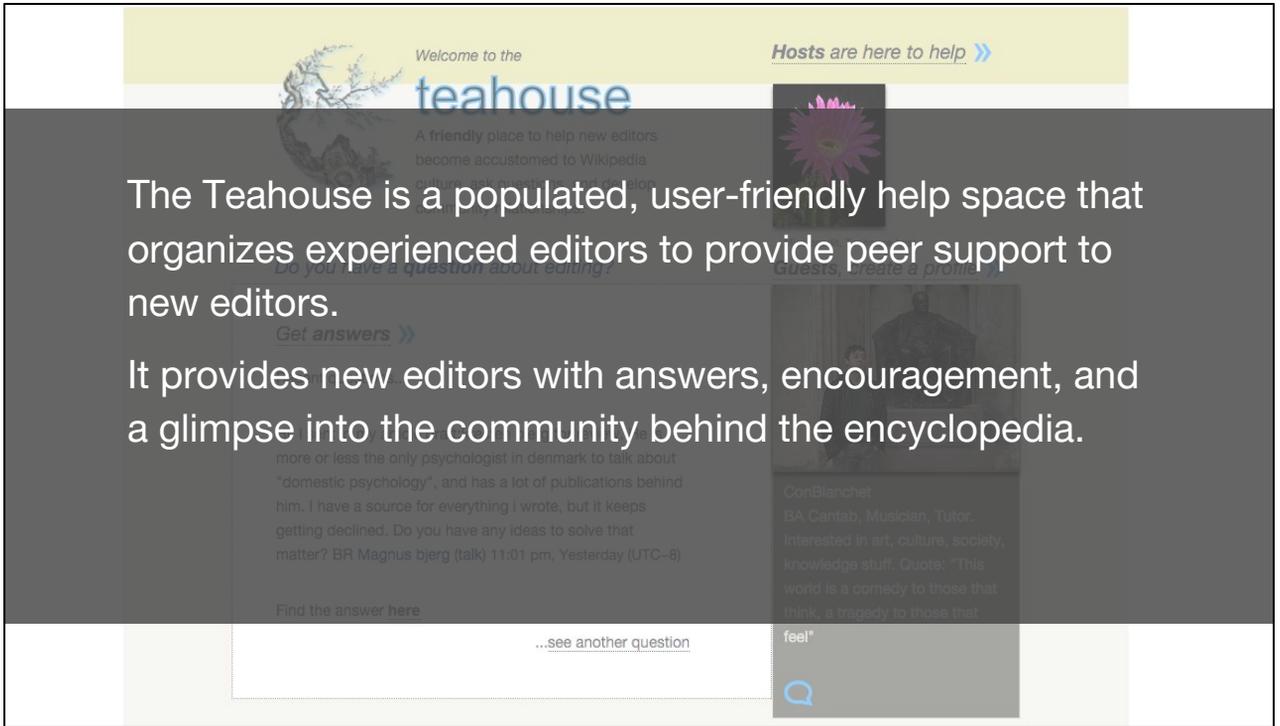


ConBlanchet

BA Cantab, Musician, Tutor.  
Interested in art, culture, society, knowledge stuff. Quote: "This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel"



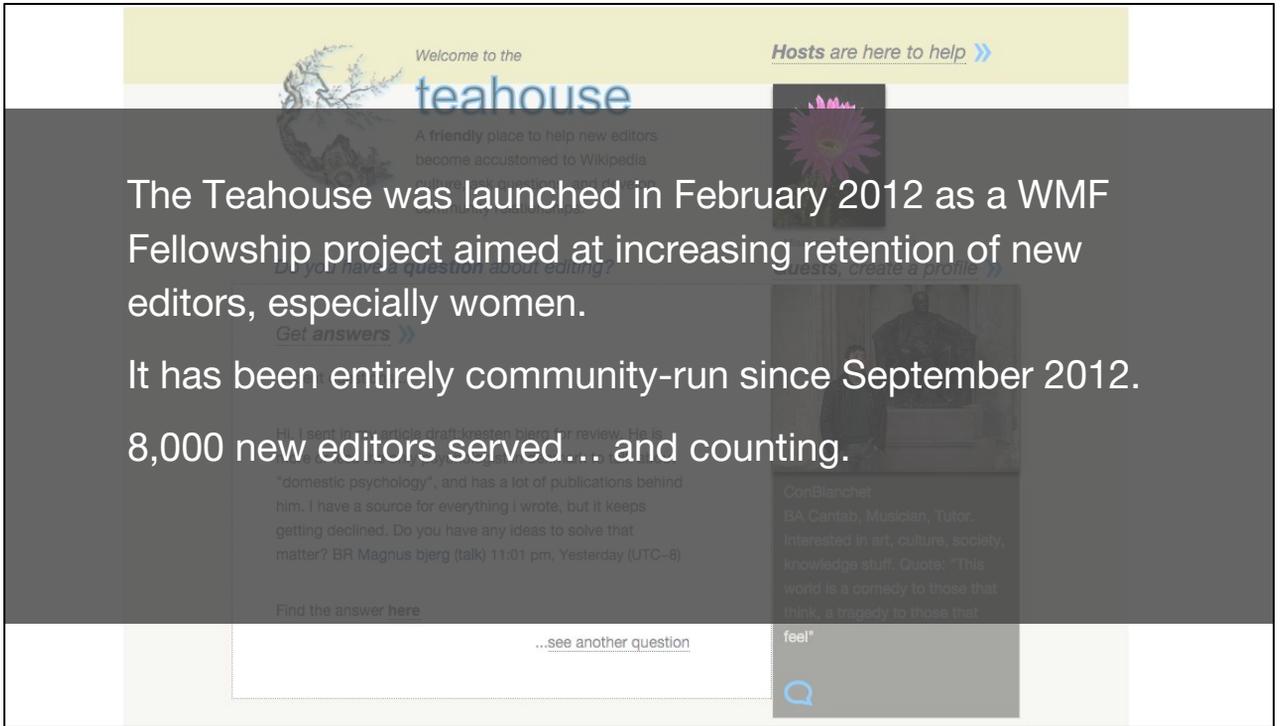
The Teahouse, which I'm going to talk about today, is an attempt to address some of these issues, and thereby increase the number of newcomers who stick around and work on the encyclopedia.



The Teahouse is a populated, user-friendly help space that organizes experienced editors to provide peer support to new editors.

It provides new editors with answers, encouragement, and a glimpse into the community behind the encyclopedia.

The Teahouse is a populated, user-friendly help space designed to provide peer support and positive experiences for new editors. When they visit the Teahouse, new editors can get answers to their questions, experience friendly encouragement, and learn about the community behind the encyclopedia.



The Teahouse was launched in February 2012 as a WMF Fellowship project aimed at increasing retention of new editors, especially women.

It has been entirely community-run since September 2012.

8,000 new editors served... and counting.

The Teahouse was created in early 2012 as a Wikimedia Fellowship project aimed at increasing new editor retention, with a specific focus on narrowing the gender gap by recruiting and retaining more women editors. Although the Teahouse was launched with Foundation support, it has been entirely community-run for the past 3 years, during which it has served more than 8,000 new editors. The type of service it provides is reflected in a set of features that serve as the foundation for the Teahouse model.

## adding a link to verify a person on a bio page [Join this discussion](#) [\[edit source\]](#)

Help - I just created three new pages - all for writers and story editors for the NBC sitcom Undateable. But they've all been flagged to be deleted because I didn't cite a source. Can someone tell me how to edit the page and insert the link to the official NBC website that lists these people as writers on the show?[CatBrewer \(talk\)](#) 3:10 pm, Today (UTC-8)

Hello, [CatBrewer](#), and welcome to the Teahouse. I have added one for [Laura Moran](#), you can use it as an example. Please read [Referencing for Beginners](#) for more detail. [DES \(talk\)](#) 3:23 pm, Today (UTC-8) [@CatBrewer](#): [DES \(talk\)](#) 3:24 pm, Today (UTC-8)

ack - I feel so out of my element --- I just updated the site for Laura Moran and Terrell Lawrence but not sure I did it correctly. I don't understand how to look at your revisions :( Sorry [CatBrewer \(talk\)](#) 3:30 pm, Today (UTC-8)

[@CatBrewer](#): click the History tab at the top of the page and then click the radio dial buttons on the 2 versions you wish to compare. Also, it is a much better idea, particularly for new editors, to create new articles in your sandbox work space and via the [WP:Article Wizard](#) as you will have much more time to make the content "ready for prime time" . -- [TRPoD aka The Red Pen of Doom](#) 3:33 pm, Today (UTC-8)

Can you tell me if I did it correctly for Terrell Lawrence? thanks! [CatBrewer \(talk\)](#) 3:31 pm, Today (UTC-8)

[@CatBrewer](#): you added a link that validates the existence of a person, but it does not address the concern that noted in the template that there is a credible claim of notability. See [this link for the basic criteria required for a stand alone article](#). And then you may wish to see [WP:REFB](#) for how to properly format the links. -- [TRPoD aka The Red Pen of Doom](#) 3:37 pm, Today (UTC-8)

(edit conflict) I made a refile and ref section on this article. [White Arabian Filly \(Neigh\)](#) 3:43 pm, Today (UTC-8)

First and foremost, the Teahouse provides a question and answer forum. Here's an example of a question thread from last week. In this thread, a new editor (CatBrewer) asks about how to add sources in order to keep a page they've created from being deleted. CatBrewer receive prompt and friendly responses from three experienced editors (called Teahouse Hosts), who go out of their way to explain how to add sources, as well as the importance of reliable sources. One of them even helps the newcomer by editing the article directly. The Q&A forum was created before we had Flow, so it uses a simple gadget that allows new editors to participate in discussions without having to edit wikitext.



MD Rashadul Islam Alif  
Start and End.



Grindall Reynolds  
Transplanted to New England 30-  
odd years ago, eager to learn and  
share the cultural history of my  
adopted home.



Rajendra Muhammad Alfarrel  
Hi! I'm Rajendra, I'm from  
Indonesia. I like all about  
transportation.



Stuti Saxena  
I'm pursuing my PhD (Political  
Science) and my interest areas lie in  
Voting behavior, Political parties,  
Political marketing.

In addition to a Q&A forum, the Teahouse provides a page where new editors can create public profiles, sharing a little about who they are, and why they're on Wikipedia.

He who never makes mistakes never makes anything - so apt for Wikipedia. No-one should be afraid to try and edit, as anything can be repaired if it's not right.



### Nthep

Nthep is a bit of a [WikiGnome](#) with an interest in history. Most of his best Wikipedia work is done with feline assistance (see photo). He also prefers coffee or beer to tea. Favourite thing

I am a musician and a retired teacher-librarian with an interest in genealogy and computer programming.



### Anne Delong

I am a regular reviewer in the Articles for Creation project, and I have been creating and improving articles about musical topics.

When was the last time that you tried something for the first time?



Cullen328 has been awarded these badges:



### Cullen328

I concentrate on content creation, referencing and expanding mediocre articles, the "Articles for deletion" process, and welcoming and mentoring new editors. I recommend [A Primer for newcomers](#) to new editors.

Guests can also view profiles created by their volunteer hosts.

## Our five host expectations >>

1. Welcome everyone
2. Be polite and patient
3. Keep it simple
4. Avoid over-linking
5. Leave a talkback notification

When a Wikipedian decides to become hosts, they agreed to live up to a few basic expectations. They agree to welcome everyone, be polite and patient with new editors and each other, keep their answers simple and easy to understand, to answer questions directly rather than simply linking to a bunch of policies, and to notify new users that they've responded to their question, since many new editors aren't familiar with concepts like watchlists and page histories yet. The expectations are not rules; hosts aren't required to follow them and there are no consequences if they don't.



Hi **Killerbeez3**! Thanks for contributing to Wikipedia. Be our guest at [the Teahouse](#)! The Teahouse is a friendly space where new editors can ask questions about contributing to Wikipedia and get help from peers and experienced editors. I hope to see you there! I [JethroBT](#) (I'm a Teahouse host)

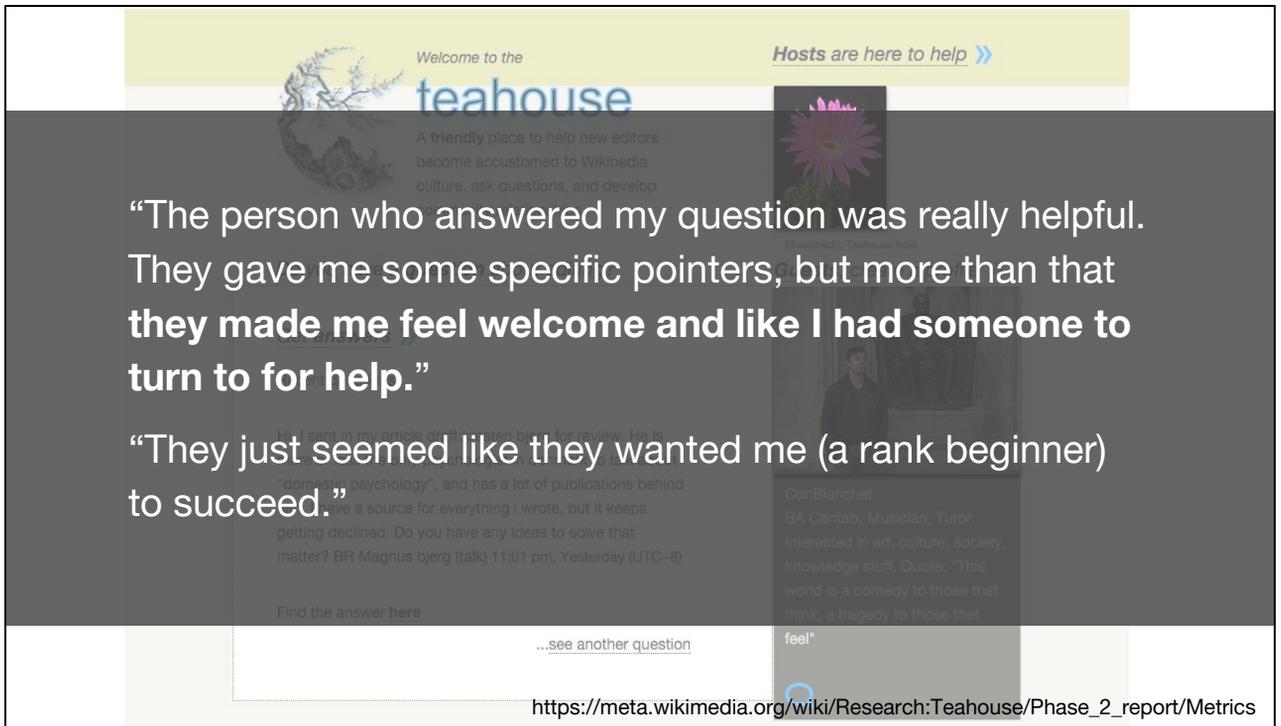
[Visit the Teahouse](#)

This message was delivered automatically by your robot friend, [HostBot \(talk\)](#) 17:25, 24 November 2015 (UTC)

The final piece of the Teahouse model is outreach. Rather than sitting back and hoping new editors find their way to the Teahouse, we send a bot to place a friendly invite message on their talkpage.

## Does the Teahouse work?

That's the basic Teahouse strategy for engaging and supporting new editors. In order to determine whether this strategy worked as advertised, in mid-2012, the original Teahouse team launched a set of surveys with guests and hosts.



Survey results like these suggested to the team that the Teahouse was providing value to new editors. These two responses from our survey show that new editors appreciated the quality of the information they received, and the overall experience. Respondents remarked on the welcoming atmosphere, the ease of use, feeling encouraged, and feeling like part of a community. We also found that a lot of female newcomers were participating in the Teahouse, at about twice the rate we expected, suggesting that the Teahouse was especially valuable for under-served and under-represented populations. But the pilot project was too short for us to definitively answer our main question: does the Teahouse encourage more editors to stick around and become Wikipedians?

# Current study

New editors who created an account between October 19, 2014 and January 12, 2015. *Criteria:* had made at least 5 edits, no red flags yet



11,674 invited to Teahouse



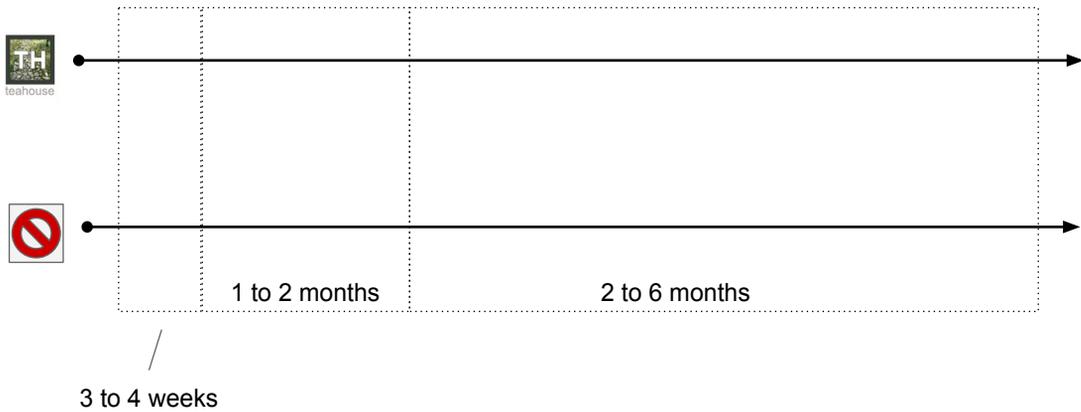
3,092 not invited (control)

[https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research:Teahouse\\_long\\_term\\_new\\_editor\\_retention](https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research:Teahouse_long_term_new_editor_retention)

Fortunately, a few months ago, Aaron and I had the opportunity to start trying to answer this question. Even more fortunately, the Teahouse has prospered under community leadership over the intervening years, so the answer was of more than purely academic interest.

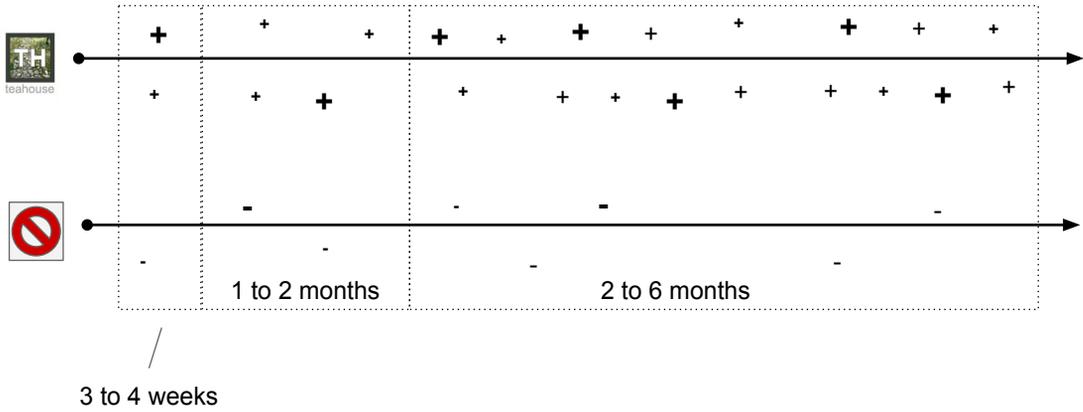
We designed a controlled A/B test to evaluate the impact of being invited to the Teahouse on a new editors' likelihood of surviving as a Wikipedian. Our dataset consisted of about 14,000 new editors. 11,600 of these editors had been invited to the Teahouse. 3,000 of them could have been invited, but the invite was intentionally held back. That's our control condition. For both groups, the criteria for receiving an invitation were the same: the editors had made at least 5 edits in the their first couple days after registration, and they hadn't received any "red flag" talkpage warnings or been blocked from editing, so we could be reasonably sure that they weren't vandals.

# Survival analysis



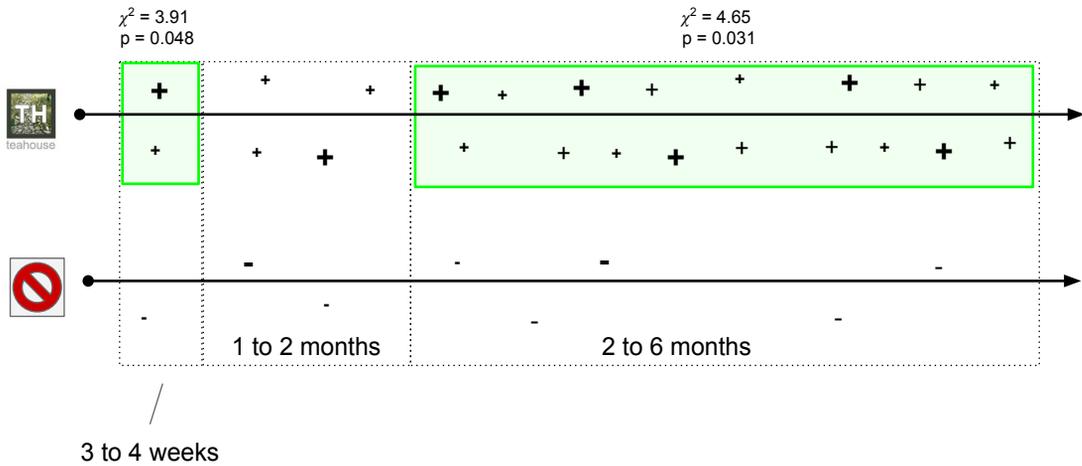
We examined how many edits each editor in our sample made during three windows of time after their invite date: 3-4 weeks later, 1-2 months later, or 2-6 months later. And we counted how many people in each group had made at least 1 edit during each of those periods, and how many people had made 5 or more edits.

# Survival analysis



We found that a higher percentage of editors in the Teahouse invitees sample met our 1 and 5 edit criteria across all three time periods.

# Survival analysis



For two of the conditions, the difference between invitees and control editors was statistically significant. In other words, we saw more invitees making edits across the board, but only in two of those cases could we be 95% sure that the increases we were seeing were more than random chance. In the other cases, we could only be 80%-94% sure, which is pretty good, but not good enough for science. So I'll focus on the findings we're most certain about.

## Short term survival

**3-4 weeks out: 10% more invitees made at least 1 edit**

3-4 weeks later, 10% more Teahouse invitees made at least 1 edit, compared to those poor neglected editors in the control group.

## Long term survival

**2-6 months out: 16% more invitees made at least 5 edits**

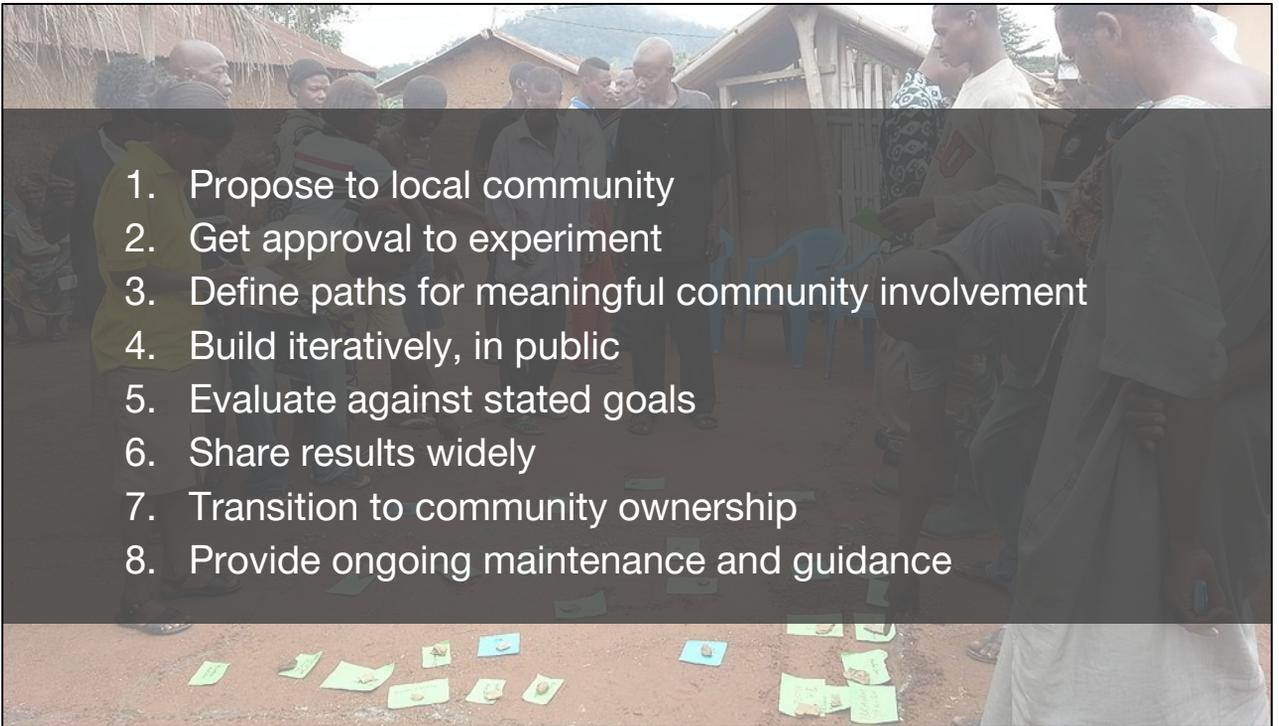
2-6 months out, the picture is even brighter: 16% more Teahouse invitees were making 5 or more edits. They'd crossed an invisible threshold and were much more likely to continue editing for months and years to come. A 16% increase might not sound like a huge deal immediately, but it's actually pretty amazing. Here's why.

The Teahouse has succeeded in an area where Wikimedia has traditionally struggled:  
**new editor retention**

New editor retention has been a recognized issue within our projects and a high priority for a long time now. There have been quite a few Foundation and community-led initiatives focused on this problem, but we have traditionally struggled to show proof of positive impact. So it's especially exciting and inspiring (to me anyway) that a joint initiative of the Wikimedia Foundation and the English Wikipedia community been successful at retaining new editors.



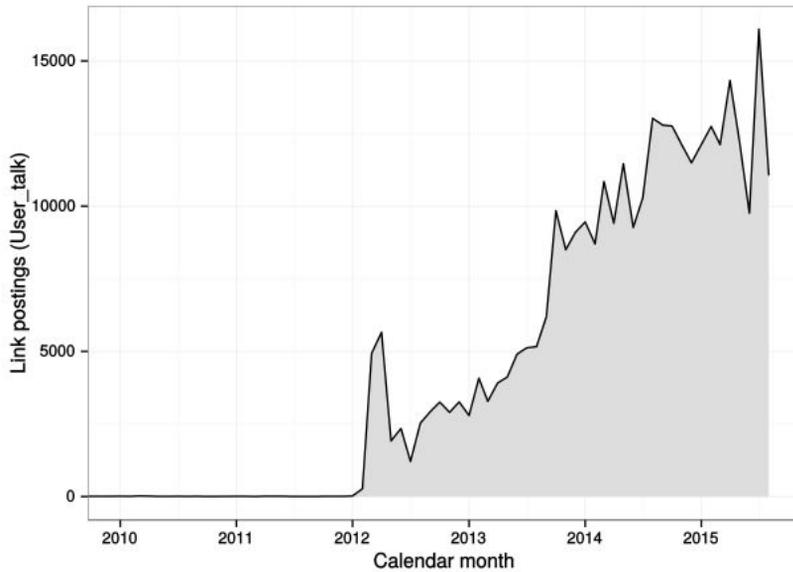
Part of that impact is probably do to the design of the Teahouse, the Teahouse model I talked about earlier. But I credit the participatory design process by which the Teahouse was created for its ability to sustain its positive impact over time.



1. Propose to local community
2. Get approval to experiment
3. Define paths for meaningful community involvement
4. Build iteratively, in public
5. Evaluate against stated goals
6. Share results widely
7. Transition to community ownership
8. Provide ongoing maintenance and guidance

There are many ways to do participatory design, but here's how it shook out in this case. The team proposed the project on the wiki, and we got approval to experiment with solutions to the problem we had framed. We involved editors early in the design and development, iterated on the design in public, evaluated the success of the pilot project against our stated goals, and then disseminated the results as far and wide as we could. At the end of the pilot, we quietly stepped back and let the community take over, offering support when needed.

# Community adoption



Links to the Teahouse on user talk pages, by month

Halfak (WMF) [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Teahouse\\_postings.monthly.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Teahouse_postings.monthly.svg)  
CC-BY-SA 3.0

Over the past few years, we've seen the English Wikipedia community become more and more invested in to the Teahouse. This chart shows growth in the number of links to the Teahouse from user talk pages over time, as Teahouse links have been included in welcome templates and as more editors have gotten involved in reaching out to new editors in need. The Teahouse has become an important part of the overall wiki-ecology.

## How can we scale this?

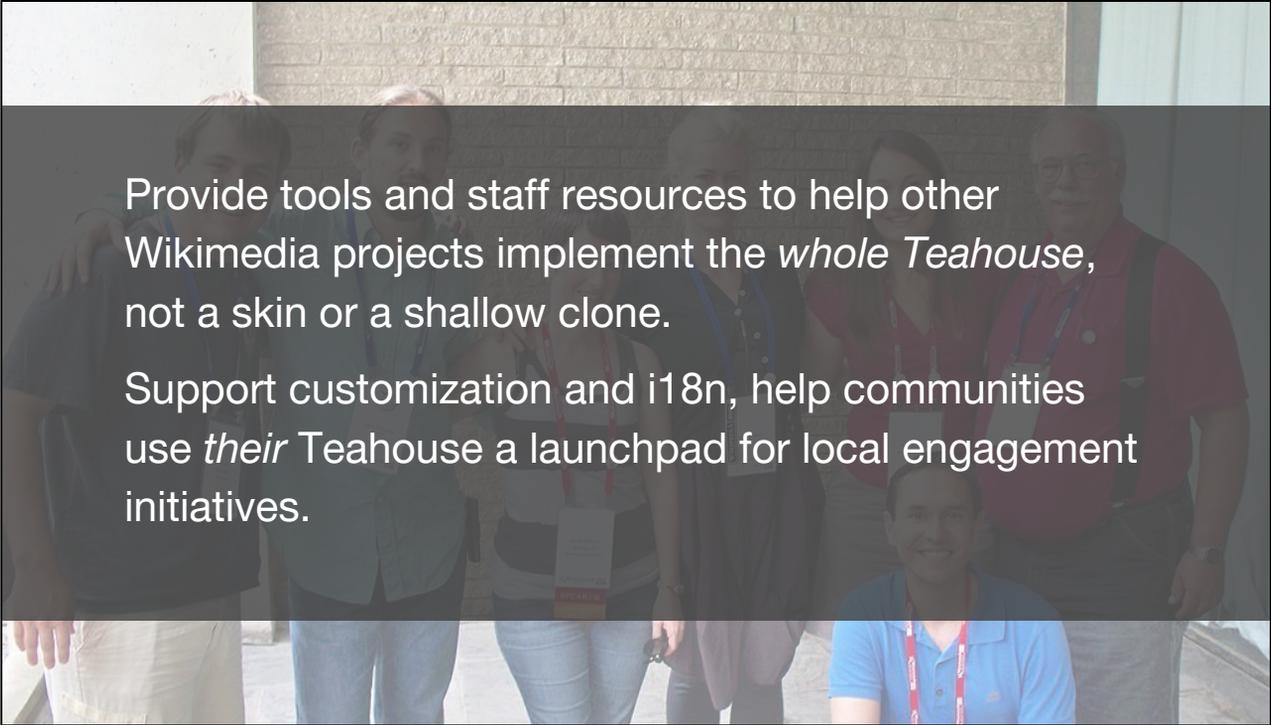
Ultimately though, a 16% increase in retention isn't enough. Every year, fewer and fewer people try to become editors to English Wikipedia. And we can't maintain the quality of the 5 million articles we have, let alone continue to create the articles we need, without retaining a larger, more diverse set of new editors. And we can't forget our other encyclopedias and sister projects, many of which also struggle with editor retention for similar reasons. With that in mind, here are a couple examples of how we could scale this success to support more new editors, better.

# Teahouse as a program

Since the success of the Teahouse is at least as much about people as it is about technology, my first example focuses on programmatic work.



The Teahouse was only able to get off the ground because of a dedicated team of staff and volunteers who shepherded it during its early days. Other successful, self-sustaining programs within the Wikimedia movement like GLAM, Wiki Loves, and the Education program, have also followed this pattern.



Provide tools and staff resources to help other Wikimedia projects implement the *whole Teahouse*, not a skin or a shallow clone.

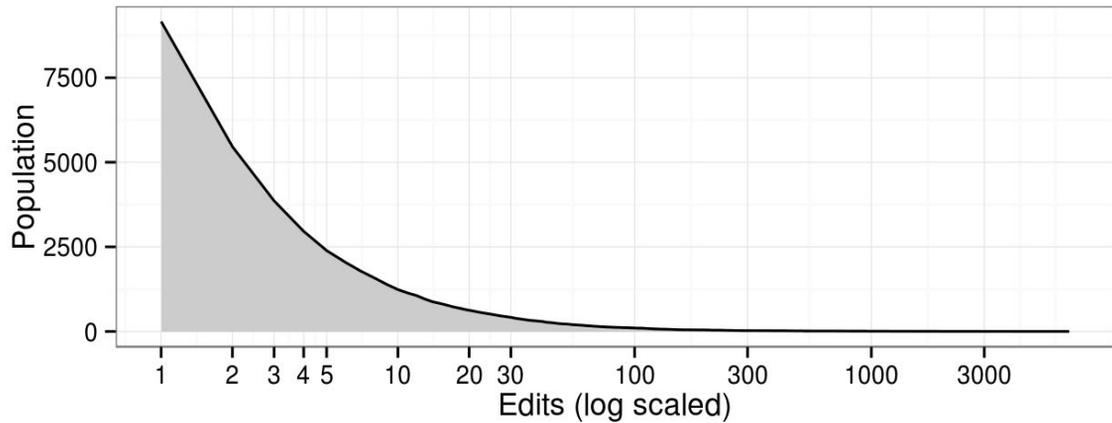
Support customization and i18n, help communities use *their* Teahouse a launchpad for local engagement initiatives.

A movement-wide Teahouse program could support Wikimedia projects that want to build on-wiki new editor support portals of their own. It would help local partners organize their community around the initiative, deploy the necessary tools, and customize their Teahouse to suit their local wants and needs, and assist them in using the Teahouse as a launchpad for other editor engagement initiatives.

## Teahouse as a product

We can also build on the success of the Teahouse as a product, and incorporate aspects of the Teahouse model into other editor-facing products and features. Here are two examples.

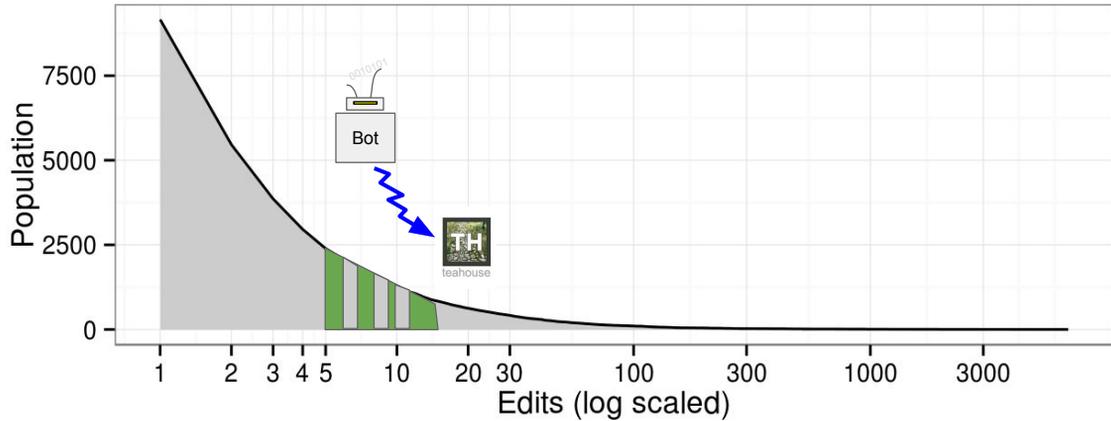
# Most editors give up after a couple edits



AaronH (WMF) [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Newcomer\\_survival\\_edits\\_population\\_plot.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Newcomer_survival_edits_population_plot.png) CC-BY-SA 3.0

Most new editors don't get to benefit from the Teahouse because they abandon Wikipedia before they get an invitation. The vast majority of people who make 1 or 2 edits never edit again.

# We're not reaching enough people in time

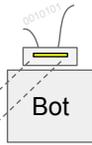


Currently, we don't invite people to the Teahouse until we can be reasonably sure that they're not going to be hostile or disruptive. Unfortunately, that has meant waiting until they've survived in the icy waters of Wikipedia for 24-48 hours, because we don't have a crystal ball that lets us tell a good editor from a bad one just by looking at a couple of edits.

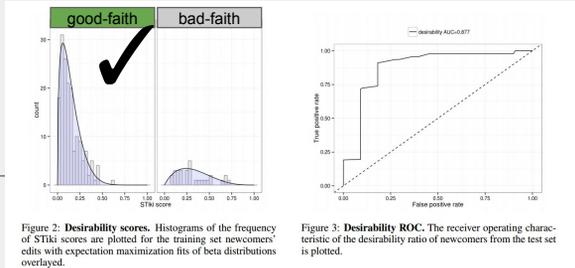
# Targeted outreach with revscoring



New editor  
with 3 edits



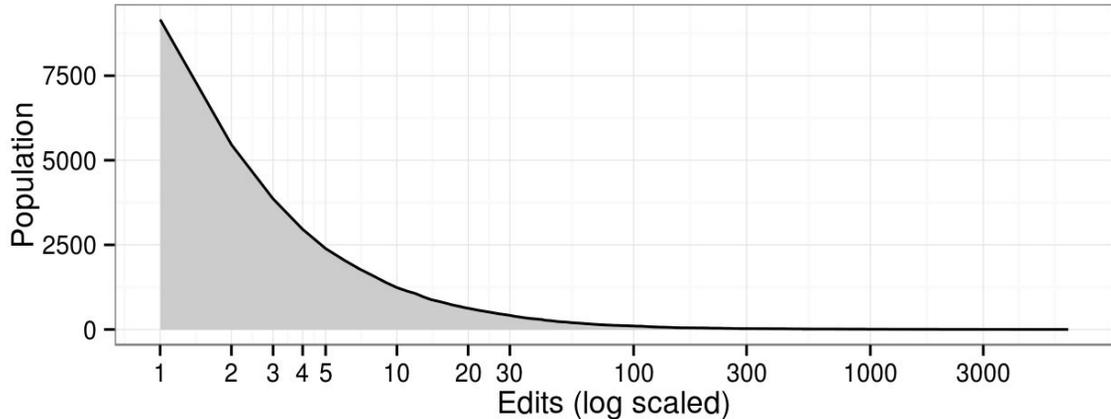
teahouse



Halfaker, A., Geiger, R. S., & Terveen, L. G. (2014, April). Snuggle: Designing for efficient socialization and ideological critique. *CSCW* (pp. 311-320). ACM. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WP:Snuggle>

Fortunately, we will soon have a way to do just that, thanks to another Foundation-community collaboration. The Revscoring system that was announced this week will make it much easier for us to distinguish between a good faith newcomer who is struggling and a vandal who is intent on messing things up. Even after the first couple edits. So we can reach many more valuable new editors sooner, before they give up, without attracting vandals to the Teahouse or wasting volunteers' time.

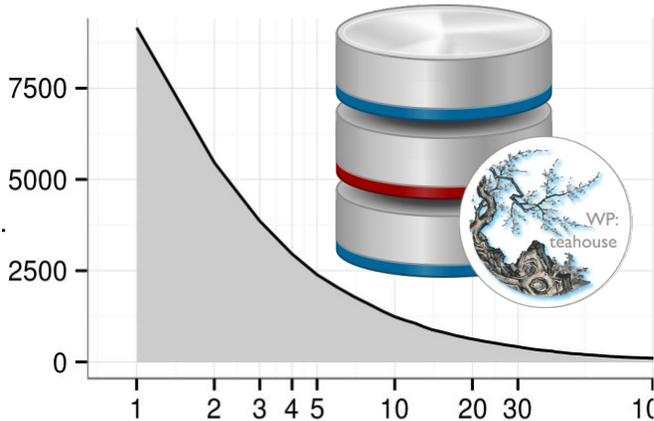
# The Teahouse won't work for everyone



AaronH (WMF) [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Newcomer\\_survival\\_edits\\_population\\_plot.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Newcomer_survival_edits_population_plot.png) CC-BY-SA 3.0

Even with better tools for identifying good faith newcomers early, we still won't be able to serve every new editor who needs help. The Teahouse is a finite resource: there are only so many hosts. We can't bring 5000 people every day to a single WikiProject. And we can't effectively support our increasingly mobile-first new editor base this way. So how do we offer a Teahouse-like experience to every new editor?

# Self-service knowledge base



Create a new editor help gadget powered by Teahouse Q&A

- 12,000 questions (and growing)
- phrased in newbie-speak
- with detailed, extended answers
- from real Wikipedians

One way to do that is to provide self-service Q&A. This is kind of like how new programmers use sites like StackOverflow. You think of a question, you type it into a search box, find that 10 other new programmers have asked similar questions, and you scan through the results to find the best answer. There are currently 12,000 questions in the Teahouse archive, and more are added every day. We know that those questions have high-quality, detailed answers, they are phrased the way newcomers would phrase them, and are more likely to be up to date and easy to understand than help documentation. We can use ElasticSearch to make these questions and answers easy to query, and provide this functionality via a simple gadget that we activate by default for every new editor.

# Conclusion

Those are just a couple examples of how I think we can build on this project. I'll wrap this up with a couple lessons that I have learned along the way as I have worked on the Teahouse.

Our projects are *living systems*—not software platforms, not content repositories.

We can't design around that; we have to design for it.

That means working with community, and taking community health seriously.

What can we learn from our successes?

The Teahouse reminds me every day that our projects are living systems. Each wiki is a densely interconnected complex of software, content, and people. Building within such a system affords certain opportunities, and presents particular challenges. At our best, we in the Wikimedia Foundation have been good-faith collaborators with our volunteer communities, and responsible stewards of software, content, and community health. And we've had many awesome successes, not just the Teahouse. So I want to close by inviting you to think of other successes, big and small, that you've seen during your time in the Foundation and the Wikimedia movement, and to reflect on what we can learn from those successes and how we can use what we've learned to play our role even better. Thank you for your time.

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