Conflict Resolution

as

Collective Responsibility

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Introduction

- I am Asaf Bartov, longtime Wikipedian, Wikimedia Foundation staff, working on community development.
- I have a talk called **Conflict Engagement for Humans** that I have given at several conferences and learning days.
- I don't want to repeat that material, even though some of you haven't heard it. (And unfortunately there is no recording, but see the link for the slides.)

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A different angle

Instead, I'll tackle the subject of conflict resolution from a different angle this time: whereas the earlier training focused on **individuals** and on individual behavior in specific conflict, today I'll focus on **collective responsibility** in conflict and on **systemic** approaches to conflict.

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The Environment for Conflicts

Some bleak facts

- Conflict is **a constant of the human condition**
- *Some* conflict is *preventable*. (Some **isn't**!)
  - The most effective way to **resolve** a conflict is to *prevent* it from arising in the first place.
- *Some* conflict causes **permanent damage**
  - So it is in our interest to *prevent* as much *preventable* conflict as possible.

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The Environment

Different wikis have **different levels of conflict**, despite being written by *the same problematic species*. What makes the difference?

The Environment

- **Many factors** affect the **likelihood of conflict**, and its **duration** and **intensity** once it arises.
  - Some are constant or extremely **difficult to change** (e.g. broad culture)
    - *Of those,* some are worth the struggle to change. (e.g. respecting copyright law; anti-LGBT bias)
  - But some are much **easier to change**, and are the result of **neglect** or **laziness**.

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The Environment

- Some environmental conflict factors that are **"easy"(-ier)** to change:
  - Outdated/incomplete **help pages**
  - Unclear, ambiguous, or missing **policy**
  - Lax or **selective enforcement**
  - **Overzealous enforcement**

Ownership

All too often, **conflict remains the problem of those directly involved in it**, and of **the single admin** who takes it upon themselves to intervene.

What if the burden were **more actively shouldered** by the **group** of admins as a whole? *What might that look like*?

(paired-interventions? round-robins? Admin council sessions? ...?)

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The cost of avoidance

- It is natural and understandable to want to stay out of conflict.
  - Especially one where you have strong views yourself.
  - Or where others have escalated to a point of verbal violence, shaming, or bullying.
- But there is a cost to **collective avoidance**:
  - Repressed conflict breeds **resentment**. That's a *powerful corrosive force* on the fabric of the community.
  - It has a **chilling effect** on others' intervention, and sends a **passive message** that certain bad behaviors are *de facto* tolerated.

How to improve? [1 of 2]

- Keep the admin ranks **fresh and able**.
  - (Try to) disobey the Iron Law of Oligarchy
  - Proactively invite/recruit fresh admins
  - Offer tutoring/mentorship to make up for capacity gaps in otherwise-high-potential admins

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How to improve? [2 of 2]

- Remember **what admin intervention is for**:
  - The goal of admin intervention *is not to pick "the winning side"*.
  - Rather, it is **to de-escalate and resolve unproductive conflict** so that *productive work can resume*; while doing so, it may emerge that one or more parties **violated norms**, and admins should **enforce agreed-upon sanctions** on those who did.

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Ending conflict [1 of 3]

- Consider the following assertion:
  - "We should strive to **resolve** conflict *by ending it*, rather than **end** conflict *by resolving it*."

- It suggests the view that there is *greater damage in the conflict going on than in ending it with the "wrong" side "winning".*
  - And therefore instead of **maintaining conflict** until the matter is *resolved*, we should *resolve* the conflict by **putting an end** to it.

Ending conflict [2 of 3]

"We should strive to **resolve** conflict *by ending it*, rather than **end** conflict *by resolving it*."

- This can be extremely frustrating to the individuals in the conflict. From *a community perspective*, however, it is a powerful idea.
- We actually **already agree with this**; who among us hasn't "lost" a notability discussion, *still* felt the *wrong* decision was made, but ultimately got on with the work?

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Ending conflict [3 of 3]

- How to **end** conflict before it is "resolved"?
  - **Deadlines** and *default outcomes*
  - **Votes**
  - **Transcend** the concrete case and *create/revise policy*
  - Create **deliberative bodies** with *binding decisions*.
  - …?

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What would work best?

Change is healthy

- In the early years, we *made up the rules as we went*
- Later, many rules have become *less changeable*
- But *wikis thrive on change* and adaptation
- *When the stakes are high,* determining *which* change is desirable becomes harder. And **we argue in circles**.
- E.g. should we change how we discuss notability? (if so, how?) Should we change how we welcome newbies? (how?) Should we accept oral citations? (how?)
- Specifically, experiments can **cut Gordian knots** (=conflicts)

Experiment!

- Disciplined **experimentation** is a method of exploring possible change towards desired results
- Discipline is key:
  - Goals
  - Hypotheses
  - Timelines
  - Evaluation
  - Post-experiment action (or reversion)

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Example #1

- **Goals**: increase retention of new contributors
- **Hypotheses**: 1. failure saps motivation; 2. conflict saps motivation; 3. recognition boosts motivation; 4. recognizing good contributions is easier than preventing failure/conflict.
- **Experimental action**: systematically identify "promising" newbies (e.g. using **Quarry**, find new contributors who have made substantial edits in the last three months and are still editing) and leave a note of appreciation on their talk page.

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Example #1 (cont'd)

- **Timeline**: six months
- **Evaluation**: compare retention of appreciated users to baseline rate of retention (measured in advance)
- **Post-experiment action** (or reversion): if the evaluation shows a significant increase in retention, make it a permanent practice. If not, stop, and look for some other action to achieve the goal.

Example #2

- **Goals**: increase coverage of undercovered topics; increase diversity of viewpoints covered
- **Hypotheses**: 1. Information on Wikipedia should be <u>verifiable</u>. 2. It is difficult to cite oral knowledge without a permanent representation. 3. Reputation matters
- **Experimental action**: identify a **partner** *already capturing* oral knowledge, review their *curation practices*, and, if suitable, declare their material citable on wiki.
- **Timeline**: 12 to 24 months

Example #2 (cont'd)

- **Evaluation**: 1. compare coverage of topics the partner covers to baseline coverage. (Has there been significant increase beyond the expected organic one?); 2. Count instances of patently false information discovered to have come from the partner's materials, and compare to traditional sources (e.g. newspapers)
- **Post-experiment action** (or reversion): keep the partner citable, or revert all the citations; possibly seek another partner

What experiments might help reduce conflict on your wiki?

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Final questions?

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Thank you
for your attention

Was this useful?

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