I'm Jonathan Morgan and I'm here today to talk about WikiProjects, how they work, where they've been, and where they are going.
I'm going to talk about WikiProjects, but the broader story I want to tell is about change. Wikipedia is changing all the time, and we often don't notice it in our day to day work on the project. One of the cool things about being a researcher is that you can zoom out a little bit and focus on broader trends, like change over time. Understanding
The general outline of this talk is to describe how WikiProjects have changed since the first ones were created on the English Wikipedia back in the early 2000s, describe some of the features and consequences of those changes, and then suggest some next steps.

**Outline**

- How have WikiProjects changed?
- What are the consequences?
- What's next for WikiProjects?
But to answer these questions right I need to get more specific. I will first cover some of the ways Wikipedia has changed, then talk about how the way WikiProjects work has changed, and then talk about how the work WikiProjects do has changed. And then I'll talk about the consequences not just for the WikiProjects of today and tomorrow, but also for English Wikipedia and maybe even the rest of the Wikimedia movement.
And English Wikipedia has changed a lot since 2001. Here are a couple examples.
Many of you have probably seen this graph or one like it, showing the massive growth and gradual decline of active editors since 2007.

There are similar trends in article content as well: shifts in the rate of new article creation and the growth of existing articles, peaking and declining at around the same time.
The social climate of Wikipedia has also changed in many ways. One example is a four-fold rise in the number of new users who get a warning as their first talk page message, rather than a message with a more welcoming tone. And this is happening despite the fact that newcomers nowadays are actually no more vandal-prone than they were in the past.

Like I said, these are just a few examples of the many ways Wikipedia has changed, there are many more.
How have all these changes affected WikiProjects? Before we get into that, I should probably give a brief overview of what WikiProjects are, and why you should care about them.
This is an example of a WikiProject, WikiProject Feminism. It has a set of goals and tasks, a list of members, resources to help them do their work, and a talk page.
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Wikiprojects are group workspaces in the project namespace of Wikipedia. You can create them about anything you want, anyone can create or join one, they don’t have any official control over content or much in the way of formal status within the broader wiki-bureaucracy.

They’ve been around since the early days of Wikipedia, and there are 1000s of them on en.wiki alone, and (at least) hundreds more across all our projects. I don’t think anyone knows the exact number.
WikiProjects perform a really critical role in our projects. <read list>

Some of these findings come from research that other people have done on WikiProjects. There’s a “further reading” list at the end of this slide deck, if you’re interested.

WikiProjects were essential for creating and curating all the content that was created in the “peak editing” years around 2007, and coordinating work among the massive influx of editors, but what about now?
Many WikiProjects are still active. There’s a database report on en.wiki that tracks how active projects are based on the number of edits to the project workspaces. You can see that there are still many very active projects getting dozens of edits a week.
But if you look at the numbers over time, you start to see the a familiar and depressing pattern. This chart shows the number of unique editors who participated in the 1000 all-time most active WikiProjects over time. It’s grouped by quarter year, to smooth out the lines. You can see that participation has dropped off by about 50%, which is an even greater rate than the overall active editor decline.
So we’ve seen that there’s been a steep drop in overall participation in WikiProjects, even steeper than we might have expected from the editor decline. To get a different perspective on this drop, I decided to examine how the work that WikiProjects do has changed over time.

Outline

• How have WikiProjects changed?
  o how has the work WikiProjects do changed?
The conventional view of WikiProjects is as engines of collaborative content creation: they focus on an encyclopedia topics, coordinate editors work as they create and expand those articles, and also develop local tools, such as subject-specific style guides, and other resources to support tasks within their scope.

If you look at WikiProjects this way, it makes sense to assume that drop in participation is tied to the decline in article creation and expansion.
However, if we look at the database report from February again.
We see that a lot of the most active projects don’t completely fit that definition. Either they focus on work beyond a single encyclopedia topic, like the Guild of Copyeditors, or they focus on a task that doesn’t necessarily involve directly editing any articles, like Deletion sorting or AFC.
As my colleagues and I continued to investigate WikiProject we began to formulate a theory that WikiProjects were being used to play a variety of important roles in Wikipedia. Not just for creating content, but also
- Building tools and community policing
- Teaching newcomers and answering questions and resolving disputes
- Rescuing orphaned articles from deletion
- Dealing with minutae and backlogs of editing tasks that spanned the entire encyclopedia
- And even brainstorming new solutions to community problems
Now, it’s probably not news to Wikipedians that there are WikiProjects out there that don’t fit the mold, but it was news to academia.

One question no one had asked was how many of these alternative WikiProjects there were out there. Were there more of them now than there were during the peak editing years? Were they more active?

I started to catalogue these alt.projects and to talk to their members to get a sense of what they focused on. I’ll give you a quick rundown of the findings related to the types of work they do first.
I found that a lot of alt.projects, including some of the most active alt.projects, like Wikify, do work on editing articles, but they coordinate editing across topics instead of a single one.

“\textit{I consider the process really important. One of the greatest improvements I've made to an article was just through wikifying it.}”

\textit{\textcopyright Member, WikiProject Wikify}
Others, like the Help Project, write and curate meta-content like Help pages

“I’d been interested in a lot of this meta stuff and I’d kind of touched on Help pages before and made a few edits... I saw someone had proposed this project to improve the help pages and I thought “God, yes they really do need improving”

~ Member, WikiProject Help
Several of the newer alt.projects we identified, like Editor Retention, are set up to brainstorm and address community issues that have emerged over the past few years, like the loss of valuable contributors.
And other ones deal with hot-button current issues like proactive mentorship for paid editors, or resolving thorny disputes among editors.
And of course, wikiprojects fight vandals and spam too. Where would we be without our border patrollers?
When we counted how many of all-time most active WikiProjects were alt.projects, we found that they were only a small subset, about 12%.
However, when we compared participation over time between alternative and conventional projects, we found that alt.projects as a whole were bucking the broader decline trend.
Conventional Wikiprojects have seen a decrease of 56% unique (registered, non-bot) editors since peak for conventional wikiprojects, but the decline is only 13% for alternative WikiProjects. In other words, they still have a pretty steady stream of participants. In 2014, a higher proportion of people who participate in WikiProjects are participating in alternative projects than ever before.
Participation in alternative WikiProjects has actually growing by some measures. Compare the total registered-non-bot edits to alternative and conventional projects, they’re almost equal now, even though there are many fewer active alternative projects.
You can also see hints that the kinds of alternative projects people are participating in has changed much more over time than conventional projects. Here’s a list of the most active conventional and alternative projects in 2006 and 2012. Alternative projects are shaded light brown. Projects that were not in the top 20 in 2006 are marked with an asterisk, indicating that they are either new or more popular than they were.
Highlighting the two alt.projects that dropped off the list after 2006 in red, you see both of them were related to creating articles.
Highlighting the alt.projects that are new to the list in 2012, you can see that most of them are less directly focused on new content creation. They focus on curation (wikify, good articles), meta-work (resource exchange), border patrol, and even new editor support.

Overall, the sense we get is that WikiProjects, despite an overall drop in participation, are doing more kinds of things than ever before. In 2014, many conventional projects are still going strong, and new alternative projects have sprung up to fill import niches in the wiki-ecology.
So what are the consequences of the decline in wikiproject participation and the rise of alt.projects? What kinds of challenges do projects face in 2014?
One key challenge for WikiProjects is maintaining momentum, even among those that managed to achieve the critical mass necessary to become highly active in the first place. Conventional wikiprojects may be especially susceptible to this issue, since many major topics are comparatively well-covered.
Another issue for newer projects is getting noticed. The Article for Improvement project is an alt.project geared towards helping newcomers work collaborate with veteran editors. But the project has had trouble advertising itself to the newcomers it wants to recruit.

“The main motive [for WikiProject TAFI] was to create a good enough framework for all editors and collaborators to come in... It was as much of a “Rope in the newcomers” thing as “Improve the important articles”

~ Member, WikiProject Today’s Article for Improvement
Another challenge, especially for alt.projects, is getting their work done using normal wiki-tools. Normal WikiProject pages work ok for creating style guides and task lists, but they are less well suited to the wide variety of tasks that alt.projects perform.
What are the consequences of the WikiProject decline for Wikipedia? How could these changes effect the project as a whole?
One impact may be a reduced ability to deal with backlogs and perform assessments and re-assessments of article quality, since WikiProjects traditionally performed these tasks.
Another possible challenge will be that with less wikiproject participation it makes it harder for us to expand into new topics, fill in the gaps in existing topics. This may be especially problematic if we want to keep fighting our systemic bias and increase our coverage of currently underrepresented topics.
And with fewer public spaces where editors who are interested in the same things can meet each other and work together beyond individual article talk pages, it may be harder for Wikipedia to maintain a collaborative atmosphere.
Given these challenges, what can be done? I can offer a few suggestions; I’m sure you can think of many more.

- What’s next for WikiProjects?
One strategy that worked for the Teahouse (which is itself kind of an alt.project) is inviting people to participate. This helped us solve the visibility problem and make newcomers aware of our project.
Another strategy is to continue developing tools to support group work. One tool I like a lot (tho it’s not widely used) is the Hot Articles tool, which provides a kind of lightweight group watchlist on the project page.
Another possible solution is good old fashioned necromancy! Getting a few fellow editors together to re-boot a WikiProject that has become inactive and start working through the backlog.
And of course, there are tons of opportunities to create new projects, not just on En.wikipedia but on other languages, as well as commons, wikisource, wiktionary and wikidata. Building projects that exist work across wikis to tie together our content and our community may be particularly important as our movement continues to become larger and more complex.
Thank you!

Jonathan T. Morgan

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Previous research on WikiProjects has generally analyzed these projects as groups, have often focused on the mechanisms those projects use to support group collaboration, and have used group theories to examine the dynamics of WikiProjects. For example, how project members pursue group goals, form common bonds, and develop a sense of common identity.

Framing WikiProjects as collaborating groups seems appropriate given what we know about them: projects develop group goals, define group tasks, and provide lists of group members, and project members interact with one another in a shared workspace.

They provide ways for editors to identify with the project, and also to collaborate directly with other group members.

And as I mentioned before, some projects also engage in group collaboration and provide engaging ways for members to advertise their affiliation with the group.
You also see changes in the way project members collaborate when you compare today’s WikiProjects with the peak editing days. This chart shows the results of an analysis of the kinds of messages people post on the talk pages of about 100 highly active WikiProjects in 2006 vs. 2011. Blue means more in 2001, red means more in 2006.

This is from a study that focused on understanding how WikiProject members work together to get things done.
I’m not going to go into all of this right now, but here are a few key differences that show how the way people use WikiProjects has changed. In 2011, it’s a lot more common for someone to post to a Wikiproject page and say “hey, I found a mistake in this article and you should go fix it”, and also for them to just post FYI-style messages basically saying that something is happening, like an RfC or a contribution drive, rather than posting questions that expect a response.
But the biggest drop between 2006 and 2011, in the same WikiProjects, was requests for collaboration. There were only about half as many instances of people asking other people to work on stuff together with them.

This isn't necessarily a completely bad thing, but it does suggest there’s less collaboration going on within WikiProjects, and that suggests that there may be something different about how people work on Wikipedia on a day to day basis more generally.