

# Wikipedia as social interaction rooms and collaborative-writing processes

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a summary of an ongoing doctorate project aimed to assess Wikipedia texts edited in Portuguese and the relationships established among Wikipedians through these texts and other interaction rooms, such as discussion pages and summaries.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.5 [Computer Application]: Arts and Humanities - *linguistics*

## General Terms

Human Factors, Languages,

## Keywords

Wiki; Linguistics; Interaction; Collaborative writing

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a summary of an ongoing doctorate project, similarly entitled, started in 2008 in the Post-Graduation Program in Linguistics at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (*Federal University of Minas Gerais*), Brazil, under the advisory of Dra Carla Coscarelli. The main aim of the present study is to map the dynamics of collaborative writing in Wikipedia in its Portuguese version and evaluate its relationship with the social interactions established among Wikipedians.

## 2. WIKI, COLLABORATIVE WRITING AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Among popular applications of the so called Web 2.0 (blogs, microblogs, social networking sites etc.), the wiki technology stands out as a collaborative writing process.

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The main characteristic of wiki is the possibility of any visitor (both registered and unregistered) to add, remove and edit content at any time by simply clicking on “edit” on a wiki page. Although explicit authorship is forbidden in the wiki culture, indirect ownership is provided by available editing history, ascertaining Wikipedians to review, change and identify every contributions to the article.

The most known and successful wiki technology is Wikipedia, an open-content encyclopedia that allows any interested individual to add and revise content. Formally launched in 2001 by Jimmy Wales and originally published in English, in 2008, Wikipedia encompasses a wide range of versions in 255 languages. Its Portuguese version site is one of the most visited worldwide, including, by May 2008, more than 377 entries (or articles, as originally named by the project) written by volunteers.

Because of the nature of the open-content contribution enterprise, Wikipedia conception is polemic. Any attempt to manipulate and falsify articles would affect such project, undermining its content credibility and the articles quality. However, Wilkinson and Huberman [9, p.3] cite a reason for the accuracy of information in most Wikipedia articles: the heavy participation of users. The participatory mechanisms of article creation and follow-up by Wikipedians, who are interested in maintaining the information accuracy, may ensure the successfulness of Wikipedia project.

A survey carried out by Arthur [1] showed that, in the English Wikipedia, the proportion of 50% of the writing contributions were performed by 0.7% of the users, and more than 70% of the articles were created by only 1.8% of Wikipedians. The fact that most of the textual contributions are made by a small number of Wikipedians enables the design of cohesive and active virtual communities.

Wikipedia roles have established four hierarchy levels based on both the amount and type of contribution. Basically, every user has the same degree of autonomy to create and change article contents, but the volume of contribution provides some Wikipedians with further empowerment. Those who have been

registered for more than 45 days and contributed to more than 100 articles have the right to vote in order to rule out a particular article, which may have been regarded as irrelevant; they can also avoid the edition of a polemic article and vote to the next subject outstanding in the site for a week period. Noteworthy, the collaborative writing interchanges elements of hierarchy and self-organization based on merit issues, as already stated by Tapscott and Willians [7].

Considering this hierarchy feature and the collaborative principle of Wikipedia, the creation of articles is the result of a constant process of cooperation and conflict among Wikipedians. The relationship among users is directly or indirectly listed across the site. Viégas, Wattenberg & Dave [8] reported that the summary users may fill in each time a change is made in the article also comprises forums where Wikipedians try to resolve disputes. Interactions among users may be explicitly seen in the talk page entry available in each Wikipedia article. It functions as extensions of edit summaries in order to reach an agreement, comprising a room for people to argue their positions.

### 3. RATIONALE

The rationale of the present study is surrounded by two knowledge fields: Linguistics and Communication. The former provides linguistic reference regarding the definition of text, the focus of our investigation. According to Beaugrande [3], text is a “communicative event”, which is the result of an interaction process among the author, the reader and the text itself. Thus, the text is not a complete product, and meaning is a construction performed by the reader oriented by the author coded material. Likewise, in the wiki context, this conception is realized in the article, considering that it is the result of a constant process of reading and writing in order to reach agreement among users. The latter, the field of Communication, provides elements to investigate interactions among Wikipedians based on the collaborative writing process, including other interaction social spaces such as discussion pages and edition summaries. The conception of virtual communities and social networks will be underlying our analyses.

### 4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In order to map the dynamics of collaborative writing in Wikipedia in its Portuguese version and evaluate its relationship with the social interactions established among Wikipedians, we, initially, selected two groups of articles to comprise our *corpus*:

- 1) featured articles, which consist of the best articles selected by Wikipedians and thus taken as “ideal”, as they follow both the writing and format criteria of Wikipedia proposal;
- 2) articles related to recent news events. Because they are constantly updated, they may not be regarded as simply encyclopedia articles, which is corroborated by Lih [6], who categorizes them into “participatory journalism”. Wiki-journalism [2] may be regarded as one of the most common practices in Wikipedia. The mapping and edition pace of these articles may

show a dynamics different from that identified in the “best articles”. The methods concerning collection of data and analyses of the edited texts are still under discussion, once this ongoing project is in the early stage.

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