

# Scientific wiki solves the 'who wrote what' problem

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Reporting in *Nature Genetics*, and working in conjunction with Society in Science, the ETH Zurich-administered fund that is dedicated to exploring new avenues in the relationship between science and society, scientist Robert Hoffmann, has developed the first Wiki where authorship really matters. Based on a powerful authorship tracking technology, this next generation wiki links every word to its corresponding author. In this way readers can always know their sources and authors receive due credit.

The history of a collaborative wiki article can become extremely complex within a few editing cycles. Someone creates a paragraph; someone else deletes a sentence, inserts a word here and there, and so forth. - "How could the reader of such an article know who wrote what," asks Dr. Robert Hoffmann, Society in Science fellow and visiting scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT.

In first generation wikis, this information could theoretically be found in the archives, but in practice, it is impossible for a reader to reconstruct the authorship of specific texts from hundreds of previous versions. This has been the root cause of a lasting suspicion against wikis in academia and the business world, since the uncertainty as to the source of a single word can decrease the value of a collaborative text in its entirety.

Apart from being key information for the reader, authorship is often pivotal to a successful academic and professional career. Authorship provides an important basis on which to establish a priority of ideas and

discoveries and to build a reputation among peers. "It is only fair to duly acknowledge authors, who invest time and knowledge in their contributions," Hoffmann says in his article.

Clear authorship attribution in this next generation wiki also makes it possible for users to rate each other based on their contributions. For the first time, collaborative publishing can therefore be enhanced with the advantages of a reputation system. Hoffmann describes how a self-regulating reputation system can help to settle editing conflicts, which were an important problem in first generation wikis and which used to depend on slow and refutable top-down decisions.

The scientific wiki project, introduced in the September issue of *Nature Genetics* and released online today, is the first of its kind and a milestone in the Mememoir project.

"This release is an important proof of principle, but our ambitious aim with the Mememoir project is to revolutionize publishing in all of science," says Dr. Hoffmann, "with a knowledge base that is open access, interdisciplinary and combines the altruistic possibilities of wikis with explicit authorship."

The system has been released online today at [www.mememoir.org](http://www.mememoir.org)

A video showing the most innovative features is available at [www.wikigenes.org](http://www.wikigenes.org)

Source: Swiss Federal Institute of Technology

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