

SBU study finds informal awards contribute to higher Wikipedia participation

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Graduate student Michael Restivo (left) and Assistant Professor of Sociology Arnout van de Rijt conducted an experiment to find out how Wikipedia works.

When Stony Brook University Sociology Professor Arnout van de Rijt and graduate student Michael Restivo decided to find out what makes Wikipedia work, they knew they faced quite a challenge. After all, neither monetary compensation nor formal work relations explain the success of this all-volunteer online encyclopedia. The team reasoned that expressions of appreciation by other Wikipedia contributors, including awards, helped to fuel what they called a “spirit of generosity.”

The team was surprised by the extent to which those rewards sustain the ongoing Internet phenomenon that is Wikipedia. Their paper, *Experimental Study of Informal Rewards in Peer Production*, has been

published in the March 29, 2012 edition of [PLoS ONE](#), an international, peer-reviewed, open-access, online publication.

“Our hunch was that a key factor fueling the extraordinary generosity that is aggregated at Wikipedia is a simple expression of appreciation given by contributors to one another,” said van de Rijt, an Assistant Professor of Sociology, citing the “barnstars” or editing awards that users give out to others and that are displayed on a user’s personal page for everyone to see.

“If you correlate such awards with productivity you will find that the more distinguished Wikipedia contributors are also the more productive ones, which confirms our hunch,” said van de Rijt. “This mere correlation could reflect a tendency for people to reward those who deserve it more, yielding the same correlation. So that left us with the question: Does working hard just lead to being rewarded with these tokens of appreciation, or do rewards also, in turn, stimulate greater future productivity?”

To find out, van de Rijt and Restivo compared award recipients with their equally deserving counterparts who did not get an award. The question was whether the former would become more productive after receiving their award. The team sampled 200 Wikipedians who were among the top one percent most productive contributors yet had never received an editing award. The researchers gave 100 of them a barnstar, with the remaining 100 serving as a control group not receiving a barnstar. Restivo and van de Rijt observed the contribution levels of all 200 during the 90-day period that followed.

“While we theorized that our award would temporarily stimulate contribution, we never expected that three months after receiving our award, recipients would continue to exhibit significantly higher productivity than their unrewarded counterparts,” Restivo said.

“Apparently, a simple token of appreciation on [Wikipedia](#) can generate hours and hours of extra work for weeks on end.”

The researchers found that people continued to act altruistically toward “a greater good” when they felt that their efforts were recognized. “If you add up all the positive karma Wikipedians have given to one another over the years, whether it be editing awards, mutual encouragement in synergistic collaboration, or spreading kindness through WikiLove, then you make a lot of headway toward explaining how all this [volunteer](#) labor is generated and sustained,” van de Rijt said.

The team concluded that receiving a barnstar increased productivity by 60 percent and made contributors six times more likely to receive additional barnstars from other community members, revealing that informal rewards significantly impact individual effort.

“Interestingly, a significant number of users who received an award from us were later additionally rewarded by other contributors. A first [award](#) may thus jump-start a virtuous cycle of productivity and recognition,” said Restivo. “On the other hand, failing to receive recognition for one’s work heightened a contributor’s risk of dropping out. These dynamics may drive a wedge between those volunteers whose contributions are recognized and those whose share of the total burden goes unnoticed. Our experiment might prompt the Wikimedia community to redirect community recognition of altruistic efforts away from the already celebrated toward less visible newcomers.”

More information: [dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0034358](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0034358)

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