

Toxic comments associated with reduced activity of volunteer editors on Wikipedia

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A study links hostility on Wikipedia to lost productivity on the site. Wikipedia, the largest reference work ever created, is written and edited by tens of thousands of volunteers, known as Wikipedians. Despite the

fact that anyone can edit any page, studies show that Wikipedia is generally a reliable source of information.

Ivan Smirnov and colleagues studied how the volunteer labor that keeps the site working is affected by hostile comments in the "user talk" pages connected to each editor. The study is [published](#) in the journal *PNAS Nexus*.

Toxic comments were identified by a toxicity detection algorithm devised by the Perspective API project. An analysis of all 57 million comments made on user talk pages of editors on the six most active language editions of Wikipedia (English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian) for the past 20 years showed that on average toxic comments on user talk pages lead to a reduction of activity by that editor. The effect is particularly strong when toxic comments are directed at newcomers.

When the first or second contribution to Wikipedia results in a toxic comment on their user page, users are 1.8 times less likely to continue contributing, compared to users who do not receive toxic comments.

Overall, [toxicity](#) may have cost the English language version of Wikipedia 265 human-years of volunteer work—and could be contributing to a reduction in the growth of the site's contributor base. Toxicity may also be contributing to the ongoing lack of gender and [racial diversity](#) among Wikipedians, according to the authors.

More information: Ivan Smirnov et al, Toxic comments are associated with reduced activity of volunteer editors on Wikipedia, *PNAS Nexus* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad385](https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad385)

Provided by PNAS Nexus

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