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# 17 The Joys of Wiki Work: Craftsmanship, Flow and Self-externalization in a Digital Environment

## Introduction

Public discussions on digital technology and the Internet tend generally to be framed in epochalist terms and to be rife with utopian and dystopian projections of our imminent digital futures (Du Gay 2003; Henningsen and Larsen, this volume). As many observers have noted, in recent years a shift in the tone of such discussions has occurred, as the optimism that accrued to the Web 2.0 and social media 10–15 years ago has waned, with darker visions being brought to the fore. Today, a probing of the role of social media as vehicles of misinformation, commoditization, and mass surveillance looms large in popular and scholarly discussions alike (Fuchs et al. 2012; Van Dijck 2013). However, there is one notable exception to this trend in the current flora of social media: since the turn of the century, Wikipedia and platforms based on the wiki-technology have been a constant source of positive wonder among commentators. This relates to the democratic nature of the Wikipedia organization, to the deliberative aspect of content production, and to the platforms' persistent avoidance of commercialism (Firer-Blaes and Fuchs 2014; Van Dijck 2013; Wright 2010).<sup>1</sup>

Prosumers (Ritzer et al. 2012; Toffler 1980) have contributed millions of articles for Wikipedia and other wiki-platforms. The true wonder of wiki-platforms is their capacity to mobilize contributors in great numbers and to incite them to write and edit articles. Based on a case study of the Norwegian local history wiki platform lokalhistoriewiki.no, we seek to understand what motivates contributors to engage in wiki work, and how this can be specified theoretically. We argue that wiki work is an avenue for the exertion of craftsmanship (Sennett 2009), and that it involves psychological processes of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2008[1991]) and social processes of self-externalization (Elster 1989).

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<sup>1</sup> Others present accounts of Wikipedia in a less enchanted tone, pointing to the challenges posed by “Wikipedia trolls” (Shachaf and Hara 2010) and “editorial wars” on the site (Yasseri et al. 2012).

## Literature Review

While there is an extensive research literature on Wikipedia and wiki-platforms emanating from the social sciences, media science, information science, education science, and other academic fields, surprisingly few of these studies are devoted specifically to questions of the drivers of the prosumers' engagement. The ones that tend to be of a quantitative and deductive nature are in most cases based on surveys of Wikipedia-contributors in various countries (Anthony et al. 2009; Baytiyeh and Pfaffman 2010; Cho et al. 2010; Kuznetsov 2006; Lund 2015; Nov 2007; Prasarnphanich and Wagner 2009; Schrorer and Hertel 2009; Xu and Li 2015; Yang and Lai 2010).

The drivers of wiki-contributors' engagement that are highlighted in the studies can be grouped into two clusters of motivations. The first cluster can be described as sociality-oriented, in that it relates to social relations and bonds persons enter into as wiki-contributors, and the norms, values, and ideologies associated with the wiki community. Thus, Kuznetsov (2006) argues that contributors to Wikipedia are motivated by altruism (the desire to share information and knowledge with others), reciprocity (the moral obligation of mutuality in gift exchange), community (the identification with and belonging to the group of self-asserted "wikipedians"), and reputation (the recognition and moral standing persons earn in the community through voluntary efforts). Other studies affirm the importance of these motivations (Anthony et al. 2009; Baytiyeh and Pfaffman 2010; Cho et al. 2010; Prasarnphanich and Wagner 2009; Schrorer and Hertel 2009; Xu and Li 2015), as well as the importance of contributors' allegiance to an ideology of free knowledge (Nov 2007).

The second cluster of motivations that is discussed in the research literature can be termed task-oriented, because it relates directly to the experience of writing and editing on wiki-platforms and the satisfaction contributors derive from this. Thus, in addition to the abovementioned motivations, Kuznetsov (2006) points to autonomy (the freedom to decide how and when to work) as a motivation for wiki contributors. Other studies highlight desires for learning and understanding and the exercise of competence as motivations for contributors (Baytiyeh and Pfaffman 2010; Nov 2007; Schrorer and Hertel 2009). Anthony et al. (2009) note how certain contributors to Wikipedia attach a purely intrinsic value to the efforts they put into the site. Similarly, other studies highlight the intrinsic motivations of contributors, as indicated by task-enjoyment or having fun (Baytiyeh and Pfaffman 2010; Nov 2007; Schrorer and Hertel 2009). In a related manner, Yang and Lai (2010) point to "internal self-concept motivation" as particularly important to contributors, whereas Lund (2015) highlights contributors' submission to a logic of gaming.

The drivers of contributors' engagement that emerged from our interviews with contributors to the local history wiki fall well within the register of motivations described in the research literature and underscore the importance of what we have referred to as task-oriented drivers. However, our aim in this chapter is not to assess the relative importance of variously classified motivations of wiki-contributors in quantitative terms. Rather, it is through a qualitative in-depth study to deepen the analytic understanding of such motivations and how these relate to the experiences of wiki-contributors. The purpose of this investigation is to construct a thick description (Geertz 1973) of the motivations of wiki-contributors, which is premised on their own accounts of their involvement on the wiki-platform and sensitive to their own conceptualizations and legitimations of this engagement. This exploration of the motivations and experiences of wiki-contributors provides a basis for theoretical specifications of wiki-contributors' engagement, in accordance with abductive analysis (Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

## Case Description

lokalhistoriewiki.no was established in 2007–2008 by The Norwegian Institute of Local History (NILH), which for half a century has been a publicly financed national organization for professional historians involved in local history (Sprauten 2006, 5). As of 2017, the institute NILH is part of the National Library of Norway. A longstanding objective of the institute has been to promote amateur local history activities in Norway and to support the numerous local history associations that are found across the country. Since the 1990s, NILH has increasingly sought to make use of digital technology and the Web for these ends. Here, the institute found a common interest with members of the Norwegian Wikipedia community, who had been looking to establish a platform for writings on topics that are deemed too specific to be accepted on Wikipedia (Wiig 2018).<sup>2</sup> From the outset, it has been an explicit policy of the lokalhistoriewiki.no that “no subject is too small” for publication on the site. Initially, the NILH wanted to develop a wiki-site on a dual model, with a section reserved for contributions from professional historians and another that invited amateur contributions. Eventually, it was decided on a model that is open to both categories.

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<sup>2</sup> A criterion for publication of articles on the Norwegian Wikipedia is that they should be of national or global interest.

lokalhistoriewiki.no is based on the wiki software and is similar to Wikipedia in many respects. This includes the layout of articles with headlines and pictures, the systems of categories and of hypertext links for cross references as well as the policy of collective ownership of articles. As in Wikipedia, articles feature public records of editions and discussions of articles. In conformity with the encyclopedic genre, the content on lokalhistoriewiki.no is organized in an itemized structure and articles are usually couched in a reporting style, dominated by constative assertions and dense with factual information. Like Wikipedia, articles vary in size from several thousand words to only a few sentences. However, in addition to the “no subject is too small” policy, the local history wiki features several modifications of the Wikipedia model. One of these is that the local history wiki allows and encourages the contribution of articles with original research. Another is that the wiki is owned and operated by a publicly funded organization. All administrators on lokalhistoriewiki.no are employees at the NILH. Some of them are also among the most prolific contributors to the wiki. In light of these features, Sveum (2010, 245) notes that the local history wiki appears to be unique in so far as it seems to have no parallel in other countries.

As the activities on lokalhistoriewiki.no have grown over the years, it has come to play an important role in the NILH and parts of the institute’s funding from the Ministry of Culture is now earmarked for the wiki. According to the former director of the institute:

During the last decade, the wiki has been the main activity for the institute in promoting knowledge-production, knowledge-dissemination and knowledge-exchange... The wiki should be an arena for co-creation. It should function as a laboratory, where professionals and amateurs with a magnitude of skills can contribute (Sprauten 2017, 303).

From 2008 to 2017, the number of registered contributors on lokalhistoriewiki.no grew from 240 to 2919. In 2017, 47,782 articles and 167,487 pictures had been published on the wiki and the yearly number of visits on the site was in excess of 1.3 million (Wiig 2018, 567). Although from time to time the NILH recruits individuals or groups from active local history communities, and provides professional assistance, most contributors do not have any formalized relationship with the institute.

A survey we carried out among all registered contributors to lokalhistoriewiki.no suggests that the typical contributors are men aged above 50 and with a high level of education.<sup>3</sup> Three quarters of the respondents to the survey were male.

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<sup>3</sup> The survey was distributed by the NILH through e-mail to the registered users of lokalhistoriewiki.no in October 2018. There were 2,660 recipients of the survey. Out of these, 740 persons responded to the survey, a response rate of 28 percent.

Three quarters were aged 51 years or older. More than 80 percent of the respondents had university education (36 percent at bachelor level, 41 percent at master level and 5 percent at PhD level). As was pointed out to us by administrators from the NILH, while there are about three thousand registered contributors to the wiki, the majority of these are active on an irregular basis only, while a small group contribute articles and editions on a continual basis. One administrator estimated this group to consist of about 80 to 100 persons.

## Data Collection

The informants in our case study were drawn from the group of highly active contributors.<sup>4</sup> We carried out 14 interviews with 15 informants. Among these, 11 contributors were formally unaffiliated to the NILH and four were administrators employed by the institute. The gender-, age- and education profile of our informants conforms to that of the total population of contributors of *lokalhistoriewiki.no*. Out of the 15 informants, only two were female. With a few exceptions, the informants were aged above 50 and several were pensioners or semi-retired from work. Most of the informants can be described as amateurs, in the sense that their local history writing was done on a volunteer basis, and in the sense that they had not held formal employment as historians, academic researchers or in related occupations. However, most of the informants had university-level education and several held master's degrees in history, some of which had been obtained at a late age, after working with local history on a volunteer basis for many years. During our last couple of interviews viewpoints from earlier interviews were frequent, and we were certain that we had reached a saturation point, where additional interviews would most likely confirm our impressions from interviews already conducted.

Although we had formulated an interview guide with a battery of questions related to overarching themes prior to conducting our interviews, we let the interviews develop according to their own internal dynamic, in line with the semi-structured approach to qualitative interviews (Kvale and Brinkman 2009). The interviews took place either in the home or the office of the informants, or at a conference room at our university. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. The recordings from the interviews comprise a total of 915 minutes, and 202 single spaced pages of interview transcripts. Most of the interviews were conducted with both researchers present as interviewers, taking turns in asking questions related to topics being discussed.

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<sup>4</sup> On two occasions in 2018, we selected persons from the top-ten list of active contributors and contacted these with requests for interviews.

We allowed the informants to control the topicality of the conversation (Sanjek 2014) and we would ask them to elaborate on experiences, concerns, and viewpoints they brought on the table. By talking to the informants about their motivations for producing wiki articles, we wanted to unravel how they give meaning to their own actions. For some informants it has been difficult to give an account of their motivations, which may be due to the fact that they spend several hours a day producing articles for the wiki; as the wiki work is experienced as an everyday activity, anchored in one's life-world, it is a challenge to make explicit the reasons for one's actions. Our job as researchers has been to interpret the meanings that the informants ascribe to their actions. Through our study, we have investigated the vocabularies of motives available to the informants in this particular time and place (Mills 1940, 913), motives being "accepted justifications for present, future, or past programs or acts" (Mills 1940, 907). With our study, we have sought to understand the motivations for wiki work on the grounds of in-depth interviews with highly active contributors to the local history wiki, in combination with the engagement of a broad spectre of social science literature. Such an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012) helped us get a grip on the importance of craftsmanship, flow, and self-externalization for wiki work.

## Findings

### Joys of Wiki Work

The most striking finding from our interviews concerns the informant's strong engagement in activities related to the local history wiki. With respect to many of our informants, it can be stated without exaggeration that this was an engagement of a life-defining character. One measure of this was the amount of time and effort they put into the wiki. Most would do wiki work daily and usually for several hours. For some, a normal day would consist of little other than working on the wiki. Thus, one informant told us that: "During the last six months, I have spent every waking hour on this. I do this from when I wake up in the morning, until I go to bed". This person had been working on a historical dissertation on and off for decades and was euphoric that he had found an outlet for getting his writings published. His statement was echoed by several other informants. In many cases, it appears that the informants alternated between periods where they devote all their available time to the wiki and periods where the activity slows down for some time. As one informant told us:

Now, I don't spend more than 3 hours a day [on the wiki] [laughs]. Earlier – and I am not joking here – I could eat breakfast and then go into my home office and start working on articles for the wiki and I would keep going until 11 PM. My only interruptions would be lunch, dinner, and the evening news broadcast.

Another informant explained: “Last fall I spent an enormous amount of time on this. I think I have spent 1,000 hours so far. I don't watch a lot of TV, to put it that way. I would say that I spend around 3 hours a day on producing material for the wiki. If you multiply that by 365, well. . .” Here, one must take into account that the men who made these statements were retirees, or out of work for other reasons, and therefore had ample opportunities to indulge in these activities. However, this does not by itself provide an explanation as to why they come to devote so much of their time to this particular activity.

A second way in which the informants' engagement as contributors to the wiki was revealed was in their stated disregard for incentives and rewards that are exterior to the work experience itself, what we referred to above as sociality-oriented motivations. While *lokalhistoriewiki.no* encourages contributors to contribute original research, it is similar to Wikipedia in that contributors do not have individual property rights to articles they produce. The informants had little to gain from their engagement in terms of making an income or furthering a career as a professional researcher or writer. As noted, the research literature on Wikipedia highlights altruism, reciprocity, identification with wiki-communities, and reputation and standing in these communities as motivations for user involvement. None of these elements featured prominently in the accounts of motivations we gathered from the contributors to the local history wiki. *lokalhistoriewiki.no* is presented officially as an arena for “co-creation” and several informants welcomed the collective aspect of the wiki. However, in actuality it appears that the degree of collective writing on the local history wiki was quite limited compared to Wikipedia and informants rarely made use of the talk-pages on the articles (which on Wikipedia plays an important role as an arena of public deliberation and consensus formation on the content of articles (Wright 2010)). Apart from editions and advisory comments from the administrators at the NILH, contributors were in most cases the sole authors of articles. None of the informants appeared to attach much importance to the local history wiki as a social field in which to compete for positions. It was also notable in the interviews that informants downplayed the gift-giving aspect of the wiki work, making it clear that the desire to share information and knowledge to the public was a concern of secondary importance. When we pushed informants to explicate their motives for contributing to the wiki, the recurring answers was that they did this “for their own sake” or for “the fun of it”. As one informant put it:

I do it because it is fun! The process in itself is fun... but I also have to defend the amount of time I spend on this to my wife. Then I say things like 'it is important for our society, for our local society, that this information is preserved and presented'... and stuff like that – she doesn't always buy into it though [laughs].

This statement is symptomatic of our interviews, in the sense that the informants would acknowledge that there are many reasons for wanting to contribute to the local history wiki, including altruistic motives. However, the principal reason for their engagement was found in the joy of the work experience itself. Similar findings appear in psychological research on the motivations of contributors to Wikipedia (see Loveland and Raegle 2013, 1297). More generally, this falls into place with the register of motivations described in the research literature on Wikipedia that we referred to as “task-oriented” in the literature review at the start of the chapter.

A third way in which the informants' engagement in the local history wiki was brought to light in our interviews was in their reflections on the obsessional qualities of these activities. Once they had started working on the wiki, several informants explained, the activity became almost like an obsession. There are always articles that need to be written, material that needs to be put online, research that needs to be done for an upcoming article. “All the red links must become blue!” one of the informants declared, referring to the system of hypertext on the wiki (blue links direct to published articles, red links to articles yet to be written). From our interviews, it appears that the obsessional pull wiki work exerted on informants had grown in tandem with their acquisition of skills and mastery of these writing tasks. As one informant put it:

I felt that it was important to get this work up and going. I felt that I was pushing a big rock, but I could not get it rolling. But then 'person X' [refers to another user on the wiki with whom he has been collaborating] came along, and then I thought: if it has started rolling, it will never stop.

Another informant referred to the work related to the wiki as a form of mental hygiene and that he needed to check in on the site many times every week.

In other interviews, the obsessional quality of wiki work was foregrounded as a form of collector mania. Several informants spontaneously described themselves as “collectors” and others agreed when we suggested this to them. Elaborating on the self-description as a collector, an informant talked about a series of articles he had written on a waterway system in Southern Norway. First, he wrote articles about all the rivers, lakes, and canal locks it consists of, moving on to articles about the timber industry and paper mills that were found along the waterway, turning to the railway line that connected to the waterway with all of its

train stations etc. One of the great joys of wiki work, the informant explained, was this process of “complementing and completing the picture”, as ever new threads of writing emerged. Over the years, this person had devoted himself to a variety of topics for shorter or longer periods of time. Many of these interests, he explained, had come about in accidental fashion, as he had stumbled on subjects he found fascinating, e.g. when he was travelling for work or vacation. From our interviews, it appears that several contributors to the local history wiki would similarly devote themselves over time to a random variety of topics.

Other informants would rather concentrate all their contributions to the wiki on a singular topic. Thus, another self-declared collector among the informants had written exclusively on a town in Northern Norway, where he for many years had been the head of the public library. As he was approaching the end of his leadership tenure, he had initiated a project of public dissemination of historical material from an archive that was kept at the library. After several years of experimenting, he decided that the project should focus on making the history of the houses and buildings in the town centre available online. Eventually, this led him to produce articles for the local history wiki, which he continued to do also after going into semi-retirement. At the time of our interview, he had been writing on the wiki for eight years and had produced near to one thousand articles, covering all the buildings in the town centre. Reflecting on the satisfaction this work gave him as a “collector”, he noted that when accessing previously unknown sources of information, this process could take the form of intellectual discovery: “...it is very satisfying to see patterns emerge. Then you just – ‘Wow! Yes!’”.

A fourth way in which the informants’ engagement in the local history wiki was revealed was through the emphasis they placed on the quality of the products they and others made on the wiki. When informants affirmed that the time and efforts they spent on the local history wiki was for “fun” only, this should not be taken as a sign of a frivolous attitude to the quality of the articles they published on the wiki or a downgrading of the importance of these texts. On the contrary, in interviews it was made clear that the quality of the articles that feature on the wiki mattered a great deal to the informants and that this was an important premise for their engagement. Most obviously, this took the form of a concern that information presented on the wiki should be reliable and based on proper source-work. Several informants pointed out that they were grateful that the administrators from the NILH reviewed all articles, making suggestions for improvement and making sure that unserious articles were removed from the site. Some even indicated that they wished the institute would exert an even stricter quality regime in the wiki. The informants’ concern with the quality of the wiki articles also tied in with an expressed appreciation of the encyclopedic genre or style of writing. Several informants talked with excitement about the use of hypertext links for making cross-

references in the wiki and highlighted the opportunities this created for turning local history into national or even global history.

The emphasis informants placed on the quality of their writing products became particularly apparent when conversations steered onto the topic of Facebook groups dedicated to local history, which have mushroomed in Norway over the course of the past decade. Most of the informants were members of such groups or were otherwise familiar with them. When asked to compare these groups to the local history wiki, they all made it clear that, even though they sometimes found pictures and other information on the Facebook groups, these did not belong to the same category as the wiki. This was due not only to the lack of quality mechanisms at the Facebook groups, or their appeal to nostalgic sentiments; postings on the Facebook groups, it was pointed out, were evanescent and momentary occurrences. Wiki articles, by contrast, enter into a medium that they perceived as more permanent and a site for the cumulative growth of knowledge. An informant's project had been to transcribe an old paper record of the farm estates in the municipality where he lived into wiki articles. In the interview, it became apparent that the informant viewed this project as a form of salvage operation. The wiki articles were of a rudimentary nature, with basic historical information about the farms only. Now that he had completed this job, the informant indicated, it would be left to others to add substance to the articles in the years to come. Foregrounded here was a trust in the local history wiki as a durable technological platform and a store of knowledge that would continue to grow in the foreseeable future. The librarian we referred to above, who had written articles about all the buildings in his hometown, similarly highlighted the permanence and solidity of the local history wiki, pointing to the fact that it was owned and operated by the NILH and the National Library. "It will not be deleted", he noted.

## Discussion

In our interviews, we were struck by the enormous amounts of time and effort contributors put into the wiki-platform, despite the apparent lack of pay-offs in the form of economic income, furthering of careers, status, prestige etc. The reasons for their engagement in the wiki-platform, emerging from our interviews, fall within the register of motivations we have referred to as task-oriented. To gain a deeper understanding of this engagement, we argue, one must recognize that the activities wiki-contributors devote themselves to is a form of unpaid intellectual work, and hence a socially mediated and culturally codified production of useful objects. Like Wikipedia, the *lokalhistoriewiki.no* platform has the form and am-

bition of an encyclopedia and its contributors view wiki work as a serious knowledge production, characterized by permanence and cumulative growth of knowledge. In order to get an analytical grip on the joys of wiki work, one must recognize that the striving to get their writings “right” in accordance with the requirements of this cultural form is a concern of paramount importance to contributors.

On this background we argue that wiki-contributors exhibit craftsmanship, in Sennett’s (2009) sense of skilled workers’ desire to do good work for its own sake. The craftsman, Sennett notes, “represents the special human condition of being *engaged* (...), practically but not necessarily instrumentally” (2009, 20, italics in original). Elaborating on Sennett’s concept of craftsmanship, we specify two distinct yet interrelated types of processes that are drivers of wiki-contributors’ engagement. One of these relates to the satisfaction wiki-contributors attain from mastering the challenges involved in wiki work. To account for this theoretically, we draw on positive psychology of flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi 2008[1991]). A prerequisite for such experiences, Csikszentmihalyi makes clear, is that persons’ skills are adequate to the challenges at hand. Elster (1989) makes a similar assertion in his theoretical account of work as a vehicle of self-realization. Much like Csikszentmihalyi, Elster stresses that activities must involve mastery of suitable challenges in order to become vehicles of self-realization. However, in Elster’s discussion of self-realization in work these psychological processes are incorporated into a broader theoretical framework, which includes the concept of self-externalization. This concept allows us to specify a second type of process that serves as a driver for wiki-engagement, namely the satisfaction that derives from making publicly available products. Whereas experiences of flow are essentially of a psychological nature, processes of self-externalization are essentially of a social nature. In wiki work, these processes tie into an integrated experience.

## Wiki Work and Craftsmanship

In Sennett’s rendering, craftsmanship “names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a good job for its own sake” (2009, 9). It is predicated on the application of complex, slowly acquired, skills of working and points to a much broader register of activities than its conventional meaning as manual labor. Essential to craftsmanship, Sennett notes, is the engagement (or what he alternatively terms commitment) of the craft worker – “if the craftsman is special it is because he or she is an engaged human being” (Sennett 2009, 21). This engagement, Sennett makes clear, is directed at the objects produced and the objective standards that apply in various domains of craftsmanship. It is a commitment to getting the product “right”, an aspiration for quality. To the craftsman,

therefore, work becomes a reward in itself rather than a means to another end. Sennett also makes frequent notice of the obsessional nature of craft work in his writing on this topic.

As such, our case study of the contributors to the local history wiki can be seen as an exemplary illustration of the exertion of craftsmanship. At the same time, the case of the local history wiki serves as an invitation to refine the notion of craftsmanship as a theoretical concept. In his writings on craftsmanship, Sennett recounts his assertions regarding the engagement of the craft worker and the inherent rewards of craft work to the point of mantras. However, when it comes to explaining how and by what specific processes this craft engagement and the satisfactions it confers on workers is brought about, his account has little to offer. In this regard, our study of contributors to the local history wiki can be a source of furthering understanding, by allowing for a specification of the processes that are at work in craftsmanship. In the sections that follow, we will argue that the power of wiki work to facilitate engaged craftsmanship is derived from its potency as a vehicle for experiences of flow and self-externalization.

## Wiki Work as a Vehicle for the Experience of Flow

One way of understanding the obsessional pull wiki work exerts on our informants is to say that it is a channel for the experience of flow, as a form of optimal experience. Psychic entropy is the normal state of consciousness, Csikszentmihalyi asserts. It is a state we experience in everyday situations, e.g. at work or in the home, where we are subjected to multiple and contradicting impressions, demands, and emotions. Moreover, he notes that when not occupied, "...the mind is unable to prevent negative thoughts from elbowing their way to center stage" (2008[1991], 169). Flow is the opposite of entropy in that it "... creates order in consciousness, and strengthens the structure of the self" (Csikszentmihalyi 2008[1991], 57). Based on empirical studies of a number of activities, he summarizes how people describe the characteristics of optimal experiences:

a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted (Csikszentmihalyi 2008[1991], 71).

The accounts of wiki work we were offered by our informants clearly fits this description, as many reported that they tend to lose track of time while engaged in this work, and that it is hard to stop working once they're "in the zone". When

talking about their experiences as contributors to the wiki, informants in effect described a “state in which people are involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi 2008[1991], 4).

What this suggests is that the wiki work of local history enthusiasts can become a vehicle for flow and that the desire for such optimal experience can be a powerful motivating factor. In fact, Csikszentmihalyi has himself written about the joy of producing history as an avenue for the experience of flow. Contrary to how persons can think of history, as a “dreary list of dates to memorize”, when producing history for one’s own amusement, through deciding “which aspects of the past are compelling... and... focusing on the sources and details that are personally meaningful... then learning history can become a full-fledged flow experience” (Csikszentmihalyi 2008[1991], 134).

A prerequisite for the experience of flow is that a person is performing a task of a nature that makes it a challenge, and that there are standards by which this performance can be assessed as more or less successful. Implied here is that if a task is experienced as trivial rather than a challenge, this may result in boredom or distraction. If, on the other hand, a task is experienced as an overwhelming challenge, this may result in paralysis or frustration. In both cases, this precludes the experience of flow. For flow to occur, a person must take on a challenge of suitable complexity, or a “challenge that can be met”, as Elster (1989, 130) puts it. Compared to many other forms of writing, the wiki-format can be said to be conducive to sustained experiences of flow among writers. Opinions voiced in our interviews provide us with clues as to the reasons for this.

Reflecting on the reasons for his dedication as a contributor to the local history wiki, one informant highlighted his curiosity and desire for learning. Part of the attraction of writing articles on the wiki, he told us, was that it was a way of learning about subjects he was curious about. This points to an immediacy between the acts of acquiring sources of information and knowledge and of completing written products. As the informant dug deeper into the various subjects he was interested in, he would constantly add published wiki-articles to his stock.

A professional historian from the NILH, who was an administrator on the wiki, told us that he would probably continue to produce articles for the wiki after his retirement, because it is possible to write contributions in a relatively short span of time. The thought of producing a book as a retired historian was much less appealing, he said. When we asked another informant, who also had authored books on local history, if he was planning to write more books, he made it very clear that he would never take on a project like that again, as this would keep him preoccupied perhaps for as long as a year and a half. He much preferred to busy himself with writing for the local history wiki, in addition to short pieces for the

local newspaper. If one considers the time spent and the amount of pages he has produced as a wiki-user, it probably exceeds that of a book by far. The crucial difference is that when writing the book, he was grappling with a singular task of daunting proportions and complexity, while the effort channelled into the local history wiki takes the form of small and independent writing tasks that are likely to provide him with an instant sense of mastery.<sup>5</sup>

We have noted that the articles that feature in the local history wiki are usually relatively short texts. To understand why the writing of such articles invites mastery, one must also consider the standards of assessment that apply in a wiki, and the flexibility of writing tasks that follow from this. It is in the nature of wiki articles that they are never finished (even though they tend to stabilise when consensus is reached among contributors), and that they always invite contributors to make revisions and additions to the text (cf. Wright 2010). In the wiki-format, it is acceptable for contributors to publish articles that are incomplete, so called “stub” articles, which serve as invitations to provide content. The task of writing a wiki article is usually of a limited scope compared e.g. to that of writing a book or journal article and the risk of being overwhelmed by this challenge is comparatively low. Adding to this is the itemized organization of knowledge on a wiki. To a local history wiki user who commits to a large project, say, of producing an account of all the school buildings in a municipality, this project may in effect dissolve into the writing of a host of separate small articles. Over time, this can provide the user with a constant supply of writing tasks, which each on their own are agreeable challenges and sources of flow.

## Wiki Work as a Vehicle for Self-externalization

In a section above, we referred to an informant who, over a period of about a decade, had written nearly one thousand wiki articles, covering the history of all the buildings in his hometown. Two books have previously been written on the town’s history, both published before the turn of the century. When we asked the informant if he in effect had produced the third edition of the town history with his contributions to the wiki, he confirmed that this was indeed how he thought of his writings. He confirmed also that he drew great satisfaction from having completed the project. This underscores the importance of self-externalization as another driver of wiki contributors’ engagement.

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<sup>5</sup> Many authors do of course experience flow also when writing a book. Nevertheless, the wiki format can provide additional satisfaction through short-term gratification from rapid self-externalization.

While our informants clearly acknowledged the collective authorship principle that applies on the local history wiki, they also conveyed a clear subjective sense of authorship to their articles and talked frequently about “their” articles. Their insistence that they were not motivated by a search for prestige and position among the contributors to the wiki (or in other circles) did not mean that they were indifferent to the publication of their writings or that they did not take pride in this. It clearly mattered a great deal to see one’s writings published on the site. In interviews, informants talked about the pleasure they gained from knowing that their articles featured on the wiki and from viewing these articles. When posting an article, an informant explained, he would look forward with excitement “to see the [published] product” and from time to time would enjoy himself looking through old articles that he was happy with.

In accordance with Sennett’s (2009) discussion of craftsmanship, this can be interpreted as an affirmation by the informant of his “presence” in the objects he has produced. Thereby, the objects become a source of pride to him and serve as an “anchoring” in the real world, as Sennett puts it. A more precise theoretical account of this matter is found in Elster’s (1989) discussion of the Marxist conception of self-realisation in work. An important part of self-realisation, for Elster, is self-actualisation, which points to the development and deployment of a person’s abilities and powers in dealing with challenges. It corresponds to the concept of flow discussed in the previous section. Much like Csikszentmihalyi, Elster highlights the importance that challenges are of a complexity that is suitable to individuals’ abilities. For self-realisation to occur, Elster argues, self-actualisation is not sufficient; it must be coupled with self-externalization. As used by Elster, the concept of self-externalization points to the public manifestation of individuals’ productive activities. It points also to the necessity of objective, or publicly agreed upon, standards by which these products can be assessed by others, in order to become potential sources of recognition and self-esteem to the individual producer. Invoking Hegel’s (1977) arguments on the centrality of the value of self-esteem to human beings, Elster notes that:

Esteem requires something that can be esteemed, some form of externalisation of one’s inner self. It is of no avail to be a ‘beautiful soul’ if the soul remains ineffable and mute; the self must be made part of the public domain. (...) Other people form the indispensable function of assessing, criticising and praising one’s performance; they provide the ‘reality control’ without which self-actualisation would be like a ‘private language’, a morass of subjectivity (Elster 1989, 136–137).

Applied to the case of the local history wiki, this means that if the reality and value of the efforts put into the site is to be affirmed, it is essential that these efforts be converted into public objects, i.e. wiki-articles. Without the published results,

the efforts would be reduced to an idiosyncratic game of dubious value and reality. In this sense, the satisfaction wiki-contributors attain through the psychological process of flow can be said to be inseparable from the social process of self-externalization. If their wiki work was not converted into public objects, this would be a private game only which, probably, would reduce its potency as a vehicle for experiences of flow.

Even though the informants were not overtly concerned with the community of wiki contributors or the social character of their wiki work, its character as self-externalization was an important premise for their engagement. The validity of this assertion was confirmed directly or indirectly in all our interviews, including an interview with a user who talked consistently about his wiki work as a form of personal amusement. This led us to ask the informant whether he would have produced these writings if they were not intended for publication on the wiki, but rather for “your desk drawer”. He replied that:

No, then I would not have had the same drive... For me, the local history wiki is actually a way to move things from my drawer and into the public domain. When it is out there, it doesn't have to be used by anyone. But suddenly, one day someone will be looking for this or that and that someone can find the stuff I have published to be useful.

Again, this statement is symptomatic of our interviews. Here, informants were emphatic that they did not seek any immediate attention and praise for their articles. What was important to them, it emerged, was that the articles should be “out there”, available to people in the future. Moreover, as we have pointed out above, it was important to them that the articles would be available on a serious platform, which is built to last.

One way of interpreting the emphasis on the quality, permanence, and cumulative character of the local history wiki that was voiced by our informants is to say that this affirms the wiki's weight and importance as a medium of self-externalization. Adding to this is the visitation numbers of the local history wiki (1.3 million per year), which are unnoticeable compared to Wikipedia, but quite substantial in the Norwegian local history context. Like Wikipedia, *lokalhistoriewiki.no* is open to all competent contributors. For our informants, this meant that they could write articles with the assurance that, while these texts may be subject to revisions by others and perhaps altered in ways they did not wish, they will not have their writing products rejected from publication and thus be deprived of self-externalization. To persons who are more bent on getting the products of their writing “out there” in the public than building a career as a professional writer, this can be a major incitement for engaging in wiki work. Reflecting on this feature of the local history, one informant turned to a religious vocabulary

and told us that “I still thank the Lord for letting me discover this wiki”. Another informant resorted to similar language, saying that: “It was like a gift from heaven. There are no restrictions, it is open. That was like a revelation to me”.

## Conclusion

There are plenty of joys associated with wiki work that foster engagement among contributors. Our aim in this chapter has been to analyse the accounts contributors to a local history wiki provides for their involvement with the platform. Based on this data we have put forward an approach for understanding contributors’ engagement in wiki work, in the sense of a dedication to do good work for its own sake. To fully understand the accounts offered by the wiki contributors, we turned to psychological theories of optimal experiences and sociological theories of individual motivations for work. Our study shows that wiki work is a strong vehicle for psychological experiences of flow and an easily accessible platform for self-externalization, and that these processes in turn come to facilitate engaged craftsmanship. This combined theoretical approach will most likely prove fruitful also for studies of contributors’ motivations on other forms of user generated content platforms.

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