Exploring the Problems with Wikipedia's Editing Rule for Public Relations

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When was the last time you looked at the Wikipedia article for your company or clients? Is it factually correct, well-balanced, and grammatically sound? If not, do you know your options for editing it? If you have tried to make changes, it is likely that you noticed the complexity of this process. If you have not tried, this article will shed light on the current problems surrounding the editing of Wikipedia by public relations/communications professionals.

Although part of Wikipedia's success comes from the fact that "anyone can edit, use, modify, and distribute" it (Wikipedia:Five Pillars, 2012, para 1-5), public relations/communications professionals are in a difficult position because they are deemed as having a conflict of interest (COI) when it comes to editing the Wikipedia articles of their company or clients. This means that the procedures public relations/communications professionals must follow are different than what anyone else must follow. Jimmy Wales, co-founder of Wikipedia and the "voice" of Wikipedia in the media has stated that when it comes to public relations/communications professionals, "This is not complicated. There is a very simple "bright line" rule that constitutes best practice: do not edit Wikipedia directly if you are a paid advocate. Respect the community by interacting with us appropriately" (Wales, 2012b, para 2).

This is not a new issue. In 2006 Wales wrote a blog post stating, "I think we need to be very clear in a lot of different places that PR firms editing Wikipedia is something that we frown upon very very strongly. The appearance of impropriety is so great that we should make it very very strongly clear to these firms that we do not approve of what they would like to do" (para 1).

Earlier this year, Wales commented on a blog post by Phil Gomes that solicited his thoughts on public relations/communications professionals editing Wikipedia (see Gomes, 2012). He said, "Best practice is very simple and no one in the PR industry has ever put forward a cogent argument (and seldom bother putting forward an argument at all) why it is important that they take the potentially (especially if I have anything to do with it) reputation damaging step of directly editing entries where they are acting as paid advocates" (Wales, 2012a, para 1).

1.1 Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to provide a thorough cogent explanation of the problems associated with the "bright line" rule and procedures for public relations/communications professionals who wish to edit Wikipedia articles. Hopefully, doing so will aid in the efforts of Wikipedia and public relations/communications professionals to work together for the mutual benefit of accurate and balanced Wikipedia articles.

Another reason for writing this article is to help inform the many public relations/communications professionals who are not familiar with the "bright line" rule that they should not directly edit the articles for their company or clients.

To accomplish this, the following 11 problems are explained below:

1. The rule does not appear to have public's best interest in mind
2. The rule singles out public relations/communication professionals
3. There is a weak public relations/communications-Wikipedia relationship
4. Public relations/communication professionals do not know the rules
5. Wikipedians do not know the rules
6. There is conflicting information about the rules on Wikipedia
7. New articles are very difficult to get and keep
8. Transparency only applies to public relations/communications professionals
9. Timeliness of responses is a concern
10. The possibility of public scorning in the media
11. Secondary concerns such as some keeping out and being creative

1.2 Method

To outline the problems with the current process or rules for public relations/communications professionals editing Wikipedia, this article draws from excerpts from Wikipedia, the media, social media, and open-ended responses from a survey that was conducted with public relations/communications professionals February 14 to March 14, 2012. It included 1,284 responses from members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), Institute for Public Relations (IPR), Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA), and National Investor Relations Institute (NIRI). The survey contained 35 close-ended questions and one open-ended question that asked respondents to share any thoughts or experiences they had with Wikipedia. The 212 responses to the closed-ended question were reviewed and used to help identify and explain the outlined problems. Some of the findings from the remainder of the study are mentioned in this article, but the full results are available in the *Public Relations Journal* at www.prsa.org/wikipedia.

1.3 Eleven Problems

The **first problem** with requiring public relations/communications professionals to follow the "bright line" rule is that it may not have the public's best interest in mind. The February to March 2012 survey conducted with 1284 responses from public relations/communications professionals found that 60 percent of the Wikipedia articles for companies and clients of respondents who were familiar with them had factual errors (see DiStaso, 2012). This is a very large percentage when considering that essentially six out of ten corporate articles have factual errors.

When a company's Wikipedia article has inaccurate information, the public is being misled and misinformed. My study found that these errors were often things that public relations/communications professionals would be the best suited to update in a factual manner – things like dates, historical information, leadership and board information, product information, and office locations. Given the intent of Wikipedia is the open sharing of accurate and reliable information (Wikipedia:Why NPOV, 2012), then restricting who can contribute most probably weakens it.

The question is: Would Wikipedia rather have inaccurate articles that have been untouched by public relations/communications professionals or articles with a higher likelihood of being accurate that public relations/communications professionals were involved in editing?

The factual errors are exacerbated by the fact that Wikipedia articles are in the top ranking of Google and other search engines. Also, many companies have community Facebook pages that display Wikipedia articles instead of official Facebook pages where organizations create and share information. This means that the Wikipedia articles do not have to be searched for directly to be easily located.

The **second problem** is that this policy singles out a group and hinders their involvement while allowing competitors, activists and others free reign. One could argue that most people who care enough to edit a Wikipedia article for a company, person, product, or virtually any topic also has a conflict of interest. While everyone is expected to edit from a neutral point of view, provide references to material published by reliable, independent sources, and to avoid giving undue weight to trivial matters, it is only public relations/communications professionals who are explicitly singled out.

Given that activists and competitors among others have potential gains from editing content in Wikipedia articles, the COI rule should apply to them as well. A discussion on the Corporate Representatives for Ethical Wikipedia Engagement (CREWE) Facebook page shed light on this topic indicating: "The line in the sand would be one having a financial relationship. Jim announcing Sierra Club membership [in his profile] would be nice in the case of his editing a piece on the Sierra Club, but that's as far as it goes, and even that would be pretty optional. A Sierra Club member can edit a page on Alcoa aluminum (and an Alcoa aluminum executive the page of the Sierra Club) without any

such declarations. But if a person is a PAID EMPLOYEE of an organization, that declaration would be necessary" (Davenport, 2012, para 1). While this distinction may be how some Wikipedians view COI, the Wikipedia:Conflict of interest page states, "Any editor who gives priority to outside interests may be subject to a conflict of interest" (2012, para 5). This page however, does not specify differences between types of conflict of interest. Given either approach, it seems fair to say that any employee of a company has a COI and not just public relations/communications professionals. Also, after reading the COI page, it appears as though activists and competitors present a loophole that is not addressed, but that one could easily apply to the standards listed. As one survey respondent said,

> "PR people are often in the best position to have direct access to factual material and they should be allowed to make edits. Just because someone isn't earning a paycheck from somebody doesn't mean they're "disinterested" - quite the contrary. Anyone who would take the time to edit a Wikipedia article definitely has some sort of perspective."

No matter how COI is interpreted, it clearly sidesteps the people who are likely the most knowledgeable on the topic. Some of the survey respondents felt strongly about being excluded from directly editing the articles of their company or clients. Examples include:

> "I have found very false information on Wikipedia put there by people with bias or malicious intent, sometimes related to individuals. If that can happen, why is it a problem for communications professionals to correct information? We are not providing commentary. We are simply correcting facts. I find Wikipedia's policy self-defeating."

> "I have been very frustrated in trying to keep our Wiki page current and accurate. Our business changes so quickly that it is difficult for anybody outside our business to keep up. The sources cited also are not the most direct, credible or notable sources of information and several acquisitions and changes in the company are not noted on the page."

The **third problem** is that excluding direct edits by public relations/communications professionals requires a good working relationship that does not currently exist between public relations/communications professionals and Wikipedians. In fact, the ultimate goal of the Corporate Representatives for Ethical Wikipedia Engagement (CREWE) Facebook group is to create a mutually beneficial relationship between public relations/communications professionals and Wikipedians. This is not currently the case in many situations. My research found that the public relations/communications professionals perceived the relationship as neutral (DiStaso, 2012). There was a lower level of satisfaction than trust indicated and 22 percent felt that they were not satisfied

with their interactions with Wikipedia editors. In fact, some of the survey respondents felt strongly about Wikipedians. Examples of direct statements include:

> "Was banned from making edits on company article because I/we insisted on correction of blatantly false material. In my experience Wikipedia is anti-Corporate. It's "Occupy Wall Street" on the Web."

> "These editors wield a ridiculous amount of power and have questionable credentials to make the decisions they do. This is definitely a problem as Wikipedia does get used and is trusted by many people who assume it's evidence-based."

I'm often asked who Wikipedians are and according to a PRWeek interview with Wales, they are educated young males (Magee, 2012). Their average age is 26 and 87 percent are male with a higher ratio of PhDs than the general public. Knowledge of who is in this group may help shed light on the relationship.

It is important to keep in mind that many Wikipedians do not believe that it is beneficial to have a relationship with public relations/communications professionals. The media coverage and Wikipedia content is largely dominated by examples of public relations/communications professionals making controversial edits. Some Wikipedians have gone so far as to state that public relations/communications professionals cannot make good edits. Wales has stated, "What I have found – and the evidence for this is pretty comprehensive – is that people who are acting as paid advocates do not make good editors. They insert puffery and spin. That's what they do because that it is what paid advocates do" (Wales, 2012a, para 4).

There are many unfortunate components of this statement. First, the misconception that all public relations/communications is about is "puffery and spin" is in direct conflict with our established ethical guidelines. For example, the PRSA Code of Ethics states, "we serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent," and "We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public" (PRSA Code of Ethics, 2012, para 7 and 8). For the most part, public relations/communications professionals adhere to these ethical standards. In addition, the more Wikipedians and the public read about bad actors, the more they will believe this is representative of an entire industry, when it is not.

My research found that 77 percent of public relations/communications professionals who directly edited the articles for their company or clients indicated that their edits "stuck" at least half the time. Of this, 32 percent stated that their edits "always stuck" (see DiStaso, 2012). This indicates that public relations/communications professionals *do* make good editors (if the edits were not "good" or correct, they would most likely be changed by Wikipedians) and can edit without causing a controversy. A valid and reliable study exploring edits public relations/communications professionals have made

would be beneficial to best understand the ratio. Until then, this evidence appears to disprove Wales' statement.

The **fourth problem** is that many public relations/communications professionals do not know the rule. It can be called many things, most commonly – the "bright line" rule, the conflict of interest rule, or the paid advocate rule. No matter what it is called, the rule remains about the same, that public relations/communications professionals should not make direct edits (or only minor direct edits) and should work with the Wikipedia community through the talk pages.

My research found that only 37 percent of the respondents were familiar with the rule, but that 16 percent of those did not understand what it meant to them (see DiStaso, 2012). With only 21 percent of public relations/communications professionals knowing and understanding the rule, this leaves a large number of people who are not currently familiar with it. It is possible that this percentage is overstated because some survey respondents apparently did not actually know the rule, as is clear by comments such as:

> "It's my understanding, maybe incorrect, that anyone can edit a Wikipedia piece. If anybody can do that, then it's certainly the prerogative of professional communicators to exercise their craft on the site."

This is not just a Wikipedia issue, but an education issue for public relations/communications professionals as well. Steps need to be taken to educate what the rule is and how to ethically navigate Wikipedia on behalf of a company or client.

The unfamiliarity of the "bright line" rule has led to the creation and editing of many an article with public relations/communications professionals believing that they have done nothing wrong. For example, when Newt Gingrich's communications director, Joe DeSantis, was criticized for editing and using the talk pages for articles related to Gingrich, he was quoted as saying, "I stopped making direct edits in May 2011 because I was alerted to the COI rules…Earlier I thought that simply disclosing my affiliation was enough but it wasn't. So I started posting requests on the Talk page" (Wallace, 2012, para 7). DeSantis has a profile on Wikipedia which identifies his relationship to Gingrich and while his editing led to a negatively framed CNN article on February 6, 2012, he won a Tsa Yig Wikipedia award that recognizes people who live by a "high moral code" just days earlier on January 25, 2012 (User talk:Joedesantis, 2012, para 7).

The **fifth problem** is that many Wikipedians do not know the rule. While a study with Wikipedia editors to explore their thoughts on public relations/communications professionals editing has not been conducted at this point, it does appear as if they also do not fully understand the rule. This is evident from the survey responses regarding comments on Wikipedia talk pages being ignored or refuted because they came from a public relations/communications professional who identified himself or herself as such. Examples of the survey comments include:

> "Editing my institution's Wikipedia page has been one of the most frustrating parts of my position. We have constant errors and several editors who are extremely derogatory toward us. Every attempt to change, edit or add to this information is deleted, using Wikipedia "rules" as the excuse. It's ridiculous that the very people who know the information are prohibited from changing the page."

> "While I understand and respect Wikipedia's editing policy, they have - in my experience - been dismissive of edits even when third party validation is presented. We receive a number of third party awards and ranking and have always provided links to these sources as validation for our updates, but the updates have only stuck 1/4 of the time and typically with some sort of battle with the editors to further justify the changes. Typically, the article is then flagged as "advertising." Meanwhile, rumor remains on the page completely unvalidated. Policy doesn't seem to be maintained equally by Wikipedia editors, in my opinion."

This inconsistent application of the policies indicates that educating Wikipedians is also necessary. It is important to note that even though Wikipedia has a high global use, it is a charity run by volunteers that lacks a regulatory body and no guarantee that error corrections will be made in a timely manner (Magee, 2012).

The **sixth problem** is that conflicting and inconsistent information exists on Wikipedia's guideline pages. Just a quick rundown of the rules, policies and guidelines – public relations/communications professionals are viewed as having a conflict of interest (COI), being paid advocates and not being able to have a neutral point of view. The challenge with these terms is that content exists in different places and is often conflicting.

The Wikipedia article about COI states in one place, "Do not edit Wikipedia to promote your own interests, or those of other individuals or of organizations, including employers. Do not write about these things unless you are certain that a neutral editor would agree that your edits improve Wikipedia" (Wikipedia:Conflict of interest, para 1), but in another it states, "COI editing is strongly discouraged…and risks causing public embarrassment for the individuals and groups being promoted" (para 2).

Editors with a COI are encouraged to disclose their interests and anything that may be viewed as controversial or not neutral on the talk page. While all content is required to maintain a neutral point of view and references, "Editing in an area in which you have professional or academic expertise is not, in itself, a conflict of interest. Using material you yourself have written or published is allowed within reason, but only if it is relevant and conforms to the content policies" (para, 12). There is no clarification of what this means; a possible example of this could be that someone working at a bakery should not edit the Wikipedia article for their bakery but can edit about cupcakes.

The Wikipedia FAQ page deals with the question, "I work in PR, and would like to fix up the article about the person or company I represent. Is that okay?" (Wikipedia:FAQ/Article subjects, 2012, question 4). The answer is "possibly *if* you do it in a way that respects Wikipedia's goal of being an accurate, unbiased source of information." It goes on to ask public relations professionals to remove vandalism, fix minor errors in spelling, grammar, usage or facts, provide references for existing content, and add or update facts with references such as number of employees or "details of a recent event."

The notes on the COI page clarify Wikipedia's thoughts on public relations/communications professionals editing; it says: "Editing in the interests of public relations is particularly frowned upon. This includes, but is not limited to, edits made by public relations departments of corporations or governmental entities; or of other public or private for-profit or not-for-profit organizations; or by professional editors paid to edit a Wikipedia article with the *sole intent* of improving that organization's image. Wikipedia is a very public forum, and news of what occurs here is frequently reported in the media. "Anything you say here and anything you do here can have real world consequences" (Wikipedia:Conflict of interest, 2012, para 56).

Wales has clarified some of the conflicting information by stating, "the policy pages on Wikipedia specific [sic] the absolute bare minimum of acceptable behavior. If all you are doing is, for example, updating an address or this years [sic] published financials, the truth is that people aren't going to freak out. That doesn't make it best practices, and I personally still very very strongly advise against it. Not everything that is "legal" under the current rules of Wikipedia is actually the most effective thing you can do for yourself" (Wales, 2012c, para 1).

Bottom line, if editing Wikipedia accounts by public relations/communications professionals is forbidden; then rules, policies, guidelines or whatever you call it should say so. Wikipedia needs to be clear and consistent in what it wants public relations/communications professionals to do and not do.

The **seventh problem** is that this policy prevents or hinders the creation of new articles.

If a company does not have a Wikipedia article, one can be started, but according to current Wikipedia policies, public relations/communications professionals should not be the ones to create it.

Wikipedia's policy for creating new accounts is that you must "be sure you write from a neutral point of view, that you have no conflict of interest, and that you are able to find references in reliable sources that are independent from the subject you are writing about" (Wikipedia:Starting an article, 2012, para 15). It is also important for organizations such as companies, charitable organizations, hospitals, and interest groups to be "notable." This requires it to have been the "subject of significant coverage

in reliable, independent secondary sources" (Wikipedia:Notability (organizations and companies), 2012, para 1). If an article is deemed not to be notable, it will most likely be deleted. Essentially, notability is determined by Wikipedians making it extra challenging for companies that wish to get a Wikipedia article started. The Wikipedia:Conflict of interest page (2012) suggests presenting your idea for a new article on the talk page of a relevant article to get things started, but the Wikipedia:WikiProject Cooperation page (2012) states that requests for new articles should be made through Wikipedia:Articles for creation or Wikipedia:Requested articles.

The **eighth problem** is that transparency is a one-way street. Wales argued that all PR professionals should be transparent about who they are and their clients. But this same level of transparency is not asked of others, including competitors, activists and Wikipedians. It is unclear why this transparency is not required of all others.

Public relations/communications professionals are strongly encouraged to disclose their conflict of interest on their profile page with language such as: "CONFLICT OF INTEREST NOTICE: I, [USERNAME], have a professional connection with the subject of this article. Please do not hesitate to contact me directly with any concerns you may have" (Bauder & Davenport, 2012, para 5).

When Newt Gingrich's communications director, Joe DeSantis changed from directly editing Gingrich's Wikipedia articles to making requests on the talk pages, Wales made the following statement on his profile page: "Thank you for being open about your identity and treating the community with respect. Reviewing your edit history, I see that you have not made any edits to article space (only talk pages) for many months - this is a very good thing indeed. Please know that as long as you continue following these practices, I will support your participation and use it as a model for others" (User talk:Joedesantis,, 2012 para 9).

The **ninth problem** is speed. Things move very fast in today's Internet society. As Chime Communications' chairman Lord Bell said, "You can destroy someone's reputation in one minute and it will take years to rebuild" (Magee, 2012, para 7). Although there are processes for removing defamatory content (such as, Wikipedia:Oversight) there is no guarantee of a timely response. When asked the speed of response for the last time survey respondents used the talk pages, the most common response was days, but 12 percent said it took weeks, and 24 percent said they never got a response (see DiStaso, 2012). Although the faster the better, having it take weeks or never getting a response is unacceptable.

Current discussions about the timing of response have occurred with CREWE members. Some Wikipedians and public relations/communications professionals have agreed on a waiting period of 48 hours that should be met before taking the next step in the editing process. This is a much shortened timeframe because the Wikipedia:WikiProject Cooperation (2012) page states that public relations/communications professionals

should to expect to wait, "something like around 5 days" for a request edit to be addressed. The next step is to post "a notice on some other board."

When the lengthy timeframe was questioned, the response was: "I think you may be looking for Wikipedia to be something that it is not. On a micro level, editors are volunteers with their own interests; helping out companies is not always very high on their list. On a macro level, Wikipedia guidelines aim to balance processes and outcomes to achieve the best long-term result. Arguably, the very first thing to suffer are timely responses...Granted, this is not very satisfactory to the company with incorrect or unfair material in their entry, and six days may be a long time in the corporate world, but on Wikipedia time it's barely a tick of the clock" (Beutler, 2012, para 1 and 2).

The **tenth problem** is that violations of this policy often result in companies having their ethics questioned in the media. While it is important to note that Jimmy Wales is no longer the CEO of Wikipedia and is now a member of the board, his official title is irrelevant to the fact that he is the public "face" of Wikipedia in the media.

Over the years many companies, governmental agencies, nonprofit organizations, universities, public relations agencies, and others have been exposed for editing or having someone from their organization or group edit. Wales has commented, "The simple and obvious answer is to do what works, without risking the reputation of the client: talk to the community, respect their autonomy, and never ever directly edit an article." (Wales, 2012a, para 2). Many of those that have been "caught" have found themselves criticized by Wales in the media.

For example, he was quoted in an Associated Press article as being "very disappointed" with Microsoft when they sought an independent expert to make changes to their Wikipedia article (Bergstein, 2007, para 3).

When it was discovered that Bell Pottinger was involved with Wikipedia edits, Wales told the BBC that they had "embarrassed their clients" and that he was "highly critical of their ethics" (Lee, 2012, para 1 and 3).

Another concern is that when a company is "caught," it often becomes clear that the media does not have a full understanding of the issue of public relations/communications professionals' involvement with Wikipedia. This is another education opportunity because since the media can have such an impact on public opinion, they should be familiar with the rules for public relations/communications professionals and the problems that may lead to a company getting "caught" doing what they feel is appropriate.

The **eleventh problem** is that the reasons outlined above have led to unfortunate secondary concerns. On one extreme are the public relations professionals who stay away from their company or client Wikipedia pages because they do not know what to do or because they believe that that they have to be "hands off." This is unfortunate

because although Wales has said that public relations/communications professionals should be "hands off," he stated it in regard to direct editing, not requiring absolutely no involvement (see Huyse, 2006).

Some have tried to refrain from editing out of fear. As one respondent to the survey said,

> "I just don't think it's worth risking my company and my reputation to be involved."

Alternately, there are public relations/communications professionals who have become more creative in their handling of Wikipedia accounts for their company or clients. For the most part, this is a profession built on ethics focused on providing accurate and truthful information in accordance with established codes of ethics. When the process does not work, ethical behavior is challenged. In fact, anyone can edit, having a COI does not prevent editing, but what it means is that it is unlikely that the edits will stick. This has led some to hire people to make edits, pose as someone else, ask someone without a COI to make the updates, or even directly edit on their own without disclosing their affiliation.

Some survey respondents indicated have creative ways to make edits:

> "In the past, I've had my interns edit, since less polished information seems to get through."

> "I created a handle w/ PR in the user name and was "blocked" and told to appeal. Instead, a member of our marketing staff just performed updates to correct factual dates and information about our organization's history that had been posted by a member of one of our more than 150 affiliated organizations."

Some may argue that both comments are against COI rules because most likely both the interns and the marketing staff are paid employees of the company. This is obviously an ethical dilemma. Should public relations/communications professionals sit and wait for changes or find a way to get it done? As an industry, that ethical highroad should be taken but the current roadblocks need to be repaired.

1.4 What this Means

Although as this article explained, there are 11 problems with the current editing rule for public relations/communications professionals, it is not completely broken. While I personally think public relations/communications professionals should be able to make edits directly on their company or client's Wikipedia articles, this is not the only way to improve Wikipedia. Minimally, three things need to happen:

1. The rules, policies, guidelines, etc. need to be clarified to clearly and consistently reflect what public relations/communications professionals should and should not do. Special attention needs to be paid to rules that are beneficial to everyone regarding the topics of timeliness and transparency.

2. Public relations/communications professionals need to be educated on why making changes to Wikipedia articles is important and how to properly navigate Wikipedia to edit their company or client's Wikipedia articles.

   This includes informing public relations/communications professionals about the editing rules and what it means to have a conflict of interest for Wikipedia. It is unfair to hold an industry to a standard many do not know exists. Hopefully, this article can assist in this effort. Please share it with your colleagues.

3. Wikipedians need to be educated on the COI rules and how to apply them to public relations/communications professionals.

   How can public relations/communications professionals be expected to follow the rules if they are not applied appropriately? This means that Wikipedians cannot dismiss edit requests on talk pages just because they come from someone with a COI.

In the meantime, public relations/communications professionals should do the following:

1. Everyone should review the accuracy and balance of the Wikipedia articles for their company or clients. This review process should be conducted frequently since content can change often, especially for high profile companies.

2. If errors are found or if you believe content needs to be added or deleted, refer to the CREWE Wikipedia Engagement Flowchart available on Wikimedia Commons. This editing decision tree for public relations/communications professionals was a project of CREWE and WikiProject:Cooperation. It was designed to help navigate the arduous Wikipedia editing process by providing a step-by-step guide.

3. If you foresee the need to make frequent multiple edits, consider joining the mentor program. This program is explained on the Wikipedia: WikiProject Cooperation page as matching experienced Wikipedians with public relations/communications professionals who are making a long-term commitment. There are listed expectations to follow in the mentorship, and direct editing is still strongly discouraged.

4. Become a member of the CREWE Facebook group to get more involved in the efforts to identify ways for public relations/communications and Wikipedia to work together for mutual benefit. Being a member is also a simple way to stay informed of the Wikipedia issues and progress.

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