

Thesis for a Diploma in Applied Systems Science  
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## **Civic Involvement in Virtual Communities? A Systematic Study of the German Wikipedia-Project**

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### **Abstract**

#### WIKIPEDIA

Wikipedia has become the most extensive encyclopedia within the last four years, after having succeeded to motivate enough volunteers to take part in the project to build a freely-accessible, multi-language, virtual encyclopedia. Paradoxically, Wikipedia can be compared to other printed encyclopedias, despite the fact that it is written by mainly non-expert volunteers and that every article may be freely changed and added to without special permission. An aspect of the project that explains this is Wikipedia's virtual community, a non-hierarchical, virtual readership, who together create a common review process.

#### RESEARCH

Preliminary studies of Wikipedia from four fields are presented and discussed: *socialpsychology*, in the form of empirical studies of Wikipedia and a well-known Open Source Project; *journalism*, in the context of virtually participatory journalism; *economics*, analysis and classification of the (information) product; and *computer science*, particularly, the data analysis of Wikipedia and the developer model "open source software" and its application to "open content".

#### PERSPECTIVES

While Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835 emphasized the commitment of the citizens as the defining factor of democracy, later works espoused a procedural and institutional perspective of democracy as an object of the state.

Today, two thirds of all Germans are engaged in civic activities (cf. Freiwilligensurvey: Bernhard von Rosenblatt (2000)), enabling in many areas the democratic ideal of self-government: all that can be organized by the people themselves is more and more organized by them independently.

This type of involvement follows certain norms and principles, that arise with unforeseen virility in virtual spaces like Wikipedia. Thus, the relation of virtual society to voluntary work and voluntary organization outside of the internet is examined.

#### METHODS

After a thorough presentation of the Internet encyclopedia Wikipedia as well as relevant studies, I present my analysis of Wikipedia from the perspective of civic involvement applied to virtual communities. I examine Wikipedia as a virtual community, comparing it to registered clubs (in Germany: eingetragene Vereine) and organizations and general civic participation in three different ways:

- (1) using a model of the structure of the decision processes;
- (2) using a measurement of social capital (from the perspective of Wikipedia as a club or organization) and participations intensity (from the perspective of Wikipedia as an involvement-project); and
- (3) posing parallels between studies of sociology and political science.

Thus, societal effects and political implications of the information age will be revealed: a community that regulates itself communally and solves problems communally is the archetype of a social system, and simultaneously, a fundamental principal of democracy. The boundaries of this general topic under discussion come together in Wikipedia, as all communicational, organizational, and production related processes run entirely on the Wikipedia platform, on which all files since the projects inception are available to all.

## RESULTS

It is shown that civic activities and involvement with Wikipedia have large overlap in the: motivations behind participation, the structural aspects of the participation, and from societal standpoint, related to social capital and social trust.

Particular to Wikipedia are: the lack of a planning phase, simplifying many initial steps, as well as the fact that in contrast to clubs and organizations, the interaction between participants is businesslike and relatively anonymous.

Generally, it can be concluded that Wikipedia shows that despite high numbers of participants, each person can take part in every aspect of the project with equal voice.

Wikipedia documents knowledge democratically and can be viewed as socially self-organized.

Additionally, Wikipedia clearly reflects markers of our own society: individualism, open participation, and aspects of the information society, improving access to open knowledge.