


Organizational Identity and Paradox: An Analysis of the “Stable State of Instability” of Wikipedia’s Identity

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Arjan M. F. Kozica¹, Christian Gebhardt², Gordon Müller-Seitz³,
and Stephan Kaiser¹

Abstract

Previous studies have reported changes in organizational identities as a result of external or internal triggers. In contrast, we highlight how the paradoxical nature of an organizational identity can influence stability and change that identity. Using the example of Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia, we show how a “stable state of instability” of the organization’s collective identity is constantly being reproduced. We contribute to the literature on organizational identity by first analyzing a case in which identity change is not triggered by a disruptive event. Second, we show how the paradoxical nature of identity triggers attempts to reconcile contradictions of the paradox, culminating in permanent state of gradual changes of organizational identity. Finally, we exemplify how, as a form of partial organization where volunteers take part in the identity formation process, Wikipedia copes with the tensions that ensue from its collective identity.

Keywords

organizational identity, paradox, contradictions, narrative analysis, partial organization, Wikipedia

Current debates on organizational identity—in terms of the central, enduring, and distinctive attributes of organizations (Albert & Whetten, 1985)—challenge the unstable and dynamic character of organizational identity (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Schultz, Maguire, Langlely, & Tsoukas, 2012). Authors tend to focus on external factors as the triggers of identity change. It was once assumed that only disruptive events such as crises caused changes in organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Whetten, 2006), but researchers now acknowledge that organizational identities adapt to external factors associated with an unstable environment. In particular, researchers have identified discrepancies between the external organizational reputation, the projected external image, and the organizational identity as being responsible for the continual reproduction and evolution of organizational identities (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Other researchers have referred to discursive resources that are available in the wider societal context of the organization and on which actors draw when defining their organizational identity (Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger, 2007; Glynn, 2008). As institutional research shows, organizational actors tend to create organizations that are similar to other organizations in the same field (thereby striving for legitimacy), while they try to create distinctive organizations (Pedersen & Dobbin, 2006). This balance triggers ongoing adaptations when they define themselves in relation to others (Clegg et al., 2007).

Set against this stream of literature, relatively few researchers have focused on identity change grounded in the characteristics of the organizational identity itself or in the specific properties of the organization. Exceptionally, in her study of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Glynn (2000) showed how different professions within an organization (as in her case musicians with an artistic identity or administrators with an economic one) make different claims of identity based on these different professional identities. Such tensions can have noticeable consequences in an organization (the orchestra went on strike in this case) and can trigger the need for hybrid identities with which different occupational groups can identify. In contrast, Golden-Biddle and Rao (1997) have argued that far from being a solution to conflicts, hybrid identities can induce them. Hybrid identities, which entail different sets of values, can cause conflicts in terms of the roles of organizational members. In their study, the board of directors of a nonprofit organization faced a hybrid identity that consisted of being “family friends” and “volunteer driven”; each element demanded different

¹Universität der Bundeswehr München, Neubiberg, Germany

²A.T. Kearny, Munich, Germany

³TU Kaiserslautern, Kaiserslautern, Germany

Corresponding Author:

Arjan M. F. Kozica, Universität der Bundeswehr München, Werner-Heisenbergweg 39, Neubiberg, 85579, Germany.
Email: arjan.kozica@unibw.de

behaviors (being friendly vs. being a vigilant monitor of the activities of staff). Because the board of directors were committed to the two aspects of their organizational identity in this case, the balancing of the two aspects was problematic. Golden-Biddle and Rao (1997) showed how this problem can be solved by bridging the two aspects, ultimately resulting in the stability of the organizational identity being restored. More recently, Schultz and Hernes (2013) took an important step toward overcoming the internal/external inconsistency of organizational identity by describing organizational identity as an ongoing accomplishment, in which actors form an identity based on the memory of the past and the perception of the future.

We add to this body of research by emphasizing how actors cope with the dynamics caused by the paradoxical nature of the organizational identity. By analyzing the organizational identity of Wikipedia, we challenge the ways in which a paradoxical nature influences the balance between stability and change in organizational identities. In so doing, we show how actors' efforts to cope with the paradoxical nature create a "stable state of instability" of their collective identity, in which stability and change are rivalry forces. We argue that our study extends earlier work in three important respects. First, in our empirical case, we do not consider the effects of extraordinary events or, as Whetten (2006) put it, a "conjunction with novel, controversial, consequential strategic choices, and/or threatened changes in the organization's self-defining social classification" (p. 227). Empirical studies most commonly analyze situations in which something unusual happens, such as a strike (Glynn, 2000), a corporate spin-off (Corley & Gioia, 2004), a latent conflict that breaks out (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997), the establishment of a new industry (Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger, 2007), or the formation of a new corporation from scratch (Gioia et al., 2010). We agree that such events offer relevant and highly interesting research opportunities (Whetten, 2006, p. 226). However, to understand how organizational identity changes it is important to analyze everyday activities in which organizational members negotiate their organizational identity. Although there are some notable exceptions (e.g., Watson & Watson, 2012), this phenomenon has hardly received any attention to date. Our article addresses this gap by asking how actors construct organizational identity through their everyday conversations about identity and shows how actors continuously negotiate their collective identity.

Second, and most important, we wish to highlight how stability and change can stem from the paradoxical nature of collective identity (Smith & Lewis, 2011) and the rhetorical struggles over its meaning. Our empirical analysis of the collective identity of Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, provides reasons why organizational identities can be inherently unstable and exemplifies how actors cope with this permanently unstable character. By following a narrative approach of organizational identity (Brown, 2006), we argue that the

paradoxical nature of organizational identity can induce instability, thereby triggering ongoing, but only gradual, changes to these identities. By elaborating on how actors—who take part in the identity formation process (Hatch & Schultz, 2002, p. 1004; Scott & Lane, 2000)—balance the stability and instability of organizational identities, we show how actors cope with the challenge of maintaining a "stable state of instability." Our case study shows how in the struggle over meaning, powerful organizational members use different techniques (utopia, meaning shifts, and subjugation) to create a certain degree of stability in the dynamic and fluid character of organizational identity.

Third, our analysis is based on an exceptional case (Miles & Huberman, 1994), in terms of a narrative analysis of the identity of Wikipedia as a partial organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011) in which a large community of volunteers participates virtually in the identity formation process (Paroutis, Heracleous, & Angwin, 2013). The volunteers at Wikipedia are clearly neither outsiders (like consumers) nor insiders (like remunerated employees) of the organization—but they nonetheless take part in the identity formation process and enable the operations of Wikipedia.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we position our study in the literature by elaborating on the discussion of organizational identity and its narrative construction. We then introduce Wikipedia as our research setting and explain our case study approach. By discussing the struggle over identity at Wikipedia, we show how different voices (some representing the dominant story of freedom as well as narrations that comprise experiences about Wikipedia as a "bureaucratic nightmare," see Wikipedia, 2010d) can influence identity change. In our discussion, we elaborate on different ways in which Wikipedia handles contradictions between these different voices and discuss how the paradoxical nature of Wikipedia's dominant identity story triggers a "stable state of instability." Finally, we conclude and summarize our contributions to the body of knowledge on this topic.

Conceptual Background: Insights From Research on Organizational Identity

Organizational identity was once seen as a property of an organization (Whetten, 2006; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). However, a substantial stream of literature on organizational identity has shifted attention from the analysis of what is central, enduring, and distinctive in an organization (seen as a "social actor") to the analysis of how organizational identities are constantly constructed by interactions, conversations, and negotiations (Schultz & Hernes, 2013). This research stream theorizes organizational identity as a negotiated order (Watson & Watson, 2012) and acknowledges that different actors struggle over their collective identity. Based on this starting point, in the following section we provide an

overview of the relevant theoretical concepts and insights from research on paradox theory and organizational identity, which then informs our study.

Paradox Theory and Identity

Paradoxes are defined as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). Tensions or contradictions, terms often used interchangeably for “paradox,” arise between different sides of the paradox, thereby constituting it (Lewis, 2000). Following Smith and Lewis (2011), paradoxes are an objective characteristic of an increasingly complex world. Actors socially construct paradoxes in ambiguous situations to grasp this reality. Even though paradoxes have a “material,” objective side, they depend on how actors make sense of the situations they face.

Organizations are characterized by multiple paradoxes, arising, for instance, in processes of learning (new and old), organizing (stability and change), and belonging (self and other; Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Belonging paradoxes evolve between the affinity to a wider collective (team, organization) and the individuality that actors strive to maintain and express within these collectives (Poole & van de Ven, 1989; Smith & Berg, 1997). In the identity literature, paradoxes are hence discussed as cross-level phenomena: They arise between the individual identity (seen as something idiosyncratic) and the collective identity that both depends on and shapes individual identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Smith & Berg, 1997). This relationship influences the tensions between stability and change in organizational identities. Fiol (2002) argued that strong identification with the collective identity can impinge organizational change efforts (resistance to new ideas and identity change), while strong identification can boost change efforts (a sense of unity for managing the change). A further insight into the paradox between stability and change in organizational identities can be derived from the study of Gioia et al. (2000), in which the authors argued that stability and change in organizational identities are both possible because core elements (the labels) remain stable while interpretations of these labels change.

A long-standing and major issue in paradox research is how organizational actors (mainly those with managerial responsibility) cope with paradoxes. This research shows that coping with paradoxes is a “never ending story” because paradoxes are enduring. It is an important cognitive capability of organizational actors to be able to recognize and to embrace paradoxes (Miron-Spektor, Gino, & Argote, 2011). On the behavioral level, organizational researchers have discussed different strategies that can be applied to cope with paradoxes. Most prominent are temporal separation (addressing first one side of the paradox and then the other), splitting (e.g., by creating organizational structures in which different

parts address different sides of a paradox), or integration (finding strategies that inherently address both sides of the paradox; for example, Poole & van de Ven, 1989). Because these strategies do not “solve” the paradox, they merely contribute to creating what we call a stable state of instability. In their model of the dynamic equilibrium, Smith and Lewis (2011) showed how actors’ ongoing activities of splitting and integration contribute to coping with multiple and competing demands and to create successful organizations in complex environments. The equilibrium has no firm foundations, however, because paradoxical tensions still exist and ambiguity remains. Other researchers have coined terms such as “working through paradox” (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) or “navigating through paradox” (Jay, 2013) to point toward the ongoing efforts that are needed to cope with paradoxes.

To the best of our knowledge, paradoxes and their “management” have not been integrated explicitly in research on organizational identity so far. At the same time, empirical research on the dynamics of organization identity has shown that identity change is a kind of “muddling through” in complex situations of identity ambiguity or (latent and obvious) identity conflict (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Glynn, 2000; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). This muddling through resembles paradox management in that actors have no clear paths to follow, and tensions between different possible identities can arise. Most research on identity change assumes that changes in organizational identity are discontinuous (Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013) and follow the Lewin (1947) rhythm of “stability-change-stability”—and hence that after a phase of conflict and ambiguity stability is reinstated (e.g., Fiol, 2002; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997).

In the scarce research that acknowledges that organizational identities are in a permanent state of change (Gioia et al., 2013), it is assumed that continuous adaptation allows for a permanent alignment with an ever-changing environment (Gioia et al., 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). This implies that organizational identities are characterized by an “adaptive instability” (Gioia et al., 2000), which enables identity change as a (more or less intended) development to be in keeping with the times. From this point of view, organizational actors change their collective identity gradually, thereby propelling the organization either into the contemporary world or toward a successful future. However, this substantially differs from a view in which tensions are paradoxically interwoven and cannot be solved enduringly.

Narrative Construction of Organizational Identities

In our empirical study, we analyze organizational identity as narrative construction (Brown, 2006; Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Chreim, 2005). This conceptualization sees organizations as socially constructed through communication and assumes that organizations are “talked into existence”

(Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). Rather than being an objective entity, organizations are realities that are performatively constructed and negotiated through different acts of communication, such as direct interpersonal speech, written documents (e.g., regulations, annual reports), and “written speech” (e.g., emails, blogs, and webpages). Previous research has assumed that a large amount of organizational communication exists in the form of narratives (Czarniawska, 1997, 1998). Narrations differ from other forms of communication such as tables, lists, or schedules in that they give “an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 17). These events can also be hypothetical, when narrations have a visionary, prospective nature and say something about the future (Boje, 2008).

In their narratives, organizational members refer to and (re-)construct coherent themes (“stories”) that make sense because they have a consistent plot. Based on this understanding, narrations are the broader term, whereas stories are specific kinds of narrations in which consistent themes are elaborated (Czarniawska, 2004). Narratives in the form of typical stories consist of a beginning, middle, and an end and have a consistent theme (see, for example, Gabriel, 2000). Such ideal types of stories are scarce, however, and narratives in which actors author stories are often fragmented, dispersed, or abbreviated (Boje, 2008). In fact, the shortest form of a narration that conveys a story, as argued by Boje (1991), is “You know the story!” (p. 115). Narratives, in which authors do not author the “whole” story, nonetheless can be “pieced together into coherent stories” (Currie & Brown, 2003, p. 569) and collectively contribute to the construction of the stories that constitute the organization.

Following such an approach, organizational identity is constituted in identity narratives, through which organizational members make sense of the distinct characteristics of the organization (Brown, 2006; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). In this sense, organizational members construct and reconstruct stories in their narratives that contain positive and/or negative characteristics of the organization. Organizational identity lies in these shared identity narratives “that, for example, people tell each other in their conversations, write into corporate histories, and encode on websites” (Brown, 2006, p. 734).

Multiple Identity Narratives and the Aspect of Power

Due to the *collective* nature of organizational identities, several actors are able to make identity claims, and organizational identities are therefore pluralistic and polyphonic (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Brown (2006) used the term “plurivocity” to “make clear that in any organization there will generally be multiple versions of its identity” (p. 746). Individual identities and values influence the content of

narratives, and individuals, seen as reflexive actors (Giddens, 1984), are partially able to tell stories in a way that supports their individual interests (Brown, 2006; Mumby, 1987). However, actors also perceive existing narratives as rule-like objective entities; to them, narratives are part of the social structure that—to a certain extent—constrains individuals (Browning, 1991). The wider institutional environment provides cultural resources on which actors rely and which enhance the legitimacy of their identity claims (Clegg et al., 2007; Czarniawska, 1997), and the existing organizational identity narratives shape the values and identities of actors (Watson & Watson, 2012). According to Deuten and Rip (2000), the fact that there are existing narratives and cultural discursive resources both “enables and constrains the characters involved” (p. 69).

The organizational fabric of narratives consists of polyphonic voices and different stories, and depending on their status or role different actors have different influences on the collective identity. The power relationships between actors influence how they construct and negotiate the organizational reality (Rodrigues & Child, 2008), and organizational identities are therefore characterized by power positions and the interests and preferences of their authors (Chreim, 2005). Researchers have identified, for instance, that senior managers have a strong influence on identity narratives (Humphreys & Brown, 2002) and that they use stories to “reinforce their claim as legitimately powerful members of an organization” (Currie & Brown, 2003, p. 566).

Consistency and Change in Organizational Identities

Researchers tend to assume that organizational identities are characterized by recurrent themes that stand out thanks to their centrality and the frequency with which actors rely on them in their storytelling (Chreim, 2005). Actors recurrently use the same characteristic labels for these central themes in their identity claims, which ensures a certain degree of consistency in organizational identities. However, even though the same labels are used in identity stories, the meanings attached to these labels might differ between actors or might change over time (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al., 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). The paradoxical nature of the labels, as we show later in our empirical analysis, allows actors to attach different, even controversial meanings to the identity labels and can trigger an ongoing struggle over the “real” meaning.

However, “stable organizations require stable stories” (Näslund & Perner, 2011, p. 91), and the different meanings and their resulting pluralistic and polyphonic narrations impinge on the consistent identities necessary to construct an organization as a distinct entity. To establish a consistent identity, powerful organizational actors such as senior managers create official stories (Boje, 1995) that form the focal

point of identity narrations (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). These stories reduce the complexity of identity stories by allowing organizational members to refer to them continuously and contribute to the solidification of the “organization” of the social construction. Within the fabric of storytelling that takes place within organizations, official stories are often “dominant stories” (Näslund & Perner, 2011), which are powerful because they fix meanings (Brown, 2004), influence the way in which other stories are told, and contribute to a hegemonic character (Humphreys & Brown, 2002).

Dominant stories are unable to remove the plurality and multiplicity that exists in identity narrations, however. Indeed, organizational members must refer to and continuously retell the dominant stories in their narrations to retain the memory of these stories, implying that they have the ability to resist and/or contest them (Boje, 1995). Local narrations might then (though not automatically) be set against the tendency of the dominant story to enforce coherence and consistency (Boje, 2001; Näslund & Perner, 2011). The concept of dominant stories in an organization points to a difference between identity narratives that are more or less dominant, where dominance refers to the relative ability of certain themes to improve consistency and reduce complexity compared with others. The dominant story largely resists change and contributes to a certain degree of organizational inertia (Geiger & Antonacopoulou, 2009)—while dissonant voices challenge the dominant story and trigger slight changes to the dominant story. This interplay contributes to change and stability in organizational identities.

Organizational Identity in Partial Organizations: Insiders, Outsiders, and Volunteers

From the foregoing discussion, it may be inferred that different actors form collective identities by narrating stories in a political process that is suffused with power. The arena in which this process takes place has been identified differently. Since the work of Albert and Whetten (1985), researchers have more or less implicitly assumed “traditional” organizations such as Royal Dutch Shell (Coupland & Brown, 2004), the LEGO Group (Schultz & Hernes, 2013), or nonprofit organizations (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997) as their natural object for securitizing *organizational* identities.

More recently, researchers have begun to expand the focus of identity research to interorganizational constellations in which multiple organizations form collective identities. Wry, Lounsbury, and Glynn (2011), for instance, discussed how groups of entrepreneurs establish collective identities that can function as newly established cultural resources and legitimate the new entrepreneurial account within the wider institutional field. Such research accomplishes the growing recognition of different levels of identity “in and around organizations” (Schultz et al., 2012),

encompassing the individual identity, the organizational identity as a shared perception or narrative construct, and the institutionalized elements of identities of the cultural environment (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011).

The analysis of partial organizations remains an underresearched topic, however. Partial organizations are a phenomenon at the organizational level of analysis that do not fit into the (implicit) picture of a formal organization very well—but which may also hardly be described as networks or institutions (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). Coupland and Brown (2004), for instance, argued that “those theories that locate organizational identities within the putatively strict confines of an organization’s ‘official’ boundaries are inadequate” (p. 1341) and called for the analysis of the interplay between formal insiders and outsiders. Clegg et al. (2007) emphasized that the boundary of an organization is itself a social construct. Identity “is thus located in the ‘belief system’ of companies that allows them to define boundaries and maintain their identities” (Clegg et al., 2007, p. 498).

From this it follows that organizational identities are negotiated both by insiders (organizational members) and the wider constituents who take part in the identity formation process. This differs from the more widely discussed finding that organizational members take external audiences into account when they form their organizational identity, as the distinction between organizational identities and image suggests (Scott & Lane, 2000). It further differs from the argument that external actors *influence* the identity formation process by, for example, asking critical questions, as shown in an analysis of the dialogue between employees of Royal Dutch Shell and external stakeholders, who asked critical questions on and challenged the interactive web presence of the corporation (Coupland & Brown, 2004). Rather, actors can directly participate in the identity formation process of an organization by authoring relevant narratives considered by other actors to be a relevant story from “within” the socially constructed boundaries of the organization. Temporary workers or freelancers, for instance, are actors who can contribute to the formation of an internal identity, provided that they identify with their host organization and that others give the same weight to their voices as they would to internal actors.

Research Context: “Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia”

What Is Wikipedia?

Wikipedia was founded by James Wales and Larry Sanger in 2001. Their vision was of a collaboratively generated online encyclopedia where volunteers, rather than experts, wrote encyclopedic entries. Wikipedia is part of the Wikimedia Foundation, a transnational nonprofit organization that hosts, among others, Wikiquote (a collection of quotations) and

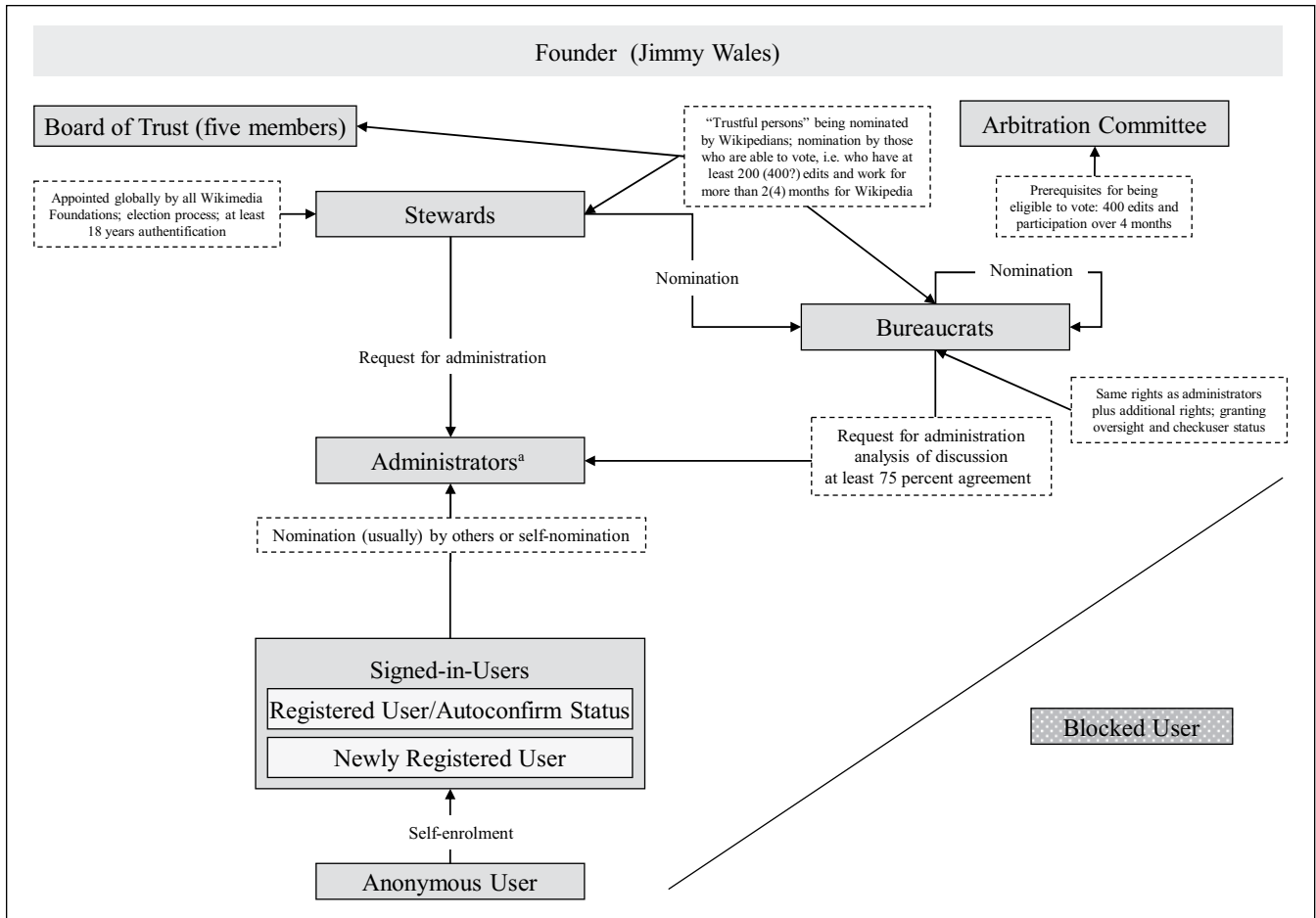


Figure 1. The structure of Wikipedia.

^aAlso called “sysops,” system operators.

Wikiversity (an academic online forum), and owns the technical infrastructure. Although few people are remunerated by the Wikimedia Foundation, Wikipedia is visited by 65 million people monthly, with 85,000 volunteers contributing more than 14 million entries (Wikipedia, 2010f).

Volunteers make use of a software tool that has been termed a “wiki,” that is, a collaborative and freely available online workspace. This workspace is composed of one or more webpages in which participants are entitled to alter the content and structure. The distinctive characteristic of a wiki is its “edit” function (in principle, every page can be altered by anyone). Through the wiki software, therefore, openness can be seen as inherent to Wikipedia’s existence (Goldspink, 2009). The same philosophy is stressed in the introduction to Wikipedia, “Don’t be afraid to edit—anyone can edit almost every page, and we are encouraged to be bold!” (Wikipedia, 2011a). Other features are a “history” function for recalling previous versions of a page, and a “discussion” function, which brings up a new and related page on which participants conduct actual conversations about the respective entry. However, wiki technology is not exclusive to

Wikipedia; rather, it is nowadays applied widely in corporate settings (e.g., Blau & Scott, 2009).

Adding to or editing content within Wikipedia implies passing a number of nuanced steps (see Figure 1 for an overview). Depending on the type of permission, a participant has some ability to alter or control Wikipedia’s content to some degree. In principle, any visitor (registered or not) is entitled to alter any unlocked page. At the next level, administrators (“admins” hereafter) have the ability to protect or delete pages entirely, block other users, or undo certain edits. Despite these minor differences, however, bureaucrats, developers, and stewards alike (see Figure 1) are essentially supposed to serve the same purpose, namely, to maintain the operations of Wikipedia.

Why Can We Analyze Wikipedia as an “Organization?”

Researchers use different labels to characterize Wikipedia, either as a social phenomenon similar to the open source movement (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2008) or a computer-mediated

community (Goldspink, 2009). Benkler (2006) used Wikipedia as a role model for his idea of an organization that pursues commons-based peer production, arguing that tasks must be performable in a distributed manner and be “broadcast” so that volunteers are able to enroll themselves. According to Ahrne and Brunsson (2011), formal organizations decide their membership, have hierarchies and written rules, monitor compliance with them, and decide on sanctions. Based on the foregoing, we find Wikipedia to be almost a formal organization in that it decides on membership by monitoring compliance with its rules (e.g., by excluding volunteers who do not obey them; Butler, Joyce, & Pike, 2008; Goldspink, 2009). Furthermore, given Wikipedia’s nuanced hierarchy (see Figure 1), the organization is characterized by a fluid concept of membership (Pentzold, 2011), an ephemeral hierarchy, and a system of rules and guidelines monitored and enforced by formal and informal sanctions (Butler et al., 2008). However, the strength of these characteristics is less significant than it is in industrial organizations, for example. Differently to more formal organizations, Wikipedia cannot decide who takes part in its operations but only who does not (by excluding volunteers as necessary). Rules are enforced only through exclusion, and there are no other options for disciplining volunteers, such as letters of warning or encouragement, or direct supervisory control. Instead of seeing Wikipedia as a fully formal organization, we conclude that it can be thought of as a partial organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011).

Wikipedia’s Editing Model and the Allegedly “Transparent Organization”

Organizational identities are intertwined with the artifacts and technical characteristics of organizations (Dale & Burrell, 2008). Wikipedia’s editing model (Wikipedia, 2010e) is central to our analysis. In essence, every single page of Wikipedia can (allegedly) be edited, even its core policies and guidelines (Wikipedia, 2010n). Volunteers can respond to edits (e.g., the modification of an entry or a policy document) with approval (passive acceptance), disapproval (i.e., by returning content to its original state), or improvement (by adding new information). Underlying the level associated with the entries themselves is the secondary level of the discussion pages. On discussion pages, contributors explain their edits, propose modifications to an article, or question particular statements or sections. This two-layer design thus enables us to distinguish analytically between officially produced texts (entries) and communicative processes that support and surround them (discussion pages). This approach bears the additional advantage that most relevant communication is clearly assigned to a particular site.

Moreover, Wikipedia offers a unique opportunity for empirical analysis because most of its communication takes place virtually and in written form. Although offline communication between contributors has a role to play within its

communicative processes, it is common practice in Wikipedia to post the content of these offline communications for a particular entry on the relevant discussion page. Even if this does not take place for some reason, offline communication influences other edits, and other editors might still discuss or revise these changes. Thus, even if offline communications were the decisive factor behind a particular change, we would expect traces of those decisions and subsequent discussions among contributors to comprise the texts pervading Wikipedia’s communicative memory. Against this background, Wikipedia can be considered to be a highly transparent organization that offers a rare opportunity to study the temporal nature of communicative processes, in contrast to more conventional organizational settings. Hence, we are able to examine a significant proportion of all the communication that constitutes Wikipedia’s identity narrative at any point in time.

Data and Method

In line with other research on organizational identity (e.g., Gioia et al., 2010), we used a single inductive case study (Eisenhardt, 1989) that has similarities with other narrative research on this topic such as that of Coupland and Brown (2004), who also analyzed web-based texts, or with the narrative analyses of Chreim (2005) or Humphreys and Brown (2002). In our study, the primary data sources were Wikipedia entries and their corresponding discussion sites. All data were taken directly from the Wikimedia domain to ensure that they were authentic referents to Wikipedia’s identity. These data offer unique empirical access to the processes of identity formation in Wikipedia, given that organizational members interact almost entirely via publicly available Internet sites.

The resulting data set consisted of 408 pages, most of which stemmed from the discussions on an encyclopedic entry (327 pages). We performed a three-stage analysis of the data using the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti, namely, collection, coding, and analysis, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 64). As units of analysis, we chose narratives, stories, and story fragments that contained references to Wikipedia’s identity. Specifically, these comprised quotations or excerpts that referred to Wikipedia’s fundamental principles or other identity-related phenomena.

Informed by our interest in the dynamics of identity construction, we began our analysis with text that contained identity-related issues and their corresponding discussions. We started with the most obvious texts about Wikipedia’s identity: the official encyclopedic entry about Wikipedia itself (Wikipedia, 2010e) and the introductory entry about Wikipedia (Wikipedia, 2010f). Even though we initially believed freedom to be an important aspect of Wikipedia’s identity (given the slogan “Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia”), we began the analysis without a predefined coding scheme to reduce bias.

Table 1. Documents Included in the Second Phase of Analysis.

Document	Type	Relationship ^a	Intensity ^b
History of Wikipedia	Self-description	Associated	Low (38)
Criticism of Wikipedia	Self-description	Associated	Medium (151)
Wikipedia: Administrators	Policy	Associated	Medium (164)
Wikipedia: Be bold	Guideline	Aspect	Low (63)
Wikipedia: Deletion policy	Policy	Constraints	High (400)
Wikipedia: Editing policy	Policy	Constraints	Medium (105)
Wikipedia: Five pillars	Self-description	Associated	Low (89)
Wikipedia: Ignore all rules	Policy	Aspect	High (654)
Wikipedia: Notability	Guideline	Constraints	High (1,621)
Wikipedia: Protection policy	Policy	Contradicts	Medium (231)
Wikipedia: Vandalism	Policy	Constraints	Medium (233)
Wikipedia: What Wikipedia is not	Self-description	Associated	High (1,319)
Wikipedia: Why Wikipedia is not so great	Self-description	Associated	Low (12)
Wikipedia: Why Wikipedia is so great	Self-description	Associated	Low (8)

^a*Relationship* refers to the overall relationship of the document to freedom.

^b*Intensity* indicates the degree to which an entry is discussed. The figures refer to the number of discussion pages associated with the entry concerned.

This first inductive step of our analysis yielded 53 codes and 279 quotations. In addition to the 13 codes associated with different forms of freedom and its limitations (e.g., free editorship, free access, control, and censorship), this procedure also resulted in codes that represented the dominant aspects of many discussions, namely, neutrality, the reliability of the knowledge produced, the individuals involved in founding Wikipedia, and the prevailing sense of enthusiasm. Using a graphical network tool to display codes as nodes, we then arranged those codes according to their logical relationships into thematic clusters.¹ We interpreted those nodes that had the highest centrality (more than five links) as being central to the identity structure of Wikipedia and those nodes that had more than 20 assigned quotations as dominant themes within this structure. The most important finding of this first step of the analysis was the significance of freedom.

Freedom stood out in terms of its centrality (13 links) and direct assignments (18 quotations). Moreover, freedom had the most second-order assignments (i.e., assignments to nodes directly connected with the focal node; 220 quotations, representing 79% of all excerpts). While analyzing the data for the first time, we additionally used the code “to be analyzed.” This indication helped us track pages or phenomena to which discussions regularly referred. The resulting collection of 35 pages constituted the basis of the second step of our analysis.

In the second step, we collected those entries and corresponding discussions that resulted from the code “to be analyzed,” thereby adding an unexpectedly large number of 12,436 pages to our data set. Examples of collected documents included encyclopedic entries such as that on Jimmy Wales (Wikipedia, 2010c), detailed identity narrations on

the organization itself such as “What Wikipedia is not” (Wikipedia, 2010p) and “Criticism of Wikipedia” (Wikipedia, 2010a), and diverse guidelines and policies intended to control Wikipedia, such as its editing policy (Wikipedia, 2010i).

We then decided to focus our further analysis solely on freedom as the dominant aspect of identity. Furthermore, we reduced our data set to those documents most clearly associated with the freedom narrative to maintain analytical tractability. From these data we chose 14 pages, including discussions that represented a balance between texts that described Wikipedia (self-descriptions) and structure descriptions, their overall relation to freedom, and finally, to avoid any bias toward only highly contested issues, the intensity with which a particular page was discussed (Table 1). This second phase of the analysis was intended to ensure a representative inquiry that avoided exploring only one sub-community of contributors.

We then listed all excerpts associated with freedom and sorted them chronologically to reconstruct the different identity stories from narratives that were often fragmented and abbreviated, and to trace the development of and change in the dominant story of freedom. Chronological ordering was possible because the vast majority of discussions are date-stamped. During the final step, we rechecked all codes to strengthen their reliability, which confirmed that freedom (and associated phenomena such as free editorship or censorship) was indeed discussed intensively. We then reconstructed the freedom narrative (i.e., the organizational story that dominates discussions by serving as a means to justify certain arguments while dismissing and discounting opposing notions), as well as the related local narrations that challenge it.

Freedom and the Bureaucratization of Wikipedia

In this subsection, we present the results of our reconstruction of Wikipedia's freedom narrative, and then present the tensions within Wikipedia's identity as represented in the dissonant local narrations that contest it.

Wikipedia's Organizational Identity: The Dominant Story of Freedom

To reconstruct the general content of the narrative texts pertaining to freedom, we used texts from entries on the Wikipedia homepage. These texts represent Wikipedia's identity, given that the textual documents produced (such as the "About Wikipedia" entry on the homepage) are deliberately intended to express organizational identity ("What Wikipedia Is"). Furthermore, they are the outcome of decision processes: Different volunteers have contributed to the finished texts (at least as they were when we had finished collecting our data). Hence, the actual texts are the outcome of a (power-based) decision, compromise, or agreement between organizational members.

The analyzed texts refer to freedom in two ways. First, freedom is used in the sense of free access, namely, providing every Wikipedia user with free-of-charge knowledge. This element of freedom is expressed in the following statement:

Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. (Wikimedia Foundation, 2009, p. 02.56)

Second, freedom refers to the process of producing knowledge (i.e., editorial freedom) in the sense that everyone is invited to contribute to the advancement of Wikipedia. The subsequent statement illustrates this second meaning of freedom:

Wikipedia is written collaboratively by an international group of volunteers. Anyone with internet access can write and make changes to Wikipedia articles. (Wikipedia, 2010f)

Our data suggest that both meanings are present although unevenly distributed in the identity narratives, even though few texts refer to the first meaning ("free-of-charge access to knowledge"). However, high-status contributors such as admins place particular emphasis on this meaning. We also find it remarkable that participants often refer to Jimmy Wales when they use the "free-of-charge access to knowledge" narrative. Wales has the status of an almost mythical figure within the community; referring to him and the texts produced by him gives a narrative greater legitimacy and additional authority. For instance, the following statement,

which is based on Jimmy Wales's notation of Wikipedia, is frequently cited:

Wikipedia is first and foremost an effort to create and distribute a free encyclopedia of the highest possible quality to every single person on the planet in their own language. (Wikipedia, 2010e)

The second meaning of freedom—the free production of knowledge—is more prominent and far more frequently referred to throughout various policies and identity-related texts. It is closely associated with Wikipedia's open editing model, which represents the alleged anarcho-democratic nature of the project for many contributors. In fact, the volunteers who produce the knowledge are not free to choose any action they wish. Rather, they are dependent on technical constraints such as the technological infrastructure of the wikis, and must observe a number of rules and regulations. Hence, there is an ingrained paradox in the freedom identity: Although the principal idea of freedom is unlimited, the "real" extent of freedom at Wikipedia entails the use of techniques that restrict freedom. As seen by most volunteers at Wikipedia (including powerful ones like administrators or figures like Jimmy Wales and representatives of the Wikimedia Foundation), rules and regulations are needed to ensure that the freedom to take part in Wikipedia's operations (to produce knowledge) is not used destructively by a few volunteers. In this sense, boundless freedom is not possible and true freedom requires elements of restriction ("unfreedom"), giving the notion of freedom a paradoxical nature. However, this is embraced in the dominant identity story, which can be seen in the following text:

Wikipedia employs the open editing model called "wiki." Except for a few vandalism-prone pages that can be edited only by established users, or in extreme cases only by administrators, every article may be edited anonymously or with a user account, while only registered users may create a new article. (Wikipedia, 2010e)

This citation is representative of a later version of an identity text: It introduces freedom while accepting its paradoxical nature by qualifying and limiting it. The need for rules and structures that delimit editorial freedom is justified by the danger of vandalism (Wikipedia, 2010o) and by referring to other basic principles. The most prevalent examples of these principles are the requirements for notability (i.e., that entries need relevance; Wikipedia would not, for instance, accept an entry about Elly, the dog of one of the authors of this article; Wikipedia, 2010m) and a neutral point of view (Wikipedia, 2010l). The latter principle states that volunteers should not have biased opinions when writing or editing entries, but should rather be politically and ideologically neutral. The way in which Wikipedia copes with the contradictions between freedom as an identity narrative and the use

of constraining rules and regulations is expressed in one of Wikipedia's basic principles—the rule to “ignore all rules”:

If a rule prevents you from improving or maintaining Wikipedia, ignore it. (Wikipedia, 2010k)

In summary, both meanings of freedom are clearly part of identity narratives at Wikipedia and form a kind of official story of Wikipedia's identity in which the paradoxical nature of freedom is embraced. According to our analysis of different texts that contain identity narratives, freedom has always been a core aspect of Wikipedia's identity and has (presumably) played a major role in making Wikipedia a successful project marked by the willingness of its contributors.

However, Wikipedia's identity story of “freedom” is not as consistent and homogeneous as might be assumed from the foregoing. The discussions that underlie the official texts tell a rather different story in which a number of voices contest the freedom narratives. In particular, our analysis yields three thematic narrations that contest the (official and most prevalent) story of freedom at the core of Wikipedia's identity: the accusation of censorship, the role of admins, and the expansion of control structures. All these dissonant voices raise the issue of increased bureaucratization at Wikipedia—and constitute an alternative identity story, in which (un-)freedom is the main characteristic of the identity narratives.

The Identity Story of Bureaucratization: Narrations That Contest Wikipedia's Freedom Story

The discussion pages are full of narrations in which organizational members discuss their perceptions of bureaucratization and the increasing perception of “unfreedom” through *censorship* and *control structures*. Some volunteers express experiences with censorship both in respect of their own entries and related to general editorial practices. The following citation is an example of the former, a narration of personal sensemaking based on some experiences as an editor:

I had formed the impression that wiki was truly open and editable; then I formed the impression that my contributions were being edited unreasonably; then, without realizing what “reverts” might mean, I formed the impression I'd upset a few “fans”; then I formed the impression that “openly editable” was, on certain pages, a misnomer. Finally, I formed the impression—wholly erroneously, perhaps—that my edits were, in effect, being censored. WTD 02:33, 22 Mar 2005. (Wikipedia, 2010d)

This narration is also interesting in terms of its structure, consisting of a beginning (the first experience of Wikipedia as a truly free endeavor), a middle (the accumulation over time of experiences of unfreedom), and an end (the impression of censorship as characteristic of unfreedom at Wikipedia; see also Gabriel, 2000).

Furthermore, a number of narrations describe systemic censorships and the removal of unwanted statements from talk pages. The following narration illustrates both accusations:

All is not well. There [*sic*] problems plaguing Wikipedia, like legal pressure, trolls,² libel laws, and ambiguous policies. These have caused this beautiful experiment to turn into a bureaucratic nightmare. A nice example is the spam blacklist, now its [*sic*] all fair and good to block abusive sites, scrapers etc, but its reprehensible to blacklist a perfectly acceptable site, because it opposes yours. This is nicely illustrated by a comment in the blacklist: #per recommendation of B. Patrick, the Foundation's attorney. I look at the title of the page, and I see spam blacklist, not “People who oppose the regime.” I'd be prepared to bet that this won't be here in a few days due to the censorship that has eaten its way into the Editors' psyche and made a little nest. See you when this isn't here.

This just got deleted, about 5 min after I'd posted it. This is a repost. Go figure (unsigned post as of April 2006; Wikipedia, 2010d).

In this identity narrative, the participant expresses his or her impression that the attempt to add a section about an Internet site that opposed Wikipedia was met by an act of censorship: his or her edits were reverted, his or her protests on the talk page were removed, and it became impossible to link to the page.

In the disputes that surround such accusations, the *role of admins* is regularly discussed. Admins have the power to block someone from editing and are therefore in a position of power at Wikipedia, of which they take advantage. Nevertheless, they are not supposed to limit editorial freedom in any way; rather, they must respect the freedom narrative. Their main task is technical maintenance: Becoming an admin is not considered a “big deal” because it is “merely a technical matter that the powers given to sysops [system operators] are not given out to everyone” (Jimmy Wales, as cited on Wikipedia, 2010g). This understanding of the role of admins is heavily contested on discussion pages, mostly in narrations about personal conflicts between editors and admins:

Then there's the topic of administrator abuse, wherein the admins attack me, personally, make false statements, threaten IP blocking during the course of their recommendation . . . The problem is that the content of the statements fails to meet even the barest of supportability standards. A comment like “delete—irrelevant fluff and neologism” should have no bearing whatsoever, as it's totally unqualified. No references are provided, no reasons given as to why the commenter believes it's neologism, fluff, or irrelevant. . . . Dr1819 13:28, 10 June 2006. (Wikipedia, 2010q)

More reflective narrations that contest the dominant identity story involve general concerns that the accumulation of

power through the development of subcommunities of admins is contrary to Wikipedia's communitarian principles. The following statement is exemplary, not least in terms of its cynical and disillusioned form:

Hell, there is nothing to worry about. Why am I even concerned? Yes, the system is perfectly adequate, and nobody will ever be driven off by a bunch of admins deciding their article has no merit or that their opinions are stupid . . . Obviously this whole process of oversight of administrators has been so well thought out and all the issues about overreach of power have been resolved, and nothing really important is going on here. Nope. System is fine. Full steam ahead. Silence the trolls, for they know nothing of the burden of responsibility! (Unsigned post as of March 11, 2004; Wikipedia, 2010r)

The experience of control through the power of admins culminates in the emergence of a group of activists known as the Wikipedia Freedom Fighters. This group aims to build and accumulate administrative power to take measures against what they perceive to be the corruption of the ideals of freedom. The following citation is an excerpt from a story told by the admin "Fantasy" of how he or she was approached by this group:

Dear Fantasy, We notice you haven't edited Wikipedia for some time. Perhaps you grew disillusioned with the project after seeing the corruption and bureaucracy at every level? If so, why not help us to help you. We are currently expanding our portfolio of administrator accounts, and as yours remains dormant perhaps you could consider donating it to us . . . Kind Regards, The Wikipedia Freedom Fighters. (Published on Wikipedia, 2010r, by Fantasy [talk] 16:34, May 11, 2009)

Finally, a number of volunteers complain about the *expansion of control structures*. This complaint complements the accusation of hierarchy (expressed in the growth in the "standing" of admins). Narrations that pertain to control structures describe an increase in protected sites, the overuse of guidelines in discussions, and the creation, expansion, and increased enforcement of Wikipedia's policies. These tendencies evoke annoyance and disappointment, as illustrated in the following text, produced by a user who had been indefinitely blocked from editing Wikipedia:

See those padlocks all over the place? Wikipedia is dead.—AnYoNe! 23:42, 25 February 2007. (Wikipedia, 2010q)

The trend toward tighter organizational structures at Wikipedia (including increased control) seems to have been particularly pronounced from 2007 onwards, as seen in the sheer number of regulations and policies from this period compared with earlier years. For instance, the policy document "What Wikipedia is not" contains information about what Wikipedia tries not to be (e.g., it is not a "dictionary" or a "newspaper"; Wikipedia, 2011b). This statement was

initially written at the time of the foundation of Wikipedia and was very brief. Since then, however, it has increased in length by approximately 1,000% (from 341 to 3,200 words; Butler et al., 2008, p. 1104).

In our empirical data, we found a significant increase in narratives that refer to declining editorial freedom through overregulation. An insightful example is the development of a central guideline that was originally intended to encourage editors to "be bold when updating pages [.] The community would like everyone to be bold and help make Wikipedia a better encyclopedia" (Wikipedia, 2010h, emphasis removed). The short explanation of this statement is followed by an extensive section that qualifies the guideline by stating that editors are only allowed to be bold when they are not being reckless. The current state of the guideline is a good illustration of the failure of all the contesting voices that have tried actively to counter the agglomeration of limiting qualifications:

I condensed the ridiculously long "but don't be reckless" section . . . for the simple reason that it's destroying Wikipedia to show new users "hey, be bold!" . . . and then load them down with the message, basically, of "don't edit if people who are already here know better than you, which they do . . . Matt Yeager ♪ (Talk?) 21:37, 11 April 2007." (Wikipedia, 2010s)

Wikipedia's Collective Identity Between Stability and Change

Our empirical analysis shows that the organizational identity at Wikipedia is based on freedom. Official statements present freedom both as free-of-charge knowledge for users and as the independence to contribute knowledge through editing. Even though the notion of freedom is inherently paradoxical, the contradictions are embraced in the dominant story (e.g., through the rule "to ignore all rules"; Wikipedia, 2009). Different narratives, however, contest the dominant story of the freedom narrative and focus on one side of the paradox. Some volunteers observe increasing bureaucracy and have the experience of *unfreedom*, for instance, when their entries are deleted by admins. From their view, freedom in the context of Wikipedia conflicts with its rules, hierarchies, and power structures. In this regard, the paradoxical tensions of freedom *are captured but not solved* in the dominant story of Wikipedia's collective identity. Hence, the organizational identity of Wikipedia is far from consistent and hegemonic. Rather, the identity narratives that encompass the dominant story and the dissonant narratives that express the alternative identity story of unfreedom show the plurivocality (Brown, 2006) of Wikipedia's identity narratives.

Regarding these plurivocal identity narratives, we now discuss how actors cope with this permanently unstable character, how some actors (try to) maintain the dominant story

of freedom, and how they obtain the appearance of consistency and coherence. In our empirical case, we found that the contradictions of the paradox are not resolved but are instead concealed for as long as possible. Our analysis shows that the actors who represent the dominant identity story in their narratives use three techniques to conceal the contradictions of the paradox (at least temporarily). Two of these are rhetorical strategies in which the content of the dominant story is adapted either through slight changes in meaning or by referring to the future (utopia). The third uses the power positions or rhetorical strategies of (de-)legitimization to subjugate dissonant voices. These three techniques of meaning shift, utopia, and subjugation, are now explained in more detail.

Unfolding Contradictions Through Meaning Shifts

Organizational identities can remain stable to a certain extent when the labels and core values attached to them remain the same while the meanings attached to the labels change slightly (Gioia et al., 2000). We find such meaning shifts to be a means of concealing contradictions in the dominant identity story of Wikipedia. For instance, the comparison between the original and most recent versions of the “rule to ignore all rules” reveals a shift in one of Wikipedia’s basic principles toward less freedom over time. This shift in meaning exemplifies the unfolding of an identity contradiction: The original rule “to ignore all rules” constituted a self-cancelling policy and therefore assumed the form of a paradox. This was concealed by an incremental limiting of the freedom, even though the name of the policy remained unchanged. Indeed, the policy gradually shifted its meaning toward the ambiguity of “the advancement of the project,” namely, the creation of an encyclopedia, which justifies the need to be neutral and notable. There are other examples of meaning shifts against the background of ambiguities in basic principles. Examples include the invitation to be bold but not too bold (Wikipedia, 2010h), the assurance that Wikipedia has no firm rules besides those that are somehow necessary (Wikipedia, 2010j), and the fact that anybody can edit Wikipedia except those users who do not edit in the “correct” way (Wikipedia, 2010i).

These slight shifts in meaning at the level of the meanings themselves (while the labels remain the same) can be used to reinstate stability—but they can also foster resistance (sometimes both at the same time) when the dominant subgroup attempts to impose these adapted identities throughout the organization. Hence, the actors who represent the dominant story at Wikipedia do not explicitly change their dominant story but rather downplay or ignore the slight changes. Indeed, these changes are blanked out in all current official identity texts, even though they provoke passionate discussion about alleged bureaucratization and the expansion of control structures. This tension is noticeable even for those identity narratives that explicitly refer to the historical

development of Wikipedia (Wikipedia, 2010b) or criticisms of it (Wikipedia, 2010a).

Unfolding Contradictions Through Utopia

Identity narrations usually rely on the past and invoke history for the sake of the present. However, as argued by Schultz and Hernes (2013) and Boje (2008), identity narratives can also have a future-oriented content. In our case study, we find that a powerful means of unfolding the contradictions of the paradox that threatens organizational identity is to describe a future-oriented, utopian identity. Such a utopia is able to legitimize certain notions while delegitimizing others. In other words, by invoking utopia, organizational members are able to justify their current versions of identity in their narratives and support them with a legitimizing reference (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). We see indications of this process at Wikipedia: Those actors who represent the dominant story slightly shift the meaning of freedom from “free editorship” to the utopian idea of “free access for everyone.” In so doing, they shift the initial core value of the possibility of the free contribution of volunteers to the possibility of universal access to knowledge. Put simply, given that the latter idea would require Wikipedia to be present in all countries and languages, and would moreover require everyone to possess the technical ability and individual skills to access the website, it is a utopia. This utopia, however, increasingly delegitimizes the notion of free editorship and creates tensions with proponents of a narrow understanding of free editorship.

This observation confirms the theoretical idea of distinguishing between tautological (an organization “is what it is”) and paradoxical (an organization “is what it is not”) organizational identities (Luhmann, 1988, p. 9).³ Wikipedia could choose a tautological identity, essentially stating that it is what it has always been. This conservative type of identity is oriented toward the past and utilizes historical accomplishments that should be preserved. Although some narratives at Wikipedia do support the latter understanding, they are rare. By contrast, a paradoxical identity description could be obtained by introducing a temporal dimension that points toward the future. This approach would allow Wikipedia to shift the meaning of its identity to “Wikipedia is what it is not yet,” allowing for sufficient fluidity (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010) to allow the constant reproduction of the organization and its identity.

In this way, a utopian identity narrative entails an impossible, ideal state of affairs. At Wikipedia, the utopia of “free access” still emphasizes freedom as the central aspect of its identity at the formal level, while simultaneously shifting its meaning. Wikipedia conceals the alternative meanings of freedom used by many organizational members in their local narrations (e.g., the experience of bureaucratization). Hence, Wikipedia is able to sustain a notion of freedom, while its actual practices and organizational structures are more limiting.

The resulting dominant story, however, is still based on contradictions (e.g., the impossibility of achieving utopias such as “free-of-charge knowledge for everyone”), implying that new tensions are likely to emerge. It was therefore unsurprising to find that the notion of the utopia of “free access” was accompanied by some disagreement. Organizational members held lengthy discussions on whether it was necessary to add to Wikipedia’s official texts Jimmy Wales’s utopian quote about a world with free access to all human knowledge for everyone.

The Subjugation of Contesting Voices

Neither of the two rhetorical strategies of coping with contradictory identity narratives—meaning shift or utopia—solves the inherent contradictions or abolishes the struggles for identity at Wikipedia. In line with the literature that focuses on politics (Rodrigues & Child, 2008) and the aspect of power (Brown, 2006), we found in our case study that actors who promote the dominant identity story at Wikipedia also handle tensions by subjugating any attempts to construct its identity differently. This was possible because the actors representing the dominant story generally hold official positions (like administrator) and hence control the resources that allow the subjugation of contesting voices.

Some narrations that contest the dominant story, such as those relating to the abuse of admin privileges, censorship, the aggregation of rules, and attempts at regulation, show how the powerbrokers at Wikipedia subjugate dissonant identity narratives in two main ways. First, they use material devices and, for instance, subjugate dissonant narrations by blocking Internet Protocol (IP) numbers or deleting entries. Materiality, or the power to control these material devices, thereby influences the emergence of organizational identity (Dale & Burrell, 2008; Doolin, 2003). Second, dissonant voices are subjugated using rhetorical strategies of justification (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Here, the majority of organizational members at Wikipedia emphasize its evaluation criteria such as its notability and a neutral point of view (an obviously paradoxical requirement for identity narratives that are linked to individual identities; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ashforth et al., 2011; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994).

For instance, advocates of the official identity story emphasize the status of Wikipedia as a high-quality encyclopedia comparable with traditional products such as Encyclopedia Britannica. Referring to legitimate higher order principles such as quality or notability thus provides legitimacy and delegitimizes arguments to the contrary (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). However, by using such higher order principles *and* by defining how they are to be understood, actors proposing the dominant identity story can shape and influence how identity is negotiated through identity narratives. In addition, as noted by Currie and Brown

(2003), the use of legitimating rhetoric by the dominant subgroup legitimates their own actions and invalidates criticism of actions such as the use of material devices to subjugate dissonant voices.

Identity Change Facilitated by Means of Paradoxes

The actors at Wikipedia who propose the dominant identity story cope with the contesting voices that challenge the paradoxical nature of the core element of “freedom” by a range of different means, namely, meaning shifts, utopia, and subjugation. Meaning shifts and the invention of and reference to a utopian idea are triggers for changes in the dominant identity story. These changes have been (in our empirical case) only slight, however, because the newly adapted meanings share some of the characteristics of the traditional meaning, thereby allowing a certain degree of continuity and stability. In contrast, the subjugation of dissonant voices mainly stabilizes the dominant identity story and prevents any changes from taking place.

Although these three techniques embrace the paradox, they fail to ensure stability and consistency in organizational identity; they merely contribute to creating a stable state of instability. As the case study exemplifies, the concealment of contradictions in an organization’s identity might not be absolute; put simply, it is impossible to resolve the problem of plurivocality (Brown, 2006) and to solve paradoxical tensions enduringly (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Where unity is impossible, hegemony remains an available option: peripheral voices become marginalized, which in turn continues to create new tensions and contradictions. Consequently, changes and adoptions (more or less slight) in organizational identities are the norm (as opposed to stable and consistent identities; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Corley et al., 2006; Gioia et al., 2010). Furthermore, changes in organizational identities are triggered by the paradoxical nature of the organizational identity and lead to a circular process that does not necessarily depend on events or on other influences external to the organization.

Given the (contestable) assumption that an organization’s identity may be perceived as stable and largely consistent at any point in time, such stability would be based on the marginalization and subjugation of voices peripheral to the organization’s identity. Even if effective in the short term, such stability would ultimately result in contradictions and paradoxical tensions, as dissonant narrations contested the dominant story of the organization, which would mainly be influenced by the actors in control of the resources (powerbrokers). At Wikipedia, authoring voices continue to contest the overarching dominant story of freedom in their identity narratives. These dissonant voices are based on an opposing identity narrative that rejects bureaucratization and expresses the experience of unfreedom. In

response, some organizational actors attempt to conceal contradictions as long as possible to maintain the stability and coherence of the prevalent organizational identity.

Latent paradoxical tensions persist, however, and can become salient contradictions (Smith & Lewis, 2011) that directly threaten to destabilize the dominant story. In our case, the indicator of this stage of development may have been the emergence of the Wikipedia Freedom Fighters, an ideologically motivated activist group that has attempted to change the organization from within (Zald & Berger, 1978). The identity struggle then becomes a power game, in which the power to control material devices and resources is mobilized to influence organizational identity. If the organization is able to reinstate coherence by concealing its identity contradictions through utopia, meaning shifts, and subjugation, its identity will change slightly—and this change will not materialize at the level of the dominant identity story.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The research questions that guide this article can be summarized as follows:

Research Question 1: How can the paradoxical nature of organizational identities influence the balance between stability and change in organizational identities?

Research Question 2: How do actors in (partial) organizations establish a “stable state of instability” of their collective identity in the face of this paradoxical nature?

With outer analysis of the empirical case, we contribute to three current issues in identity research. First, we emphasize the paradoxical nature (Smith & Lewis, 2011) of organizational identities, offering an alternative explanation of the factors that can trigger changes in organizational identities. Whereas research to date (including concepts such as “adaptive instability,” Gioia et al., 2000) most often assumes the presence of exogenous events or factors that trigger identity change, our conception does not depend on any such external occurrences. Rather, we interpret change as a self-sustaining condition inherent in the ongoing attempt to conceal contradictions that are the product of earlier attempts at concealment. We thus offer an explanation of organizational identity change that is based in the inherent paradoxical nature of the organizational identity itself and that endures because paradoxes cannot be managed away.

Second, the analysis of our empirical case shows that the paradoxical nature of freedom triggers an *ongoing* struggle over identity in which different actors simultaneously strive either to stabilize the organizational identity or to change it. We have argued that the dominant story of freedom results from a narrative process in which actors from the dominant subgroup attempt to impose their notions of organizational identity throughout the entity. Members of the dominant

group are often powerbrokers able to use technical artifacts (e.g., blocking the computer access of volunteers) to subjugate dissonant voices and create the illusion of coherence and consistency in identity narratives. However, although dissonant voices are marginalized and concealed by invoking utopia, meaning shifts, and subjugation, they still influence the dominant identity story. This can be seen in the *slight* adaptations to the dominant story (toward a utopian idea and a shifting meaning). As we show, this struggle fosters a gradual change in the organizational identity of Wikipedia, while allowing the prevalent understanding of “freedom” to remain stable.

Our case study thus combines the findings of previous studies of organizational identity that emphasize fluidity and latent instability with those of studies that focus more on ambiguity, struggle, and conflict. Specifically, our case study addresses and radicalizes recent discussions on endurance as a core element of organizational identity (as proposed by Albert & Whetten, 1985). A lack of stability in organizational identity is useful because it enables organizations to overcome misalignments between their identities and their external images (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Dutton et al., 1994; Gioia et al., 2000). This point has also been referred to as “adaptive instability” (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 63). We agree with this understanding of organizational identity as a “potentially precarious and unstable notion, frequently up for redefinition and revision by organizational members” (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 64). Our findings also confirm the notion of different levels of identity change (meanings and labels) by illustrating how such changes occur even though modifications at the level of the labels themselves may fail to materialize. The plurivocity of identity stories in our empirical case study is consistent with approaches that refer to the ambiguity of identity (Corley & Gioia, 2004) or identity conflicts (Fiol, 2002; Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). As our results indicate, plurivocity cannot only be a result of conflicting ideas of what the identity of an organization ought to be. Ambiguity and conflict create contradictions, which organizations are then challenged to conceal to maintain the appearance of stability. As we show here, Wikipedia conceals its contradictions using the approaches of utopia, meaning shifts, and subjugation.

Previous research on identity conflicts has emphasized the role of latent conflicts created through hybrid identities. As noted earlier, several empirical studies have shown that such conflicts are solved after a time of upheaval—as in the study of Golden-Biddle and Rao (1997) who found that organizational members react to conflicts by attempting to “transform the hybrid identity into a monolithic identity” (p. 602). However, in view of the findings obtained from our case study, we remain skeptical of the notion of “identity repair work” as described by these authors. Most previous work on this topic suggests some degree of linearity in identity

change, namely, a period of stability followed by a period of change, followed by a period of reinstated stability (e.g., Fiol, 2002). Our case study illustrates how dominant identity stories can be incomplete and inherently paradoxical, and how the process of establishing a single identity narrative and ascribing to it an official status fosters these tensions and contradictions. These tensions result in the need to conceal contradictions (e.g., by means of utopia, meaning shifts, and subjugation). Hence, although this logic of the circularity and self-sustainability of identity change processes has been assumed thus far, it has not explicitly been stressed in the literature on organizational identity. It has more aspects in common with Smith and Lewis's (2011) model of "dynamic equilibrium," in which they argued that organizational members can cope with paradoxes by iteratively addressing the different sides of them. Our theorizing exemplifies their model by showing how a paradox is sustained as a paradox in a circular process (by slightly shifting the element of the paradox in the dominant story) rather than by solving it. We thus suggest that identity change could be conceptualized as a circular process and that change can be at the core of collective identities. Consequentially, the instable and dynamic aspect of organizational identity is a crucial starting point for investigating organizational identity.

Third, our study breaks new ground in analyzing a partial organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). In so doing, our study differs from those of other authors by defining "inside" as a property of the organizational identity discourse rather than seeing organizational identity as lying within "objectively" and clearly identifiable organizational boundaries. The case of Wikipedia integrates "volunteers" who contribute to the online community as an inherent part of the identity formation process, rather than treating them as external stakeholders (Scott & Lane, 2000). What defines the "inside" of the organizational identity is then the collection of people who share certain parts of the collective identity and who take part in organizational processes (e.g., by making their voices heard) that constitute the community as organized entity.

As with any inductive study about extreme cases, our study has limitations. On one hand, testing our observations—in the first place at Wikipedia and subsequently in other settings—in a deductive fashion might reveal more coherent results in a larger population. Semantic analyses might also be beneficial as they could complement using mixed methods what we explored by means of "counting the countable" (Lee, 1999). On the other hand, integrating research on social movements (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007) and organized publics (Blau & Scott, 1962/2003) might shed new light on the fluid nature (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010) of the partial organization we observed.

In conclusion, our research contributes to an understanding of how the paradoxical nature of collective identities influences the way in which the balance between stability

and change evolves in collective identities. Though Wikipedia represents an extreme case, we deem our findings to be at least partially theoretically generalizable (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Paradoxes are ubiquitous and natural in organizations (Smith & Lewis, 2011) and we would expect paradoxical tension in collective identities to be unexceptional. Information technology (IT)-based partial organizations similar to Wikipedia might experience similar challenges, in particular. Take, for instance, open source software projects like Mozilla's Firefox or the development of Linux software. In these cases, the lines between volunteers and employed members are similar to those at Wikipedia and it is likely that there are intense debates about the different notions of freedom that should and do apply. In such organizations where people voluntarily take part in organizations and the processes of identity formation, it is relevant and interesting to question how these volunteers influence the negotiation of organizational identity and how the organizational identity (and its formation processes) influences their motivation to contribute voluntarily to the organization. Members of professional service organizations, to give another example, are challenged to cope with the paradoxical tension between professional autonomy and increasingly managerial orientation in their collective identities (e.g., Empson, 2004). Further research is therefore needed to analyze how common paradoxical tensions at the core of collective identities are, and whether the consequences are similar to those we found in our empirical case study. It will be of relevance to discuss how paradoxes in collective identities interrelate with other organizational paradoxes such as paradoxes of performing or learning. Current research has started to discuss how paradoxes coevolve in organizations (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), but more research is needed to enhance our understanding of this.

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Notes

1. Available from the authors on request.
2. According to Wikipedia, the term *troll* describes a person who willfully through obscene, offensive, or hateful actions ("trolling") attempts to disrupt a community or garner reactions, attention, and controversy.
3. The text from which this quotation originates discusses the different self-descriptions of society as one example of social systems. We see no reason why the general argument should not be applied to other forms of social systems such as organizations.

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Author Biographies

Arjan M. F. Kozica works as a lecturer at the German Armed Forces Command and Staff College and as postdoc at the University BW Munich at the chair for human resources management and organizational studies. His current research interest is in organizational learning, knowledge-intensive work, and organizational paradoxes.

Christian Gebhardt received his doctorate from Ingolstadt School of Management for which he conducted ethnographic research cooperation with Siemens AG. Also, he was visiting PhD student at Ross School of Business, University of Michigan. His research interest is in organizational identity, institutional theory, and corporate sustainability. He is currently working as manager for the management consulting firm A. T. Kearney.

Gordon Müller-Seitz works at the TU Kaiserslautern, Faculty of Business Studies and Economics. His research and consulting focuses on dealing with risks and uncertainties, innovative technologies and forms of organizing, interorganizational networks, and projects. His work has been applied at European corporations and consulting firms and has appeared in research journals and practitioner outlets.

Stephan Kaiser is a full professor at the University BW Munich and holds the chair for human resources management and organizational studies. His current research interests are in knowledge-intensive work, technology, human resources issues, and organizational theory. His work is published in a number of books and academic journals.