Norms that Govern: the Case of Wikipedia

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Abstract

In the absence of top-down authority, individuals may turn to collective governance to successfully manage common-pool resources. This solution to the Tragedy of the Commons must adapt to the changing needs and desires of individuals while maintaining temporal coherence and consistent mutual expectations within a framework of shared intentions and values. Here, we provide an explicit study of norm formation through more than a decade of creation and cross-linking of user-made guidelines and policies on the online social system Wikipedia. Increased page creation in the norm network and a rapid rise in the inequality between pages precedes order-of-magnitude growth in the active user population and the gradual partitioning of core norms into separate spheres of influence. At the same time, network analysis reveals persistent local motifs indicative of stable, underlying cognitive mechanisms that guide the accounts of cooperation, neutrality, and verifiability at the core of the system's self-understanding.

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