

Seeing the Smoke Before the Fire: Conflict Management in Policy- Supported Mass Collaborations

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Abstract. This study reflects preliminary work on the function of policies in conflict management in Policy-Supported Mass Collaboration Systems (PSMCS). By 1) developing tools to identify patterns of behavior that precede moments of conflict and 2) ascertaining the role(s) of governance in managing those moments, a long term goal is to develop a conflict prediction and management tool.

1 Introduction

Policy-Supported Mass Collaboration Systems (PSMCS) are virtual communities which rely on rules and guidelines to achieve their goals of creating and maintaining valuable knowledge artifacts. Salient features of PSMCS include the participation of large numbers of dispersed people with fluid memberships, lightweight interactions, and loose couplings. Examples of PSMCSs include Wikipedia and other Wikimedia projects, GitHub, Facebook, Twitter, Apache, Mozilla, Digg, Flickr, and Mechanical Turk. While these quite different organizations vary in the ways their virtual mass collaboration communities

operate, they all have established policies and policy systems that are central to achieving their goals.

1.1 Conflict

Conflict occurs wherever people congregate, both physically and virtually. Seeing conflict between groups of people is an established research approach (Thatcher & Patel, 2014). Much research identifies conflict that arises between two groups which do not share common knowledge (Rahim, 2011). Conflict is a concern, not merely because it is an uncomfortable human interaction, but because it can create greater overload for an organization and lead to dysfunctional outcomes. It takes extra time and more effort to perform regular activities in a contentious environment, as shown in Figure 1.

Recently, however, research has categorized conflict by types—cooperation, competition and avoidance (DeChurch & Marks, 2001, DeDreu & van Vianen, 2001, Weingart & Olekalns, 2004)—and has identified cooperative conflict as a positive feature in an organization (Gittell, 2003). Cooperative conflict works in situations where the community has a high level of mutual trust (Simons & Peterson, 2000) and strongly-held common goals (see Figure 1). This type of conflict produces better outcomes (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2002) because the conflict makes the task-oriented team more flexible and creative (Carnevale & Probst, 1998) and encourages greater cognitive understanding (Simons & Peterson, 2000). Conflict has this positive impact on tasks because it makes the team look more closely at the task issues, deliberate about them more thoughtfully, and arrive at decisions more efficiently and with more innovation (DeDreu & West, 2001).

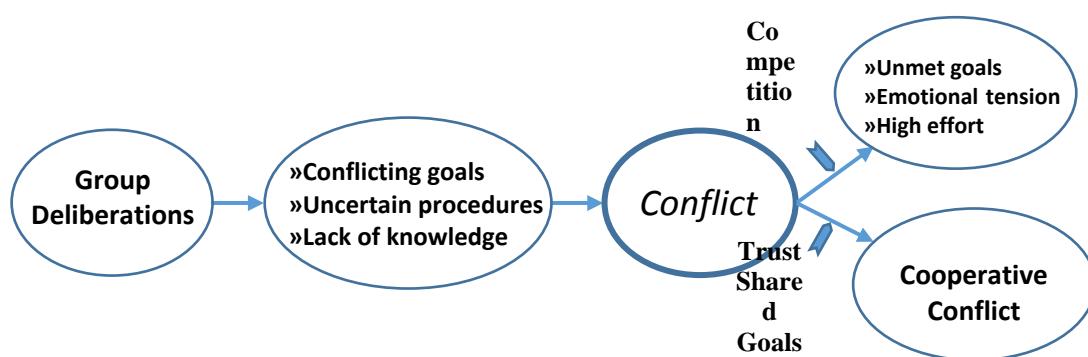


Figure 1. Conflict Process and Resolution

1.1.1 Conflict in PSMCS

Research has focused on conflict in PSMCS (Mattei & Dobrescu, 2011). General work on conflict and work on conflict in PSMCS identify sites of

conflict, but focus on the resolution of that conflict with the assumption that conflict must be resolved for progress to be made. However, it is possible that rather than resolving it, the conflict should be recognized and understood, and the organization should have tools with which to prevent the conflict from overwhelming the group or from losing focus on its goals. The ability to recognize the tension which leads to conflict and to implement policy in the effort to contain the conflict's overload may focus the deliberation on the goals of the community, avoid the distraction of upheaval, and reduce the overhead created by energy expended tangentially to community goals.

1.1.2 Governance and Conflict

Much research has examined the resolution of conflict through coordination (Kittur et al., 2007, Weingart & Olekalns, 2004), consensus (Joyce et al., 2013, Kriplean et al., 2007, McIntosh, 2008), and policy formation (Beschastnikh et al., 2008, Black et al., 2008), demonstrating the importance of policy implementation in conflict resolution. Some research has viewed conflict in PSMCS as a natural occurrence, where the important question for attaining goals in spite of that conflict is the degree or type of conflict (Joyce et al., 2011), but the overload created in the community and the threat to its pursuit of its aspirations which are caused by conflict should and could be diminished if contexts leading up to conflict were better understood, and if currently informal methods of conflict resolution, such as policy implementation, were formalized and codified. In the absence of hierarchical team structures, PSMCS may need to rely more heavily on systems of governance to prevent conflict from leading deliberations to poor or inefficient outcomes. Previous work on policy and conflict management in PSMCS (Joyce et al., 2011) has found that they address conflict through four main approaches: risk avoidance, risk minimization, threat management and impact containment.

1.2 Wikipedia

1.2.1 Wikipedia and Governance

Wikipedia is of particular interest for this study because it is a successful PSMCS which incorporates elements of bureaucratic, centrally-controlled organizations with those of community-governed mass collaborations. Wikipedia is a Mass Collaboration System because of the large size of its community, the ease with which participants can join and leave it, the immediacy of their relationships with each other, and the fragility of these relationships. As of December 2015, there are 18,223,711 named accounts in Wikipedia. A much smaller number of members regularly participate: only 124,572 have edited in the preceding 30 days, less than 0.7% of the population; over 3 million edits are

carried out every month. Joining the community is as simple as making an edit, though a more formal avenue exists: through enrolling as a user. Most participants edit little and rarely, developing weak relationships to the community.

Wikipedia is Policy-Supported. Examination of the policy structures of Wikipedia reveals a comparably complex structure of rules and policies. There are 53 pages in the “Wikipedia Official Policy” category as of January 2013. There are 38 pages categorized as “Wikipedia guidelines”, organized into seven subcategories. In addition, there are over 100 pending and over 450 rejected proposals for guidelines and policies. Likewise, in spite of the fact that bureaucracy and formal organization are regularly (and loudly) disparaged in discussions within Wikipedia, the reality is that Wikipedia and other mass collaboration efforts contain large and complex rule structures which contribute significantly to their functioning and success. Studies of Wikipedia (Beschastnikh et al., 2008) and anecdotal evidence from Wikipedia participants suggest that the policies, rules, and guidelines play an important part in both the day-to-day operations and overall success of Wikipedia, as shown in Figure 2 below.

- And that's [sic] just Ontario. I'm sorry, but our provinces are large, about the size of 6 or seven states. Our county road system is equivalent to your state road system. - floydian
- I would, but it's not my duty to clean up Canada (and the horrible state it's in). --Rschen7754
- Good, then stay working on your US articles. I am cleaning up the Canadian articles, and you are being counter-productive to that every step of the way. If you won't nominate those, and you are making a half-finished attempt to nominate this article, then I will close the nomination as incomplete. - floydian
- What? You can't do that. --Rschen7754
- WP:COI by just attempting that. If you're going to be a WP:DICK take it to WT:USRD and WT:CRWP and I and others can leave comment. Arguing with a foul attitude says nothing and will drive problems on yourself. Considering I started the project, I should know this. Mitch32(The Password is... See here!)
- Actually I can, please go read Wikipedia:Guide_to_deletion#Nomination, which states that you must complete all of the steps, followed by the text: "Incomplete nominations may be discarded or ignored". This nomination is incomplete, aside from the fact that it was also made to try and prove a point. - floydian
- WP:COI will get you blocked. You are a major part of this AFD, meaning closing it is a conflict of interest for one side and therefore the problem is also going to fall on you. Now actions will be taken if you attempt to close this. Mitch32(The Password is... See here!)

Figure 2: Sample Conflict in Articles for Deletion in Wikipedia

1.3 Workshop Proposal

Previous work has focused on Wikipedia and conflict (Kittur et al., 2007) and on conflict in its Articles for Deletion deliberations (Joyce et al., 2011). Previous work has also established the association between greater group effort expenditure and policy citation (Joyce et al., 2013). However, what has not been accomplished is a clear sense of the function of policies in these moments of conflict. It is clear that policies are invoked at moments of conflict, but do they serve to resolve or exacerbate the conflicts? What part do they play in developing Cooperative Conflict, if any?

We have built a new data set from Wikipedia's Articles for deletion deliberation and are poised for analysis of the role of policy in conflict resolution. This workshop would be instrumental in our effort to develop appropriate measurement tools.

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