

Fostering Voluntary Contributions to a Public Good  
A Large-Scale Natural Field Experiment at Wikipedia

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*This natural field experiment tests the effects of purely symbolic awards on volunteer retention in a public goods context. The experiment is conducted at Wikipedia, which faces declining editor retention rates, particularly among newcomers. Randomization assures that award receipt is orthogonal to previous performance. The analysis reveals that awards have a sizeable effect on newcomer retention, which persists over the four quarters following the initial intervention. This is noteworthy for showing that awards for volunteers are effective even if they have no impact on the volunteers' future career opportunities. The awards are purely symbolic, and the status increment they produce is limited to the recipients' pseudonymous online identities in a community they have just recently joined. The results can be explained by enhanced self-identification with the community, but they are also in line with recent findings on the role of status and reputation, recognition, and evaluation potential in online communities. JEL codes: C93, M52, H41.*

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Wikipedia is an undisputed success story. It is the largest online encyclopedia, and its content is provided and curated by voluntary contributors. As of May 2015, more than 55 million registered editors have voluntarily contributed to this public good.<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia is the world's sixth most popular website<sup>2</sup> and comprises more than 35 million encyclopedic articles<sup>1</sup> in 288 different languages<sup>3</sup> (see also Greenstein and Zhu 2012).

Yet, from the perspective of standard economic theory committed to the self-interested *homo economicus*, such contributions should not have occurred, because they are not remunerated financially. They do not even entail reputational benefits that might translate into higher future earnings. The editors (i.e., contributors) of Wikipedia are anonymous since they most often use pseudonyms. Moreover, articles are the result of common work, making it difficult, if not impossible, to trace the author of a specific part. Readers are therefore unable to see who wrote an article or helped to improve it. Non-virtual prestige benefits and material advantages can thus be excluded as drivers of this form of voluntary behavior. As a consequence, standard economics would predict that rational individuals do not contribute to Wikipedia.

The conflict between theoretical prediction and empirical observation has been identified in the private provision of public goods more generally. The puzzle that the existence of such public goods<sup>4</sup> poses to theory has intrigued economists for a long time (e.g., Olson 1965); many analyses have been devoted to the motivations underlying such pro-social behavior (Gaechter 2014 presents the central findings of recent research on pro-sociality).<sup>5</sup>

This paper focuses on a different but related question, how to foster and uphold the behavior already undertaken by individuals. Voluntary commitments have become increasingly fleeting because fewer and fewer volunteers are willing or able to commit to an organization for an extended period of time (Macduff 2005). Nonprofit organizations, however, are dependent on sustained involvement of volunteers. Even a project such as Wikipedia, which has seen millions of people contribute, is severely threatened by declining retention rates among its newer members (Wikimedia 2011a).

Voluntary organizations are confronted with the challenge of fostering the behavior of their members without, however, crowding out their intrinsic motivation with the rewards they choose to employ (see Gneezy et al. 2011 for a discussion of when incentives do and do not work to motivate pro-social

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<sup>1</sup> [https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Wikipedias#Grand\\_Total](https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/List_of_Wikipedias#Grand_Total) (accessed May 24, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/wikipedia.org?range=5y&size=large&y=t> (May 24, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> [https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Wikipedias](https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/List_of_Wikipedias) (May 24, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Other examples of online public goods are given in Zhang and Zhu (2011), including products from open source software development (e.g., Mozilla Firefox) and content sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube).

<sup>5</sup> Studies on motivations to contribute to online public goods are, e.g., Benkler (2002), Lerner and Tirole (2002), Lakhani and von Hippel (2003), and Nov (2007). Von Krogh and von Hippel (2006) provide a categorization and review the literature on open source software; Table 1 in von Krogh et al. (2012, p. 654) offers a recent overview.

behavior). These organizations have to strike a delicate balance between the nature and salience of the rewards, and the self-determinedness and self-perception of volunteers (Frey and Goette 1999, Falk and Kosfeld 2006, Ariely et al. 2009). Voluntary organizations can neither bind their members with contractual agreements, nor can they use monetary incentives, as for-profit firms do to incentivize their employees. Employing small monetary rewards that accommodate their cash constraint is often even inferior to using no cash rewards at all (Gneezy and Rustichini 2000). Non-monetary alternatives have to be employed to motivate volunteers to stay.

The existing literature is largely silent on the effects and potential of purely symbolic rewards, in particular awards, for pro-social behavior. However, it can be observed that throughout history, the provision of honor to volunteers, for instance with orders of merit, has played an important role in most if not all societies (Frey and Neckermann 2009). Awards provide an opportunity to "repay" volunteers in a non-monetary currency that may cater to their initial motivations (e.g., seeking honor) while reducing the risk of crowding-out (Frey 2007). While states have retained the monopoly over official orders (e.g., the *President's Volunteer Service Award* in the US), non-state entities have created other forms of awards (e.g., journals such as *Management Science* bestowing annual service awards to a select group of Associate Editors and reviewers to recognize their voluntary contributions). There are nowadays plenty of honors given for pro-social behavior, ranging from the prestigious *Florence Nightingale Medal* of the International Committee of the Red Cross to well-respected awards bestowed by private organizations, such as the *Eagle Palms* awarded by Boy Scouts of America.

The analysis of the potential of awards in furthering the provision of public goods is confronted with a major obstacle. Since awards are by definition given for extraordinary behavior, causality cannot be established. Omitted variables and endogeneity bias cannot be ruled out. As it is those deemed the best who receive awards, it is not surprising that award recipients also perform better than others in the future. Such superior performance may simply reflect the fact that award winners are more able and more motivated than non-winners. Observing the superior performance of award recipients thus does not establish whether it is the award conferral as such that raises subsequent performance.

Various methods can help identify an award's causal effects. One is to compare the performance of award winners with that of a closely comparable group, in particular, with the set of award nominees (e.g., Ginsburgh 2003). It is also possible to construct a comparison group using the synthetic control method (Chan et al. 2014), or to perform a difference-in-differences analysis in which awards are given for a task uncorrelated with the outcome measure of performance (Neckermann et al. 2014).

An ideal identification strategy uses randomization in a natural field environment (e.g., Chen et al. 2006 and Gneezy and List 2006, testing gift-exchange on the Internet and in the field). This method has been approximated by an experiment where students were hired for a one-time data entry job of two hours and

subjects in the award treatment were promised a symbolic congratulatory card in addition to the fixed wage (Kosfeld and Neckermann 2011). Notwithstanding these recent advances in the literature on awards, however, various limitations remain. In some cases, the identification of a causal relationship remains uncertain (internal validity), and the award entails material benefits that may be responsible for any effects found; in other cases, the setting is artificial and focuses on a short time window of several hours, so that external validity and especially the extension to pro-social behavior are doubtful. True randomization is difficult to institute in the field because award-giving institutions are reluctant to relinquish control of the selection process.

To circumvent this problem, a new award scheme can be implemented, with a committee of senior practitioners to establish the award's reputation. Such an approach was chosen for this experiment. Each month, all newly contributing Wikipedia editors are subjected to a basic screening (to filter out vandals, for example), after which a fixed number of individuals are randomly allocated into the treatment group. An award is posted on their personal page and their name is announced on the official award page, embedded in a national Wikipedia portal. The experimental design, based on a random treatment allocation, allows for a straightforward identification of causality by basic mean-comparison tests.

To the best of my knowledge, this paper presents the first natural field experiment using randomization to identify the causal effects of symbolic award schemes on voluntary contributions to a public good. In particular, I examine whether awards that are of no present or future material value can motivate new contributors to uphold their engagement, thus increasing newcomer retention. The awards are not just purely symbolic; they are also highly community-specific since they are tied to pseudonyms. The status and recognition effects of the awards are limited to the community of Wikipedians, which the award recipients have just recently joined. Only the award recipients themselves know that they are the individuals behind the pseudonyms that were awarded.

The experiment is conducted at the German language edition of Wikipedia, which is the second-oldest after the English Wikipedia and ranks among the largest Wikipedia language versions<sup>6</sup> in terms of article numbers (more than 1.8 million as of May 2015<sup>7</sup>), contributors (more than 2.1 million registered accounts<sup>9</sup> of editors mostly based in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) and usage (over 1 million views per hour<sup>8</sup>). The experiment spans more than eleven months and comprises observations on 4,007 individuals. With its focus on newcomer retention, the study addresses one of the most important challenges Wikipedia faces. Although its readership has been increasing steadily (Greenstein and Zhu

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<sup>6</sup> [https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Wikipedias](https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/List_of_Wikipedias) (May 24, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> <https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Spezial:Statistik&action=raw> (May 24, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> <http://stats.wikimedia.org/DE/> (as of March 31, 2015).

2012), Wikipedia is struggling with declining retention rates among its contributors, especially among new ones (Suh et al. 2009, Wikimedia 2011a).

The field experiment provides empirical evidence that awards do indeed increase retention among newcomers by motivating them to uphold their contributions to a public good such as Wikipedia. Activity is considered in three fundamental dimensions: general activity, direct work on articles, and behind-the-scenes coordination work. In all three cases, the positive effect of the award is not only statistically significant; it is also sizeable and of practical importance, given the retention problem Wikipedia and other volunteer organizations face.

The key findings derived from the analysis are that awards positively and sustainably impact individual behavior even if they cannot entail any material or career-related benefits; they are powerful motivators even if the status increment they produce is limited to a community the award recipients have just recently joined. The purely symbolic awards increase the share of editors remaining active in the following month by 20 percent ( $p = 0.000$ ). They also raise the share of authors who continue to directly contribute content to articles by 13 percent ( $p = 0.017$ ). In contrast to previous results on gift exchange involving money (Gneezy and List 2006), the symbolic awards' effect persists even over longer time periods. The retention rate among the group of award recipients continues to significantly exceed that of the control group in each of the four quarters following the initial award bestowal.

One possible explanation for the finding that symbolic awards significantly increase retention is that awards induce their recipients to self-identify as members of the community of Wikipedians (a name commonly used for Wikipedia editors). The results on indirect community work done behind the scenes support this conjecture; the awards significantly raise the fraction of newcomers willing to fulfill tedious maintenance tasks, which are more likely to be assumed by editors who self-identify with the community (e.g., Butler et al. 2007, Kittur et al. 2009, Zhu et al. 2012). Other explanations are provided by recent studies on the role of status and reputation, recognition, and evaluation potential in online communities. The relevance of these explanations is supported by anecdotal evidence from recipients' direct responses to the award and, in the case of status and reputation concerns, by data on social signaling. The persistence of the treatment effect over the year following the intervention is most likely also supported by success-breeds-success dynamics triggered by the initial award.

## **I. Experimental Setup**

### *A. Background on Wikipedia*

Over the fourteen years since its launch in 2001, Wikipedia has become an established online information repository.<sup>9</sup> The English and German language versions of Wikipedia draw more than 10.7 million and 1.2 million views per hour, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Articles are only one part of the project, however. Wikipedia is composed of several areas of activity (called "namespaces") that categorize the different contributions editors can make; grouping for instance all article edits, all file uploads or all contributions to Wikipedia-related meta issues (such as policy design). Every single page has its discussion room ("talk" page) on which editors (called "users") can exchange comments. Contributors also have a personal user page where they can introduce themselves to the community, as well as a corresponding talk page that serves as a platform for communicating with others. Contributors' activities can thus take many different forms.

To improve quality and fight vandalism, a multitude of standards and rules have gradually been established. New editors wanting to contribute to Wikipedia therefore have to comply with an increasingly complex regulatory framework. Non-compliance with established standards often leads to quick deletion of one's work, be it by other editors or even by automated tools (Morgan et al. 2013). Today, newcomers are more likely to be greeted with a warning rather than a welcome message (Pinchuk 2011), harsh criticism being no exception (Kraut et al. 2012). While reverts (deletions) help preserve quality, they substantially decrease newcomers' willingness to further contribute to the project (Halfaker et al. 2011). Given a diminishing number of topics that do not yet have a Wikipedia entry, new editors often have to fit their contribution into an existing article and defend it in front of more tenured editors keeping watch over their field of expertise (Suh et al. 2009).

In the German language Wikipedia, newcomers' contributions even have to be screened and confirmed by established editors before being publicly visible. As a result, it can take a considerable time until new editors see the product of their work appear on Wikipedia.

### B. *The Experimental Design*

"[W]orking closely with practitioners" is listed as one of the three central advantages of field experiments by List and Rasul (2010, 105). The present study both lends support to this assertion and emphasizes that practitioners' endorsement is most likely to be vital for any such endeavor. The backing and trust of several highly reputable community members were central to this experiment. These contacts were established via telephone calls, which were followed up by regular roundtable meetings with a group

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<sup>9</sup> Collaborations between Wikipedia and prestigious research and state entities are no exception (Butler 2008). Already in 2008, *The Economist* argued: "IT IS the biggest encyclopedia in history and the most successful example of "user-generated content" on the internet" available at <http://www.economist.com/node/10789354> (June 16, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> <http://stats.wikimedia.org/EN/Sitemap.htm> (July 24, 2013).

of editors willing to tackle the retention problem with the help of the experiment. They became official founding members of the project, which was thus institutionalized under the umbrella of the Swiss national Wikipedia portal,<sup>11</sup> providing the award with considerable reputation and a formal character. The award's official page is displayed and described more closely in Appendix A (see Appendix A1 for a screenshot of the translated page). The page briefly describes the award, how it was developed at several roundtable meetings, and what was the idea behind its creation; namely, to honor new editors and their valuable contributions to the German language Wikipedia. The names of the Wikipedians behind the program are also given. The description does not contain any explicit performance criteria for getting the award, other than that the editors have made their first contributions to the German language Wikipedia in the previous month; it is mentioned that there were more than 4,000 newcomers as potential candidates in a given month. The text does not say that randomization was used to select who out of the final sample of deserving candidates would win the award. It also does not announce that the awards' effects would be evaluated so as to preserve the advantages of a natural field experiment (Harrison and List 2004), i.e., that subjects remain in their natural environment and that their behavior is not distorted by their awareness of the experiment. Below the descriptive text, the respective month's list of award winners is displayed.

The experiment proceeds in four steps (see *Table A1* in the Online Appendix). First, on the 6th of every month, I obtain a data dump of the German language Wikipedia, where contributors are identified by an Internet Protocol (IP) address at the time they connect to the Internet, as well as their username and ID if they register an account on Wikipedia. I am responsible for making the decision about whom to bestow with the first level award ("Edelweiss with Star"), while the core project members evaluate the previous winners to select the recipients for the second and third level awards (2 Star and 3 Star). A computer script is used to identify all new editors who have made their first edit to an article in a given month (approximately 3,000) and submit them to a basic screening, whereby algorithms single out those editors who are not blocked<sup>12</sup> and who have contributed at least twice, with a minimum of five days between their first and last edit. This increases the chances that editors actually return to their account and see that they have received an award (if they belong to the treatment group).<sup>13</sup> Only registered editors are considered for the experiment;<sup>14</sup> "bots" (automated tools) are excluded.

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<sup>11</sup> Wikipedia portals coordinate work on specific topics related to the respective portal's thematic focus.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Choi et al. (2010, p. 110): "Some users were blocked by Wikipedia because of their vandalistic edits [...]. We excluded those users."

<sup>13</sup> This condition drastically reduces the size of the subject pool since, as shown by Panciera, Halfaker, and Terveen (2009, p. 55) for the English Wikipedia, roughly "60% of registered users never make another edit after their first 24 hours."

<sup>14</sup> IP addresses are often not permanent. They identify a specific device whereas the same person may contribute via various devices. Moreover, they can map to multiple computers in a network (e.g., in an office) or to a single but public computer, which is used by different persons (Zhang and Zhu 2011).

Second, the remaining editors (approximately 500) are examined one by one to exclude vandals, advertisers, secondary accounts ("sockpuppets"), group accounts (including those created by organizations) and accounts of Wikimedia employees according to a rulebook developed for this purpose.<sup>15</sup> For this step, an algorithm was developed that flags an editor if specific keywords are found on his or her user page. Only editors are retained who have made at least one contribution to an article that is still visible at the day of the screening, i.e., that has not been deleted, whereby only articles are considered that are not tagged for deletion (as, e.g., in Zhu et al. 2013). This careful screening process was developed in consultation with experienced community members. It helps ensure that members of the resulting pool of candidates would in principle all deserve a small newcomer award for their first efforts to contribute to Wikipedia.

From the pool of remaining editors (approximately 370), 150 award recipients are randomly selected (treatment group). In a fourth and last step, on the morning of the 12th of the given month, the list of winners is posted on the award's page and a text accompanied by a graphic award is placed on the awardees' talk pages, informing them that there were over 4,000 newcomers, i.e., potential candidates, in the previous month (see Appendix A2). A Wikipedia account bearing the name of the award was created for the purpose of making these posts, which are publicly visible.

Wikipedia keeps the history of every edit made by each contributor, including the timestamps. This allows me to observe the entire range of activities that contributors engage in (e.g., correcting or writing articles, uploading files), including the correspondence among editors on talk pages.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the accurateness of the performance measurement is close to that in lab experiments, but the scope of action is not artificially imposed and even social interaction is allowed for and taken into account. At the same time, the Internet context makes it possible to treat each award recipient equally, whereas face-to-face interactions could be subject to variability of emotional expressions and inadvertent signaling by the researcher.

### *C. Relevant Outcome Variables*

*General activity.*—The dependent variable of interest is retention, i.e., whether a newcomer becomes active again in the month following the awarding date—the "original definition of activity" being that at least one edit be made in a given month (Wikimedia 2011a, p. 11). As stated on the Wikimedia research

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<sup>15</sup> This is in line e.g. with Walling and Taraborelli (2012), who also "exclud[ed] to the best of [their] knowledge sockpuppets and other categories of spurious accounts."

<sup>16</sup> Only the correspondence via email is not observable. However, emails only constitute a minor fraction of the correspondence, as becomes evident e.g. by the following advice: "In general, you should not expect Wikipedians to contact you by email. Instead, check back to the talk page periodically to see if your question has been answered" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Researching\\_with\\_Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Researching_with_Wikipedia) (May 20, 2013).



pages, "[t]his metric has commonly been used [...] when examining the 'decline' of participation".<sup>17</sup> In a supplementary analysis examining treatment effect persistence, the time horizon is extended to consider the quarters (i.e., three-monthly periods) following the intervention. As a robustness check, the general notion of activity is further restricted, ignoring contributions to the project's page and to the editor's own pages so as to make sure that the results are not driven by merely award-related communication.

*Direct work on articles.*—Retention can also be more narrowly conceived. The most conservative measure of retention would exclusively consider article edits as a form of direct content provision, ignoring all other activities (as, e.g., coordination work or file uploads). A binary variable indicates the shares of the treatment and control groups that remain active in this work dimension.

To ensure that any treatment effect found in the analysis (i.e., a higher retention rate among subjects from the treatment group) is not driven by minor editing activities, the degree of activity is considered as an extension. The Wikimedia research team has developed a categorization of activity levels that can be used to see whether the award also produces editors who are more active in providing content to articles than are subjects in the control group. Authors are divided into four groups according to the number of article edits they make in the following month: those who become inactive, those making 1 to 4 article edits, "active" editors (5-99 article edits), and "very active" editors (100+ article edits).<sup>18</sup>

Since the field experiment focuses on newcomer retention, further performance measures are consciously avoided. In particular, the number of article edits as such is not used as a variable for the analysis, despite its favorable property of being a continuous variable. The measure has several pitfalls (see, e.g., Adler et al. 2008). Most importantly, the experimental treatment may introduce an asymmetry between treatment and control groups that inhibits the use of this measure for the analysis. A person can prepare a whole article and put it on Wikipedia in one edit, while another person may correct minor mistakes in an article and save each single change, thus generating many more edits. Each time the save button is hit, one edit is registered. If the distortions of the edit count measure were distributed equally among treatment and control groups, the measure would be flawed, but the comparative analysis could still be revealing. However, receiving an award may prompt newcomers to make an effort to abide by the community conventions, which explicitly ask each editor to reduce the number of edits made to a single article by collecting and previewing all the changes before saving them.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the award may in fact lead to a decline in the number of edits made by award recipients. The focus on retention (both broadly

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<sup>17</sup> [http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research:Metrics/survival\(t\)](http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research:Metrics/survival(t)) (May 28, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> See <http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research:Metrics> (June 7, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> The following illustrates the convention: "It is strongly recommended that you use [the Show preview button] before saving [...] Saving the same article several times in quick succession makes it harder for people to check what changed, and clogs up the page history." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Show\\_preview](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Show_preview) (June 18, 2013).

and narrowly defined) allows the analysis to circumvent the problems related to such performance measurements.

*Indirect community work.*—For the discussion of the results, variables capturing volunteers' readiness to fulfill indirect community work help to assess whether increased self-identification with the community and a sense of belonging may provide a partial explanation for the award's effect on retention. Such "necessary but mundane" (Lakhani and von Hippel 2003) coordination and maintenance tasks behind the scenes are more likely to be assumed by editors who self-identify with the community (e.g., Kittur et al. 2009). As Butler et al.'s (2007) survey study suggests, commitment and identification with a community make contributors more motivated to fulfill behind the scenes community maintenance work, which is vital for the community's health (see also Ren et al. 2011, p. 77). Zhu et al. (2012) demonstrate, for the context of Wikipedia, that volunteers become more willing to fulfill maintenance and other unattractive but important tasks if they identify and feel they belong to the group. To operationalize an editor's willingness to fulfill indirect community work, the "active on talk pages" variable assesses whether the editor has made any contributions to the talk pages in Wikipedia. The variable "active on Wikipedia meta pages" captures whether the editor has been involved in the organization of the Wikipedia project itself, designing and discussing policies and guidelines, or doing other administrative work. Two further variables measure whether the newcomer has edited his or her own user page, which is most often employed to introduce oneself to the community, or the personal user talk page, which is usually used to respond to other editors' requests.

*Status and reputation concerns.*—A further and related explanation for why awards may affect newcomer retention is that they lend reputational capital, enhancing the recipient's social image and status in the community. As a proxy for such status and reputation concerns, data on social signaling is used to estimate the share of award recipients who chose to display the award more prominently by putting it on their personal user page.

## **II. Theoretical Background**

Awards such as medals of merit or badges of honor are extrinsic, non-monetary motivators. In the terminology of Bénabou and Tirole (2003, p. 504), these awards correspond to "discretionary" or "ex post" rewards, as opposed to "promised" or "ex ante" contingent incentives (e.g., innovation prizes as studied, for instance, by Terwiesch and Xu 2008). Awards differ from monetary rewards mainly in that they impose little material cost on the giver; they do not require an exact definition and measurement of performance; they are less likely to crowd out the recipient's intrinsic motivation; and they are more suitable for establishing special ties of loyalty and respect between the giver and the recipient (Frey 2007). The publicity as well as the selective and official nature of their bestowal, often involving a

prestigious award committee, differentiate awards from positive feedback, personal praise, and gift exchange (Frey and Gallus 2014).

Research on awards has only recently gained momentum in economics and management (e.g., Ginsburgh 2003, Frey 2005, Rablen and Oswald 2008, Malmendier and Tate 2009, Kosfeld and Neckermann 2011, Chan et al. 2014, Neckermann et al. 2014, Gallus and Frey 2015; see Frey and Gallus 2015 for a survey). It is confronted with two main problems in the field: the identification of causality, as discussed in the introduction, and the isolation of the purely symbolic dimensions of awards.

The context of Wikipedia makes it possible to examine the causal effects of awards while ruling out material and career-related benefits that awards might entail; individuals tend to operate anonymously under pseudonyms (Wikimedia 2011b). Most studies on awards in the field involve monetary pay, even if only to remunerate subjects for their participation in the experiment. However, the mere presence of financial rewards may interact with the award's effects (Heyman and Ariely 2004). The award given to members of the treatment group on top of their regular pay may, for instance, add meaning to the latter. Since the present experiment does not involve any transfers of money, such possible interactions of awards with money are excluded.

To test the prediction that purely symbolic awards increase newcomer retention on Wikipedia, the analysis considers whether subjects subsequently become active again. It focuses on the month following the intervention and looks at general activity, but also more narrowly at direct contributions to articles only. In a supplementary analysis, it considers whether the difference in retention rates persists over the following quarters.

It is not clear *a priori* whether awards retain any meaningful motivational effect if they are purely symbolic and given to newcomers to a community. After all, awards with no material value are "just pieces of ribbon" (Besley 2005), as some observers contend. In this experiment, not even ribbons are used; the award is just a graphic digital symbol.

Research on *social identification* suggests that being publicly acknowledged by senior community members and being categorized as a valuable contributor may foster a perception of belonging and self-identification with the community (see Ren et al. 2011 for an overview of the literature and proposals for encouraging identity-related commitment in online communities). Even purely random assignment to a group can activate social identity and foster unselfish cooperation (Goette et al. 2006). As Karau and Williams (2001, p. 129) suggest in their collective effort model, strengthening individuals' social identification with a group is an effective strategy for enhancing individuals' concern with group outcomes; it enhances liking of the group (see Kraut and Resnick 2011, who draw on this model to develop a framework for encouraging contribution to online communities). Applied to the online context, the result of this increased identification and liking is a higher willingness to fulfill less rewarding

coordination and maintenance work (Butler et al. 2007, Kittur et al. 2009, Zhu et al. 2012). However, the categorization as a newcomer might also have the opposite effect and induce award recipients to identify as outsiders and/or feel inferior to the established community members.

Another possible and related explanation for why symbolic awards may foster retention is that they enhance their recipients' *status and reputation*; i.e., the benefits accruing directly to the individual ("individual outcome" in Kraut and Resnick's 2011 framework). Status is an important social need that individuals strive to achieve (Lindenberg 2013). Laboratory studies have shown that subjects are willing to incur costs to attain higher status (Huberman et al. 2004, Charness et al. 2014); they work harder even if they expect to be only privately informed about their rank (e.g., Kuhnen and Tymula 2012). Recent field research provides further support for such concerns about relative standing (Blanes i Vidal and Nossol 2011), and is even arguing for an inherent preference for high rank (Tran and Zeckhauser 2012). Yet, there is also lab and field evidence for the sometimes-dampening effects of rank information (see Tran and Zeckhauser 2012 for an overview).

Moreover, status and reputational concerns in the voluntary sector differ from those in workplace environments. On the one hand, in a public goods context where everyone benefits from the individual's contributions, informing people that they do better than average may lead them to conclude that they have "done enough" and should reduce or discontinue their involvement (see Chen et al. 2010 for field experimental evidence from an online community).<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, honoring new editors for their recent contributions may serve as a cue activating their self-image as a generous individual, leading to increased identity investments in the future (e.g., Bénabou and Tirole 2011). When made public, such interventions providing information about people's contributions can trigger social image concerns (see Kraft-Todd et al. 2015 for a survey of related field experiments). In a field experiment in 30 Dutch churches, Soetevent (2005) finds that removing anonymity significantly increases charitable contributions (see also Andreoni and Petrie 2004 and Rege and Telle 2004 on how unmasking contributors increases public good contributions in the lab). Yet, most observed effects of identifiability can also be driven by aversion from shame, which recent experimental evidence suggests can be a stronger motivation for giving than anticipation of prestige (Samek and Sheremeta 2014). In the present experiment, however, shame is unlikely to play a role since subjects use pseudonyms and the treatment only highlights positive performance. Somewhat more related, therefore, is a field experiment by Lacetera and Macis (2010), showing that medals are effective *ex ante* incentives for blood donations—but only if they are publicly awarded. It is still unclear whether symbolic awards have a motivating effect if there are no face-to-face

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<sup>20</sup> As Thaler and Sunstein (2008, p. 69) admonish, "If you want to nudge people into socially desirable behavior, do not, by any means, let them know that their current actions are better than the social norm."

interactions, and if the status and reputational value they produce is limited to an online community the person has just started to interact with.

*Recognition* is a closely related motivational factor (see, e.g., Bradler et al. 2013 on employee recognition). It is particularly effective when coming from peers (e.g., Lerner and Tirole 2002 for the case of open source software development) and when being public, in which case it also caters to social image concerns (see Karlan and McConnell 2014 for field and lab experimental evidence related to charitable donations). Awards provide public recognition, even when restricted to an online context; but when awards are given to new contributors, the recognition does not come from established peers. It comes from members of an as of yet unfamiliar community. Nevertheless, being recognized in the beginning for the first contributions can be an important motivator because it raises self-confidence and shows that one's efforts have a valuable impact on the community's performance and outcomes (Karau and Williams 1993, Rashid et al. 2006). Such early recognition by community members can moreover motivate recipients to increase their efforts so as to honor the award.

*Evaluation potential theory* provides a related and most basic rationale for why awards may affect behavior in a public goods context: awards signal to their recipients that their individual inputs are being identified and evaluated (e.g., Harkins and Jackson 1985, Karau and Williams 1993, 2001). Award recipients no longer feel "lost in the crowd" (Latané et al. 1979), but rather experience that they receive a fair share of credit for good performance, even though this performance will be merged with the work done by the millions of other editors. Yet, if recipients perceive the award and performance evaluation as obtrusive or even controlling, their intrinsic motivation can also be crowded out.

A recent field experiment (Restivo and van de Rijt 2014) on peer-to-peer rewards on Wikipedia warrants caution, indicating that factors such as who gives recognition, and to whom, greatly matter. Restivo and van de Rijt analyze barnstars, which are widely used informal peer-to-peer rewards that any one editor in the English Wikipedia can freely and spontaneously give to any other editor. In a first study (Restivo and van de Rijt 2012), editors belonging to the top 1 percent most productive contributors, but who had not yet received such a token of recognition, were found to respond positively to receiving a barnstar. They raised their subsequent contribution level by 60 percent. Since this finding "only pertained to already highly-active contributors" (Restivo and van de Rijt 2014, p. 451), the authors replicated the experimental procedures and anonymously gave barnstars to a random sample of the top 10 percent most productive contributors, who had also never before received a reward for their efforts. Surprisingly, this study yields contrary results to the previous findings and also to the authors' theory-based expectations. The barnstars had no effect on productivity, and they even provoked a decrease in retention among those core contributors. The authors conclude that "[c]ontributors must already have a high level of involvement in the community before they can be motivated by use of informal rewards. In insufficiently

qualified populations, recognition does not motivate recipients to increase effort, and may even do more harm than good [...]" (2014, p. 459). The present study tests whether these conclusions hold for giving awards to new contributors.

Several noteworthy differences to the present field experiment need to be pointed out to derive useful implications for the study of awards. Firstly, the *types of reward* and *by whom they are given* vastly differ. Restivo and van de Rijt study informal, peer-to-peer rewards as they are frequently used on the English Wikipedia to examine their effectiveness. These rewards are given spontaneously, at an indeterminate rate, and in unlimited numbers (see the article on "Wikipedia:Barnstaritis"). In the experiments by Restivo and van de Rijt, the bestowal was a one-off event; all barnstars were distributed in a single spell. Every editor, even when unregistered, can post such tokens on other editors' talk pages. As Kraut and Resnick (2011, p. 49) argue, the fact that barnstars are "based on the judgment of only a single editor" hampers their credibility. In the studies by Restivo and van de Rijt, the rewards were given anonymously (2014) or by a self-declared "not very active"<sup>21</sup> user account (2012). The tokens are thus being passed up a prestige hierarchy. This might provide one explanation why the second study reached such surprisingly negative results. In contrast, awards are usually formally institutionalized; they are given at regular intervals, and their numbers are held constant and limited. The present field experiment carefully mirrors such award schemes; the awards are not just one-off events, but they are given every month, and in limited numbers. As the sociologist William Goode (1978, pp. 160-163) argues, the source of esteem of awards greatly matters, which is why it is rare that one individual bestows awards. The award giver needs to have prestige to give. In this experiment, a formal award board was instituted, composed of reputable community members. Moreover, a dedicated award page was created, which is embedded in a national Wikipedia portal and also contains a hall of fame where past winners are listed. This has the additional effect that award recipients enter a group of past winners to whom they belong and from whose reputation they can benefit (see, Brennan and Pettit 2004, pp. 196–198 on reputation-pooling).

Secondly, the *subject pools* are fundamentally different. Restivo and van de Rijt focus on the most productive editors. Their second study broadens the analysis, from the top 1 percent to the top 10 percent, but the authors caution the reader that these contributors "are still quite active overall" (2014, p. 453, Note 1). They still belong to what the authors call the "core" contributors (p. 453). Moreover, the editors from "this already highly selective sample (top 10% of contributors overall)" (p. 455) had never before received a barnstar, despite their efforts and despite the pervasiveness of barnstars on the English Wikipedia. As Restivo and van de Rijt (2014) propose as a general motivation for their endeavor to widen the pool of subjects to the top 10 percent of editors, "informal rewarding may be a mechanism to recruit

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<sup>21</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Administrators%27\\_noticeboard/IncidentArchive691#IP\\_handing\\_out\\_random\\_barnstars](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Administrators%27_noticeboard/IncidentArchive691#IP_handing_out_random_barnstars) (October 15, 2013).

and retain new volunteers" (p. 452). This points to the question that the present field experiment set out to study: whether new volunteers can be retained through symbolic awards whose reputational value is constrained to the online community. The preceding discussion shows that the theoretical explanations for why awards may (or may not) impact behavior are highly contingent on whether the subjects are core members or newcomers (where awards can, e.g., still induce social identification, where their status and reputational value are unclear, and where recognition may enhance self-confidence at a critically uncertain stage).

In sum, the present field experiment adds insights to the literature on motivation and rewards in that (i) it is able to establish the causal effect of awards on individual behavior (i.e., retention); (ii) the award scheme created mirrors institutionalized award schemes as observed in practice (i.e., with regular intervals, fixed numbers, repeated bestowals over a long-term horizon, a hall of fame, a reputable jury and the prestige of a national portal); (iii) monetary and career related benefits from receiving the award are ruled out; (iv) the status and reputational capital provided by the award are limited to the online community, and (v) newcomers are examined, who have not yet been socialized in the community.

### **III. Empirical Analysis**

#### *A. Randomization*

At first sight, randomly bestowing awards seems to be an almost impossible endeavor, because awards are designed to be given to individuals who excel in their tasks. However, this experiment shows that it can succeed if two important conditions are fulfilled. Firstly, a basic pre-selection has to exclude obviously undeserving candidates, such as vandals. Secondly, subjects who by chance do not receive the award should be an unidentifiable group who ideally are ignorant of the award's existence. This is why the higher levels of the award could not be randomly bestowed. Non-receipt of the second-level award risks demotivating people belonging to the identifiable group of winners of the first-level award who have made an effort to be honored again but fail to win. Such a decision can hardly be randomized.

Randomization has advantages beyond the identification of a causal effect (Zeitoun et al. 2014). Most importantly, it prevents biased decisions (e.g., based on a jury member's political hue) and discourages strategic manipulation (e.g., awards given for work on a particular issue). Randomization hence gives a wide variety of individuals with different interests and areas of engagement the chance to be honored and to receive attention, which is in line with Wikipedia's concern for diversity.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> "Wikipedia also needs more *different* Wikipedians [so as to] increase the quality and completeness of the encyclopedia [as well as] the likelihood that any new member of the community will find like-minded collaborators and feel like they fit in" (Morgan et al. 2013, p. 8).

As a randomization check, Panel A of *Table 1* displays the t-tests of the observable variables a jury actively selecting award winners might take as performance criteria (i.e., number of general edits before awarding date, number of article edits, number of different articles edited, number of talk edits). Panel B includes Chi-square tests on binary variables that might predict responsiveness to an award, i.e., if editors had previously created their own user page, responded to messages on their talk page, or were actively participating in discussions on talk pages more generally (for a similar reasoning, see Zhang and Zhu 2011, p. 1609). Panel C shows the t-test of the "treatment immediacy" variable, which predicts the likelihood that editors would notice their award receipt. The more days that have passed since an editor's last activity, the less likely is the editor to take note if an award is posted on his or her talk page (e.g., Zhu et al. 2013, Restivo and van de Rijt 2014).

TABLE 1 — RANDOMIZATION CHECK

	Treatment (SD; Min; Max)	Control (SD; Min; Max)	Difference
<i>A. Performance measures (ex ante)</i>			
total # of edits (mean)	24.10 (64.11; 0; 1918)	25.17 (62.09; 0; 1026)	-1.07 (-0.53)
# article edits (mean)	17.15 (56.56; 0; 1862)	17.41 (45.60; 0; 910)	-0.26 (-0.16)
# different articles edited (mean)	7.46 (49.43; 0; 1834)	7.07 (29.07; 0; 834)	0.39 (0.31)
# talk edits (mean)	2.91 (8.71; 0; 113)	2.66 (9.78; 0; 200)	0.25 (0.84)
<i>B. Responsiveness predictors</i>			
user page self-edited	0.20 (SD=0.40)	0.19 (SD=0.39)	0.01 (0.391)
user talk self-edited	0.16 (SD=0.36)	0.14 (SD=0.35)	0.01 (0.308)
active on talk pages	0.41 (SD=0.49)	0.38 (SD=0.49)	0.03 (0.089)
N	1617	2390	4007
<i>C. Likelihood of noticing award receipt</i>			
treatment immediacy (in days)	15.19 (9.82; 1; 42)	14.73 (9.95; 1; 78)	0.46 (1.43)
N	1612	2383	3995

*Notes:* Values rounded to 2 decimal places. SD, Min and Max stand for Standard Deviation, Minimum and Maximum. t-values are reported in parentheses in the last column of Panels A and C. Differences were estimated with Chi-square tests in Panel B, where the last column indicates *p*-values in parentheses. For the number of observations (N) in treatment and control groups, see *Table A1* in the Online Appendix. N is smaller in Panel C because some editors' ex ante edits have afterwards been deleted and are thus no longer observable. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .



As expected, before the intervention, the differences are all negligible, point into different directions, and are never even marginally statistically significant.<sup>23</sup> Before the awarding date, editors in the control and treatment groups are all similarly productive, they are equally likely to respond to others, and they are all similarly likely to detect an award in the event that one was placed on their talk page. The binary outcome variables, i.e., whether an editor stays active at all, or only on article pages, are not included; by definition they should take the value 1, given that the pre-selection only considers newcomers who have made their first article edit in the previous month.

However, the ordinal variable based on the Wikimedia Foundation’s categorization of activity levels, which will be included as an outcome variable, can be used as a further randomization check (the levels of activity being 0 article edits, 1-4 article edits, 5-99 article edits, and 100+ article edits). A Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test (see *Table B1*, Online Appendix B) produces statistically insignificant results ( $z = 1.169$ ,  $\text{Prob} > |z| = 0.2426$ ). This again confirms that assignment to treatment and control groups was random.

### B. Results

The analysis considers eleven awarding rounds, from September 2012 to July 2013. Each month, 150 newcomers received the “Edelweiss with Star” award. As of May 2015, when the latest data dump was received, 33 editors (2 percent) from the treatment group and 77 editors (3 percent) from the control group had been blocked since the awarding date and thus dropped out of the data set. Treatment and control groups therefore comprise 1,617 and 2,390 editors, respectively (see *Table A1* in the Online Appendix for an overview of the monthly cohorts).

Thanks to the random assignment of the treatment, potential confounding variables are on average distributed equally between the treatment and control groups. Hence, basic and clearly interpretable mean-comparison tests can be used to see whether the award has a causal effect on retention, both broadly (general activity) and narrowly (direct article work) defined; and if so, what the size of the effect is.

*General activity.*—Figure 1 plots the shares of editors in the control and treatment groups who become active again in the first month after the awarding date. This basic bar chart indicates that the retention rate is 7 percentage points higher for recipients of the award. The error bars indicate that the 20 percent increase in the retention rate is statistically significant.

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<sup>23</sup> A power analysis indicates that even a small effect of .2 (see Cohen 1988) would be detected, if it existed, with a probability of .9999975 (one-tailed) given the sample size of the two groups and an alpha error probability of .05.

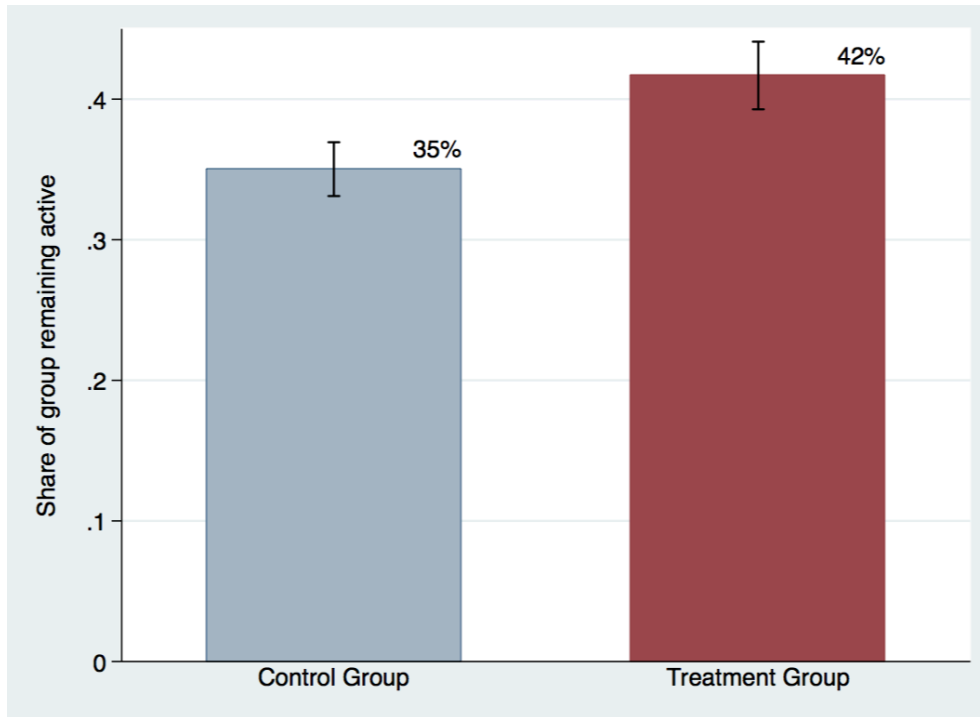


FIGURE 1. MEAN RETENTION RATES

*Notes:* Focusing on first month after awarding date. Error bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals.

*Table 2* reports the retention rates in the treatment and control groups, as well as the differences between them and the  $p$ -values resulting from the Chi-square tests. Panel A focuses on the most basic measure of retention, i.e., whether any activity can be observed after the awarding date. Following Figure 1, the first row considers the month after the awarding date and shows that the difference observed in the bar chart is indeed statistically significant at the 99.9 percent level ( $\chi^2(1) = 18.22$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ).

TABLE 2 — RETENTION EFFECT

	Treatment (1)	Control (2)	Difference (3)
<i>A. General activity</i>			
active (1st month)	0.42	0.35	0.07*** (0.000)
active (following 2 months)	0.49	0.43	0.06*** (0.000)
<i>B. Direct content provision</i>			
active, only article edits (1st month)	0.36	0.32	0.04* (0.017)
active, only article edits (2 months)	0.43	0.40	0.04* (0.022)
N	1617	2390	4007

*Notes:* Average values are rounded to 2 decimal places. *p*-values from Chi-square tests are reported in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Row 2 in Panel A (*Table 2*) extends the period of observation to the 2 months following the intervention to ascertain that the difference observed in row 1 is not due to a temporal substitution effect, i.e., that award recipients do not merely advance their next period of activity to the first month instead of the second after the awarding date. The results in row 2 show that, when considering the 2 months following the intervention, the retention rate in the treatment group still exceeds the retention rate observed in the control group by 6 percentage points (49 percent versus 43 percent). This treatment effect of 14 percent is again highly statistically significant ( $\chi^2(1) = 12.75$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The award's effect on retention is thus not due to editors resuming their activity earlier than usual because of the award.

*Direct work on articles.*—When restricting the definition of activity solely to article edits (*Table 2*, Panel B), the share of award recipients who remain active in this dimension of work amounts to 36 percent in the month following the award bestowal; it is 4 percentage points higher than the retention rate of 32 percent observed in the control group. The award's causal effect, raising the retention rate by 13 percent, is statistically significant at the 95-percent level ( $\chi^2(1) = 5.66$ ,  $p = 0.017$ ). As before, extending the time horizon to the two months following the intervention still produces a significant difference in the retention rates of the two groups (43 percent in the treatment versus 40 percent in the control group).

The analysis of Panel B (*Table 2*) can be extended to explore whether the award also produces more highly active authors. The Wikimedia Foundation's categorization of activity levels (focusing on article edits) is used as a basis for this part of the analysis. Figure 2 shows the average marginal effects of the

award for the different levels of article editing activity in the first month after the awarding date, including the respective 95% confidence intervals. As can be seen in Figure 2, the award’s effect on retention is not driven only by minor article editing activity; the share of newcomers who remain active is significantly increased at every level of activity (1-4 edits; 5-99 edits; and  $\geq 100$  edits). Figure 2 thus illustrates that the award not only lowers the attrition rate of new authors (as seen in Panel B of *Table 2* and in the "inactive" category in Figure 2); it raises the share of editors at every level of activity.

The limitations of the edit count metric have been mentioned above, but transforming the measure into an ordinal variable mitigates the distortionary tendencies and helps ascertain that the award's effect on retention found in Panel B of *Table 2* is not due to only minor article editing activity. A Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test (see *Table B2*, Online Appendix B) also shows the statistical significance of the finding that the treatment group tends to have larger values on the ordinal "degree of activity" variable than the control group ( $z$ -value = -2.470, Prob >  $|z|$  = 0.0135).<sup>24</sup>

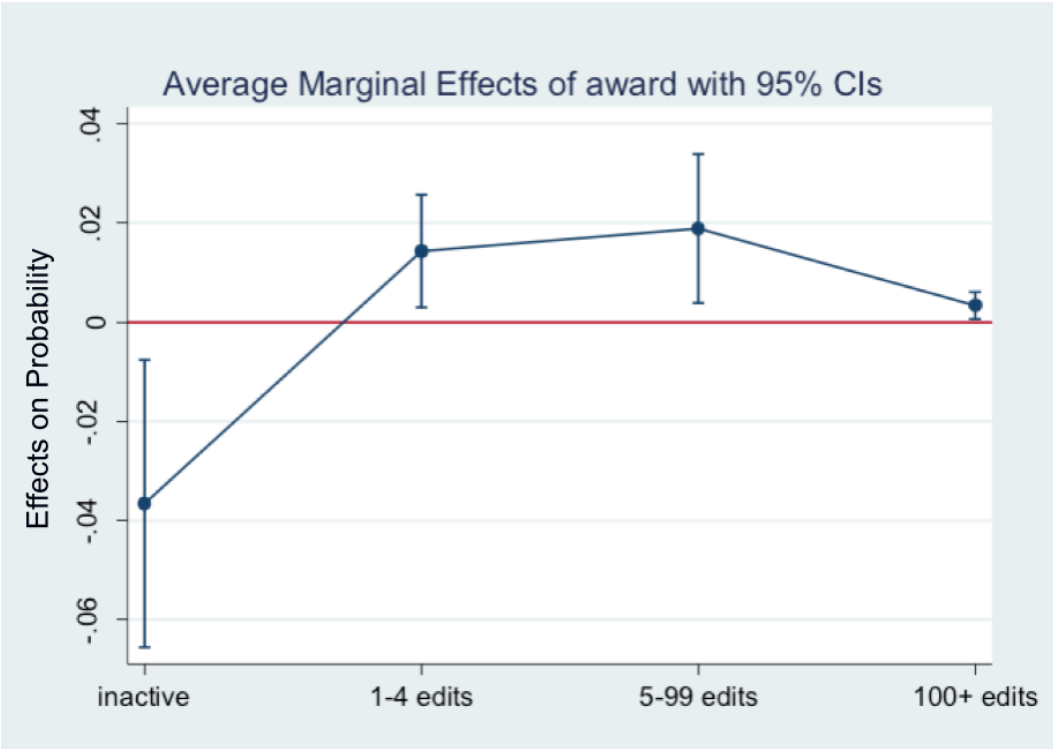


FIGURE 2. DEGREE OF ARTICLE EDITING ACTIVITY

Notes: First month after awarding date. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The figure extends row 1 of Panel B in *Table 2* and shows the treatment effect at each level of article editing activity.

<sup>24</sup> Mann Whitney only allows one to draw conclusions about the statistical significance of the test. For the effect size, ordered logit is used. The proportional odds ratio of comparing subjects of the control group with award recipients on the level of activity is 1.17764 (Prob >  $|z|$  = 0.014), the cut-points being .7351199, 1.708068, and 3.925069. This means that the odds of high activity (i.e., 4 or more edits) versus the combined lower categories of activity are 1.18 times greater for subjects in the treatment group.

*Treatment effect persistence.*—The focus of the analysis lies on the first month after the awarding date, for two main reasons. Firstly, four weeks are a long time horizon in the Internet context, where the first 24 hours are highly predictive of an editor's future engagement (e.g., Panciera et al. 2009, Morgan et al. 2013). Previous research on gift exchange has shown that positive effects initially found vanished after the first couple of hours (Gneezy and List 2006). If the award scheme prompts more newcomers to return, this provides an opportunity for other community members to get in contact and involve them more thoroughly in the community. Secondly, and relatedly, recent work on success-breeds-success dynamics in online communities, including on Wikipedia, suggests that positive public peer feedback leads to cascades of positive reinforcement by other community members (van de Rijt et al. 2014; see also Kraut and Resnick 2011, p. 52). It therefore becomes increasingly difficult to look at the direct effect of the award as the time horizon is extended, also because some editors receive further awards over time. Notwithstanding this cautionary note, a supplementary analysis further extending the period of observation is helpful to get an indication of whether the difference in retention rates between the treatment and control groups also persists over the long term. Since the focus on article edits ignores important forms of contribution, such as coordination work which is crucial for the health of the community, the analysis of treatment effect persistence again considers general activity (as in Figure 1 and Panel A of *Table 2*).

*Table 3* shows that, when considering the retention rates in the quarters following the initial award, the difference between treatment and control groups persists and remains significant until and including the fourth quarter after the intervention. Whether on its own or together with reinforcing feedback dynamics, the award provokes an increase in the retention rate by 11 percent (from 47 to 52 percent;  $\chi^2(1) = 9.51, p = 0.002$ ), 10 percent (from 31 to 34 percent;  $\chi^2(1) = 4.61, p = 0.032$ ), 13 percent (from 24 to 27 percent;  $\chi^2(1) = 4.67, p = 0.031$ ), and 13 percent (from 23 to 26 percent;  $\chi^2(1) = 4.33, p = 0.037$ ) in quarters 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively, after the intervention. The difference in quarter 5 still points into the expected direction but it is no longer significant ( $\chi^2(1) = 1.50, p = 0.221$ ).

TABLE 3 — TREATMENT EFFECT PERSISTENCE

	Treatment (1)	Control (2)	Difference (3)
<i>A. General activity</i>			
Quarter 1	0.52	0.47	0.05** (0.002)
Quarter 2	0.34	0.31	0.03* (0.032)
Quarter 3	0.27	0.24	0.03* (0.031)
Quarter 4	0.26	0.23	0.03* (0.037)
Quarter 5	0.21	0.20	0.02 (0.221)
N	1617	2390	4007

*Notes:* Average values rounded to 2 decimal places.  $p$ -values from Chi-square tests are reported in parentheses. The two higher-level awards, which are not randomly bestowed, fall into quarters 1 and 2; they could be received after months 2 and 5 after the initial award whose effects are being tested. The scheme includes no further awards thereafter.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

There is so far only limited evidence on the post-intervention persistence of treatment effects in the context of voluntary public goods contributions. The related field experiments that do consider long run post-intervention implications (six months and longer) mostly study treatments targeted at charitable giving (e.g., Meier 2007, Shang and Croson 2009, Landry et al. 2010), and environmental conservation interventions using household-level social comparison messages (Ferraro, Miranda and Price 2011, Ferraro and Price 2013, Allcott and Rogers 2014). The results of these studies are mixed; while in some cases the effects persist after the treatment's discontinuation, in other cases they vanish or even turn into negative net effects, for instance due to motivation crowding-out. Figuring in the non-negligible costs of some of the interventions, the overall evaluation can become very negative. Symbolic awards are a low-cost intervention. The basic test in *Table 3* helps ensure that the positive effect found in the first month after the intervention is not reversed later on. The finding that the retention rate in the treatment group continues to lie significantly above that in the control group in each of the following four quarters indicates that awards have the potential to trigger a dynamic that fosters retention over the long term.

### C. Discussion

There are various mechanisms through which awards can have a positive effect on newcomer retention, besides the external reinforcement produced by success-breeds-success dynamics. The following discussion considers four major explanations: enhanced self-identification with the community, status and reputation concerns, recognition, and evaluation potential in online communities.

*Self-identification with the community.*—Wikipedia editors' willingness to fulfill mundane but important coordination work behind the scenes is taken as a proxy for their self-identification with the community (in line with, e.g., Butler et al. 2007, Zhu et al. 2012). *Table 4* presents results on four central measures that reflect whether newcomers are willing to assume such maintenance work and actively engage with the community. Row 1 shows that the award increases the share of newcomers willing to coordinate with others on talk pages, for instance discussing article content or rules, by about 50 percent in the month following the intervention (from less than 13 percent to more than 19 percent;  $\chi^2(1) = 32.85$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The second row indicates that the award also increases the share of editors who participate in the organization of the Wikipedia project, developing guidelines and fulfilling administrative tasks, by 33 percent in the first month after the intervention (from 6 to 8 percent;  $\chi^2(1) = 6.34$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). The share of newcomers who self-disclose and introduce themselves to the community on their personal user pages is raised by 75 percent (from 4 to 7 percent;  $\chi^2(1) = 18.97$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ; see row 3), thus providing others with greater opportunities to contact them (e.g., based on the fields of interest indicated on the personal page). Compared to the control group, twice as many award recipients respond to others' requests on their talk pages and thus enter in direct contact with community members (8 percent versus 4 percent;  $\chi^2(1) = 34.17$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ; see row 4). These results indicate that enhanced self-identification as a community member may be one important reason for why the awards have such a significant effect on newcomer retention.

TABLE 4 — SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION

	Treatment (1)	Control (2)	Difference (3)
<i>A. Indirect community work (1st month)</i>			
active on talk pages	0.19	0.13	0.07*** (0.000)
active on Wikipedia meta pages	0.08	0.06	0.02* (0.012)
user page self-edited	0.07	0.04	0.03*** (0.000)
user talk self-edited	0.08	0.04	0.04*** (0.000)
N	1617	2390	4007

*Notes:* First month after awarding date. Average values rounded to 2 decimal places.  $p$ -values from Chi-square tests are reported in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

*Status and reputation concerns.*—Another possible explanation for the awards' effect on retention is that they lend reputational capital to newcomers, even if that capital is restricted to the online community. To understand whether status and reputation concerns provide a pertinent explanation, data on award recipients' choice to more prominently display the award by putting it on their personal user page is collected. As of May 2015, 58 award recipients from the eleven awarding rounds had put a small template (called "Babel") that had been created by a recipient of the first wave (see Appendix A3) onto their user page; 43 had copied the award graphic or both the graphic and the entire text (Appendix A2) to display it there (7 among them also included the small template). Hence, 94 winners (5.8 percent) had chosen to display their receipt of the award more prominently on their user page. This number provides a lower-bound estimate of the relevance of reputation and status concerns; many individuals can be expected to refrain from engaging in active social signaling for fear of diluting the signal of merit.

*Recognition.*—Awards signal to their recipients that their contributions and effort are being recognized and considered valuable by others. In particular for newcomers, such recognition can raise self-confidence in a critical learning phase marked by uncertainty. While the experimental setup does not allow the single mechanisms accounting for the awards' motivational effect to be isolated, anecdotal evidence suggests that recognition and enhanced self-confidence are relevant explanations. Several award recipients referred to their feeling of being recognized in their response to the award. Some exemplary quotes are: "Thank you very much for the recognition. I will continue [contributing]!" (in February 2013), "Thank you very much. I have spent much time with Wikipedia. The recognition for this [effort] makes me very happy" (April 2013), "I feel very honored to receive this award. It makes me realize that contributions, even if they may be small, are recognized here" (December 2012), or "Dear friends in Switzerland. I thank you most warmly for this recognition. It is nice that my contributions are positively taken note of in Switzerland. Thanks and kind regards to the Confederates" (in August 2013). The recognition provided by the awards may also strengthen their recipients' confidence and encourage them to embark on more demanding projects, as the following exemplary quote suggests: "Dear Edelweiß-Team, as an absolute newcomer I am *very* delighted about this award! I initially only wanted to make a few corrections every now and then, but this form of welcoming has highly motivated me! I am now working on my first article... Many heartfelt thanks in retrospect!" (from September 2012; emphasis in original). Although the wording of the award scheme on purpose omits any reference to future expectations, some responses indicate that the recognition provided leads some recipients to want to honor the award and live up to perceived expectations: "Hello Portal Switzerland, a heartfelt *Merci vielmal* [Swiss German for "many thanks"] for the award, which makes me tremendously happy! I will do my best to live up to the honor. Best regards, [...]" (November 2012; as before, author's translation).



*Evaluation potential.*—Related to the recognition-based explanation, awards also signal to their recipients that their individual inputs for the common good are being identified and evaluated. Recipients no longer feel "lost in the crowd" and instead experience that they receive credit for their inputs. The relevance of this explanation is supported by responses illustrating that some individuals clearly attribute their award receipt to specific contributions they have made, which they perceive to have been evaluated. For instance, one recipient wrote to his mentor: "[...] I received an award from the Portal Switzerland *for my first article* (Edelweiss with a Star)!! I want to thank you most warmly for mentoring me, since I would not have succeeded in writing the article like that without your help during my first Wiki-steps. As such, a petal of the edelweiss belongs to you; just choose one. Again, thank you and I look forward to our future cooperation!" (from September 2012; emphasis added).

All four explanations, social identification, status and reputation concerns, recognition, and evaluation potential, seem to be important in explaining the motivational effects of symbolic awards. Future research could usefully inform the design of awards by examining the conditions under which the single mechanisms become more or less important. It could also differentiate the relevance of the mechanisms according to different types of award recipients (e.g., based on the degree of previous contributions, seniority, age, gender, professional background), and analyze who is most responsive to receiving symbolic awards.

#### D. *Robustness*

Two additional binary activity variables are created to ascertain that the central result, that symbolic awards significantly increase newcomer retention (Figure 1), is not merely driven by award-related communication. In line with the analysis in Panel A of *Table 2*, the two variables record any type of activity. However, the first alternative variable for measuring general activity ignores contributions to the award project's page, and the second variable goes even further in that it also omits edits to the editor's own user and user talk pages.

Panel A in *Table B3* (Online Appendix B) presents the results from the Chi-square tests which compare the means of editors who stay active in the month following the awarding date. Excluding the award project's page (row 1) does not change the results from row 1 in Panel A of *Table 2*. This suggests that award recipients who post a thank you note on the project's page also make other contributions. Additionally excluding editors' own pages somewhat reduces the effect, but still shows a difference of 5 percentage points, which is highly statistically significant ( $\chi^2(1) = 11.95, p = 0.001$ ; row 2 in *Table B3*, Panel A). The treatment's positive effect on retention is hence not produced simply by communication on the award. A causal effect of the award on retention can be established even when applying very

conservative measures of activity, such as that in row 2 of *Table B3* or the one that only considers direct edits to articles (*Table 2*, Panel B).

Focusing on the more restrictive measure of activity (as in row 2 of *Table B3*), which excludes the award project's page and editors' own pages, Panel B of *Table B3* considers the robustness of the findings on treatment effect persistence. Panel B shows that using this conservative measure of activity leaves the original findings from *Table 3* unchanged, i.e., the difference between the treatment and control groups persists in the four quarters following the intervention, and ceases to be significant in the fifth quarter after the awarding date.

#### IV. Concluding Remarks

While research on the motivations for private contributions to public goods is extensive, little is known about the rewards that help sustain volunteers' contributions without crowding out their intrinsic motivation. Awards such as orders and medals of valor are symbolic rewards that may foster such voluntary contributions. They are certainly a widespread phenomenon. However, any investigation into their causal effects is hindered by their juries' unwillingness to see their authority replaced by random decision-making processes.

This study presents a large-scale natural field experiment in which an award scheme with fixed intervals and award numbers is institutionalized and randomization is employed to establish clear causal effects of awards on voluntary contributions to a public good. The experiment addresses one of the online encyclopedia's most serious challenges, the retention of new editors. It explores whether purely symbolic awards can be used to increase newcomer retention, even if the status and reputational capital they provide are limited to an online community the award recipient has only recently joined.

The award scheme is shown to have a considerable and statistically highly significant effect on retention. The share of newcomers who remain active in the month after the awarding date is 7 percentage points higher for the treatment group than for the control group. This is a 20 percent increase in the retention rate ( $p = 0.000$ ), from a share of 35 percent to one of 42 percent, which is not driven by a temporal substitution effect or by award-related communication. When solely considering direct contributions to articles, the award also increases the fraction of newcomers who remain active, resulting in a difference of 4 percentage points between treatment and control groups. The 13 percent increase (from 32 percent to 36 percent,  $p = 0.017$ ) is not driven by minor editing activities; the award increases the shares of authors at all three commonly considered activity levels.

A supplementary analysis of treatment effect persistence indicates that the difference in general retention rates observed between control and treatment groups continues to be significant over the four quarters after the intervention; it becomes insignificant thereafter. The discussion considers four main

explanations for the motivational effect of the symbolic awards: increased self-identification as a community member, status and reputational concerns, recognition, and evaluation potential. Additional data (e.g., on social signaling) as well as anecdotal evidence support the relevance of these explanations. Recent research on success-breeds-success dynamics in online communities furthermore suggests that external reinforcement triggered by the award (e.g., additional positive feedback, lower reversion rates) may provide another important explanation, in particular to account for the treatment effect's persistence.

The findings are worth noting not only because the award is costless and has no material implications, but also because it is given to newcomers who operate under pseudonyms that they have only recently adopted. Previous research (Restivo and van de Rijt 2014) has suggested that "rewards may [...] be counterproductive for [editors] who are not already sufficiently embedded within the core contributor community" (p. 459), warning that it can even lead to lower retention. The present study follows the authors' call for further investigation and shows that even new community members can be positively motivated by symbolic rewards, if these convey meaningful signals of appreciation. The estimates are conservative since non-responsiveness to the intervention may be due not only to indifference, but also to unawareness, since some recipients simply do not (or only belatedly) return to their user page and thus do not see that they have won an award (Panciera et al. 2009, p. 55; Morgan et al. 2013, p. 5).

The analysis focuses on the treatment's effect on newcomer retention and does not consider any possible spillover effects of the award. These are most likely to affect senior editors, since work on Wikipedia is highly content-oriented<sup>25</sup> and repeat social interaction, if it occurs, tends to take place between newcomers and more experienced editors who help them and answer their questions. The positive effect the award might have on these third parties is exemplified by the quote referenced in the discussion section, where an award recipient thanks his mentor. Just as such additional positive effects are not captured in the evaluation of the award, potential negative effects on non-recipients are also not considered. However, these can be expected to be negligible or even non-existent, since other newcomers are most likely unaware of the award's existence. Moreover, there is no list showing specifically which editors were considered and left without award.

While these considerations suggest that the award program's beneficial impact may well exceed the effects found in this analysis, two limitations should also be noted. Firstly, the value of awards hinges on their rarity; they have to be used sparingly to prevent inflationary tendencies. Awards should therefore be integrated into a broader reward scheme (also including, e.g., thank you gifts and communal events), alongside other forms of providing recognition (e.g., personal praise), to increase retention rates. A

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<sup>25</sup> As is stated in the description of talk pages, "The purpose of all talk pages is the improvement of Wikipedia as an encyclopedia" <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Diskussionsseiten> (June 5, 2015; author's translation).

promising avenue for future research will be to explore the relationship between awards and other rewards, and that between the value of an award and the quantity and frequency with which it is bestowed. Varying other award parameters, such as the degree of publicity, and considering which volunteer groups are most responsive to symbolic awards would be of equal interest.

Secondly, the experiment is conducted in an anonymous online context. As noted by Zhang and Zhu (2011, p. 1613), an interesting direction for future research will be to examine the findings' generalizability to non-virtual fields and other public goods contexts. However, the results as they stand are important given the increasing penetration of the Internet into professional and private spheres. The finding that anonymous newcomers to an online community are motivated by attention and public social recognition is important and should receive further attention by researchers. It may inform policies dealing with anonymity and its impacts on individual behavior.

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## APPENDIX

### APPENDIX A: THE AWARD

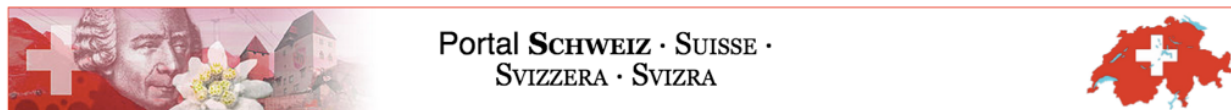
The design of the award page was modeled on that of the Swiss national Wikipedia portal, the banner of which is prominently displayed on top of the website (see Appendix A1). The award and a link to its page also appear on the front of the Portal Switzerland page. The text on the award page briefly describes the award and the idea behind it, without giving any details on performance criteria other than the condition that the editors have each made their first contributions to the German language Wikipedia in the previous month (what kind of contribution is not defined). The aim of the award is declared, i.e., "to honor new [editors] and their precious contributions to the German language Wikipedia. They deserve our thanks and recognition." The names of some of the team members are provided so that questions, suggestions or criticism can be directed to them. The page mentions that there were more than 4,000 newcomers in the previous month, and then displays the month's lists of recipients of the 1, 2 and 3 Star awards, as well as a link to the lists of former recipients (similar to a hall of fame). On the bottom of the page, a small template (called "babel", Appendix A3) that was created by a recipient of the first wave is offered for those interested to copy and put it onto their personal user page.<sup>26</sup>

The award that is put on recipients' talk pages resembles a medal and displays a Swiss national symbol (an edelweiss flower) and a golden star, adorned by a laurel wreath. The text informs its recipients that there were more than 4,000 newcomers in the previous month (see Appendix A2 below). Award recipients usually post their reactions underneath the award on their talk page or on the project's talk page. Some put the babel or the entire award graphic on their user page.

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<sup>26</sup> Editors frequently display such templates on their user pages to provide information on their language skills, for instance. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Babel> (June 27, 2013).

## Appendix A1. Official award page (author's translation)



The Award „Edelweiss with Star“ honors on a monthly basis a selection of those users who have made their first contributions to the German-language Wikipedia in the previous month. Awardees who continue their engagement can receive two further awards besides the original award: "Edelweiss with two Stars" and "Edelweiss with three Stars".

The award recipients shall be considered as representative for all those new users who have constructively contributed to our common project. Welcome!

### Idea and Realization

With the Edelweiss-Award, a group of authors of the [Portal Switzerland](#) wishes to honor new users and their valuable contributions to the German-language Wikipedia. They deserve our gratitude and our recognition.

The idea for such an award emerged from the [Wikipedia roundtable in Zurich](#). After that, the award "Edelweiss" was for the first time bestowed in July 2012. The suggestions that were made after the first round of bestowals were intensively discussed and carefully integrated into the present award concept on consecutive roundtable meetings.

In case of questions, suggestions or criticism, please feel free to directly contact one of the users present at the roundtable meetings (for instance, [7 user names]). We are eager to preserve the positive spirit of this award and to abstain from dragging new users directly into discussions.

### Edelweiss with Star

Out of more than 4,000 candidates who were for the first time active in the German-language Wikipedia in May 2015, we have awarded the following users in early June.

XYZ	XYZ	XYZ	XYZ
XYZ	XYZ	XYZ	XYZ
XYZ	XYZ	XYZ	XYZ
XYZ	XYZ	XYZ	XYZ
XYZ	XYZ	XYZ	XYZ
XYZ	XYZ	XYZ	XYZ
XYZ	XYZ	XYZ	XYZ
XYZ	XYZ	XYZ	XYZ
XYZ	XYZ	XYZ	XYZ
XYZ	XYZ	XYZ	XYZ
XYZ	XYZ	XYZ	XYZ
XYZ	XYZ	XYZ	XYZ



Note: "XYZ" is a placeholder for the pseudonyms of the award winners, which are displayed there.

## Appendix A2. Award template inserted on user talk pages (author's translation)

### An Edelweiss for You


Hello [User Name], out of more than 4,000 new authors in the month of [May] you belong to those who have already enriched Wikipedia through their participation. As a small thank-you for your contributions to the German language Wikipedia we hereby present you with an Edelweiss from Switzerland. With best regards -- [The Project Edelweiss-Award](#) in the [Portal Switzerland](#), 12 [June 2015]

We hereby present  
**[User Name]**  
 with the award



**Edelweiss with Star**  
 of the [Portal Switzerland](#)  
 for contributions to the German  
 language Wikipedia.  
 sgd. [The Project Edelweiss-Award](#)

## Appendix A3. Babel template (author's translation)



This person was presented  
 with the award **Edelweiss  
 with Star**.

Fostering Voluntary Contributions to a Public Good  
A Large-Scale Natural Field Experiment at Wikipedia

**ONLINE APPENDIX**

ONLINE APPENDIX A:

TABLE A1 – EXPERIMENTAL IMPLEMENTATION

Cohort	New accounts	1st time-contributors	1st time-contributors of article content	<b>STEP 1: AUTOMATIC FILTER</b>	Remaining	<b>STEP 2: SCREENING w/ RULEBOOK</b>	Remaining for random selection	Accounts blocked after awarding date (TG/CG)	<b>STEP 3: RANDOM ALLOCATION TG* / CG*</b>
1 (Sep12)	7,187	3,202	2,662	-2,177	485	-122	363	10 (3/7)	147 / 206
2 (Oct12)	7,917	3,567	2,931	-2,590	341	-44	297	6 (3/3)	147 / 144
3 (Nov12)	9,088	3,739	3,016	-2,587	429	-39	390	12 (4/8)	146 / 232
4 (Dec12)	7,663	3,178	2,629	-2,194	435	-78	357	8 (5/3)	145 / 204
5 (Jan13)	9,147	4,225	3,525	-3,102	423	-99	324	5 (2/3)	148 / 171
6 (Feb13)	8,460	3,788	3,128	-2,443	685	-170	515	11 (2/9)	148 / 356
7 (Mar13)	8,439	3,638	3,013	-2,382	631	-170	461	21 (7/14)	143 / 297
8 (Apr13)	7,456	3,351	2,729	-2,165	564	-162	402	11 (5/6)	145 / 246
9 (May13)	7,520	3,459	2,767	-2,308	459	-127	332	4 (0/4)	150 / 178
10 (Jun13)	8,383	3,622	2,927	-2,425	502	-156	346	11 (1/10)	149 / 186
11 (Jul13) <sup>†</sup>	7,693	3,233	2,932	-2,410	522	-192	330	11 (1/10)	149 / 170
Sum							4,117	110 (33/77)	<b>1,617 / 2,390</b>
Total									<b>4,007</b>

\* *Notes:* TG and CG stand for treatment group and control group. Accounts that have been blocked after the awarding date are no longer included in the data (figures as of May 6, 2015). As is explained on the corresponding Wikipedia page, "blocks [...] are used by administrators to technically prevent a user account [...] from editing Wikipedia. Blocks are used chiefly to deal with immediate problems such as vandalism or edit warring" See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Banning\\_policy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Banning_policy) (June 5, 2015).

<sup>†</sup> The numbers given in the columns "New accounts" to and including "Step 1: Automatic Filter" are based on a data dump received in June 2015. Since some user accounts have been blocked over time, these numbers are slightly lower than they were in July 2013, when the automatic filter was applied.

ONLINE APPENDIX B

*TABLE B1 – RANDOMIZATION CHECK*

Ordinal variable: Level of article editing activity before awarding date.

Two-sample Wilcoxon rank-sum (Mann-Whitney) test

award	obs	rank sum	expected
0	2390	4825695	4789560
1	1617	3204333	3240468
combined	4007	8030028	8030028

unadjusted variance 1.291e+09

adjustment for ties -3.346e+08

adjusted variance 9.562e+08

Ho:  $n\sim ea\_ord(award==0) = n\sim ea\_ord(award==1)$

z = 1.169

Prob > |z| = 0.2426

*TABLE B2 – EFFECT ON LEVEL OF ACTIVITY*

1st month after awarding date, article edits only.

Two-sample Wilcoxon rank-sum (Mann-Whitney) test

award	obs	rank sum	expected
0	2390	4715172.5	4789560
1	1617	3314855.5	3240468
combined	4007	8030028	8030028

unadjusted variance 1.291e+09

adjustment for ties -3.837e+08

adjusted variance 9.071e+08

Ho:  $n\sim ta\_ord(award==0) = n\sim ta\_ord(award==1)$

z = -2.470

Prob > |z| = 0.0135

TABLE B3 — ROBUSTNESS CHECKS

	Treatment (1)	Control (2)	Difference (3)
<i>A. General activity (1st month)</i>			
active, excl. award pages	0.42	0.35	0.07*** (0.000)
active, excl. award & own pages	0.40	0.35	0.05*** (0.001)
<i>B. Treatment effect persistence. DV: active, excl. award &amp; own pages</i>			
Quarter 1	0.51	0.47	0.04* (0.013)
Quarter 2	0.34	0.30	0.03* (0.027)
Quarter 3	0.26	0.24	0.03* (0.048)
Quarter 4	0.26	0.23	0.03* (0.032)
Quarter 5	0.21	0.20	0.02 (0.232)
N	1617	2390	4007

Notes: Average values rounded to 2 decimal places.  $p$ -values from Chi-square tests are reported in parentheses. DV stands for dependent variable.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .