

# Coordination and Efficiency in Decentralized Collaboration

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## Abstract

Environments for decentralized on-line collaboration are now widespread on the Web, underpinning open-source efforts, knowledge creation sites including Wikipedia, and other experiments in joint production. When a distributed group works together in such a setting, the mechanisms they use for *coordination* can play an important role in the effectiveness of the group's performance.

Here we consider the trade-offs inherent in coordination in these on-line settings, balancing the benefits to collaboration with the cost in effort that could be spent in other ways. We consider two diverse domains that each contain a wide range of collaborations taking place simultaneously — Wikipedia and GitHub — allowing us to study how coordination varies across different projects. We analyze trade-offs in coordination along two main dimensions, finding similar effects in both our domains of study: first we show that, in aggregate, high-status projects on these sites manage the coordination trade-off at a different level than typical projects; and second, we show that projects use a different balance of coordination when they are “crowded,” with relatively small size but many participants. We also develop a stylized theoretical model for the cost-benefit trade-off inherent in coordination and show that it qualitatively matches the trade-offs we observe between crowdedness and coordination.

## Introduction

In many settings on the Web, groups of people who may have no off-line associations with one another come together around a project-oriented site that supports remote interaction, discussion, and the production of a shared work product. This style of highly decentralized collaboration — the participants are geographically dispersed and may not interact with each other outside the context of the site — is the driving force behind a range of large open-source projects hosted on sites such as GitHub, as well as knowledge creation sites including Wikipedia and recent experiments in massively collaborative problem-solving.

One of the crucial questions that emerges, as these forms of interaction become increasingly influential, is to understand what makes them effective at a structural level, and to characterize the properties associated with better outcomes.

To address this question, we draw on a conceptual framework that has proven powerful in off-line domains — analyzing the effectiveness of teams through their *coordination mechanisms*. These mechanisms broadly include the set of practices that help a team organize its collaboration on a task, for dividing up shared work, setting intermediate goals, and resolving disagreements (Barnard 1968; Cooper 1980; Foushee 1982; Helmreich et al. 1986; Malone and Crowston 1990; Faraj and Sproull 2000).

**The Present Work: Trade-Offs in Coordination.** A fundamental property of coordination is the cost-benefit trade-off that it entails. Coordination is beneficial, but it comes at a cost — the work that team members put into coordination could be used on the substance of the project itself (Becker and Murphy 1994; Entin and Serfaty 1999; Kittur, Lee, and Kraut 2009; MacMillan, Entin, and Serfaty 2004). Referring to the communication overhead inherent in coordination, Macmillan et al. write,

*“Because communication is essential to team performance, effective team cognition has a communication overhead associated with the exchange of information among team members. Communication requires both time and cognitive resources, and, to the extent that communication can be made less necessary or more efficient, team performance can benefit as a result”* (MacMillan, Entin, and Serfaty 2004).

Our understanding of this cost-benefit trade-off comes largely from the study of relatively small face-to-face teams, as in the research noted above. But the trade-offs involved in coordination are equally or more pronounced in on-line domains due to the limited ability of on-line teams to rely on less costly implicit coordination mechanisms (Entin and Serfaty 1999; Kittur, Lee, and Kraut 2009; Salas, Stout, and Cannon-Bowers 1994; Wang et al. 1991), which often require shared mental models that are difficult to maintain on-line (Cannon-Bowers, Salas, and Converse 1990; Wittenbaum, Stasser, and Merry 1996).

These trade-offs have clear implications for the design of these systems. There is thus an opportunity to combine the work in the organizational literature on coordination and its consequences for performance with the long line of work on coordination and its uses in on-line domains (Kittur and

Kraut 2008; Kittur, Lee, and Kraut 2009; Kittur et al. 2007b; Krieger, Stark, and Klemmer 2009; Malone and Crowston 1990) and to evaluate the findings in the context of some of the most active on-line collaborative settings.

**Research Questions for Coordination.** An important question in the literature on off-line domains has been to understand the possible levels of coordination that balance the trade-off between cost overhead and performance gains, leading to the best team and individual performance. When we move to the context of large on-line projects, how do such projects manage this trade-off, and can we identify principles in how this balance is managed?

We approach these questions both through the development of an analytical framework and through the study of large on-line datasets. In particular, we focus on Wikipedia articles and GitHub projects as two rich collaborative domains that share some essential abstract properties:

- They each contain projects in which there is a primary work product and also a channel for coordination among members of the project team.
- Participation in projects has an interlocking structure, in the sense that the participants in one project may also be involved in others.
- Certain projects may have a higher level of status or visibility than others; on Wikipedia certain articles are featured, and on GitHub certain projects can have a non-trivial number of watchers.

These ingredients also relate in interesting ways to the coordination framework proposed by Malone and Crowston (Malone and Crowston 1990), who identify goals, activities, actors, and interdependencies as the general components of coordination.

We organize our work around two central trade-offs in coordination:

- Do high-status projects manage the coordination trade-off differently from typical projects?
- How does coordination relate to a project's team composition and crowdedness — in particular, the amount of work produced relative to the number of members in the team?

In addition to the data analysis supporting these two questions, we develop a mathematical model to capture the balance of costs and benefits in coordination abstractly.

It is important to note a few features of our approach. First, we organize our work around the aggregate analysis of large datasets, and our findings are correspondingly oriented toward trade-offs at this cumulative level. Our investigation is thus complementary to more fine-grained studies of individual projects and the specifics of their coordination strategies. Second, while our analysis is performed on two particular domains — Wikipedia and GitHub — we seek to articulate a framework that can be applied to on-line collaboration across many contexts. With this in mind, we develop the core components of our approach — projects and shared work, coordination mechanisms, interaction across projects, and measures of status and visibility — at a general level,

and illustrate how they can be applied across these two different contexts to yield closely related findings. We hope through this alignment of common structure to suggest a set of principles that can be used more broadly.

Finally, we believe that our analysis of coordination raises a number of possible suggestions for design, as we discuss further in what follows. Applications supporting collaboration increasingly seek to steer groups of users toward effective interaction, and coordination mechanisms can be a powerful component of this process. But the trade-offs inherent in coordination make clear that it can be a non-trivial problem to determine whether a system should be guiding a group toward more or less coordination in a given situation. By understanding how levels of coordination naturally vary with the visibility of a project and the crowdedness of the setting, we can establish principles by which coordination mechanisms can be tuned based on the underlying context.

**Summary of Results.** We establish results on the trade-offs in coordination for our main questions described above. We first show that there are significant aggregate differences in the way that coordination is used in the higher-status projects on both Wikipedia and GitHub, relative to the use of coordination in typical projects. This suggests that properties related to coordination can be relevant to questions of performance and visibility in our on-line setting. For Wikipedia, where the set of participants in a single project is often larger and more diverse, we delve further into the question by looking at how much the effort and coordination is concentrated on a small set of the most active participants — this connects to an argument due to Kittur and Kraut, who posit that a balance of effort in on-line tasks in which a few participants do most of the work can correspond to a form of implicit coordination (Kittur and Kraut 2008).

We then explore the relationship between coordination and the composition of the project. We find that additional coordination is most useful when there are many team members and the task is small, resulting in a crowded environment; it is most wasteful when the number of team members is small and the size of the task is large. As with our results on high-status projects, our findings here too are consistent in Wikipedia and GitHub.

We supplement this analysis with a formal model for studying the trade-off between the cost of explicit coordination and the benefits it brings to a project. The predictions of the model also suggest that crowdedness is a key parameter in the coordination trade-off.

## Wikipedia Data

In this section and the next, we describe our two datasets — Wikipedia and GitHub. We begin with Wikipedia, which is the larger and more complex of the two, and the one where we are in some cases able to compute correspondingly more complex functions of the data.

For our purposes, each Wikipedia article constitutes a project that is produced by the set of users who edit it. Wikipedia captures many of the basic features that one sees in on-line collaboration more generally, and for our purposes

it also exhibits three desirable properties. First, since each article constitutes a project with its own internal life-cycle, we can observe the history of many projects in a common environment, exploring sources of variation among them. Second, Wikipedia contains explicit markers of success and failure for projects, including recognition of certain highly successful articles. Finally, Wikipedia has well-developed mechanisms for explicit coordination, along with extensive records of coordination for each article (Viegas et al. 2007; Keegan, Gergle, and Contractor 2012). Our data contains approximately 3.4 million articles, each with a discussion page. This corresponds to the entire edit history of English Wikipedia up to April of 2007, developed as a resource by Crandall et al (Crandall et al. 2008).

We now describe how the basic ingredients of our framework manifest themselves on Wikipedia: we first consider coordination mechanisms, and then measures for the status and visibility of articles.

**Coordination Mechanisms on Wikipedia.** We look at two kinds of interactions to measure coordination in Wikipedia: (i) discussion edits, and (ii) comments left on article edits. Each article on Wikipedia has a *discussion page* that is used to discuss issues related to the editing of the article such as planning, resolving arguments, and enforcing conventions (Viegas et al. 2007). We use the number of edits to discussion pages as a measure of how much effort editors spend explicitly coordinating. There is significant variation across articles in the amount of discussion-page editing and in aggregate we will see that the variation points to overall differences across different types of articles.

There is a second widely-used form of coordination: When a user edits a Wikipedia article, she has the option of including a comment where she can briefly explain the nature of the edit. Leaving comments is often helpful for other editors because the comments allow them to easily identify the kinds of edits other users have contributed. Comments are similar to discussion-page edits in that editors use them to communicate about the editing of the article, but in contrast with discussion edits, comments are much terser and thus tend to explain the nature of an edit without long discussions. In this sense, we can think of comments as lying somewhere on the spectrum between explicit and implicit coordination, and more implicit than discussion-page edits.

In some of the analysis we will consider both of these coordination mechanisms, but at other points we will focus on discussion edits, since they are the mechanism that allows for explicit coordination, including the ability to engage in back-and-forth interaction between multiple participants.

**Use of Discussion Pages and Comments in Wikipedia.**

While edit comments and discussion pages are meant to facilitate the collaboration among Wikipedia editors to write high-quality articles, people can use these tools for any purpose. For example, as is often the case on the Web, it is possible that discussion pages and comment could be used for spam or other unintended purposes. If this were the case, measuring coordination by the number of discussion edits

and comments would be misleading. To address this issue and to further understand how people use discussion pages and comments, we read a small random sample of comments and discussion sections from our data and manually categorize them according to their purpose.

Using a set of 100 randomly selected comments, we first construct a set of categories of purposes. Then, we sample a new set of 100 randomly selected comments and organize them into the determined categories. We use the same procedure to categorize a randomly selected section from 100 discussion pages. Tables 1 and 2 show the categories and the number of examples in each category for comments and discussion pages, respectively. We observe that the majority of the sampled comments and discussions are directly related to the writing of the article. Any comment or discussion that was not relevant to the editing of the article was placed in the "Other" category. Out of the 100 categorized comments and discussions, only 11 and 6 fell in the "Other" category.

This analysis suggests that edit comments and discussion pages are indeed mostly used by editors to coordinate their collaboration on Wikipedia. Having established that these tools seem to be employed to facilitate coordination, we use the number of comments and discussion edits as a proxy for how much explicit coordination the editors perform.

Category	Num
Mentions section	52
Reverted edit	14
Minor edit	19
Added content	14
Removed content	7
Correction	2
Mentions other users	14
Other	11

Table 1: Categories of Wikipedia edit comments and number of examples in each category. Categories are based on a random sample of 100 comments. Comments can belong to more than one category.

**Featured Articles.** We now discuss a natural status measure for articles on Wikipedia. The Wikipedia community chooses an article to feature every day through a *peer review* process<sup>1</sup>, and according to their guidelines, such articles among the very best in terms of professional standards of writing, presentation, and sourcing<sup>2</sup>.

We are interested in comparing coordination practices between highly successful articles and average articles. While every measure of success includes particular idiosyncrasies and potential biases, we believe that using the featured-article designation as a success measure has a number of clear advantages. In particular, rather than defining an ad hoc success measure ourselves, the set of featured articles

<sup>1</sup>See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Peer\\_review](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Peer_review) for a description of Wikipedia's peer review process.

<sup>2</sup>See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured\\_article\\_criteria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_article_criteria) for a description of the attributes a featured article must have.

Category		Num
Justify	Text edit	14
	Change metadata	4
Suggest Action	Specific text edit	9
	Add content	13
	Remove content	4
References	Change metadata	7
	Provide	4
Question	Request	16
	On article's topic	8
	On Wikipedia conventions	5
	Copyright issues	8
	Dispute claim in article	12
	General discussion about article's direction	8
	Other	6

Table 2: Categories of Wikipedia discussion page sections and number of examples in each category. Categories are based on a random sample of 100 discussion pages. Discussions can belong to more than one category.

is a clear success measure that Wikipedia’s own community has defined. This has the advantage that our success measure is likely to be compatible with the standards and goals of Wikipedia editors, and it is something that produces incentives among editors. It is certainly true that many very good articles are never featured, but the existence of the designation allows us to define a concrete and very high standard of success for an article: whether it has been featured or not.

### GitHub Data

GitHub is a Git repository service used by millions of people to collaborate on open source software projects. Even though GitHub is smaller and more specialized than Wikipedia, it also exhibits the properties that make it a useful testbed for coordination in decentralized collaboration. We use data obtained from GitHub Archive<sup>3</sup>, which provides a record of various aspects of all public repositories. From these data we are able to capture specific metrics of a project’s visibility, size, and amount of coordination among collaborators. Our data contains all public projects that were actively developed during a three month period starting in May of 2012, which consists of about 300,000 projects. As with Wikipedia, we discuss how to develop measures of coordination and status for GitHub projects.

**Coordination Mechanisms on GitHub.** When a user commits changes to a repository, others users have the option of making comments or asking questions by issuing a *commit comment*. This feature allows collaborators to discuss contributions and provide feedback. We use *commit comments* to measure coordination on GitHub to understand how people use comments on GitHub, we manually categorize a small sample of comments. We follow the same methodology we use to categorize Wikipedia comments.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.githubarchive.org/>

Table 3 shows the categories and the number of examples in each category. We observe that commit comments are largely used to discuss issues directly related to the project, and hence serve as a reasonable measure of coordination.

Category	Num
Coding suggestion	48
Code explanation by author	3
Showing appreciation for other’s work	15
Reporting bug	13
Question about other’s code	19
General programming question	4
Expressing disapproval of other’s work	7
Other	15

Table 3: Categories of GitHub comments and number of examples in each category. Categories are based on a random sample of 100 comments. Comments can belong to more than one category.

**GitHub Watchers.** In GitHub, users have the option of *watching* repositories they are interested in. During the time period we are analyzing, watching a repository was a way bookmarking projects of interest<sup>4</sup>. Since GitHub is mainly used to develop open source software and we only consider public projects, it is reasonable to assume that having many watchers signals high visibility. Hence, we use the number of watchers a project has as continuous measure of status.

Having now articulated how the basic ingredients of our framework are reflected in both the Wikipedia and GitHub, we turn to our central questions in order.

### Coordination in High-Status Projects

In this section we investigate how the amount of coordination varies with the status of a project. For Wikipedia, we compare coordination in featured and non-featured articles, and in GitHub we measure coordination as a function of the project’s number of watchers.

As noted in the introduction, we interpret our analysis via the trade-off between the costs and benefits of explicit coordination (MacMillan, Entin, and Serfaty 2004): While a highly coordinated team of collaborators has the advantage that it can split tasks, resolve disagreements, and set goals effectively, a team that works with little coordinating has the advantage that it spends all its efforts working on the task rather communicating with team members.

**The  $x$ -Core.** It is known that in many on-line settings, a few users are responsible for much of the content of the site (Kittur and Kraut 2008; Kittur et al. 2007a). We call this small group of users the *core* of the project. More concretely, we define the  $x$ -core of a project to be the smallest set of users that account for an  $x$  fraction of all the work; these are the most active participants on the project. As we increase  $x$ ,

<sup>4</sup>See <https://developer.github.com/changes/2012-9-5-watcher-api/>

the  $x$ -core gets larger as more participants get included, and finally the 1-core is the set of all participants. We define the size of a project’s  $x$ -core as the number of users it contains.

The  $x$ -core can be defined for any collaborative project, but we focus here on its application to Wikipedia, because the projects there are large enough to show substantial variation as we range over possible values of  $x$ . By contrast, most of the GitHub projects we analyze are smaller and more focused, and since the  $x$ -core analysis is correspondingly less informative, we do not apply it in GitHub.

On Wikipedia, a natural question is whether featured articles tend to have a larger or smaller  $x$ -core size than non-featured articles. Measuring work by the number of edits, we compute the fraction of editors that belong to the  $x$ -core of each featured article, which captures the extent to which a small fraction of individuals are doing most of the work.

Figure 1 shows the median fraction of editors in the article’s  $x$ -core for different values of  $x$ . Throughout the paper, statistical significance of the difference in medians using the Mann-Whitney U test (Kruskal 1957) is indicated by the color of the dots: black (p-val < .001), green (p-val < .01), yellow (p-val < .05). We observe that featured articles have significantly smaller core sizes for most values of  $x$ . Having few editors in the core may be beneficial for an article by making coordination among the core easier. In the same spirit as this result, Kittur and Kraut found that Wikipedia articles benefit from having many editors as long as a few editors are responsible for most of the edits (Kittur and Kraut 2008). They propose that organizing in such a way that a few editors are responsible for most edits is an implicit form of coordination.

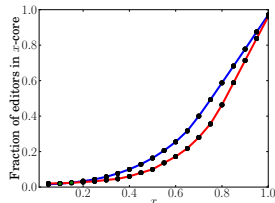


Figure 1: Median fraction of editors in  $x$ -core for featured articles (red) and non-featured articles (blue).

**Coordination in Featured Wikipedia Articles.** We now study how Wikipedia editors make use of explicit coordination mechanisms to interact with each other, and how this operates differently in featured and non-featured articles. In this analysis, we consider the  $x$ -core for each  $x$ ; this lets us consider both the full article (when  $x = 1$ ), as well as whether coordination mechanisms are differentially used by the most active editors (for smaller values of  $x$ ).

We would like to compare featured and non-featured articles, focusing on potential differences in coordination behavior. We do this by constructing a comparison set — a set of featured articles and a set of non-featured articles over which we can compare aggregate properties. Given the a priori differences between featured and non-featured articles,

such a comparison set needs to be constructed carefully so that the contrasts we identify are not simply consequences of surface-level differences that we already understand.

In particular, we control for three different features in setting up the comparison set. First is the volume of edits: featured articles tend to have a lot of editing activity before they are featured, and once they are featured they attract even more attention than they would get under normal circumstances. Hence, when we compare editing behavior in featured and non-featured articles, we control for the number of edits. Second, we control for the stage of development of the article at the time of its last recorded edit. Since articles on Wikipedia are created every day, our data contains well established articles that have been edited thousands of times as well as newer ones that have only been edited tens of times. Finally, a third factor we control for is the stage of Wikipedia as a whole at the time when the edits to an article were done. Conventions among Wikipedia editors gradually change over time, and the behavior of editors can be systematically affected by new conventions or features added on Wikipedia. Thus, our comparison set of featured and non-featured articles comprises roughly the same distribution of time points from the history of Wikipedia.

In summary, we construct two sets of articles with roughly the same distribution of edits that were generated at roughly the same time period — one of featured articles and one of non-featured articles. In the Appendix we provide the full details on exactly how this comparison set is constructed.

Let’s now look separately at how discussion pages and comments are used by featured and non-featured articles, considering the  $x$ -core for multiple values of  $x$ . Given the coordination trade-off we discussed above, it is unclear whether featured articles should display higher or lower use of these coordination mechanisms.

Figures 2(a) and 2(c) show that for all values of  $x$ , the  $x$ -core produces more discussion edits and comments in featured articles than non-featured articles. Recall that our set of non-featured articles is constructed to mirror the activity level of the featured articles as measured by article edits, so the comparison in Figures 2(a) and 2(c) is effectively saying that there is more coordination per edit in featured articles.

A distinct but related question is to consider which of the editors on an article are accounting for the coordination activity. In particular, there are two natural hypotheses: that the most active editors are overrepresented in the discussion as they coordinate; or, alternately, that the less active editors are overrepresented in the discussion while their more active counterparts do the work of writing the article itself.

To investigate this, we define  $d(x)$  (respectively  $c(x)$ ) to be the fraction of discussion-page edits (respectively comments) created by editors in the  $x$ -core, and we plot the differences  $d(x) - x$  and  $c(x) - x$  as functions of  $x$ . Note that  $d(1) - 1 = c(1) - 1 = 0$  by definition, and in the event that every editor contributed to the discussion pages and comments in proportion to their article editing activity, we would have  $d(x) - x = c(x) - x = 0$  for all  $x$ .

In Figures 2(b) and 2(d) we show plots of  $d(x) - x$  and  $c(x) - x$  respectively, averaged separately over featured and non-featured articles. The fact that these functions are posi-

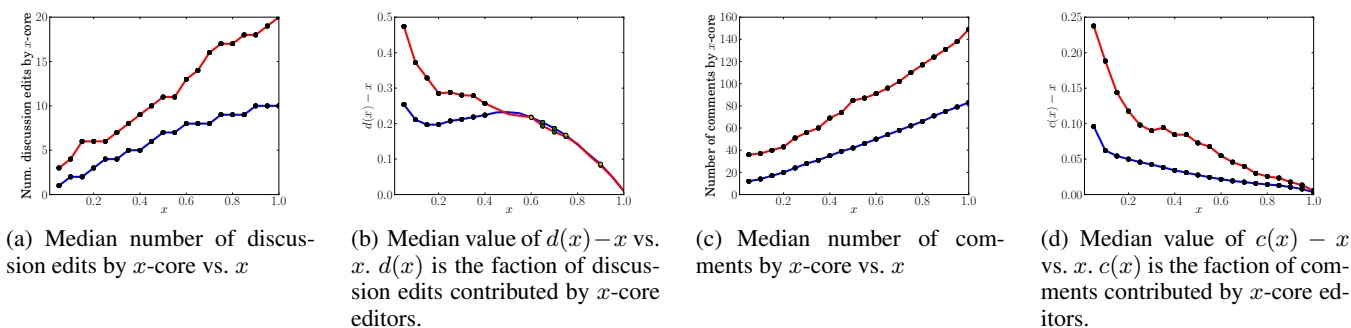


Figure 2: Differences in the use of comments and discussion pages among editors of featured (red) and non-featured (blue) articles.

tive over all  $x < 1$  shows that the more active editors (those who belong to the  $x$ -core for small  $x$ ) are in fact overrepresented in these coordination mechanisms. Moreover, this overrepresentation is particularly pronounced for the featured articles, again suggesting some of the distinctive ways in which featured articles use coordination. There is also an interesting contrast between discussion-page edits and comments:  $c(x) - x$  is higher for featured articles over all  $x < 1$ , while  $d(x) - x$  is higher for featured articles only for  $x < 1/2$ . It would be interesting to further explore how this difference relates to the lighter-weight nature of comments relative to discussion-page edits.

**Coordination in Highly-Watched Github Projects.** We now look at the relationship between coordination and status on GitHub, keeping our discussion more brief for this dataset. Since our measure of status in GitHub is continuous, rather than comparing two sets of projects, we look at how the number of comments per commit changes with number of watchers. Figure 3(a) shows that the number of comment per commit increases with number of watchers — this trend points in the same direction as our Wikipedia analysis, with higher-visibility projects using more coordination overall.

It is natural to ask whether the number of watchers is serving purely as a proxy for the number of commits, but as Figure 3(b) illustrates, the number of comments per commit is roughly constant as a function of the number of commits. Thus the trend we are seeing is not due to the number of commits, and this argues for the relationship between visibility (number of watchers) and the level of coordination.

We thus see that both GitHub projects and Wikipedia articles with higher status spend more effort coordinating. As noted earlier, this suggests the implication that projects with higher visibility may be usefully guided in the direction of greater levels of coordination relative to typical projects.

### Coordination in Crowded Environments

Having established that projects with different status and visibility in Wikipedia and GitHub can exhibit significant aggregate differences in their use of coordination, we now explore the differences in coordination among projects with different team composition. Our basic intuition is that

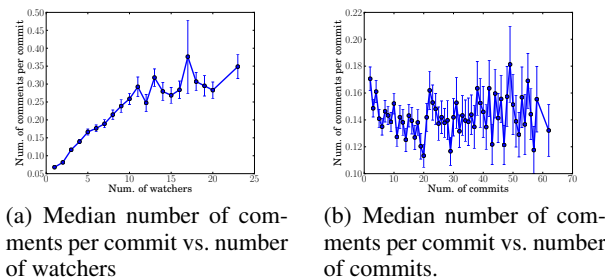


Figure 3: Comments as a function of the number of watchers (GitHub).

projects that involve a larger number of users require more coordination than smaller teams. However, since our data sets include projects that output different amounts of work, the size of a team should be considered in relation to the amount of work it produces. For a project with a fixed amount of work produced, we expect that the amount of coordination will increase with team size. Furthermore, for a project with a fixed team size, we expect that the amount of coordination will decrease with amount of work produced. In summary, our hypothesis is that more crowded projects (large team size and low production) will require more coordination than less crowded ones. This is because as projects become crowded by users, but the amount of work available does not increase accordingly, users will lose the ability to work separately on independent tasks, and more communication will be necessary to coordinate multiple users working on the same task. We now test our hypothesis on our data sets.

**Crowdedness in Wikipedia.** We would now like to compare our hypothesis with what we observe in Wikipedia. We first need to define measures for the project’s amount of work produced, number of users, and amount of coordination. To define reasonable representations of these parameters we take each Wikipedia article  $a$  and consider the users  $U_a$  who have made at least one edit to the article and one edit to the discussion page. These are users who have demon-

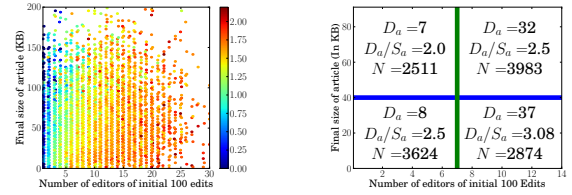
strated awareness of the existence of the article’s discussion page. Since articles in our data are at different stages, we consider a constant number of initial edits to measure the number of editors interested in the article and levels of coordination. We record the timestamp  $T_a$  when the 100th edit by users in  $U_a$  was made. We let  $S_a$  be the set of users in  $U_a$  who contributed at least one of the first 100 edits. The  $S_a$  parameter represents the size of the team as it existed at a fixed point in time. We let  $D_a$  be the number of discussion edits made before time  $T_a$ . The  $D_a$  parameter represents the amount of coordination exhibited by the team. Here, we only consider discussion edits since they are the more explicit coordination mechanism. Finally, we let  $N_a$  be the eventual size of the article in bytes, which represents the amount of work produced by the editors.

Figure 4(a) depicts the amount of coordination  $\log(D_a)$  in an article of size  $N_a$  and  $U_a$  editors. It is drawn as a heat map, with the color corresponding to the value of  $\log(D_a)$ . Furthermore, in figure 4(b), we split articles into four categories depending on whether — relative to the median article — they have a lower or higher number of bytes ( $N_a$ ) and a lower or higher number of editors ( $S_a$ ). We compare the number of discussion edits ( $D_a$ ) and the number of discussion edits per editor ( $\frac{D_a}{S_a}$ ) among the four categories.

Figures 4(a) and 4(b) show the general trend we hypothesized. The amount of coordination, measured by the number of discussion edits and discussion edits per editor, increases with the number of editors and decreases with the size of the article. Articles that are crowded with many users and low production exhibit the most coordination.

**Crowdedness in GitHub.** We now explore the role of crowdedness in the coordination of GitHub projects. We measure amount of work produced, number of users, and amount of coordination analogously to how we measured them for Wikipedia, and then perform an analogous investigation of the relationship. For each GitHub project  $p$  we let  $U_p$  be the users who committed at least once and contributed at least one comment. We record the timestamp  $T_p$  when the 100th commit by users in  $U_p$  was made. We let  $S_p$  be the set of users in  $U_p$  who contributed at least one of the first 100 commits. We let  $C_p$  be the number of comments made before  $T_p$ . Finally, we let  $N_p$  be the eventual size of the project measured by the total number of commits in the full history of the project. We use  $N_p$  as the amount of work produced,  $S_p$  as the number of users, and  $\log(C_p)$  as the “amount of coordination.”

Since the GitHub data set is much smaller than Wikipedia, in order to see the change in coordination with project size and number of users, we split the projects into 100 bins by splitting the number of users ( $S_p$ ) and the size of the projects ( $N_p$ ) into 10 bins by percentile. We then measure the amount of coordination ( $\log(C_p)$ ) within each bin. Figure 5(a) shows a heat map of coordination  $\log(C_p)$  as a function of number of users ( $S_p$ ) and the size of the projects ( $N_p$ ). To observe a numerical representation of the trend, we also split the projects into four categories depending on whether they have low or high number of users and project size, relative



(a) Heat map of “amount of coordination” ( $\log(D_a)$ ) as a function of the number of “article parts” ( $N_a$ ) and number of editors ( $S_a$ ) in Wikipedia articles.

(b) Articles are split into 4 categories at the median size ( $N_a$ ) and number of editors ( $S_a$ ). Each area shows the median number of discussion edits ( $D_a$ ), median number of discussion edits per editor ( $D_a/S_a$ ), and number of articles ( $N$ ). Differences between cells are statistically different (p-val < 0.05)

Figure 4: Amount of coordination in Wikipedia articles of different composition.

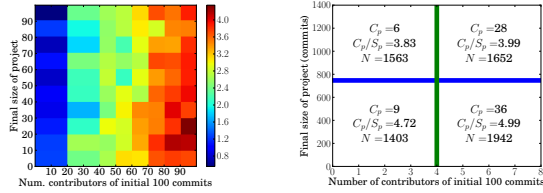
to the median. Figure 5(b) shows the median values of  $D_p$ ,  $\frac{D_p}{S_p}$ , and the number of projects in each category.

We find that the trend is similar to the one observed in Wikipedia. As projects become more crowded with many users and small size, users tend to coordinate more. Overall, the fact that coordination and crowdedness align closely in both domains raises a further potential implication for design — to recognize projects that are becoming increasingly crowded, and to correspondingly guide groups toward coordination resources as this is occurring.

## Modeling Coordination and Crowdedness

We now develop a simple theoretical model of coordination, so that we can study the cost-benefit trade-off in coordination at a more formal level. The model is highly stylized to reduce this trade-off to its basic essence. The benefit of working with a concrete stylized model is that by stripping away much of the complexity of the coordination process that is specific to Wikipedia and GitHub, we can highlight how certain trade-offs depend only on a set of simple assumptions that are present in other domains outside of Wikipedia and GitHub. We find that the model accomplishes this — from the analysis of the model, we identify the relationship between crowdedness and coordination, which matches our original hypothesis and the effects we found in Wikipedia and GitHub.

**General Setting for the Model.** We begin by modeling the costs and benefits of coordination in a stylized setting that represents a team’s collaboration. The costs result from the fact that time spent on coordination does not directly advance the project itself. The benefits will be based on dividing up the work without redundancy — in the absence of coordination, there is the danger that two people will try to do the same step in the project simultaneously, resulting in a loss in efficiency. In the context of GitHub and Wikipedia,



(a) Heat map of “amount of coordination” ( $\log(C_p)$ ) as a function of percentile of number of “project parts” ( $N_p$ ) and number of users ( $S_p$ ) in GitHub projects

(b) Split of projects into 4 categories by low or high size ( $N_p$ ) and number of editors ( $S_p$ ). Each area shows the median number of comments ( $D_p$ ), median number of comments per user ( $D_p/S_p$ ), and number of projects ( $N$ ). Differences between cells are statistically different (p-val < 0.05)

Figure 5: Amount of coordination in GitHub articles of different composition.

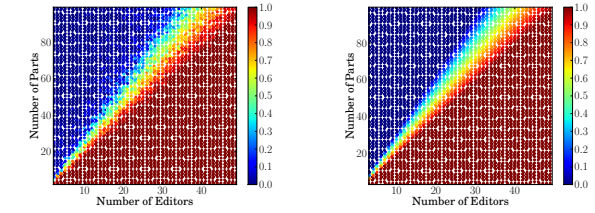
we can think of this model as capturing the way in which coordination is particularly important when two users are working on the same section of an article or the same part of a program. Without coordination or discussion, users who disagree on the outcome often engage in “edit wars,” undoing each other’s work (Viégas, Wattenberg, and Dave 2004).

As discussed above, our model is not designed to capture all the nuances encountered in contexts as complex as Wikipedia and GitHub. Indeed, our goal is in a sense the opposite, to find the simplest formulation of a model in which the inherent trade-off between coordination and efficiency emerges from the basic properties of the model.

The structure of our model is as follows. There is a project with  $N$  parts that need to be finished. Each part starts in the *unfinished* state, and requires one unit of work; a part transitions from the unfinished to the finished state when a user works on it. A set of  $E$  users work on the project. In a single step, a user contributes a unit of work to one part. If the part is currently unfinished, then it becomes finished. If the part the user worked on was already in the finished state, the situation is more subtle, reflecting the collision between two users. The new contribution has no effect with probability  $1 - \alpha$ ; and with probability  $\alpha$  it in fact has a negative effect, clashing with the previous contribution and returning it to the unfinished state. This captures the idea noted above, that when two people work on the same task, it can create additional work as the differences are resolved.

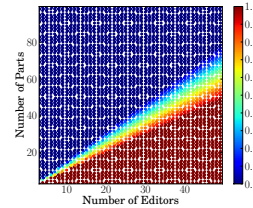
Users arrive sequentially and can either coordinate with previous users before contributing, or contribute without coordinating. Specifically, each user is allowed to perform two actions, selected in one of the following two ways:

- *Coordinate*: If the user coordinates, she uses her first action to coordinate with others to find an empty project part, and then uses her second action to add a contribution to the empty part, moving it to the finished state. In this case, she contributes exactly one part to the project.



(a) Values obtained from simulations. Parameter  $\alpha = 1$ .

(b) Values obtained from analytical approximation. Parameter  $\alpha = 1$ .



(c) Values obtained from analytical approximation. Parameter  $\alpha = 0$ .

Figure 6: Predicted amount of coordination by the model. Heat maps show the amount of coordination ( $\beta$ ) that optimizes the number of finished parts of a project with  $E$  workers and  $N$  parts.

- *Not Coordinate*: If the user does not coordinate, then she uses both of her actions to sequentially contribute to two randomly selected project parts. Either of these parts might turn out to be finished, in which case the contribution has no effect (with probability  $1 - \alpha$ ) or returns the part in question to the unfinished state with probability  $\alpha$ .

Each user chooses to coordinate independently with probability  $\beta$  and to not coordinate with probability  $1 - \beta$ , where  $\beta$  is fixed in the beginning of the process. The two actions allowed to users in the model represent the ability that users in decentralized collaboration platforms have to spend all the effort contributing to the projects, or to split their efforts between contributing and coordinating. For example, as we observed, some editors justify their edits in the discussion page and some propose their edits before applying them to the article. Likewise, some GitHub users explain their code after committing it.

Collectively, the set of users would like the project to have as many finished parts as possible. How much should they coordinate in order to maximize this objective? We are interested in finding the value of  $\beta$  that maximizes the number of finished parts by the end of the process.

Figure 6(a) depicts the optimal  $\beta$  with  $N$  parts,  $E$  users, and with  $\alpha = 1$ . It is drawn as a heat map, with the color corresponding to the value of  $\beta$ . Here  $\beta$  has been optimized by running a large number of simulations of the process. We observe first of all from the heat map that the relationship between crowdedness and coordination in this synthetic model follows the same qualitative direction that we observed for both Wikipedia and Github. We now turn to an analytical ap-



proximation of the optimal  $\beta$  and show it agrees very closely with the simulation results.

**Analysis of optimal coordination probability** Fix  $N$ ,  $E$ , and  $\alpha$ , and let  $P_i$  be the expected number of finished parts the project has after  $i$  users have passed through the project. Also, let  $X_{C,k}$  be the probability that a user who does not coordinate finishes  $k$  parts given that there are  $C$  finished parts at the time the user arrives. When  $k < 0$ ,  $X_{C,k}$  is the probability that the user will *undo*  $k$  parts from the project. We make the following approximation:

$$P_{i+1} = (1-\beta)(P_i + 2X_{P_i,2} + X_{P_i,1} - X_{P_i,-1} - 2X_{P_i,-2}) + \beta \quad (1)$$

Note that this is an approximation since the exact value of  $P_{i+1}$  is  $(1-\beta)(C_i + 2X_{C_i,2} + X_{C_i,1} - X_{C_i,-1} - 2X_{C_i,-2}) + \beta$ , where  $C_i$  is the actual number of finished parts after user  $i$ , not the expected value of  $C_i$ . That is, we make the deterministic approximation that  $C_i$  is always its expected value.

Writing the values of  $X_{C,k}$  in terms of  $\alpha$ ,  $C$ , and  $N$  and plugging them into equation 1, we get the following recurrence relation:

$$P_{i+1} = AP_i + P_0$$

where  $A = \frac{1-\beta}{N^2}(1+\alpha)^2 - 2\frac{1-\beta}{N}(1+\alpha) + 1$  (2)

and  $P_0 = -\frac{1-\beta}{N}(1+\alpha) + 2 - \beta$

Solving the recurrence, we get a closed form solution:

$$P_i = P_0 \left[ \frac{A^i - 1}{A - 1} \right] \text{ if } A \neq 1 \quad (3)$$

and  $P_i = iP_0$  if  $A = 1$

For fixed  $N$ ,  $\alpha$ , and  $E$ ,  $P_E$  in equation 3 gives the expected number of completed parts as a univariate function of  $\beta$ . We can easily optimize this function and solve for the value of  $\beta$  that leads to the most completed parts. Figure 6(b) shows the optimal value of  $\beta$  for a range of values of  $N$  and  $E$  and  $\alpha = 1$ . We observe that the result from the simulations (figure 6(a)) and the analytical approximation (6(b)) are very similar, suggesting that both approaches lead to a good approximation of the optimal solution.

We notice first that when  $E > N$  the best  $\beta$  is 1, for the simple reason that in this case, if all users coordinate, they will finish all the parts – the best possible outcome. Conversely, when  $N$  is very large and  $E$  is small then the best  $\beta$  is close to zero. That is because there are many more parts than users, so it is unlikely for users to collide, and hence coordinating is mainly wasteful. In between these two extremes, there are values of  $N$  and  $E$  in which the best value for  $\beta$  lies non-trivially away from both zero and one.

In the previous analysis we set  $\alpha = 1$ . We now show that the high level predictions of the model hold for any value of  $\alpha$ . Figure 6(c) shows the optimal  $\beta$  for a range of value of  $N$  and  $E$  using  $\alpha = 0$ . We observe that the area where the optimal value of  $\beta$  is strictly between 0 and 1 rotates clockwise and there is overall less coordination. However, the basic trend observed when  $\alpha = 1$  holds here too — projects

require more coordination when the number of project parts is smaller relative to the number of users. Analogous plots across various values of  $\alpha$  between 0 and 1 exhibit the same general trends. For all  $\alpha$  the model thus makes a basic qualitative prediction: users should coordinate more as the project becomes more “crowded,” with  $E$  large relative to  $N$ . The alignment of this stylized model with our hypothesis and the trends we observed in Wikipedia and GitHub suggests the potential robustness of the relationship between crowdedness and coordination in other collaborative domains. It is striking that this relationship emerges clearly from the model, despite the fact that crowdedness was not explicitly built into the model’s structure.

## Discussion

Through the use of rich datasets and a theoretical model of coordination, we have analyzed the performance of on-line projects from the perspective of coordination mechanisms. On both Wikipedia and GitHub, we find that projects with high status and visibility differ in aggregate from other projects in the way that they use coordination. We also find that crowding of project participants is a key parameter underlying the coordination level in Wikipedia and GitHub. We develop a theoretical model for the coordination process; the analysis of the model aligns with the trends found in the data, suggesting the potential robustness of the findings.

The relationship between coordination and these structural properties of projects can suggest principles for designing coordination mechanisms in several dimensions.

- The relationship between crowdedness and coordination suggests that coordination mechanisms should not be surfaced uniformly across different projects, but instead emphasized more strongly on *crowded* projects – those with many team members relative to the project’s size.
- In a related vein, our analysis has pointed to differences between lightweight and heavyweight coordination mechanisms, especially in their differential usage across active and peripheral team members. There is thus a need to integrate these different coordination styles across different types of contributors.
- Featuring and visibility interact in subtle ways with coordination, as we have seen; there may also be additional dimensions along which coordination should most effectively be varied.

Broadly speaking, our framework here suggests that an understanding of the roles of coordination mechanisms in different settings can benefit from a data-oriented analysis of their inherent trade-offs.

The similarities in these effects across both Wikipedia and GitHub suggests some of their generality; it will be interesting to consider how these findings carry over to other on-line domains in which decentralized teams collaborate on projects. As we have seen from the two domains in this paper, the basic ingredients of our model and analysis can usually be directly adapted to new settings, since the framework can be applied whenever there is a group faced with a primary work product and a separate channel for exchanging

coordination-related messages. Ultimately, seeing how these findings transfer across domains will be a next useful step on the way toward understanding the process of large-scale on-line collaboration.

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## Appendix: Sampling Wikipedia Articles

In this appendix we describe the sampling of featured and non-featured Wikipedia articles in more detail. Recall that our goal here is to create, for each featured article, a comparison set of non-featured articles that have roughly the same number of edits at roughly the same periods of time.

Our procedure is as follows. For each article  $a$ , we let  $e_b(a, y)$  be the number of times  $a$  was edited before year  $y$ . Similarly, we let  $e_d(a, y)$  and  $e_a(a, y)$  be the number of times  $a$  was edited during and after year  $y$ . For each article  $a_f$  featured in year  $y$ , we find  $k$  random non-featured articles,  $L_{a,k}$ , that have approximately the same number of edits as  $a_f$  during the years before and after  $y$ . That is, for an article  $a_f$  featured during year  $y$ , the non-featured article  $a_n$  can be in  $L_{a,k}$  if  $\frac{|e_b(a_f, y) - e_b(a_n, y)|}{e_b(a_f, y)} < .05$  and  $\frac{|e_a(a_f, y) - e_a(a_n, y)|}{e_a(a_f, y)} < .05$ .

We aim to investigate the differences in the amount of coordination between featured and non-featured articles that are not a direct consequence of differences such as volumes of edits. Hence, we also require that  $e_b(a_f, y) < e_b(a_n, y)$  for  $a_n$  to be included in  $L_{a,k}$ . The results turn out to be the same with and without this additional restriction. We choose the article  $a_n$  from the set of all non-featured articles without replacement. That is, the sets  $L_{a,k}$  are pairwise disjoint.

We define  $F$  to be the set of articles that have been featured on Wikipedia for which  $L_{a,k}$  is non-empty, and we define  $NF = \cup_{a \in F} \{L_{a,30}\}$ , the non-featured articles with approximately the same number of edits as a featured article during the years before and after the year the article was featured. Throughout the paper we compare the sets  $F$  and  $NF$ . We repeat the analysis with different choices of  $k$  and find that the results are consistent for all moderate values of  $k$ . We present the results for  $k = 30$

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