"The problem with Wikipedia is that it only works in practice. In theory, it can never work" states a popular joke among Wikipedians. By reversing the logic of a well-known phrase they brilliantly reflect the improbable success of their community. When Wikipedia officially took off at the beginning of 2001 – and even many years after – no one believed that thousands (now: millions) of people would be able to create a coherent knowledge base.

Wikipedia is not the only example of online communities that successfully deliver intellectual goods that are in use by the public at large. Some of the open source software – for example, the popular Firefox browser – is produced in the same manner. However, many of such peer production projects never deliver anything useful, and even the few successful ones often struggle to keep their products at high level of quality. Everyone has probably encountered underdeveloped articles on the Wikipedia or found some errors within. Bugs in open source software are a nightmare to organizations that rely on them. That was the case with the famous “Heartbleed” bug in the software that is used to encrypt online transactions – even giants such as Amazon have experienced that community production does not necessary warrant quality control.

What fascinates us as social scientists is that some online communities – built from enthusiast not seeking financial gains but simply enjoying common work – incredibly deliver products of high quality. What is it that makes some succeed and others fail? How can we support such peer production communities so that they can give us more of their interesting and useful products and services?

To answer these questions we will take a closer look at editors of the Wikipedia that voluntarily join WikiProjects – sub-communities that look after articles on specific topics, for example, video games or movies. We will check how different WikiProjects organize their work – how they divide the tasks and check quality. We will investigate if they create typical group roles, such as “leader” or – very important for quality control – “devil’s advocate”, that is, a critic. We will confront their work styles with the effects: the quality of articles that the WikiProjects curate.

We hope that we can find a connection between how online communities organize their work and the quality of their products. This knowledge can help us design novel technological solutions – for example, new functionalities for social interaction platforms – and can support communities of committed volunteers deliver the products that serve us all.