

To the president of MIT  
Professor Susan Hockfield  
<http://web.mit.edu/hockfield/>  
[hockfield@mit.edu](mailto:hockfield@mit.edu)

To the dean of SIMS, University of California at Berkeley  
Professor AnnaLee Saxenian  
<http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/~anno/>  
[anno@sims.berkeley.edu](mailto:anno@sims.berkeley.edu)

March 11, 2006

Dear professor Hockfield and professor Saxenian,

I have a problem on the integrity of science with two of your students, Rob Speer at MIT who started the problem, and Joseph Lorenzo Hall at SIMS who is interfering in an unhelpful way. The problem is summarized in the appendix.

Obviously, the integrity of science is a difficult subject even for academics so there must be a great deal of tolerance with students. With students, they certainly cannot be held accountable as scientists can, and they are only learning the trade. Yet, students e.g. know that one cannot cheat a test and that one must study a topic before one gives conclusions on it. When issues of integrity arise, it can be very educational for them to have the issue discussed. In this case, these two students would learn a lot about scientific conduct and scientific integrity.

In the present case, the issue is on the behaviour of these students on the internet, in particular wikipedia. It appears that communication with these students is greatly hindered by that environment, which does not allow the quality of deliberation provided by a personal chat with a person that they respect. My reason to contact you is to ask you to find a teacher or counselor at your school to have that chat.

It is to be considered whether the activity of those students within wikipedia is related to their life as students at your schools. My impression is that this relation exists. Firstly, they present themselves on their wikipedia pages as students of MIT and SIMS, thus partly referring to those institutions and their education there, implying their relation to you. Secondly, they are active in editing work, where they refer to learned books and where they use difficult words. Their behaviour thus cannot be strictly separated from their education and prospective position as scientists. This is most clearly so with Joseph Lorenzo Hall who is already a Ph.D. student who thus must write scientific papers for the journals. For Rob Speer, who started the problem, it can be observed that his education on computing science is relevant for the topic where the problem arose.

In the end, it is with students similar as with academics: An academic can still be a good academic “professionally” even if he or she steals roses from the neighbours or tells gossips to friends in church, but, the expectation would be that that behaviour would not occur. The expectation would be decent behaviour, worthy of an intended graduate or doctor, especially when the integrity of science is involved.

The relation to your school also arises directly from the nature of their misconduct. When a student behaves badly in an area that he sees as distinct from his education, it can be educational to him or her to be reminded that this behaviour does not fit a graduate, for which the very education is intended. As said, I kindly ask you to find a teacher or counselor within your institution to discuss matters on a personal level with those students. I already tried to explain it to them via the contact that is provided by the internet, but this didn’t help, and my hope is that such a talk on a personal level would help them to see the problem.

Unfortunately, the student Rob Speer only provided the co-ordinate “a senior at MIT studying computer science and music” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Rspeer>) and explicitly refused to give a name and email address of his professor. There appear different organizations dealing with computer science at MIT, so I can only write to the President, professor Hockfield, with the polite request to forward this issue to the appropriate person. To my relief, though, I noted a speech by professor Hockfield where she discussed academic integrity, in the case of two scientists at Lincoln Laboratory, so I have been confirmed that integrity has her attention.

The Ph. D. student Joseph Lorenzo Hall can be identified via <http://josephhall.org/> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Joebeone>, [joehall@berkeley.edu](mailto:joehall@berkeley.edu). At the present, SIMS is smaller than MIT, so I suppose that professor Varian can identify this student with some ease.

Both students have been informed of this letter, via the email addresses on their webpages.

For your information: in the past I have had brief contact with professor Blanchard (MIT) and Varian (SIMS) as fellow economists. This was only a brief contact, I don’t mean to imply any recommendation on their part, yet this information might be to your assistance.

Respectfully yours,

Thomas Cool / Thomas Colignatus  
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## Description of the case

“Unethical behaviour by Rob Speer (student MIT) and the failure to observe that behaviour, even when it is pointed out, by Joseph Lorenzo Hall (SIMS), on Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem, voting systems in general and the Borda Fixed Point method in particular.”

Author: Thomas Colignatus, March 11 2006

## Introduction

The basic point is that Rob Speer didn’t study the references that I gave him, but stuck to the wikipedia policy that references don’t have to be read. Thus he applied wikipedia policy rules in a rather bureaucratic manner, and didn’t adopt the critical scientific attitude. This attitude implies that he is instrumental in creating false information to the general public, while actually suggesting to the public that the information would be sound.

When confronted with this point, he didn’t reply to this with rational conversation, but became very defensive of his position. Normal comments were called “threats”.

The problem with Joseph Hall is that he didn’t recognize this behaviour, even when this was pointed out to him. He tried to mediate, but didn’t see the point on which.

The students hold that wikipedia would be a special environment. This is only partly true. Wikipedia has some conventions, but conventions are not binding, and, which is my point, there is always the higher code of conduct of scientists.

In addition, while I was writing this case report & letter, in order to arrive at common scientific ground, it turned out that the situation at wikipedia developed further. I was given a notice (“Request for comments”) with a 48 hours horizon; but then within 10 hours there followed a complete block from wikipedia.

The new blocking complicates the issue but on the other hand makes it simpler, since it shows even more clearly that **wikipedia** and **science** are on difficult terms.

It appears that some wikipedians don’t like any interaction of the internal wikipedia environment with people from the outside. One can understand this to an extent. What is amazing for a scientist is that wikipedians don’t make a distinction between issues on the integrity of science and other cases. Clearly, contacting a professor to encourage the education of a student is different from contacting a professor to fire his secretary. In the case when a scientist at wikipedia would show scientific misconduct within wikipedia, an alternative route would be to contact the professional organization, rather than the university. But in case of students, that is impossible.

## The key point

The key point is that Rob Speer holds wikipedia policy rules above the critical scientific attitude. This can be shown by this discussion on Arrow's impossibility theorem.

I entered the following criticism to the existing article (for the readers):

### Criticism

The history of ideas shows that mankind has struggled with paradoxical concepts like zero and division by zero, the infinite and infinitesimals (Achilles and the hare), the liar paradox, the squaring of the circle, and the like. Arrow's impossibility theorem belongs to this category. It stands to note that his theorem thus is an important contribution. That said, however, the value of the theorem must be judged by itself.

The theorem is not merely a mathematical result but must also be judged from the viewpoint of rationality and morality, since humans must adopt a constitution for their society. Arrow claimed that these axioms would be 'rational' and 'morally desirable' (sometimes interpreted as 'fair'). The "Arrow axioms" however are not rational, since they cause an inconsistency and no rational person would adopt an inconsistency. The axioms only seem rational each considered by itself, but jointly they are irrational. The axioms also are morally unacceptable, since one cannot be asked to do something impossible. For example, for a bike one wishes round wheels to ride. And one wishes square wheels for parking. But square circles don't exist. Arrow concludes that rational and useful bikes don't exist. The proper conclusion is that one requires a standard.

Since 1950 researchers have not quite taken account of these aspects, and hence the theorem has generated much confusion and also a negative attitude towards democracy (since students are taught that it is 'impossible'). For the proper analysis (also of Sen's misguided theorem on liberalism), see these links:

- [Voting theory for democracy](#)
- [Definition & Reality in the General Theory of Political Economy](#)
- [The discussion page at wikireason](#)

Retrieved from "[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arrow%27s\\_impossibility\\_theorem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arrow%27s_impossibility_theorem)"

Next to the “article” page there is a “talk” page for the editors. There evolved the following discussion, where Rob Speer first deleted the criticism and, after a revert by me, then said that the text would be either original research or un-verifiable or both. The discussion was:

## Added criticism

Note that the page still states "Arrow's theorem states that there is no general way to aggregate preferences without running into some kind of irrationality or unfairness." This is nonsense, but I left it for the time being, to allow others to digest the criticism.

[Colignatus](#) 01:58, 3 March 2006 (UTC)

I agree that that statement is nonsense, so I removed it. Your additional section was written as an opinion, however, and I reverted it. The widely-held criticisms of Arrow's theorem already appear under "Interpretations of the theorem". It's better Wikipedia style to ensure that the whole article is neutral - separate "advocacy" and "criticisms" sections are a last resort for particularly contentious topics. [rspeer](#) / [Jæðsɪ](#) 03:38, 8 March 2006 (UTC)

No, the text that I entered is not an *opinion* but a reasoned statement. It is not an *interpretation* but a reasoned statement. It may be that you are right that there should not be a separate criticism section, but, given the first part of the article, this reasoned statement can be put here. My suggestion is that more people think through what the article would look like but including the reasoned statement in the main body of the article. It is useful to have the text available in the article before the whole is re-edited, to prevent innocent readers to get a wrong impression. [Colignatus](#) 22:32, 10 March 2006 (UTC)

I noticed that Rob now added a notification on original research or verification. This is better than simply removing the text, but there remains a confusion. You all must distinguish me (1) as a scientist who for you is a third party and who provides sources, e.g. see me as the writer of VTFD in 2001, (b) as a scientist who helps you, just now, to get this article straight. You should note that the [verifiability](#) condition concerns **facts** that need be checked by various sources. But the text that I provided (in the disputed criticism section) contains a **reasoned argument** that you can check by the logical faculties of your minds. Thus the condition does not apply in that sense. Also the reference to original research doesn't apply, since I didn't enter original research. The research originated in 1990 and was published in 2001. The only thing I do now is correct the misleading element in the article, and provide the reader (and you as editors) with a condensed reasoned statement, that you again can check by using the logical faculties of your minds. Also, the [verifiability](#) page mentions that the sources should be reliable. Well, again this is a non-issue for this paragraph. For, the point is that a reasoned argument is provided, so that it doesn't matter where it is from, and you have to use the faculties of your minds. If the washing lady says  $1+1=2$  then this has the same value as when the bishop says so, even when the bishop doesn't know what he talks about. Which is exactly why I added the suggestion, above, that when the reasoned argument is understood, the criticism might perhaps best be included in the main text, revising the main article. I didn't do that myself, since all of you would be completely shocked, not having digested that reasoned statement. Some other comments: PM 1: I doubt whether you will find many other sources on criticism other than I already included in the list of literature in the links that I provided. If someone feels like unpacking those links and

transferring those references into the main body, feel free to do so. PM 2: Now that Rob has eliminated that one sentence, that he agreed was nonsense, perhaps the header Criticism is too strong, and it may be perhaps Evaluation or something like that. PM 3: If the consensus is that this group of editors cannot take responsibility for using their logical faculties of minds on the reasoned argument, then you may also attribute it to me, see [Colignatus at wikinfo](#), and perhaps research a bit how reliable I am. Simply a Google scholar is not enough, though. PM 4: If all this fails, I would like a comment from someone who follows the logic of the reasoned argument and have suggestions how it can remain available for readers, then in another format or place. [Colignatus](#) 20:22, 11 March 2006 (UTC)

Retrieved from "[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Arrow%27s\\_impossibility\\_theorem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Arrow%27s_impossibility_theorem)"

## **A communication to the professor of a student is called a “threat”**

Before the above exchange on Arrow’s impossibility theorem, there was another exchange, where basically the same happened. This was on the Borda Fixed Point method that I introduced. The discussion on that is more convoluted, so I won’t quote it here. The text is available at wikipedia. But, in that exchange I already concluded that I needed to contact Rob Speer’s professor, so I asked him to provide his name and email address. However, instead of being happy that a scientific colleague was called into the scene, Rob Speer called this a “threat”.

### **Other people at wikipedia joined in:**

What's this about talking to Rspeer's professor or dean? Why do you want to do that? What are you hoping to accomplish? I must tell you that it does sound like a threat, and like completely inappropriate behavior within the Wikipedia culture.

&mdash;[[User:Bunchofgrapes|Bunchofgrapes]] ([[User talk:Bunchofgrapes|talk]]) 23:36, 8 March 2006 (UTC)

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- :.....:What I try to accomplish: see that email. Don't judge before you read it. And if culture is baked in stone, would you really like that ? Did you ever hear about the world wide web so that different cultures meet ?  
[[User:Colignatus|Colignatus]] 01:35, 10 March 2006 (UTC)

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- :.....:That is definitely a threat and ultimatum and completely and totally inappropriate. What's next short of arbitration? Colignatus, Rspeer has given a bit, it's your turn. --  
[[User:Joebeone|Joseph Lorenzo Hall]] 03:54, 9 March 2006 (UTC)

:.....:(a) Explain why this is a threat. (b) It is not so, that you can hold that Rspeer gives some and then the other person must too. If Rspeer was out of order, this needs correction. (c) I noticed that you are at SIMS, so now I have to write to

Hal Varian, if he's still there. Why don't you behave decently, it would have saved us all a great deal ? [[User:Colignatus|Colignatus]] 01:35, 10 March 2006 (UTC)

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+ :::::::::::We are behaving decently. We have attempted to reach a civil resolution with you. Now you have threatened me by saying that you now have to write a professor at my school, Hal Varian (he's our former Dean). What are you going to say to him? That I tried to find a civil solution to a dispute that has been blown out of proportion? Not only can I pretty much guarantee that he won't read your email, I can guarantee that he won't care either way. The OED defines threaten as "to declare one's intention of injuring or punishing in order to influence." You have declared your intention to write emails to superiors of ours in the hope that they will punish us or otherwise influence our actions. That's a threat. -- [[User:Joebeone|Joseph Lorenzo Hall]] 16:51, 11 March 2006 (UTC)

(Obviously, I never said or implied that they needed punishment or to be influenced. Only correction, as an educator or scientific colleague is able to do. / TC.)

(It is a bit strange that Joseph Hall assumes that SIMS, so interested in the information society, would not be interested in wikipedia. / TC.)

### **Part of the problem is the official guideline on wikipedia**

Part of the problem is the official guideline. But, again the students put this guideline above the age-old practice of scientific consultation.

A quote of Rob Speer:

I quote the policy on threats at [WP:NPA](#):

*Threats or actions which expose other Wikipedia editors to political, religious or other persecution by government, their employer or any others. Violations of this sort may result in a block for an extended period of time which may be applied immediately by any sysop upon discovery. Sysops applying such sanctions should confidentially notify the members of the Wikipedia:Arbitration Committee and Jimbo Wales of what they have done and why.*

Yes, the situation does fall under both "other" clauses. Editors have been banned for threatening to contact employers in the past, though, and I think contacting academic superiors falls along the same lines. [rspeer](#) / [rspeer](#) 18:00, 11 March 2006 (UTC)

## Other points to consider

In the discussion above on Arrow's impossibility theorem, I already showed how Rob Speer didn't use his critical faculties but worked more operationally. I still don't know whether this is because he is no real student of voting theory, has done any exams in the subject or not, and perhaps is more an operational engineer than an academic scientist. However, such aspects are less relevant compared to the way how one reacts to criticism.

In the discussion on the Borda Fixed Point method I concluded in an early stage that it was useless to discuss issues with him, and that I needed to contact his professor.

I tried to explain to him that a discussion with him was useless, and I tried to clarify the situation by saying: "If you teach a monkey to climb, you will get a coconut on your head."

His reaction was that I had compared him with a monkey, and that he considered this a personal attack.

However, I explained, and I still hold that this is clear from the context and clear from who has studied the references that I gave, that I did not compare him with a monkey, but only invoked the saying. This saying clarifies the mechanism: that it was useless to go into a discussion with him since it would only lead to more problems. From which it followed that I needed to contact his professor.

However, this explanation was rejected.

There are more examples where a clarification of the situation was not properly listened to but translated into personal attacks.

A nice other example (taken from the "Request for Comments") is: "Threat to disrupt Wikipedia to make a point: "So, you hold that this voting system page is based about notability ONLY, and that logic and reasoning are not important ? In that case, I can propose to delete this page."" This reaction means that a "reductio ad absurdum" argument is wholly misinterpreted.

In the appendices there are links and some prints of exchanges, that show that there is no respect for a person who explicitly refers to the integrity of science and who invokes the rules of scientific conduct.

## Conclusions

It may also be mentioned that, though I am quite at home in editing scientifically warranted reviews, the wikipedia syntax and all the procedures they have were new to me, so that I undoubtedly have been less effective in my reaction.

Nevertheless it amazes me that a decent scientist who wants to correct erroneous statements in a public and open-access encyclopedia is elbowed out of the situation by some students who may well know less of the matter, who don't read and study, and who hold the rules of scientific research and conduct to be less relevant than the local conventions.

The prime conclusion remains that it would be useful that the schools discuss these events with these students.

The events also cause two hypotheses on the general situation.

- (1) Perhaps this is an indication to review the general attitude of students, as more students are involved in the wikipedia project.
- (2) Scientists would have a task to critically evaluate wikipedia, not only the result but also the rules of conduct.

## References and Appendices

### Basic links

While the list of links originally was much shorter, there now is a longer list with various statements on blocking that I have had no influence on.

The case thus is documented at:

- (a) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Deletion\\_review#Colignatus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Deletion_review#Colignatus)
- (b) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User\\_talk:Colignatus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_talk:Colignatus)
- (c) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Borda\\_fixed\\_point](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Borda_fixed_point)
- (d) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Arrow%27s\\_impossibility\\_theorem#Added\\_criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Arrow%27s_impossibility_theorem#Added_criticism)
- (e) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arrow%27s\\_impossibility\\_theorem#Criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arrow%27s_impossibility_theorem#Criticism)
- (f) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Requests\\_for\\_comment/Colignatus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Requests_for_comment/Colignatus)  
(though within the time limit I was blocked from entering a reply)
- (g) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Voting\\_system](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Voting_system)

Wikipedia also stores histories of pages.

PM. It may be that pages are deleted over time, but one might ask a recovery on the above mentioned "deletion review" page.

General information is provided at

- (a) <http://www.wikinfo.org/wiki.php?title=Colignatus>
- (b) [http://wikireason.net/wiki/Boycott\\_of\\_Holland](http://wikireason.net/wiki/Boycott_of_Holland)
- (c) <http://www.dataweb.nl/~cool>

## **A request for a time out is not respected**

Wikipedia has various mechanisms for conflict resolution. However, the proof is in eating the pudding. It turns out for example that a basic mechanism for a “time out” is not respected.

### **Time out**

I ask a time out, so that I can write my email(s) to the dean / professor (s). Please understand that I am very busy professionally, and this wikipedia environment consumes too much time to be able to combine much. But leave these points, and I'll return to them a.s.a.p.

This is a re-edit of an earlier explanation, please respect this request for this time out. Writing carefully on issues of the integrity of science does require time. Colignatus 01:07, 11 March 2006 (UTC)

This is totally ridiculous, Colignatus. There is no basis for contacting someone who has nothing to do with this dispute and could do nothing about it. We'll have to explore other alternatives since you didn't accept mediation. -- Joseph Lorenzo Hall 16:15, 11 March 2006 (UTC)

Retrieved from "[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Borda\\_fixed\\_point](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Borda_fixed_point)"

## **Accusations from someone who probably doesn't know much about voting theory**

A quote from Sean Black who did the blocking:

This behaviour is increasingly distressing. As I cannot find any edits of Colignatus' that are not either self promotion or personal attacks, despite several warnings, I've blocked him indefinitely. If he is able to demonstrate to me or any other admin that he will not engage in this behaviour further, he may be unblocked, but if the behaviour *does* continue after being unblocked, then I expect that he will be blocked again.--[Sean Black](#) <sup>(talk)</sup> 20:48, 11 March 2006 (UTC)

However, I my edits are not self-promoting and are no personal attacks.

In an appeal to rethink matter, I sent Black the draft letter to MIT and SIMS, but he apparantly did not read it, and replied simply:

That you have attempted to gain the personal information of Wikipedia editors proves to me that my block was a good thing.

Sean

## Colignatus, escalated

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WP:ANI#Colignatus.2C\\_escalated](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WP:ANI#Colignatus.2C_escalated)

I asked earlier for [Colignatus](#) ([talk](#) • [contribs](#)) to be blocked for making personal threats against me, when he was threatening to contact my MIT dean to try to intimidate me into allowing his POV original research on [voting system](#) articles. Other admins weren't willing to block him at the time, encouraging [an RfC](#) instead.

[Joseph Lorenzo Hall](#), who has come to my defense in the discussion and endorsed the RfC, is now the target of personal threats himself:

*["I noticed that you are at SIMS, so now I have to write to Hal Varian, if he's still there. Why don't you behave decently, it would have saved us all a great deal ?"](#)* -- [Colignatus](#)

Colignatus has been warned several times that he can be blocked for such threats. Since he is not actually being blocked, however, he has the opportunity to extend his threats to more people. Every day that this RfC goes on, as well as the RfAr that would probably have to follow it, is an opportunity for Colignatus to make more threats against diligent Wikipedia contributors. I maintain that he should be blocked now, indefinitely, by an uninvolved admin.

I quote the policy on threats at [WP:NPA](#):

*Threats or actions which expose other Wikipedia editors to political, religious or other persecution by government, their employer or any others. Violations of this sort may result in a block for an extended period of time which may be applied immediately by any sysop upon discovery. Sysops applying such sanctions should confidentially notify the members of the Wikipedia:Arbitration Committee and Jimbo Wales of what they have done and why.*

Yes, the situation does fall under both "other" clauses. Editors have been banned for threatening to contact employers in the past, though, and I think contacting academic superiors falls along the same lines. [rspeer](#) / [JædsJ](#) 18:00, 11 March 2006 (UTC)

This behaviour is increasingly distressing. As I cannot find any edits of Colignatus' that are not either self promotion or personal attacks, despite several warnings, I've blocked him indefinitely. If he is able to demonstrate to me or any other admin that he will not engage in this behaviour further, he may be unblocked, but if the behaviour *does* continue after being unblocked, then I expect that he will be blocked again.--[Sean Black](#) <sup>(talk)</sup> 20:48, 11 March 2006 (UTC)