A recent Pew study suggests that people are turning peer-production communities for the creation and consumption of medical information online. Approximately 60% of Americans have turned to Wikipedia for health and medical information, but little research has investigated how this information is created and valued. Prof. Kane will present the results from two separate but related research projects that investigate the creation of health and medical information on Wikipedia.

The first study conducts a rich case study of 9 years of collaboration surrounding the development of the article on Autism, one of the most highly regarded articles on Wikipedia. Results from this study suggest that the core-periphery model of collaboration – where the collaborative effort is driven and guided by a small, stable core of contributors who do most of the work – is overly simplistic. Rather, we find that the membership in the core is fluid, with different people performing different work at different stages of the article’s development. This study concludes that that theories based in organizational ecology may be more suitable for studying these collaborative efforts.

The second study collects the entire collaborative history of all 16,000 medical articles on Wikipedia from 2002 – 2009, testing whether the network of collaborators that results from people joining and leaving different collaborative efforts affects the quality of information created. In general, we find strong support for our hypotheses that the network of articles and collaborators does affect the quality of information, but in ways somewhat different than predicted by traditional network theory. Using a cluster analysis to account for heterogeneity in our sample, we find that, while these results hold for the “typical” article, this network influences the most and least viewed articles in different ways. We also find a recursive relationship between traffic and viewership that stabilizes over time.