

The People's Encyclopedia?: Wikipedia and the Question of Identification and Media

Democracy

This paper seeks to analyze Wikipedia in light of the questions/policy issues of identification and media democracy. I begin by outlining my personal experience with Wikipedia and attempt to make sense of it by bringing to bear Star's (1999) dimensions of infrastructure, focusing on: transparency, learned as part of membership, and links with conventions of practice, as they relate to the aforementioned questions. This discussion will be supplemented by Star's (1999) linking of infrastructure to relationality and ecology and how these ideas aided my analysis of Wikipedia. Furthermore, Star's (1999) 'trick of the trade' which explores master narratives will also be discussed. It will be argued that although Wikipedia is touted as the people's encyclopedia, the reality is that "the people" have less say in the Wikipedian enterprise than meets the eye.

On a very basic level, Wikipedia is an online information infrastructure serving a dual functionality as an information resource from a user perspective (i.e., a collection of linked articles and images that can be consulted, referenced, and used for individual information needs), and as a collaborative interface where one can contribute information anonymously, or create a user account and join an online community. Wikipedia can be analyzed from a technical level as a repository of articles, discussion pages, coding and tags, user accounts, rules and guidelines, all with history pages of their evolution, time-stamped with each addition made. As Star (1999) suggests, one can examine the "hidden mechanisms subtending those processes [...] digging to unearth the dramas inherent in system design creating, to restore narrative to what appears to be dead lists" (p. 377). As such, studying information infrastructure is a pursuit that attempts to

uncover “embedded strangeness, a second-order one, that of the forgotten, the background, the frozen in place” (Star, 1999, p. 370). Prior to delving into the different methods of unfreezing infrastructure, a background account of my involvement and knowledge of Wikipedia is necessary.

My experience with Wikipedia has been revealing of a far more political being laced with bureaucracy and power imbalances than may appear on the surface. Prior to editing any articles, I took it upon myself to educate myself as to the appropriate practices and guidelines for contributing information. Wikipedia’s policies are out in the open, stating that content must be “verifiable against a published reliable source, so excluding editors' opinions and beliefs and unreviewed research, and is free of copyright restrictions and contentious material about living people” (“Wikipedia:About,” 2011). In addition, content must be neutral (“Wikipedia:Neutral,” 2011), and adhere to Wikipedia’s “no original research” clause (“Wikipedia:Original,” 2011). I also made sure to familiarize myself with Wikipedia’s copyright policies (“Wikipedia:Copyright,” 2011) as well to ensure that I did not violate any code. I continued to proceed with my edit as an anonymous user, and made a contribution bearing the aforementioned in mind, and followed their criteria to the letter. However, my contribution was reverted, and there was no recourse to how or why it was revoked. A couple days later, I decided to make the same contribution, just in case it was deleted by accident. An hour after my edit, my contribution was reverted again by a different user. As a bit of a social experiment, I created an account and made the same edit a couple weeks later—that edit remains today. As such, this suggests that Wikipedia has created a mechanism whereby the verification process is more conducive to people who make contributions from user accounts. Therefore, the concept of everyone’s encyclopedia is curious given this one example, because the same edit associated with a user

account (which has no history other than the singular edit made to the article in question) was received more readily than what could be regarded as a random edit. Therefore, this question of verifiability is much more sinister than perhaps it may seem. If this one instance unveils a trend that occurs on a regular basis, perhaps Wikipedians themselves preclude Wikipedia's potential to be everyone's encyclopedia, to be more than populated and regulated by Wikipedians. Wikipedia puts forth the notion that it is free to participate as anyone can create an account/contribute/edit; however, it is a community that is heavily policed despite its all-inclusive invitation. Wikipedia is wrought with politics and bureaucracy for controlling, monitoring and regulating content. As delineated by Stvilia, Twidale, Smith, and Gasser (2008), "[e]ditors who are willing to perform quality assurance work are promoted to an administrator or a bureaucrat status based on their performance, knowledge of Wikipedia processes, and most important, the needs for additional IQ assurance tools and permissions to make their work even more effective" (p. 988). As such, the existence of a higher administrative class questions the inclusivity of "everyone's" encyclopedia, as they are given the authority to oversee and determine who and what is allowed to exist in Wikipedia.

Wikipedia is clear in its admonition that it is not a democracy ("Wikipedia:What," 2011). However, Wikipedia does rely on discussion and editing as a practice that determines consensus ("Wikipedia:What," 2011). What is interesting about this arrangement is that although there is no democratic mechanism determining decisions as to what finally counts as relevant information/knowledge, the very discussion that is had by various contributors to the legitimization of the knowledge/information put forward is essentially democratic. Perhaps making Wikipedia more democratic would be a means to capture the "sum of all human knowledge" ("Vision," 2009) as it relates not only to the process of knowledge production but

also the process of knowledge legitimization. If Wikipedia is to truly actualize its claim, then perhaps Wikipedians should not target edits made by specific kinds of users. The suspicion or targeting of contributions that do not originate from an account is facilitated by the fact that there are accounts in the first place. The existence of user accounts suggests an added clause to Wikipedia's mantra: the sum of all knowledge *as according to Wikipedians*. What purpose does holding an account really have? So that one can link all edits made back to one person? To gather statistical data? To try and regulate what goes on in Wikipedia in a more transparent fashion? Is there the notion that people might be more cautious in the information they contribute if there is an account associated with the edit? If that is the case, then why allow for users to make edits without an account in the first place? If someone repeatedly vandalizes articles, is disrespectful, or delinquent, then IP addresses can still be banned. If there is still a need for administrators/bureaucrats, then there could be another need for those invested in overseeing and reinforcing Wikipedia's policies to do so outside of having a user account. Yet, those invested in Wikipedia can participate as actively as they would otherwise without an account. Must a sense of community be fostered by being able to identify one's self by a profile, or is the community created based on a continued contribution to the quality of Wikipedia articles? The idea that Wikipedia has a user base is a curious. If one is trying to dissuade the notion of individual authorship, with the aim of promoting a more communal collaborative authorship, then why are user accounts necessary? User accounts, in a way, unveil to other members personal activity which may effectively give some members more credibility than others if user accounts are used as a badge of activity/contribution. How are we to make sense of my experience?

A technique I found useful for analysing Wikipedia's infrastructure is Star's (1999) dimension of "transparency" in which she states "infrastructure is transparent to use, in the sense

that it does not have to be reinvented each time or assembled for each task, but invisibly supports those tasks” (p.381). As an online information resource, Wikipedia is consistent and straightforward in terms of its navigation from a user perspective as one can access it like any other website. However, in order to actively contribute content, one must be aware of all the policies and guidelines delineated to do so if one endeavours to have their edit last. In addition, one also requires basic knowledge of HTML and how to edit and format text from a technological standpoint. These different approaches to and uses of Wikipedia are transparent insofar as they are clear to anyone who seeks them out; however, whether they are intelligible and by whom is another story. The degree of transparency becomes clearer the more one becomes familiar with the infrastructure, thus leading to another one of Star’s (1999) dimensions: “learned as part of membership” (p.381).

While Star (1999) describes a property of “learned as part of membership” (p.381) to be how “strangers and outsiders encounter infrastructure as a target object to be learned about, [while] [n]ew participants acquire a naturalized familiarity with its objects, as they become members” (p.381), in Wikipedia, the more one immerses oneself within the collaborative community of knowledge production (i.e., [re]presentation), the more one becomes aware of the power structures embedded within it that might not be as observable or even of consequence to the average user.

Another of Star’s (1999) dimensions of infrastructure is how infrastructure is “link[ed] with conventions of practice” (p.381). As Star (1999) explains, “infrastructure both shapes and is shaped by the conventions of a community of practice” (p.381). We can see this dimension manifest in Wikipedia’s infrastructure insofar it, as an information resource, is indebted to the community of collaborative efforts. However, in light of my experience with Wikipedia, the

attempt to contribute information anonymously was not as well received as it was when the same contribution was associated with a user account. As such, the communal facet of Wikipedia is not something to be ignored as it is an embodiment of a convention that privileges, or in extreme cases demands, some degree of ownership or accountability to that which is contributed.

Therefore, this suggests that perhaps the norm is to question or target, even dismiss, the substantive contributions made anonymously as opposed to focusing efforts on ensuring the best information is made available.

Beyond the elements of infrastructure discussed, I also found Star's (1999) notion of infrastructure as relational quite useful. The very notion reminded me of dialectic in a Marxist sense, which is a useful tool for appreciating that different aspects of a situation take on a particular meaning depending upon the relationships established between various elements. What was useful about the idea of infrastructure as relational was that it helped me to see more clearly the power relations within the Wikipedia enterprise and the subsequent imbalances between contributors and the arbiters of given contributions. From the point of view of a contributor, my naïve assumptions about what counts as a useful/legitimate contribution were clarified in light of the authority that came to bear and make such decisions.

I found Star's notion of infrastructure as ecological less helpful in its ability to shed light on my experience with Wikipedia, though this may be more the result of my having missed her meaning as it is the result of ecology being an unproductive concept in relation to infrastructure. I understand the ecology of infrastructure to deal with infrastructure as a structural network whereby various elements conform to the network. As such, the whole complex of any system seems to refer to the systems ecological bend; however, such an explanation seems only to refer back to an understanding of infrastructure in general. It is interesting to note that in trying to gain

a clearer understanding of infrastructure as ecological, I referred to an article by Star and Ruhleder (1996) entitled “Steps towards an Ecology of Infrastructure” only to find that the article concludes precisely by asking “what is an ecology of infrastructure?” (p. 33).

In terms of Star’s (1999) tricks of the trade for “‘reading’ or unfreezing some of [infrastructures] features” (p.384), I found “identifying master narratives and ‘others’” (p.384) the most useful. As Star (1999) states, “[m]any information systems employ what literary theorists would call a master narrative, or a single voice that does not problematize diversity. This voice speaks unconsciously from the presumed center of things” (p.384). The master narrative of Wikipedia seems to be the privileging of the position of a published work without problematizing the various sources of knowledge that are considered legitimate beyond publication. Moreover, the master narrative is tied into identification insofar as by privileging a published source, that type of person who has been published is seen as superior to a *hoi polloi* who may be able to make a viable contribution but cannot because they don’t fit the criteria of the master narrative. Such an arrangement breaks down democracy which is rooted in equality. The implications of such identifications for democracy are that, rather than having a forum based on equality, we return to the narratives of hierarchy and stratification. The very notion of a classification of different human beings is problematic. The dangers of classification and putting people into categories both limits the options we make available to everyone and also nurtures a pattern of thinking whereby human beings are seen as types rather than as ends in themselves (Gandy, 1995; Lyon, 2007). Will classification by its very nature create knowledge that is biased to serve a particular type of person who has been classified in any given way?.

It is hoped that a project like Wikipedia opens up greater democratic avenues and ensures that information that is collected is never used to exclude but only to widen the scope of potential

users and of contributors. In talking about reference, Latour (1999) suggests that the whole chain of reference is disrupted when perspective becomes dominated by any authority considered to be final. However, Latour (1999) is also cognizant of the possible nihilism inherent in his understanding of the signifying chain because in having a free flow of interpretation in any direction, we can argue for no definitive truth. The fact that Latour (2004) says there is no sound ground for criticism (and ironically, therefore, no sure ground for the verification of facts) leads to nihilism and this is precisely the conclusion Latour (2004) fears when he suggests, “but what does it mean, when this lack of sure ground is taken out from us by the worst possible fellows as an argument against things we cherished?” (Boler, 2008, p.10). If there is no sound ground for reference, then it is seemingly a mere function of power (i.e., who is published, or who owns the publishing houses). In terms of creating categories of people (i.e. referees and the refereed), it is precisely buying into these divisions that leads to the holocaust. I am making this stretch just to show what can very well be the consequences of classifications however seemingly innocuous. The point here is to keep the whole idea of classification/identification in mind so that our thinking does not become subject to such a destructive view of people.

Returning to Wikipedia’s assertion that it is not a democracy (“Wikipedia:What,” 2011), this stance alone is one of the largest infrastructural barriers hindering/precluding its ability to attain its vision of harvesting the “sum of all human knowledge” (“Vision,” 2009). A way to address this issue is to make the process of contribution via networked collaboration more democratic by offering more opportunities to people to contribute information how they see fit and to come to a consensus as equals. As Best (2005) eloquently delineates

We need to move the discussion from criticisms focused on a limited and constrained vision of democracy to reflections on the ramifications of democracy as visceral, lived, and subjective, and to pursue investigations of democratic communication as an overlapping

and generative dialogue with various representational and persuasive modes of expression.

(p.232)

A step in the direction of democratic communication and knowledge dissemination would be to find a means to welcome other forms of knowledge (i.e., personal and tacit knowledge) into Wikipedia's cannon. As such, we can keep the existing infrastructure by opening the avenues that are already there for more democratic use.

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