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Producing Historical Knowledge on Wikipedia

Petros Apostolopoulos
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In the late 1990s, the transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 technologies brought many changes in the way people produce historical knowledge and have access to it.¹ The first generation of the World Wide Web was dominated by static websites and facilitated by search engines, which only allowed information-seeking behavior. People were limited to the public viewing of content. The second generation of the World Wide Web, as Melissa Terras writes, saw the development of online platforms which allowed and encouraged two-way dialog, and fostered public participation, the co-creation of knowledge, and community-building.² Both professional historians and amateurs constructed many web sites and blogs, some of which became popular. History and the knowledge about the past became accessible and usable to anyone who had access to the Internet.

Various key brands controlled these new opportunities and attempted to devolve programming and content power to the user. Some striking examples are Google, Wikipedia, Facebook and YouTube.³ These popular digital spaces alter the ways in which historical knowledge is gathered, produced, and disseminated.⁴ At the same time, they involve much more than a simple transmission

¹ I would like to thank Professor Tammy Gordon for reading the paper and providing me with insightful comments.

² Melissa Terras, "Crowdsourcing in the Digital Humanities," in *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2016), 420-421.

³ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History. Historians and heritage in contemporary popular culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 90.

⁴ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Arnold, 2000), 189, Mark Poster, "Manifesto for a history of the media," in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan and Alun Munslow (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 40.

of historical knowledge. These digital spaces encourage creative engagement with the past, as users are not just passive consumers of histories produced by others, but take active role in using and understanding the past.⁵ Web users engage, discuss, use, and interpret the past, and through this process, they produce historical knowledge. As Daniel Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig wrote in 2006, “the number of authors of history web pages is likely greater than the number of authors of history books.”⁶

The aim of this study is to examine one of these digital spaces, Wikipedia, and demonstrate how it establishes a public and digital space, where users produce historical knowledge following specific guidelines and methods. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia founded by Jimmy Wales in 2001; its main concept is that anyone can edit any page at any time.⁷ This concept gave Wikipedia the opportunity to function as a public space for personal reflection. Wikipedia provides this opportunity through the “talk” portal, which makes public the discussions and debates between Wikipedia users about some contested points. The “talk” portal shows the stages that the creation of a Wikipedia page follows and the users’ involvement in this process.⁸

This article intends to show how Wikipedia’s methods and tools can constitute an exemplar for digital public history projects in the future. Both the methods and guidelines that Wikipedia establishes for the selection and production of historical knowledge can inspire the creation of new digital public history projects, in which history will not be consumed passively, but it will be

⁵ Regarding the participation of people in the popular historical activities, see: Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past. Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁶ Daniel Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 2006), 150.

⁷ Andrew Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution. How a bunch of Nobodies Created the World’s Greatest Encyclopedia* (London: Hyperion ebook, 2009), 14.

⁸ The talk pages are “administration pages where editors can discuss improvements to articles or other Wikipedia pages,” see: “Help: Using talk pages,” accessed May 31, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Using_talk_pages.

produced actively by the public. This study explores the current historiography on Wikipedia underlining the lack of research on users' involvement, analyzes the guidelines and tools that Wikipedia uses to produce historical knowledge, and demonstrates how specific Wikipedia pages (related to history) were created by different Wikipedia users. A good understanding of Wikipedia can show how history is consumed and produced in the public and digital sphere and provide historians with useful tools to do history.

A Historiographical Overview of Wikipedia

The foundation of Wikipedia and the new methods of collection, production, and dissemination of knowledge that it introduced, piqued the interest of many academics, who were curious to study this new encyclopedia. Many works were published in order to analyze this digital source of knowledge. The most significant works fall into the following categories. Studies that focus on: 1. the accuracy of Wikipedia, 2. the history of Wikipedia, and 3. the participation practices and open character of Wikipedia.

Regarding the first category, one of the first and most important studies on Wikipedia, is the article of the historian Roy Rosenzweig, "Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past" (2006), which examines the accuracy of Wikipedia in U.S. history and the way that Wikipedia presents the historical events.⁹ According to this study, Wikipedia accurately reports names, dates, and events in U.S. history and most of the factual errors made are small and inconsequential. These results did not differ much from Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia and the Encyclopedia Britannica, which also contain mistakes. Nevertheless, Rosenzweig's critique is that "good historical writing requires not just factual accuracy but also a command of the scholarly literature, persuasive analysis and interpretations, and

⁹ Roy Rosenzweig, "Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past", *The Journal of American History* 93 (2006):117-146.

clear and engaging prose”.¹⁰ The contribution of this study was very important, as it showed that despite the fact that the historical knowledge is produced by amateurs and non-professionals on Wikipedia, its accuracy in names, dates, and events is comparable to that of other encyclopedias. Moreover, the work, *Writing History in the Digital Age*, edited by Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki, examines different perspectives on Wikipedia.¹¹ Specifically, regarding the use of Wikipedia in education, the chapter by Martha Saxton, *Wikipedia and Women’s History: A Classroom Experience*, studies the representation of women in the online encyclopedia and shows how students should deal with this source of knowledge.¹² The chapter by Amanda Seligman, *Teaching Wikipedia without Apologies*, demonstrates how Wikipedia can teach students to think about authority, authorship, and argument in tertiary sources.¹³ In the same book, Shawn Graham describes the way that an article of Wikipedia can be improved, in order to show students how historians can create “signal” in the “noise” of the Internet, using digital media tools.¹⁴

Over time, additional studies focused on the history of Wikipedia and its methods. The work of Andrew Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution. How a Bunch of Nobodies Created the World’s Greatest Encyclopedia* was published in 2009 and

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki, *Writing History in the Digital Age*, (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2013), accessed June 16, 2017, <http://writinghistory.trincoll.edu/crowdsourcing/wolff-2012-spring/>.

¹² Martha Saxton, “Wikipedia and Women’s History: A Classroom Experience,” in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, ed. Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2013), accessed June 16, 2017, <http://writinghistory.trincoll.edu/crowdsourcing/wolff-2012-spring/>.

¹³ Amanda Seligman, “Teaching Wikipedia without Apologies,” in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, ed. Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2013), accessed June 16, 2017, <http://writinghistory.trincoll.edu/crowdsourcing/wolff-2012-spring/>.

¹⁴ Shawn Graham, “The Wikiblitz: A Wikipedia Editing Assignment in a First-Year Undergraduate Class,” in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, ed. Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2013), accessed June 16, 2017, <http://writinghistory.trincoll.edu/crowdsourcing/wolff-2012-spring/>.

constituted the first popular history of Wikipedia.¹⁵ The work ranges from short biographies of Jimmy Wales and other Wikipedia founders to different important events in Wikipedia's history. Moreover, more general works such as the study of Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge. From the Encyclopedie to Wikipedia*, analyze Wikipedia as an online encyclopedia and the methods of knowledge production and dissemination Wikipedia follows.¹⁶ In his work, *Consuming History. Historians and heritage in contemporary popular culture*, Jerome de Groot examines how society consumes history and how this consumption can help us to understand history and its representation in popular cultures. Jerome de Groot analyzes the foundation of Wikipedia in the context of networked interfaces with information and shows how this knowledge is represented in this digital encyclopedia.¹⁷ The Ph.D. dissertation of Despoina Valatsou, *The emergence of new sites of memory on the internet*, studies diverse kinds of "memory websites" where historical content and information are produced not only by professional historians, but increasingly by public audience. Valatsou examines Wikipedia as a site of memory and analyzes its different guidelines.¹⁸

Regarding the third category, a number of works examine the participation, open character, and more generally, the community of Wikipedia. Specifically, the work of Dariusz Jemielniak, *Common Knowledge? An Ethnography of Wikipedia* examines active participation within the Wikipedia community.¹⁹

¹⁵ Andrew Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution. How a bunch of Nobodies Created the World's Greatest Encyclopedia* (London: Hyperion ebook, 2009).

¹⁶ Peter Burke, *A Social History of knowledge. From the Encyclopedie to Wikipedia* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 2012), 273-274.

¹⁷ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History. Historians and heritage in contemporary popular culture*, 93-98.

¹⁸ Despoina Valatsou, *Ανάδυση νέων μνημονικών τόπων στο διαδίκτυο* (PhD diss., National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2014), accessed June 10, 2017,

http://repository.edulll.gr/edulll/retrieve/9398/3034_1.77_%CE%94%CE%94_7_10_14.pdf.

¹⁹ Dariusz Jemielniak, *Common Knowledge? An Ethnography of Wikipedia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

Jemielniak seeks to produce an ethnography of Wikipedia, revealing that it is not entirely at the mercy of the public. Wikipedia balances open access and users' power with a set of traditional organizational forms. The work of Nathaniel Tkacz, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness* places Wikipedia's open character in a long lineage of political-philosophical thought.²⁰ The article by Noriko Hara, Pnina Shachaf, and Khe Foon Hew offers a cross-cultural analysis of Wikipedia as a community of users.²¹ The authors make a comparative examination of typical behaviors on the discussion pages of Wikipedia across different languages. Joseph Reagle introduces in his study, *Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia*, the concept of "stigmergy" to examine the community of Wikipedia.²² According to this term, the collaborative production of knowledge on Wikipedia is not just based on the communication of the users but on the previous work done and on the "good faith" collaboration.²³

These works provide a useful context for the present paper, but their combined nature also reveals the lack of work on users' involvement in the production of historical knowledge. Both the engagement of people with the production of historical knowledge and the opportunity that everyone has to write their own opinions about the page constitute important aspects that are marginalized or neglected by the above mentioned studies. This is significant, if we consider that the main feature of Wikipedia is the "amateurization" of knowledge as the British historian Peter Burke has argued.²⁴ This means that Wikipedia has to be examined as a public space, which allows people to come in contact with the past, to produce it and to discuss it.

²⁰ Nathaniel Tkacz, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

²¹ N. Hara, P. Shachaf, K. Hew, "Cross cultural analysis of the Wikipedia community," *Journal of the American Society of Information Science and Technology* 61 (2010): 2097-2108.

²² Joseph Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2010).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge*, 273.

Guidelines and the policy of Wikipedia

In 2003, the constant growth of Wikipedia and the lack of funding led Jimmy Wales to establish the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation.²⁵ The aim of the foundation was to oversee Wikipedia and its other projects (Wikibooks, Wikinews, Wikispecies, Wikidata).²⁶ The establishment of the Wikimedia Foundation gave a more formal structure to Wikipedia, which formulated its own policies and guidelines.²⁷

Specifically, Wikipedia published the five fundamental principles, which determine the way it gathers and produces knowledge. Firstly, Wikipedia is an encyclopedia, which means that it contains the characteristics of encyclopedias, almanacs and gazetteers. As Wikipedia writes, it is not “a soapbox, an advertising platform, a vanity press, an experiment in anarchy or democracy, an indiscriminate collection of information, or a web directory.”²⁸ Secondly, Wikipedia pages are written from a “neutral point of view,” so historical knowledge should be objective and impartial.²⁹ This can be achieved if the Wikipedia articles are verifiable, accurate, and cite reliable, and authoritative sources, especially when the project is controversial or is on living persons.³⁰ Therefore, personal opinions, experiences, and interpretations do not belong to Wikipedia.³¹ The third principle is that the content is free and “anyone can use, edit and distribute.”³² Nevertheless, users have to “respect copyright laws, and never plagiarize from sources.”³³ The fourth pillar is that Wikipedia

²⁵ “Wikimedia Foundation,” accessed January 20, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikimedia_Foundation#History.

²⁶ Ibid., Fethi Erinc Salor, *Sum of all knowledge: Wikipedia and the encyclopedic urge* (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2012), 98.

²⁷ Ibid., 99.

²⁸ “Wikipedia: Five Pillars,” accessed January 20, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five_pillars.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

users, and especially the editors should have a good communication, treat each other with respect and civility, and never “disrupt Wikipedia to illustrate point.”³⁴ The last principle is that Wikipedia has policies and guidelines, but their content and interpretations can evolve over time.³⁵ As Wikipedia writes, “the principles and spirit matter more than literal wording, and sometimes improving Wikipedia requires making exceptions. Be bold but not reckless in updating articles.”³⁶

In addition to these five pillars, Wikipedia has established three principal core content policies: *Neutral Point of View* (NPOV), *Verifiability* and *No Original Research*.³⁷ Wikipedia argues that these principles complement each other, so they should not be interpreted separately.³⁸ These policies determine the type and the quality of material that is acceptable in Wikipedia articles. It is obvious that NPOV is regarded by the Wikipedia as very significant, as it is mentioned twice, both as pillar and as a core content policy.³⁹ The principle of NPOV is that history should be produced with objectivity. As the historian Herman Paul argues in his article about the virtues and skills of “being a historian” that objectivity in the discipline of history was connected with the detachment of historians’ feelings, opinions and biases.⁴⁰ Objectivity has traditionally been regarded as a virtue for the historians and as a *sine qua non* for epistemic success.⁴¹ The policy of NPOV is connected with the policy of *No Original Research*, which does not allow Wikipedia users to include personal opinions and articles should not be products of primary research. *No Original Research* is defined by Wikipedia as “any analysis or synthesis of published material that serves to reach or imply a

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Wikipedia: Core Content Policies.”

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ E. Salor, *Sum of all knowledge*, 101.

⁴⁰ Herman Paul, “What is a scholarly persona? Ten theses on virtues skills, and desires,” *History and Theory* 53 (2014): 361.

⁴¹ Ibid.

conclusion not stated by the sources.”⁴² This means that research on Wikipedia has to be based on secondary sources, which are known and widely accepted. This kind of research is the opposite of academic historical research, which is based on primary sources and on original research. It is worth mentioning that this policy is not applied to the talk section of Wikipedia pages.⁴³

Moreover, the sources have to be verifiable and published. The policy of *Verifiability* means that “people using the encyclopedia can check that the information comes from a reliable source.”⁴⁴ The guideline of verifiability is very important for the perception of history in this community, as verifiability replaces the concept of truth.⁴⁵ Marshall Poe suggests an interesting definition of the truth on Wikipedia:

The power of the community to decide, of course, asks us to reexamine what we mean when we say that something is “true.” We tend to think of truth as something that resides in the world. [...] But Wikipedia suggests a different theory of truth. Just think about the way we learn what words mean. Generally speaking, we do so by listening to other people (our parents, first). Since we want to communicate with them (after all, they feed us), we use the words in the same way they do. Wikipedia says judgments of truth and falsehood work the same way. The community decides that two plus two equals four the same way it decides what an apple is: by consensus. Yes, that means that if the community changes its minds and decides that two plus two equals five, then two plus two does equal five. The community isn’t likely to do such an absurd or useless thing, but it has the ability.⁴⁶

⁴² “Wikipedia: No original research,” accessed January 20, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No_original_research.

⁴³ E. Salor, *Sum of all knowledge*, 101.

⁴⁴ “Wikipedia: Verifiability,” accessed January 20, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability>.

⁴⁵ Despoina Valatsou, *Ανάδυση νέων μνημονικών τόπων στο διαδίκτυο*, 105.

⁴⁶ Marshall Poe, “The Hive,” *The Atlantic*, September 1, 2006, accessed July 4, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/09/the-hive/305118/?single>.

Wikipedia includes a catalogue of sources regarded as reliable.⁴⁷ Wikipedia suggests the users writing history articles should use easily accessible published scholarly sources from academic presses. They can use specialized encyclopedias on historical topics, which are edited by experts, and “memoirs and oral histories that specialists consult with caution, for they are filled with stories that people wish to remember—and usually recall without going back to the original documentation.”⁴⁸ On the other hand, Wikipedia points out that the users should not get history from novels, films, TV shows, or tour guides at various sites, as “they are full of rumor and gossip and false or exaggerated tales and tend to present rosy-colored histories in which the well-known names are portrayed heroically.”⁴⁹ Therefore, despite the fact that Wikipedia is a digital encyclopedia, its reliability and, more specifically, the reliability of the historical articles is based on printed academic sources that may or may not be available online. This means that Wikipedia does not seek a distinction between the online and the monographic narrative, but it develops a dialogue between these two forms and, thus, enriches both the kind of printed encyclopedias and other related digital spaces.⁵⁰

James Purdy considers the way that Wikipedia articles are created as paradigmatic method for the conduct of academic research and writing. He argues that this method is based on four characteristics: study, dialogue, reconsideration and exchange, which constitute the basis of academic work.⁵¹ The process of studying constitutes the research and verifiability of the sources. The dialogue has to do with the arguments expressed by Wikipedia

⁴⁷ “Wikipedia:Reliable source examples,” accessed July 4, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reliable_source_examples#History.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Regarding the dialogue between the old and the new (online) narrative, see: Chiel van den Akker, “History as Dialogue. On Online Narrativity,” *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review* 128 (2013): 103-117.

⁵¹ James Purdy, “Wikipedia is good for you!” in *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, ed. Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky (Indiana: Parlor Press, 2010), 205-224.

users that take part in the creation of a page. The reconsideration has to do with the community reflection on how an article will be edited and how the sources will be used in the article. Lastly, the exchange signifies the way Wikipedia users share their knowledge, concerns, worries, and their interpretations on a topic.⁵²

As shown above, Wikipedia provides the users the opportunity to discuss issues on the talk page portal before committing to editing the article itself.⁵³ Specifically, according to Wikipedia, talk pages, which are also known as discussion pages, are “administration pages where editors can discuss improvements to articles or other Wikipedia pages.”⁵⁴ Wikipedia argues that “article talk pages should not be used by editors as platforms for their personal views on a subject” but they have to aim to the discussion and communication between the users and mainly to the improvement of encyclopedia.⁵⁵ Wikipedia provides guidelines for use of talk pages: 1. Communicate, 2. Stay on topic, 3. No meta-discussions, 3. Be positive, 4. Stay objective, 5. Deal with facts, 6. Share material, 7. Discuss edits, 8. Make proposals.⁵⁶ Practices considered unacceptable in the talk pages include: 1. Personal attacks (insults, personal threats, legal threats, posting other editors’ personal details), 2. Misinterpretation of other editors, 3. Asking for personal details from other editors, 4. Attempting to impersonate another editor, 5. Claiming to be an administrator, 6. Use of the talk page as a forum.⁵⁷ When these guidelines are not followed, the users is blocked or banned from editing Wikipedia.⁵⁸ Therefore, Wikipedia maintains that talk pages are not forums, so personal opinions, which are not related to the improvement of the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ E. Salor, *Sum of all knowledge*, 104.

⁵⁴ “Help: Using talk pages,” accessed May 31, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Using_talk_pages.

⁵⁵ “Wikipedia: Talk page guidelines,” accessed May 31, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Talk_page_guidelines.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

article, will be removed or refactored.⁵⁹ However, as we will see in the next section, the talk pages are used by many users as places to express personal opinions about the past and to make historical connections between the past and the present.

Wikipedia operates based on specific guidelines and principles, which do not allow the expression of personal views on the pages but only collaboration and communication between users. According to Wikipedia's guidelines, personal experience and interpretation do not belong in the online encyclopedia and contributions to the production of knowledge have to be neutral, verifiable, and not the product of original research.

Crowdsourcing and Hypertextuality on Wikipedia

Two important tools for the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia are authorship and hypertextuality, which are formed by both the Internet world and Wikipedia guidelines.

As shown above, the main concept of Wikipedia is that authors are drawn from a crowdsourcing process. Wikipedia uses an open call to attract a crowd of people, who will contribute to writing and editing articles.⁶⁰ The concept of crowdsourcing appeared first in an article published in *Wired* magazine in 2006 that explained how businesses were beginning to outsource work to individuals.⁶¹ A few weeks after the article was published, the term was being used by many websites, such as Wikipedia, Flickr, Project Gutenberg, etc.⁶² As Melissa Terras argues, in all these projects crowdsourcing uses the available communications networks to distribute tasks amongst large numbers of interested individuals, working towards a common goal.⁶³ According to Daren Brabham, the use of crowdsourcing can solve two types of

⁵⁹ "Wikipedia:What Wikipedia is not," accessed May 31, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:What_Wikipedia_is_not#FORUM.

⁶⁰ Despoina Valatsou, "Crowdsourcing digital history online," *Historein* 14 (2014): 30.

⁶¹ Jeff Howe, "The rise of crowdsourcing," *Wired*, June 1, 2006, accessed November 5, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/2006/06/crowds/>.

⁶² Terras, *Crowdsourcing in the Digital Humanities*, 421.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 422.

problems: information management issues and ideation problems. Information management issues occur where information needs to be assembled, selected, created, sorted, and analyzed. Wikipedia users find the sources, select which they will use, they analyze them, and then produce historical knowledge. Ideation problems occur where creative solutions need to be proposed, that are either empirically true, or a matter of taste or market support.⁶⁴ Wikipedia using this tool deals with both the lack of financial resources and experts, and creates a self-regulating community capable of constructing historical narratives.⁶⁵

The Wikipedia community includes both registered and unregistered editors; however, most of them are registered. All editors are welcome to contribute, but first they have to verify their sources and edit them according to the community's guidelines. Therefore, the editor becomes one of the several editors of a single edit. Each edit is recorded individually and classified by the day and time, when the edit was saved along with the username of the editor or the I.P. address of the unregistered editor.⁶⁶ Anyone who respects the carefully drawn up guidelines can make or alter an entry. At the same time, the origins of an entry can be reconstructed at any time by anybody.⁶⁷ Thus, crowdsourcing creates a space where a large group of people collectively discuss, interpret, and describe the past participating in a public production of historical knowledge⁶⁸

This self-shared authority on Wikipedia creates a different perspective in the relation between reader and text. Wikipedia uses hyperlinks to facilitate exploration of the topic. Hyperlinks are

⁶⁴ Daren Brabham, *Crowdsourcing*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013).

⁶⁵ Fien Danniau, "Public History in a Digital Context. Back to the Future or Back to Basics?," *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 128-4 (2013): 130-131.

⁶⁶ E. Salor, *Sum of all knowledge*, 145.

⁶⁷ Danniau, "Public History in a Digital Context," 130.

⁶⁸ Trevor Owens, *Crowdsourcing Cultural Heritage: The Objectives Are Upside Down*, accessed March 10, 2012,

<http://www.trevorowens.org/2012/03/crowdsourcing-cultural-heritage-the-objectives-are-upside-down/>.

references to other texts that the reader can directly follow either by clicking, tapping or hovering. Hypertextuality, the existence of hyperlinks in the text, is one of the fundamental concepts of the Internet and defines the structure of the digital text. As Fien Danniau argues hypertextuality “ensures that we can criss-cross from one online item to another and in this way are liberated from a fixed linear narrative. The Internet is so constructed that there is not center and no periphery, only the point of departure of the use.”⁶⁹ Hypertexts allow Wikipedia users to move easily between different historical events, figures, concepts, from long-term to short-term, micro to macro levels and so on.

Wikipedia has contents that include the following categories: Reference, Culture, Geography, Health, History, Mathematics, Nature, People, Philosophy, Religion, Society, and Technology.⁷⁰ These categories, which have the form of a hyperlink, contain other sub-categories. If we jump into the category of History on Wikipedia, we will notice that a definition of history pops up.

History is divided into the following subcategories: history by region, history by continent, list of time periods, history by subject.⁷¹ These subcategories have the form of hyperlinks, so users can jump from one page to another. However, the majority of users do not use the categories links on Wikipedia, but they search through general search engines, such as Google or through Wikipedia’s search function.⁷² As Chiel van den Akker mentions, in the age of new media readers are driven mainly by the impulse of curiosity and not by the historical sublime, which characterized the historicist view of the past.⁷³ As Akker argues, the historical

⁶⁹ Danniau, “Public History in a Digital Context,” 126.

⁷⁰ “Portal:Contents,” accessed July 1, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Contents>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² E. Salor, *Sum of all knowledge*, 155.

⁷³ Chiel van den Akker, “Antiquarianism and Historical Consciousness in the New Media Age,” in *Sensitive Past. Questioning Heritage in Education*, ed. Carla van Boxtel, Maria Grever and Stephan Klein (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2016), 65.

sublime was the shock felt by the public about a “distant, separate, and different past, a past that had been and was not longer,” but people had to draw lessons from it.⁷⁴ The feeling of curiosity signifies a more personal and interactive way for the public to explore the past, to navigate its different aspects for the satisfaction of their personal interests. Wikipedia offers this opportunity through the use of hyperlinks. This digital form of text works as linked building blocks that are meaningful in themselves and “make room for association and personal paths of readers.”⁷⁵

Wikipedia produces a system of knowledge whose complexity and interconnectedness are based on the iterations of hyperlinks rather than on all-encompassing system imposed from the beginning by the editor-in-chief.⁷⁶ Hyperlinks connect readers to relevant parts of the analysis from different directions with different purposes.⁷⁷ In this way, Wikipedia opens a new mode of digital and public storytelling, as personal associations with the past are generated through the awareness of the text produced from below and the interactivity of the hyperlinks, which immerse the readers, users, and viewers in the story world.⁷⁸

Repairing the past on Wikipedia⁷⁹

Among its guidelines and policies, Wikipedia creates a space where the users get the opportunity to intervene and discuss how the past should be represented. Many philosophers of history have studied the relation between history and justice and there are

⁷⁴ Ibid., 62. Regarding the historical sublime, see: Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁷⁵ Peter Haber, *Digital Past. Geschichtswissenschaft im Digitalen Zeitalter* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2011), 119, cited in Chiel van den Akker, “History as Dialogue. On Online Narrativity,” 112.

⁷⁶ E. Salor, *Sum of all knowledge*, 157.

⁷⁷ On the role of hyperlinks and their meaning for historians, see: Edward Ayers, “The Pasts and Futures of Digital History,” *History News* 56/4 (2001): 8.

⁷⁸ Ann Rigney, “When the monograph is no longer the medium: Historical narrative in the online age,” *History and Theory* 49 (2010):109.

⁷⁹ Part of this section has been published in Petros Apostolopoulos, “The affective historical knowledge practices on Wikipedia,” *ERIS VU Journal for Humanities* (2018): 21-34.

many opposing statements about this topic. Two important philosophers of history, Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin have examined the specific topic and have developed different positions. Friedrich Nietzsche argues in his book, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, that humankind has to stop hoping for justice and must learn to forget, in order to be able to live.⁸⁰ He writes: “Here it become clear how necessary it is to mankind to have, beside the monumental and antiquarian modes of regarding the past, a third mode, the critical: and this, too, in the service of life. [...] It requires a great deal of strength to be able to live and to forget the extent to which to live and to be unjust is one and the same thing.”⁸¹ On the other hand, the philosopher, Walter Benjamin, in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” argues that there is “a secret agreement between past generations and the present one”, which is that “like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power” to redress the injustices of a catastrophic past.⁸² For Walter Benjamin, “[...] only a redeemed mankind received the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past been citable in all its moments.”⁸³

These positions on history and justice formulated by F. Nietzsche and W. Benjamin express two different views on the presence/absence of the past and on the way that people have to deal with it. Berber Bevernage questions this dichotomy and suggests the Jacques Derrida’s concept of spectral time as a better concept. Spectral times overcomes the dichotomy of present/absent past and offers a better concept to understand the way that people haunt pasts.⁸⁴ The concept of specters is related to the Derrida’s

⁸⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Nietzsche: Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57-124.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

⁸² Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Walter Benjamin. Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 254.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁸⁴ Berber Bevernage, “Time, Presence, and Historical Injustice,” *History and*

theory of the “trace”, which cannot be determined in the simplicity of a present.⁸⁵ In contrast, specters are “out of joint”, as they include parts coming from both the past and the future.⁸⁶ Following this concept, this section detects these specters of the past in the Wikipedia discussion pages and also discerns the responses of the users to these specters through the users’ participation in the production of historical knowledge.

In the article on the Great Depression on Wikipedia, one chapter of the page is about the “Role of women and household economics”.⁸⁷ The section refers to the impact of the Great Depression on women showing that they did not have a stable family income, so they had to work harder and to deal with food, clothes and medical care. There are many details about the strategies that women followed in order to deal with these problems.⁸⁸ This chapter caused a significant dispute between the users regarding the suitability of this section in the specific page. In the talk page of the entry the unregistered user “DrVentureWasRight” writes about the section: “This section seems to be really out of place. We don’t really talk about the effects of any specific group or subgroup. I really read [sic] like someone copied it out of a high school research paper. I recommend removing it from this page, although it might find a place on one of the country specific Great Depression page.”⁸⁹ This suggestion triggered the anger of an editor of the page “Rjensen”. This user is registered, and, as we can see in his page

Theory 47 (2008): 152. For the concept of spectral time, see: Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The state of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

⁸⁵ Berber Bevernage, “Time, Presence, and Historical Injustice,” 162.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “Great Depression,” accessed November 30, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ “Talk:Great Depression,” accessed November 30, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression#Determining_the_start_of_the_Great_Depression⁸⁹ “Great Depression.”

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁹ “Talk:Great Depression.”

on Wikipedia, is an active historian and a Research Professor at Montana State University, with a PhD from Yale University in 1966, author of many books, articles and papers on American political, social, military, and economic history, and has been working on the editorial boards of academic journals such as the *Journal of American History* and the *American Journal of Sociology*.⁹⁰ “Rjensen” also has many “barnstars”, which are a reward to contributors “for hard work and due diligence.”⁹¹ Furthermore, “Rjensen” is awarded with “The Mary Wollstonecraft Award”, which is awarded to editors, who have helped “improve the coverage of women writers and their work on Wikipedia through content contributions, outreach, community changes and related actions.”⁹² “Rjensen’s” response seems very angry and he writes: “Who is this “we” that does not want to talk about women? Obviously some narrow economist who is unaware of the wealth of reliable sources on the great depression.”⁹³ He continues his argument pointing out that the job market of this period was stratified by gender. Moreover, the user suggests a reference to the impacts of the Great Depression not only on women, but also on men, and poor people citing a relevant bibliography on these topics.⁹⁴ “DrVentureWasRight” intervenes again in the discussion and writes: “We is [sic] the Wikipedia community. Now, I didn't say we shouldn't talk about women. I said that it was totally out of place in this article. We could have a section on the effects of various groups in the depression, but I suspect that would be highly dependent upon country and culture. We could also branch it off in to its own page entirely. That could work, but there really isn't enough material here to make a good

⁹⁰ “User:Rjensen,” accessed November 30, 2018,

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Rjensen>.

⁹¹ “Wikipedia:Barnstars,” accessed November 30, 2018,

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Barnstars>.

⁹² Ibid. See also for “Template:Mary Wollstonecraft Award,” accessed November 30, 2018,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Mary_Wollstonecraft_Award.

⁹³ “Talk:Great Depression.”

⁹⁴ Ibid.

page. If you're interested in adding in more detail then making a page like 'Effects on Women in the Great Depression' could work well.”⁹⁵ “Rjensen” closes the discussion arguing that his statement about the women and the Great Depression is based on reliable sources, as the Wikipedia editors are obliged to do. “Rjensen” points out that “the material is from an advance scholarly study”. In this way, both users disagree about which aspects of the Great Depression have to be represented in the related page. Nevertheless, the citation of published sources on the topic by “Rjensen” will close the discussion, as according to Wikipedia guidelines all the articles should be based on reliable, published source.⁹⁶ At the same time, the fact that “Rjensen” is a user with many contributions and “barnstars” will make its arguments stronger and more convincing. Thus, the specific section will not be removed.

The sources that are used in an article often become a matter of disagreement between the users. In the page about the Great Depression, the use of the collected works of Joseph Stalin in the section on the effects of the Depression in the Soviet Union is cause for discussion, and many users express their opinion.⁹⁷ The user “Sagecandor” detects the specific source and wonders if this primary source is reliable for Wikipedia or it would be better to use a secondary source.⁹⁸ As shown above, this claim is based on Wikipedia policy that the primary sources that are used on Wikipedia, have to be published.⁹⁹ More users become involved in the discussion, question the value of the source, and eventually decide to remove the specific link. However, careful analysis of the discussion highlights that users disagree both about the personality of Stalin and the reliability of his writings. The user “Rjensen”

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Regarding the policy of the reliable source, see: “Wikipedia:Identifying reliable sources,” accessed June 1, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Identifying_reliable_sources.

⁹⁷ For the source, see: “Collected Works Volume 14,” accessed June 1, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/CollecWorksVolume14>.

⁹⁸ “Talk:Great Depression.”

⁹⁹ “Wikipedia:No original research.”

argues that “Stalin faked a lot of numbers”.¹⁰⁰ He cites studies in order to prove his argument, mentioning quotes from these works, including: “there is no person in authority, from Stalin down, who would not sign a hundred pages of false statistics and think nothing of it.”¹⁰¹ The user “Crosswords” disagrees, writing that “the Soviet Union wasn’t effected by the global financial crisis and under his lead the Soviet Union became an industrialized nation this is common knowledge that you can find everywhere in the west.”¹⁰² The discussion will close again with “Rjensen’s” statement that “even the Russians today agree Stalin faked a lot of numbers.”¹⁰³ Thus, Wikipedia users are engaging in the discussion portal about the Great Depression and expressing their opinions on how the page have to represented [sic].

In talk pages, history seems fragmentary and not homogenous, it does not place the diverse human experiences of the past within one context.¹⁰⁴ History takes different forms and seems to reverse the claim of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari that “history is always written from the sedentary point of view and in the name of unitary State apparatus, at least a possible one, even when the topic is nomads.”¹⁰⁵ In Wikipedia talk pages, history does not unify but creates a space for antagonism, pluralism and fragmentation, where users deal with the past and feel that they can correct it through their interventions.

The Wikipedia community does not wait to forget, to drop a historical event into oblivion through historical distance and to visit the traces of the past after a long time in order to arrogate and redeem the historical past through the narrative. On Wikipedia the historical distance from the past is contracted, the historical time as

¹⁰⁰ “Talk:Great Depression.”

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Berber Bevernage, “Time, Presence, and Historical Injustice,” 158.

¹⁰⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MS and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 23, cited in Jerome de Groot, “Changing the Game: Public History and the Space of Fiction,” *International Public History* (2018): 2.

a notion is compressed and the past touches the present. We can detect this statement in the page of Cyclone Nargis. This disaster took place in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar during May 2008 and caused 138,000 fatalities. The cyclone occurred on May 2nd and the related page on Wikipedia was created at the same day. Nevertheless, Wikipedia users express their concerns about the page in the talk section of the article and mention that the page has to be updated with more information. The user, “Cyclonebiskit”, which is involved in the writing of Wikipedia pages related to natural disasters, argues that “it is really hard to get information now, the disaster is in some ways still around, but if you watch almost any news station, or read almost any paper, you will find nothing on the storm. There are only online sources for information.”¹⁰⁶ An unregistered user responds with a personal view on Cyclone Nargis and states that it is a “sad fact” that the only people who know about the disaster are dead and cannot talk. The user criticizes the people, who offer information about the disaster in order to earn money. It seems pessimistic in the way that the page will be updated in the future, as the people who experienced the cyclone and could be a valuable source of information, are dead.¹⁰⁷ As shown above, traumatic events such as cyclones or important events in the modern US history such as the Great Depression cannot only be present or absent; they are productive, haunts people’s life, and defines their present and future.

Wikipedia seems to reverse the belief of many historians that “Truth is the daughter of Time.”¹⁰⁸ Wikipedia users do not believe that as the years pass, we come to see events more accurately and observe their impacts with greater detachment. In contrast, the proper representation of a historical event on

¹⁰⁶ “Talk:Cyclone Nargis,” accessed June 10, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Cyclone_Nargis. Regarding the profile of the user “Cyclonebiskit”, see: “User:Cyclonebiskit,” accessed June 10, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Cyclonebiskit>.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Mark Salber Philips, “Rethinking Historical Distance from Doctrine to Heuristic,” *History and Theory* 50 (2011): 12.

Wikipedia is based on the evaluation of the Wikipedia community, and not on the chronological distance from the past. Wikipedia users express their feelings and opinions about the past; they are trying to administer justice in the past and even more to prevent the past from falling into oblivion. In this way, Wikipedia users make sense of history and interpret the past in order to understand the present and expect the future.¹⁰⁹ Memory is very important in the way that Wikipedia users are trying to codify the past and to share their reflections on it. Memory works as a door of the user to experience, feel and correct the past and to transform it into a meaningful and sense-bearing part of the present.¹¹⁰ At the same time, Wikipedia does not serve only as a site of memory, as the Wikipedia users are trying to verify their opinions selecting and citing external sources and other data, which can attribute validity to their reflections. This need for intervention in the production of historical knowledge, especially when it has to do with a contested or traumatic past, is felt and experienced as an obligation. This duty makes Wikipedia users feel that the sequence of historical time is not irreversible, but it can be reversible and revocable through their interventions. On Wikipedia there is not a historical past that can stand separate from its production and consumption by the users.

Conclusion

In 2013, Fien Danniau published the article, “Public History in a Digital Context. Back to the Future or Back to Basics?,” where she analyzed the current digital public history projects, and showed the weaknesses that some of them had in both attracting the public and constructing historical narratives.¹¹¹ She

¹⁰⁹Jörn Rüsen, “What does “Making sense of history” mean?” in *Meaning & Representation in History*, ed. Jörn Rüsen (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), 3.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Danniau, “Public History in a Digital Context,” 118-144, Regarding the incapability of digital public history projects to construct a historical narrative, see: Pedro Telles da Silveira, “From Instant History to the Infinite Archive: Digital Archiving, Memory and the Practical Past at the Roy Rosenzweig Center

suggests Wikipedia as an exemplar for public historians in order to override these problems and design better digital public history projects in the future.¹¹² This idea shows how important is the research on Wikipedia for public and digital historians, not only to prove its accuracy in historical facts, and its eligibility for use in classrooms, but to use its techniques and methods in new public digital history projects. Wikipedia's capability of producing historical narratives, its self-critical character through the talk pages, and its open character are significant tools that should not be underestimated. The popularity of Wikipedia and, particularly, the popularity of the historical pages that are visited daily by a lot of people have to be studied and not be neglected as a kind of not "real history." Wikipedia cannot change radically the historical scholarship but can bring the historian closer to the society.

for History and New Media," *Historein*, 17/2 (2018), accessed December 5, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12681/historein.10964>.

¹¹² Danniau, "Public History in a Digital Context," 118-144.