



Dare to edit! – the politics of Wikipedia

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Between 1751 and 1772 Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert published their *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. The work, of which the Discours Préliminaire des Éditeurs could be seen as the programmatic outline, is nowadays often regarded as one of the monuments of European Enlightenment. It formed an enormous project which had an almost gargantuan aim that reached beyond the geographical borders of France. The idea behind the *Encyclopédie*, according to Diderot, was that it should contain all knowledge available on the planet:

The goal of an encyclopedia is to assemble the knowledge scattered far and wide on the surface of the earth, to expose its general system to our fellow men with whom we live and to transmit it to those who will follow us, so that [...] our sons, by becoming more educated, might become at the same time more virtuous and happy. (quoted in J. Creech, 1982: 183)

It is hard to find a better summary of the Enlightenment ideals. The project of the *Encyclopédie* is an ethical project and its constituters found themselves saddled with a moral task. With more knowledge, that is, all the knowledge from all over the world, people can become more virtuous, i.e. better individuals. *Sapere aude*, dare to know, as we follow Kant’s motto for the Enlightenment. But also, dare to speak! Who else than the great minds of that era – Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu – could serve this moral undertaking?

Today, having gone through more than two hundred years and multiple technological developments, this motto *Sapere aude* could be turned into *Dare to edit!* As Wikipedia screams from the screen: ‘Don’t be afraid to edit — anyone can edit almost any page, and we encourage you to be bold!’²⁸ It is within the Wikipedia project that traces of Diderot’s and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* return. With a network that spans the whole globe the ideal of the *Encyclopédie* seems within reach. However, it is not just the great minds that create this new encyclopedia, but anyone that feels the need to contribute. The authority of the big authors has begun to vanish, and a new form of authorship has come into existence. In Wikipedia anyone can be an author. As I will argue in this essay, this change in authorship has led to a new form of politics in which the author has not disappeared, but on the contrary can be found everywhere. Wikipedia cannot be

²⁸ Wikipedia (2010) ‘Wikipedia: Introduction’. [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Introduction>]

called a democracy, but constitutes what I propose to call an *authocracy*. From now on authors govern the community.

The portal to the world

The question of how to structure an encyclopedia is not only an epistemological issue, but probably even more a political one. As Michael Zimmer argues, encyclopedias ‘are not simply transparent windows or portals to a discrete world of information’ (Zimmer, 2010: 97). Rather, they structure what can be said and what can not be said about our world. It is the structuring and through this structuring the control over the information about the world. In a more or less Foucaultian way Zimmer argues that: ‘The structure of encyclopedias, then, serves the purposes of specific social and political contexts, not just organizing and presenting information, but shaping it in ways that exert control over how discourses of knowledge can even take place. The encyclopedia’s structure sets the very framework within which the knowledge it means to impart becomes possible to attain’ (Zimmer, 2009: 98). In this way, every encyclopedia sets up a certain poetics of knowledge. The ultimate question is how to structure knowledge in the slightest political way. Needless to say, the encyclopedia should appear to be freed of any suspicious political traits and Diderot and d’Alembert, already aware of this major problem, tried to overcome these politics by creating their own original poetics.

Before the *Encyclopédie* there were two ways of ordering that underpinned the epistemology of encyclopedias. One way was the systematic organization according to subject matter. One well known example of this systematic organization is Borges’ Chinese encyclopedia (discussed by Foucault in a very lucid way in his *Order of Things*) in which a strange classification of animals can be found. This classification reduces the scattered division of topics in some larger sets of knowledge. The other option, alphabetization, leaves every single topic in place. With alphabetization, the compilers of the encyclopedia are no longer dependent on the more or less arbitrary subsumption of topics in some larger units. The structure of the encyclopedia becomes more user-friendly. It certainly overcomes the problem of the arbitrariness that constitute larger categories. According to Zimmer, alphabetization not only served user-friendliness, but had a more important role on an ontological level: ‘Alphabetization was viewed as a more egalitarian method of organization [...] avoiding the hierarchies of systematization and reducing all subjects to the same ontological level’ (Zimmer, 2009: 100). Nevertheless, alphabetization is never a true egalitarian method for at least two reasons. First, it is always confined to the structure, the hierarchy of the alphabet, which is in essence a particular cultural structure. So by escaping the hierarchy of subject matter, one is still trapped in the hierarchy of the alphabet. Second, it is an attempt to create egalitarianism on the level of subject matter, yet leaves the hierarchy between author and reader intact.

Against this background, Diderot and d’Alembert developed their own epistemological model: their encyclopedia was a project with a future-oriented focus. Readers could become more virtuous and happy by reading their collection of all available knowledge. Therefore, the articles written for the *Encyclopédie* should anticipate future knowledge, and accommodate as well as inspire the ongoing quest for knowledge. With a very

luminous idea, Diderot and d’Alembert found a solution for overcoming the linearity of the text. They invented a system of *renvois*, of cross-references, in which they found a way out of the confinements of the alphabet. They were able to guide readers from one text to another to obtain further knowledge. It is a system of referring to not yet read texts in which it becomes clear that knowledge only exists as a whole. This system of *renvois* can be seen as the reflection of their epistemology. As James Creech argues: ‘Just as the *Encyclopedia* is a permanent anticipation of its epistemological model, the text is itself an anticipation of the object – knowledge – that it is supposed to represent’ (Creech, 1982: 188). Furthermore, the system of *renvois* had the function of a hidden political instrument in that it made things visible that were not allowed to be visible. Zimmer, aware of the political potential of the cross-referencing, argues that the system of *renvois* made it possible to juxtapose articles with opposing ideas, hereby placing heavy weight on the reader’s shoulders: ‘Diderot’s *renvois* shaped the presentation of knowledge in an ideologically subversive way to the benefit of the user’ (Zimmer, 2009: 104).

The system of *renvois* did not only anticipate future knowledge. Seen from a contemporary perspective, it is possible to say that in the proposed solution to the struggle with the fixation of knowledge, the modern hypertext was anticipated. With this early hypertextual structure a premature possibility for the death of the author can be traced. However, the *Encyclopédie*’s authors were still confined to the physicality of the format of the printed book. It is only until Wikipedia came into existence that the problem of fixation is overcome, nevertheless leading to new problems.

As Diderot and d’Alembert did feel the pressure of time while working on their project, for they did not only want to represent the whole of knowledge but as pointed out above they tried to anticipate it, this gigantic task obviously could not be completed by two people only. As Creech shows, Diderot was aware of the fact that only a group could accomplish the moral and intellectual undertaking within the time span of twenty years (Creech, 1982: 189-190). The work was divided and each author worked individually on a text. According to Landow and Delany, this collaborative process could be called the segmentation model (Landow and Delany, 2002: 234). As a form of collaborative work, the *Encyclopédie* already challenges the romantic notion of author-genius (or author-god). There is no longer one authority responsible for the meaning of the whole text, that is, the whole encyclopedia. The several segments or lexias of the *Encyclopédie*, nevertheless, were still related to one author(ity). It kept the hierarchy between authority and reader in place. Here the fundamental difference between the *Encyclopédie* and Wikipedia can be found. At the moment of writing, there are more than 75,000 people contributing to Wikipedia. There are more than 10 million articles written in 260 different languages.²⁹ There is no doubt that with Wikipedia the function, and with the function the whole notion of authorship has changed. The question is not if, but rather how this authorship has changed. Which characteristics of the author-function can be discerned and which disappeared? To answer this question two texts will be discussed which recur in probably every debate on authorship from the 1960s onwards. It is true that the importance of those two texts, Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death

²⁹ Wikipedia (2010) ‘Wikipedia: About’. [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>]

of the Author' and Michel Foucault's 'What is an Author?', for contemporary debates of authorship cannot be overestimated.

Let the dead bury their dead...

In 1968 Roland Barthes buried the author in his essay 'The Death of the Author.' According to Barthes, the author is a modern figure that emerged from the Middle Ages via French rationalism up until the moment of Barthes' publication. Before Barthes developed his anti-hierarchical argument, literary studies and criticism were 'tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions' (Barthes, 1977: 143). But since it is never possible to fully grasp who this author is, Barthes was able to put forward that 'writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin' (Barthes, 1977: 142). Now the author has been eliminated, the language of literature turned on itself and nothing but itself. As always with French theory of the 1960s, Mallarmé functions as the historical point of reference. With Barthes' discussion of this elimination, the characteristics of the author-function become clear. The author is there first and foremost to limit, to close, the text. To 'furnish it with a final signified' in Barthes' words (Barthes, 1977: 147). It is exactly this theological authority, Barthes speaks of an Author-God, that he wants to get rid of. Secondly, the author is there to put the text in the context of a temporality: 'the Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book' (Barthes, 1977: 145). This temporal characteristic is related to the theological characteristic in that one always has to believe in the author as point of origin. It is the author that is the creator, the one who gave birth to the work. Therefore, the author is conceived as the authority underneath the text. But Barthes showed us – like the New Critics more than 20 years before him had done – the impossibility of knowing the author. Ripped of his theological and temporal characteristics, the author is nothing more than what Barthes calls a sriptor: 'the modern sriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate' (Barthes, 1977: 145). The only power he has is 'to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them' (Barthes, 1977: 146). This brings Barthes to his metaphor of the text as a tissue, which, needless to say, has the connotation of texture, a network of quotations. The only place where those different lines come together is the reader. As Barthes' famous dictum suggests: 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (Barthes, 1977: 148).

Later Barthes has worked this out in *S/Z*, his magnificent essay on Balzac's *Sarrasine*. In this text he arrives at the distinction between the writerly text and the readerly text. The readerly text leaves no room for the act of interpretation. That is, there is no room 'to appreciate what plural constitutes it' (Barthes, 1974: 5). There is no room for the texture of the text. For Barthes all classic texts are readerly texts. With the writerly text, however, the reader is no longer a consumer, but becomes a producer of a text. The writerly text gets its right to exist not as physical object, but as the act of interpretation. It lives by its being as tissue, as a network of multiple lines.

Barthes is very critical of the literary institution because it pushes the reader in a position of idleness, which maintains a clear division between producer and user of the

text, between owner and customer and between author and reader. The reader then ‘instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, [...] is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*’ (Barthes, 1974: 5). His anti-hierarchical argument does not only concern the relationship between reader and author, but the relation between consumer and the literary institution as well. Barthes’ argument specifically concerns literary works. Nevertheless, the descriptions of the characteristics of the author-function he puts forward are useful in a non-literary discourse as well and describe perfectly well where the articles of Diderot’s encyclopedia derived their authority from. But it is in Foucault’s text that we find a more thorough analysis of this author-function.

Two years after Barthes’ declaration of the death of the author, Michel Foucault, in his essay ‘What is an Author’, takes issue with this claim. Foucault, like Barthes, sees the turning of literature upon itself, he takes Beckett as his example, as the condition for the killing of the author. Writing is intimately linked to death: ‘Where a work had the duty of creating immortality, it now attains the right to kill, to become the murderer of its author’ (Foucault, 2001: 1624). There is no longer that particular personality behind the text, but only ‘the singularity of his absence [...] a victim of his own writing’ (Foucault, 2001: 1624). It is, however, never enough to accept this claim without taking the responsibility for its consequences. Thus, Foucault felt the need to polemicize against Barthes (without directly referring to him): ‘It is obviously insufficient to repeat empty slogans: the author has disappeared; God and man died a common death. Rather, we should re-examine the empty space left by the author’s disappearance; we should attentively observe, along its gaps and fault lines, its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void; we should await the fluid functions released by this disappearance’ (Foucault, 2001: 1626). It is precisely what Foucault has done, through the analysis of the problems and the functions that come with a certain form of authorship, in his essay ‘What is an author?’

The first problem that serves as a prelude for the discussion of the different functions of the author is the author’s name. Foucault asks what exactly the author’s name is doing. On the one hand, the author’s name describes the author as an object, while on the other hand it designates the person that bears that name. Furthermore, it is not something that could easily be replaced by a simple pronoun. It is not a simple element of discourse. Rather, it designates a specific type of discourse for it serves as a classification of texts. Its name ‘remains at the contours of the texts – separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence’ (Foucault, 2001: 1628). Although the author limits the text, it does not mean that there is necessarily only one possible meaning, which would be the intended meaning of the author, of the text.

Where Barthes’ essay was more concerned with the consequences of the death of the author for the interpretation of texts, Foucault seems to focus more on the construction of authorship and its consequences for the status of a discourse. He discerns at least four different characteristics of the author-function. First, there is a legal characteristic. Texts are objects of appropriation. This characteristic came only into existence at the moment that a system of ownership and copyright rules was established. Second, the author-function is not always the same in all discourses. Even within one discourse the author-

function changes over time. Foucault points to the distinctions between a literary discourse and a more scientific discourse. In the history of both discourses authorship changes over time. An author of a scientific text from the Middle Ages has a different function compared to the author of a contemporary scientific text. The same goes for authorship within the literary discourse. The third point concerns the way the author-function is constructed. It is not a simple formation but a convergence of several aspects. In the example of Saint Jerome, Foucault sees four criteria of authenticity that are still used by modern critics: a standard level of quality, a conceptual or theoretical coherence, stylistic uniformity and the formation of a historical figure (in which one could recognize Barthes' theologico-temporal characteristic). Finally, Foucault notes that 'all discourses that support this 'author-function' are characterized by this plurality of egos' (Foucault, 2001: 1631). There are a number of voices which make it no longer possible to refer to one extra-discursive individual.

It is nonetheless possible to apply the author-function to classify or name larger quantities of discourses. Foucault names this the "'transdiscursive" position', and the authors that occupy these positions 'initiators of discursive practices' (Foucault, 2001: 1632). They should not be confused with the romantic genius of the great literary authors. Rather, one should think of the examples of Marx or Freud and although he leaves this point as a sketch, it becomes clear that these initiators distinguish themselves by setting the rules of the game. They create the possibility of other discourses and other texts.

Foucault's analysis is an analysis of the historical formation of authorship. Nonetheless, he was tempted to envision future developments for the function of authorship: 'We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author. Discourses, whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity' (Foucault, 2001: 1636). The questions will no longer be the questions concerning the authenticity of the author, but the questions that concern the status, control and circulation of the discourse. At this stage the author has become what Barthes called the scribe, the one who is only able to mix writings, and the authority of the author has changed.

Both essays are dealing with the problem of the hierarchy between author and reader. Barthes, with his theory of intertextuality, blows up any possible relation between reader and author, which ultimately leads to an infinite relativism for where do we find the borders of a text? Foucault with his inquiry into speaking positions paved the way for the possibilities of a discourse without an author. By burying the Author, at the hands, nevertheless, of these well-known authors, the seeds for a new form of authorship were planted.

...and the new rise up

As the example of the *Encyclopédie* has shown, despite the potentialities of the system of *renvois* the hierarchy between author and reader was still kept in place. That is to say, it was only the voice of the author that could be heard. The author as authority decided what could be said and what not, what could be heard and what not, what could be seen

and what not. The authors of the *Encyclopédie* were those author-gods to whom the text as form of knowledge could be traced. Notwithstanding the polemics of Barthes and Foucault, it is only until the invention of the Internet that this hierarchy collapsed. As it is often argued, Seán Burke observes that the hypertextual construction of the Internet is the practical elaboration of the theories of Barthes and Foucault. By way of claims which conflate readerly and political empowerment, the new technologies are represented as the material embodiment of the ‘Copernican overturning’ by which the texts revolve around the reader rather than the author. ‘The “ultrademocratic” freedom of the reader as Burke points out ‘is opposed to a tyrannically author-centred literature which forces the reader down a pre-determined and linear path imposed by authorial intention’ (Burke, 1998: 199-200). Landow and Delany, like Burke, see the hypertext as the embodiment of the concepts coming from French post-structuralist thought (Landow and Delany, 2002: 230). The argument that the author-god has disappeared so that an ultra-democracy comes into being seems likely at first sight, but needs to be scrutinized.

Wikipedia is the ultimate embodiment of the collapse of the culture of the book, of which according to Burke the concept of the author is derived. However, authorship has not disappeared, that is, only its functions have changed. With Wikipedia there is no author as authority behind the discourse any longer. Yet, it is not possible to declare the author dead, because the reader is at the same time author as the author is at the same time reader. Although this does not mean that the reader-as-author becomes an author-god, it is very well possible to alter the whole universe of the text by changing just one sentence. But in that case there could always be another author to undo and alter this altering of the text. Since there is a history of changes for every wiki, it is possible to undo and redo any altering at any time such that there is no single being that has complete control over the whole text.

Hierarchies of authority, i.e. representation, are collapsed. As the whole Wikipedia-project revolves around this new form of authorship, for it is an encyclopedia build by authors from all over the world, it comes as no surprise that this is the most fundamental principle of the politics of Wikipedia. Chantal Mouffe very lucidly defines politics as ‘the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political’ (Mouffe, 2005: 9). ‘The political’ is ‘the dimension of antagonism which I [= Mouffe] take to be constitutive of human societies’ (Mouffe, 2005: 9). What will be shown is that it is exactly this ordering of human coexistence in combination with conflictuality that is central to the Wikipedia project. Wikipedia is the ordering of what could be said about our world, driven by the antagonisms which find their way into the project in the form of the constant revision of the text. The reader can keep track of these revisions, and thus of ‘the political’, through the discussion page, that treats controversial topics, as well as through the history page, that keeps track of the history of additions and undo’s. Essentially, what is going on on the ‘pages’ of Wikipedia in terms of politics is a struggle over voice, a struggle which only becomes visible when one decides to delve further into the wiki structure, i.e. the discussion and history pages. Before Wikipedia the only group that had a voice was the group that consisted of Authors. Therefore, the reader had no voice, had no influence over what could be said and what not. With Wikipedia there is no hierarchical divide between the reader and the author, which means that the project is build on a fundamental egalitarianism. The reader-as-author

has become able to speak, has obtained a voice in the community, and this community exists within a participatory culture. As Henry Jenkins observes and describes the collapse between reader and author in favor of participation: 'Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other' (Jenkins, 2006: 3). However, in Jenkins' view not all participants are created equally. Although this might be true on a practical level, the radical equality on a theoretical level still holds.

The fundamental egalitarianism within the community even goes beyond the roles and authority of the members of the community. Since every member is reader as well as author, the reader has the authority to decide whatever topic is interesting enough to add to the encyclopedia. And, because there is no difference in the appreciation of the individuals that make up the community, given that authority is absent, there is neither a hierarchy in subject matter. Obviously, some subjects get more attention than others, but that does not make them more important than the others. When every subject in the encyclopedia has the same right to exist there is no need to count visits or words anymore. In an encyclopedia, which has as aim to collect all knowledge available, every single piece is important for the construction of the whole, i.e. it gains its authority from its totality as being all-comprehensive. In its turn, this radical equality of subject matter finds its reflection in the structure of the encyclopedia. As pointed out above, Diderot and d'Alembert preferred alphabetization over the systematic categorization to construct equality of subject matter. With Wikipedia this problem of systematic or alphabetical structure is resolved. It uses both alphabetization and systematic structuring as navigation tools. But with the search engine and the hypertextual structure one could enter the encyclopedia wherever one wants to, one could go wherever and alter whatever one wants to. It is clear that the politics of Wikipedia do not only reside in the author-as-reader or reader-as-author function, but also in the order of things, which is directly resolved into the reader-as-author-function, that is, the accessibility and entrance to the structure of the whole.

This structuring of Wikipedia overcomes another problem as well. The hypertextual structure of the encyclopedia, like Barthes' writerly text, asks for a new reading strategy. The hypertextual structure constantly contests a linear way of reading, whereas the individual lexias have a more traditional structure. What happens is that there is a tension between the writerly and the readerly which is resolved in what could be called a *participatory* text. In this participatory text the reader-as-author has the ability in every instant to edit the text, that is, Wikipedia encourages the reader-as-author to be bold in altering the physicality of the text. Wikipedia overcomes one of the problems, concerning a fundamental epistemological principle that was central to Diderot's and d'Alembert's project: the fixation of knowledge. A certain fixation was necessary for the *Encyclopédie* to give future readers a ground on which to build their knowledge. However, with Wikipedia both linearity and temporality collapse. It does anticipate future readers and future knowledge like the *Encyclopédie*, but what counts for Wikipedia is the here and now of the knowledge. We want the world and we want it now. Where the here and now in the *Encyclopédie* functioned as a sort of baseline, the here and now in Wikipedia is constantly anticipated. The driving force behind this anticipation is the idea that knowledge always could and will be improved, because the world itself is not a fixed whole that consists of determined objects. Rather, those

objects are always part of a certain partition that already in itself contains a specific poetics that could always be questioned leading to a new partitioning. Therefore, it seems more suitable for the development of knowledge in that it is constantly alterable. This, of course, comes with a flipside: it will be hard to refer to the wiki because it is in a potential infinite flux. The only moment that counts is the very now, and this very now is always already moving away: today's knowledge will be less worth seen from tomorrow's perspective. This is precisely where enemies and friends find their ground for battle. It is the ultimate problem, the aporia, of the participatory text: the threat of relativism that is itself part of Wikipedia's poetics. With absolute knowledge as the limit, the mission of Wikipedia will never be fulfilled.

The birth of authocracy...

There is no single author that limits the participatory text anymore. No single being that can appropriate, as Foucault's first characteristic of the author-function would have it, the text in a legal way. Instead, it is possible to hear a polyphony of voices. The plurality of egos has become more tangible. In addition, the construction of authorship, Foucault's third characteristic of the author-function, has become more problematic. The principles that Saint Jerome proposed considering the construction of authorship and that Foucault discusses have lost their value. The author is no longer seen as a historical figure bringing stylistical uniformity, theoretical coherence and a standard level of quality. Is this a real problem? Burke gives us the answer: 'the phenomenon of multiple authorship has only ever been problematic to the notion of authorship when the latter is romantically conceived in terms of solitary genius' (Burke, 1998: 196), which has perfectly been done away with by Barthes. It is a notion that does not belong in our participatory culture which asks not for passive spectatorship but for active participants who share a certain responsibility towards what could be seen as the objects of our world, that is to say, the common. 'What emerges' as Jenkins argues 'might be called a moral economy of information: that is, a sense of mutual obligations and shared experiences about what constitutes good citizenship within a knowledge community' (Jenkins, 2006: 255). What this good citizenship consists of is nothing but being a reader-as-author. The only condition for entrance into the community lies in becoming an author, otherwise you cannot be heard, and you cannot be seen. What is more important, in terms of equality, is that you will not have any influence over what could be said, what could be seen and what could be done. As a reader, you will not have any influence over the order of the perceptible, that is to say: it is precisely in this poetical moment, through which the object has become visible, that the reader-as-author or the author-as-reader forms a community. Thus, one always has the potential to become an author and consequently a member of the community.

To enter the community of Wikipedia one must apply for the citizenship of being a reader-as-author. This implies that the community consists only of readers-as-authors sharing, a *sensus communis*, a responsibility for the objects, and thus the partitioning of our world. Would one call this a democracy? What, then, is the *demos*, to use a signifier that refers to a faceless unrecognizable mass? It seems that contrary to what some technological utopianists make us believe, Wikipedia cannot be called a democratic project. As the encyclopedia itself, in a list of negative definitions, i.e. of what it is not,

makes clear: ‘Wikipedia is NOT a democracy.’³⁰ There is no proper demos to govern the community. Neither can it be called, as some techno-negativists seem to do, an anarchy, because in that anti-ideal, citizenship itself becomes irrelevant, impossible even. Moreover, what could be said about the world becomes completely irrelevant, which in the positive ideal of Wikipedia this would never be the case. The only order that governs the community is the order of authors, but not from a central place. Wikipedia cannot be compared with an agora, in that there is no centre from where the authorities govern. Rather, there are two opposing forces struggling to give this community its form. The author is nowhere, nowhere is authority. And the author is everywhere, everywhere is authority. It is the essence of this communal form we can call *authocracy*. As shown before, the authocracy of the Wikipedia-community consists of 75,000 authors all working on one single work, namely Wikipedia as encyclopedia. This collective of authors constitutes one enormous writing body. But it is impossible to locate this writing body. With Barthes, it is possible to say that here the theological function of this author has ceased to be. It becomes impossible to locate the origin of the text, like it becomes impossible to see any possible direction a text could be going. Barthes eliminated the temporal embeddedness of the text which with Wikipedia has become all the more real. Since it is impossible to say anything on past or future, the only thing that counts, as already pointed out, is the here and now, and in the very moment of the here and now the writing body is so dispersed that the author is everywhere. Thousands of authors are working in the same moment on the structuring and controlling of the knowledge about our world.

... and how it was killed by the police

It has become clear that Wikipedia is an entirely political project, a project which could only be built on a new stripped form of authorship. The politics of Wikipedia consist of restructuring the order of our world of knowledge. It is the reordering of what can be said and what not, what can be heard and what not and what can be done and what not. But it is also a reordering of who is allowed to speak, to make things visible or to silence things. It is the space where politics and epistemology meet. The structuring of the available knowledge goes hand in hand with the structuring of the community, where the ordering of speaking positions goes hand in hand with the formation of citizenship.

In this authocratic community, where the author is at the same time everywhere as he is nowhere, it becomes impossible to attribute the text to a single author. Who is responsible for the text, or, who is the owner? This question of Foucault’s first author-function, which is in essence a question of hierarchy, can now only be answered with: the community. However, the founders of the Wikipedia-project felt the need to go back to the kind of hierarchical structure that is more characteristic of the printed book and thus erode the fundamental principle on which the community was built, the egalitarian idea of authorship. It is possible to identify at least three different developments that threaten the authocratic principle that came with the birth of the reader-as-author.

³⁰ Wikipedia (2010) ‘Wikipedia: Wikipedia is an encyclopedia’ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedia_is_an_encyclopedia]

The first development forms a direct threat to the kind of authorship Wikipedia is built on. The founders of the Wikipedia-project thought it necessary to construct a social contract. In order to guarantee the freedom of all citizens, the founders think it is necessary to limit this freedom. Clearly not everything is sayable. As Wikipedia puts it:

You are a Wikipedia editor. Since Wikipedia has no editor-in-chief or top-down article approval mechanism, active participants make copyedits and corrections to the format and content problems they see. So the participants are both writers *and* editors.

Individual users thus enforce most of the policies and guidelines by editing pages, and discussing matters with each other. Some policies, such as vandalism, are enforced by administrators by blocking users. In extreme cases the Arbitration Committee has the power to deal with highly disruptive situations, as part of the general dispute resolution procedure.

Some features of the software which could potentially be misused, such as deleting pages and locking pages from editing, are available only to administrators, who are experienced and trusted members of the community.³¹

The individual users have influence over most of the policies and guidelines. That is to say: there is a residue of non-authoritarian power. But more importantly, what this policy guideline suggests is the return to hierarchy, a specific power structure, in other words, the end of the authoritarianism. The founders installed a police order, made up of ‘trusted members’, whoever they may be and whoever decides on this trustworthiness, that have the right to exclude people who behave in a non-tolerable manner. ‘Non-tolerable behavior’ is what Wikipedia calls vandalism: ‘common types of vandalism are the addition of obscenities or crude humor, page blanking, and the insertion of nonsense into articles’.³² This setting up of a police order, which is called the administration, threatens the theoretical underpinnings of the encyclopedia. The administration has the ultimate power to exclude citizens, that is, to silence authors. The administration also has the power to lock the pages from being edited, which constitutes a threat to the epistemological idea of the anticipation of the constantly changing knowledge. Nevertheless, the authors still have the power to add subject matter to the encyclopedia. As the administrators would like us to believe there is no top-down mechanism.

The second development that threatens the authoritarian community is the policing of the articles. On the one hand, there is ‘positive’ policing in the form of so-called featured articles: ‘A featured article exemplifies our very best work and features professional standards of writing, presentation and sourcing.’³³ Those articles, recognizable by the bronze star on the top right corner, have an exemplary function for the community, they show what good citizenship, and thus good authorship, consists of. The implication is that authors themselves do not know what good citizenship is, and that they need to be governed by higher ranked community members. Furthermore, it is the return to a

³¹ Wikipedia (2010) ‘Wikipedia: Policies and Guidelines’. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Policies_and_guidelines#How_are_policies_enforce.3F]

³² Wikipedia (2010) ‘Wikipedia: Vandalism’. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Dealing_with_vandalism#How_to_respond_to_vandalism]

³³ Wikipedia (2010) ‘Wikipedia: Featured Article Criteria’. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_article_criteria]

hierarchy of importance and quality, downgrading all the other non-ranked articles. Nonetheless, these articles do not always keep their status as featured article: some have lost their status because they could not stand up against the continuous flux of the text. On the other hand, alongside ‘positive policing’ ‘negative policing’ exists in the form of the disputed statement. According to Wikipedia:

The accuracy of a statement may be a cause for concern if:

- It contains unlikely information, without providing references.
- It contains information which is particularly difficult to verify.
- It has been written (or edited) by a user who is known to write inaccurately on the topic.³⁴

Obviously, these ways of labelling articles forms a threat to the egalitarian principles of the authocratic community.

The third development, perhaps the most radical, affects the voice of the author. Since 2003 the authors are only allowed to include verifiable information. Information should come from a reliable third-party source, so that it always is possible to check it. Wikipedia is more and more depending on the authority of other sources. And the author? The author has become what Barthes called a scriptor: the one who is only able to mix writings so as not to rely on one single source. The one, who is at the same time multiple, who creates a tissue in which every word practically has become a *renvoy*.

What, then, is left of the authocratic ideal of Wikipedia since it is no longer only the author who governs the community? As argued above, with Wikipedia the temporal and theological characteristics of the author-function have vanished. Because of the multiplicity of voices it became impossible to construct the author as a historical figure. As a consequence it was impossible to ascribe the text to a single author. Instead, the text could only be attributed to the community. Therefore, the authors had a political role central to the encyclopedia. Their function was to deconstruct all possible hierarchies in order to give Wikipedia its full potential. Since everyone became an author, all authors governed the community, and this is where the encyclopedia gained its authority from. The authocracy not only brought our central assumptions of authorship and authority into clear focus, it radically challenged those assumptions, especially the notion of the author-god, the notion of ownership and our poetics of knowledge. But most of all it challenged our notion of authority. This is what the founders of the project were not able to deal with. As a consequence authocracy, almost before it had practically begun to flourish, had to be killed.

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