

Online representation and the social construction of history

Post(-)colonial conflict on Wikipedia

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Introduction and main research questions

The Wikipedia has evolved to be the most important source for encyclopedic knowledge online (Alexa, 2018). Its declared goal is to “bring about a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge” (Wikimedia, n. d.). The fulfilment of this ambitious vision has been the subject of empirical investigations, among others, from feminist- (Ford, 2011; Ford & Wajcman, 2017) and research in digital geographies (Graham, 2011; Graham, Straumann & Hogan, 2015), which indicate that there is still a long way to go. Also, the Wikimedia Foundation (the organisation behind Wikipedia) itself is concerned with the issue, as expressed in the 2018 edition of its official annual conference devoted to “what and who is still missing from our sum of all human knowledge, and building shared strategies to bridge these collective gaps” (Wikimedia, 2018).

The aim of this paper is to focus on the ‘who’ in a specific historic moment where conflicting societies formally disengage with each other, namely the processes of independence of French overseas colonies in Africa. We are interested whether Wikipedia’s open and collaborative approach is able to overcome a long-running hegemony of western knowledge production in this particular situation of potentially conflicting historic narratives? Therefore, we seek to answer the following questions:

1. Where do editors of articles related to decolonisation come from?
2. Which group of editors is successful in asserting its version of decolonisation?
3. Do edit controversies emerge between authors from different geographical backgrounds, specifically between former colonised states and colonising states?

Theoretical background

This study investigates whether contemporarily elaborated knowledge about colonial conflicts is predominantly shaped by the writing of authors belonging to the former colonial empires. Therefore it touches upon the main concern of postcolonial thinking, which is occupied with analysing “the ways in which western knowledge systems have come to dominate” (Sharp, 2008, p. 5) and studying the continuities of this form of dominance in times of post-colonialism (ibid.). In fact, many of the rather abstract philosophical concepts brought forward by this line of thought seem to gain specific and concrete meaning in the context of the globalized collaborative knowledge production on Wikipedia.

Pocock (1998) thinks of history as a way of creating a society’s own identity. Apart from its own decisions and actions an important part of this is “the narrative and myth of how society is said to have come into being and acquired the capacity for autonomy” which is why he refers to this as “constructed history” (p. 219). This perspective highlights two aspects that are of great relevance to this investigation. First, it acknowledges the enormous importance which the historic moment of independence has specifically for colonized societies. Second, by considering history as a means of identity creation, the continuity of the struggle over signification and re-construction of past events until present days becomes apprehensible. However, in contrast to other spaces of historic debate the process of construction of history and any potential struggles involved in it become observable on

Wikipedia, given that any even minor change to an article is documented via the systems version history.

Laclau & Mouffe (2001) speak of social objectivity to describe a practice in identity building, where everything that is constitutive to an identity is included, but anything that is different from the predominant discursive regime is neglected. According to Mouffe (2000), “social objectivity is constituted through acts of power. This implies that any social objectivity is ultimately political and that it has to show traces of exclusion” (p. 13f) We are interested in whom is exerting power and whom is being excluded. Specifically we ask whether “‘underdeveloped societies’ are ‘silenced societies’ [...] in which talking and writing take place but which are not heard in the planetary production of knowledge” (Khatibi, 1983, p. 59 according to Mignolo, 2000, p. 71).

Our research is interested in studying these processes and potential power constellations that evolve within them, on the basis of the location of involved authors. By doing so our inquiry focuses on what Walter Mignolo, another postcolonial thinker has denominated the “locus of enunciation” that highlights the importance of place from ‘where’ someone speaks which involves a certain ‘politics of location’ (Mignolo, 1999, p. 236). Again, on Wikipedia this place becomes observable to some extent as information disclosed by the editors participating in the writing.

Empirical approach

Our research encompasses the representation of the independence of former French colonies in Africa, which includes 17 countries (Truhart, 1996). We decided to limit our investigation to these colonies in order to reduce the historic complexity of those processes. Starting from each country’s main article we compiled a list of 355 articles concerned with actors, events, agreements and treaties related to the respective decolonisation process.

Similarly to the approach proposed by Viégas, Wattenberg, and Dave (2004) we then downloaded each article’s full revision history (122 931 revisions in total) and consecutively compared each revision to its predecessor using a diff-algorithm (Myers, 1986). This allowed us to attribute the authorship of each text fraction in each article to specific Wikipedia editors on the level of single characters. We will now proceed to geolocate all editors based on their IP address or location information disclosed on their user pages.

Based on this data we can assess where editors involved in the revision of relevant articles are based (RQ1) and whom of them are relatively successful in contending their version of historic events (RQ2) by measuring the fraction of text produced by editors per country weighted by the time it persisted in the article visible to Wikipedia readers. Finally, we inquire whether conflicts between Wikipedia editors emerge along the conflict lines of former colonial domination (RQ3) by assessing whether editors based in France remove information contributed by editors based in former colonies and vice versa significantly more often than they do with editors based in unrelated countries.

Our research inquires how knowledge is globally contested and socially negotiated between individuals within Wikipedia’s highly complex communication infrastructure. Therefore we believe that it is a valuable contribution to track 5 on “Demokratische Öffentlichkeit vs. Fake News, Trolle, Denkfabriken” and more generally to this years conference theme “Widerspruch”.

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