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Dossier "Academic research into Wikipedia"

The Truth of Wikipedia

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Resum

What does it mean to assert that Wikipedia has a relation to truth? That there is, despite regular claims to the contrary, an entire apparatus of truth in Wikipedia? In this article, I show that Wikipedia has in fact two distinct relations to truth: one which is well known and forms the basis of existing popular and scholarly commentaries, and another which refers to equally well-known aspects of Wikipedia, but has not been understood in terms of truth. I demonstrate Wikipedia's dual relation to truth through a close analysis of the Neutral Point of View core content policy (and one of the project's "Five Pillars"). I conclude by indicating what is at stake in the assertion that Wikipedia has a *regime of truth* and what bearing this has on existing commentaries.

Paraules clau

Wikipedia, Neutral Point of View, NPOV, Truth, Collaboration

La veritat de la Viquipèdia

Abstract

Què significa l'afirmació que la Viquipèdia té una relació amb la veritat? Que la Viquipèdia conté, malgrat que sovint es digui el contrari, tot un dispositiu de la veritat? En aquest article vull mostrar que, en realitat, la Viquipèdia té dues relacions diferents amb la veritat: una de ben coneguda i que constitueix la base dels comentaris populars i acadèmics, i una altra que es refereix a aspectes també ben coneguts de la Viquipèdia, però que no s'ha entès en termes de la veritat. Demostro aquí la doble relació de la Viquipèdia amb la veritat a través d'una detallada anàlisi d'una de les principals normes que regeixen a la Viquipèdia, el «punt de vista neutral» (que ahora és un dels «cinc pilars» del projecte). Finalitzo l'article demostrant el que es posa en qüestió quan diem que la Viquipèdia té un «règim de la veritat» i com això repercuteix en els comentaris existents.

Keywords

viquipèdia, punt de vista neutral, PVN, veritat, col·laboració



What does it mean to assert that Wikipedia has a relation to truth? That there is, despite regular claims to the contrary, an entire apparatus of truth in Wikipedia? In this article, I show that Wikipedia has in fact two distinct relations to truth: one which is well known and forms the basis of existing popular and scholarly commentaries, and another which refers to equally well-known aspects of Wikipedia, but has not been understood in terms of truth. I demonstrate Wikipedia's dual relation to truth through a close analysis of the Neutral Point of View core content policy (and one of the project's "Five Pillars"). I conclude by indicating what is at stake in the assertion that Wikipedia has a *regime of truth* and what bearing this has on existing commentaries.

The Abandonment of Truth

Both supporters and detractors regularly suggest that truth is not central to Wikipedia. For Joseph Reagle, what he describes as the "abandonment of 'truth'" (2010, p. 56) is central to the success of Wikipedia's mode of collaboration and also what distinguishes it from its predecessors:

Historically, reference works have made few claims about neutrality as a stance of collaboration, or as an end result. While other reference works have had contributions from thousands of people, they were still controlled by a few persons of a relatively homogenous worldview. Indeed, a preoccupation of traditional references is their authoritativeness, quite different from Wikipedia's abandonment of "truth". (Reagle, 2010, p. 56)

Reagle notes how the authoritative stance of previous encyclopaedias is replaced in Wikipedia by the Neutral Point of View (NPOV). This policy, Reagle asserts, is what allows people who do not share "a relatively homogenous worldview" to collaborate on the same Wikipedia entry. The NPOV and related core content policies (Verifiability and No Original Research) are what seemingly replace the criterion of truth — the requirement that an entry or a particular statement is true — *and* what allows these people to get along. This is also how Jimmy Wales sees the function of NPOV, and Reagle makes use of the following passage to support his own claims:

The whole concept of the neutral point of view, as I originally envisioned it, was the idea of a social concept, for helping people get along: to avoid or sidestep a lot of philosophical debates. Someone who believes that truth is socially constructed, and somebody who believes that truth

is a correspondence to the facts of reality, they can still work together. (Wales, cited in Reagle, 2010, p. 53)

These positive accounts of the replacement of truth with NPOV (and Verifiability) are met with more critical perspectives. The most common objection is simply that replacing more typical notions of truth with the NPOV as the threshold of inclusion for a statement means that things that are true might be excluded from the encyclopaedia if they do not also meet the NPOV and related policy requirements. Such objectives are usually manifested in cases involving recognised experts, such as the 2005 incident involving climate change expert William Connelly (see Schiff, 2006) and more recently, the incident involving Timothy Messer-Kruse and the article on the "Haymarket affair" of 1886 (see Messer-Kruse, 2012). In both instances, these experts complained that their "true" contributions were either watered down or deleted from the encyclopaedia. It is these kinds of situations that led Simson Garfinkel to write critically about the same developments described by Reagle and Wales:

Wikipedia has evolved a radically different set of epistemological standards – standards that aren't especially surprising given that the site is rooted in a Web-based community, but that should concern those of us who are interested in traditional notions of truth and accuracy. On Wikipedia, objective truth isn't all that important, actually. What makes a fact or statement fit for inclusion is that it appeared in some other publication — ideally, one that is in English and is available free online. (Garfinkel, 2008)

I want to suggest, however, that by accepting Wikipedia's own claim that truth has been replaced by the NPOV, both sides of this debate have missed the most crucial dimension of Wikipedia's relation to truth. Contrary to the consensus, there is no escaping the truth of Wikipedia. To explore these (two) relations to truth, I turn to its supposed replacement, the Neutral Point of View.

The Neutral Point of View

Iterations of NPOV are coextensive with the history of Wikipedia. In his oft-cited *Slashdot* essay "The Early History of Nupedia and Wikipedia: A Memoir", project co-founder Larry Sanger recalls how a version of NPOV was already established in Wikipedia's precursor, Nupedia:

Also, I am fairly sure that one of the first policies that Jimmy and I agreed upon was a "nonbias" or neutrality policy. I know I was extremely insistent upon it from the beginning, because



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neutrality has been a hobby-horse of mine for a very long time, and one of my guiding principles in writing “Sanger’s Review.” Neutrality, we agreed, required that articles should not represent any one point of view on controversial subjects, but instead fairly represent all sides. (Sanger, 2005)

The original Nupedia policy was titled “Lack of Bias” and its core elements are strikingly similar to the current Wikipedia equivalent. Some especially pertinent excerpts include:

Nupedia articles are, in terms of their content, to be unbiased ... This requires that, for each controversial view discussed, the author of an article (at a bare minimum) mention various opposing views that are taken seriously by any significant minority of experts (or concerned parties) on the subject. In longer articles, of course, opposing views will be spelled out in considerable detail. In a final version of the article, every party to the controversy in question must be able to judge that its views have been fairly presented, or as fairly as is possible in a context in which other, opposing views must also be presented as fairly as possible...

On any controversial issue, it is usually important to state which views, if any, are now (or were at some time) in favour and no longer in favour (among experts or some other specified group of people). But even this information can and should be imparted in such a fashion as not to imply that the majority view is correct, or even that it has any more presumption in its favor than is implied by the plain fact of its popularity.

To present a subject without bias, one must pay attention not just to the matters of which views and arguments are presented, but also to their wording or the tone in which they are mentioned. Nupedia articles should avoid describing controversial views, persons, events, etc., in language that can plausibly be regarded as implying some value judgment, whether positive or negative, except when the judgment is on some relatively innocuous matter and is virtually universal. It will suffice to state the relevant (agreed-upon) facts, to describe various divergent views about those facts, and then let readers make up their own minds about what the correct views are. (Nupedia Editors, 2000)

Sanger notes how the “Lack of bias” policy from Nupedia was translated into Wikipedia very early on as a “Rule to Consider” and shortly thereafter into the Neutral Point of View policy by Wales — a name disliked by Sanger for its oxymoronic status (2005). Despite the name, the core elements of the initial policy remained intact.

The NPOV page has existed since 2001, and as of October 2011 it has been edited roughly 4,500 times (toolserver.org, 2011). During this time it has undergone many transformations

and the current version is much longer than the first revised version of November 2001 (the earliest version available on Wikipedia). Nonetheless, the core aspects of NPOV, its most forceful statements, remain largely unchanged. The current “Wikipedia:Neutral point of view” page has a text box near the top noting its status as an English Wikipedia policy and a “widely accepted standard that all editors should normally follow” (Wikipedia Contributors, 2011a). A square box to the right signals that NPOV is one of the five pillars and a “core content policy”. The opening text reads:

Editing from a neutral point of view (NPOV) means representing fairly, proportionately, and as far as possible without bias, all significant views that have been published by reliable sources. All Wikipedia articles and other encyclopedic content must be written from a neutral point of view. NPOV is a fundamental principle of Wikipedia and of other Wikimedia projects. This policy is non-negotiable and all editors and articles must follow it.

“Neutral point of view” is one of Wikipedia’s three core content policies. The other two are “Verifiability” and “No original research”. These three core policies jointly determine the type and quality of material that is acceptable in Wikipedia articles. Because these policies work in harmony, they should not be interpreted in isolation from one another, and editors should try to familiarize themselves with all three. The principles upon which this policy is based cannot be superseded by other policies or guidelines, or by editors’ consensus. (Wikipedia Contributors, 2011a)

The first sentence summarises the epistemic stance of Wikipedia, with the rest of the passage indicating the force of this stance (“non-negotiable”, “cannot be superseded”) and pointing to its two key allies, “Verifiability” and “No original research”. While the orientation towards bias has been slightly weakened — “as far as possible without bias” — and the concept of “reliable sources” has been included, much of this opening statement closely mirrors the first iteration from Nupedia.

What has been crucially preserved from the outset is a particular two-fold relation to truth. Neutrality, defined interchangeably as non-bias or lack of bias, attempts to distance itself from the truth-battles of the outside world, that is, from contests of truth that take place outside of Wikipedia. For example, it no longer matters if a statement, “Jesus was resurrected”, corresponds to an actual reality of the figure Jesus rising from the dead. Such distancing from these battles in turn enables an inclusiveness, where competing truths — reconfigured as conflicting “points of view” — can all be subsumed into the encyclopaedic mode, albeit under quite specific conditions. For example, “Jesus was resurrected” might appear instead as “Most Christians believe in the resurrection of Jesus” or “The belief that Jesus was resurrected is a core component of



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Christian faith" and such statements therefore become compatible with other, non-Christian perspectives on Jesus. Indeed, the entry on Jesus contains six main "religious perspectives", a sub-section on "other [religious] views", and a section dedicated to "historical views" (Wikipedia Contributors, 2011b).

This first relation to truth, one of distancing and inclusion, is captured in the part of the statement that requires "representing fairly ... all significant views". It is restated in the "this page in a nutshell" box (at the top of the page) as: "Articles mustn't take sides, but should explain the sides, fairly and without bias" (Wikipedia Contributors, 2011a) and it is equally present in the original Nupedia formulation above. It is this first relation to truth that also marks the limit of most commentaries on the subject (such as those considered earlier).

There is, however, a second relation to truth, what might be called *the truth of the NPOV* or the internal truth of the encyclopaedia. Recall that NPOV "doesn't take sides, but should explain the sides, fairly and without bias". How does this actually work? What is the truth of this statement? Another way of putting it is: how is the first relation to truth, one of distance and inclusion, established and confirmed? The NPOV entry provides most of the answers.

After the sentence, "Observe the following principles to achieve the level of neutrality which is appropriate for an encyclopaedia", there is a list of six principles:

Avoid stating opinions as facts.

Avoid stating seriously contested assertions as facts.

Avoid presenting uncontested assertions as mere opinion.

Prefer non-judgemental language.

Accurately indicate the relative prominence of opposing views. (Wikipedia Contributors, 2011a)

These principles spell out a precise relation to "outside" truth, at the level of individual statements. The first two require weakening the truth-value — or "facticity" — of anything contested. Any statement whose truth-value is contested "should be attributed in the text to particular sources, or where justified, described as widespread views, etc." (Wikipedia Contributors, 2011a). The fourth principle is similar to these first two, but directs the focus to language and authorial voice. Another way of putting it would be: "avoid adding opinions to facts". The third principle is the converse of the first two principles: if something is uncontested, don't weaken its truth-value. This principle comes very close to participating in "truth battles" with the distinction, perhaps, that what matters is not whether or not a statement is actually true, but whether its truth is contested. The above example of Jesus' resurrection captures this distinction: The statement "Jesus was resurrected" is clearly contested and thus cannot be included. By reformulating it as "Most Christians believe in the resurrection of Jesus", the statement is weakened, at least in relation to the resurrection of Jesus.

However, the focus of the truth-value of the statement has actually been redirected from the resurrection of Jesus to whether or not most Christians believe this to be true. Because this element of the statement, "Most Christians believe", is an "uncontested assertion", it therefore cannot be presented in a weakened form: "It is the opinion of X that most Christians believe...". And despite Wikipedia's "abandonment" of truth, it nonetheless has a whole regime (of truth) in place for determining whether or not this transformed statement, with its altered focus on "Most Christians believe", is in fact uncontested.

The final principle requires all of these newly formed statements to be ordered in relation to one another, and this order is determined by an outside reality. Together, these five principles explain how NPOV is established at the level of individual written statements, but by no means do they represent the limits of this content pillar. "Neutrality procedures" also apply to the naming of articles, the structure and arrangement of articles, the "weight" given to particular perspectives (eg, 1,000 words on a minor perspective, while the majority view is only 100 words long), research methods for acquiring sources, and so on.

There is, therefore, a whole other relation to truth to be found in the NPOV pillar. The truth-value of a statement is by no means rejected, merely redirected. And while I have described this regime of truth as the internal truth of Wikipedia, in actual fact the twofold relation to truth cannot be grasped entirely in terms of an inside (a truth of NPOV) and outside (the truth battles beyond the encyclopaedia). Instead, the reach of NPOV extends well beyond the limits of the encyclopaedia. NPOV must be understood as a grid of intelligibility, a set of forceful statements that circumscribe a world beyond the encyclopaedia as well as the precise manner in which to engage with it; it is an internal truth with an external reach. It is also at this point that the NPOV policy's allies become especially important.

Alongside NPOV, "No original research" and "Verifiability" make up Wikipedia's three core content policies, which are designed to work in unison: "Because these policies work in harmony, they should not be interpreted in isolation from one another" (Wikipedia Contributors, 2011a). "No original research" establishes a pre-existing outside world as the only legitimate source of encyclopaedia statements. But the *outside* invoked by "No original research" is very specific: "Wikipedia does not publish original thought: all material in Wikipedia must be attributable to a reliable, published source" (Wikipedia Contributors, 2011c). The pre-existing outside world is purely discursive, a world comprised solely of sources. It is on this level, or in regard to this outside that Wikipedia engages in battles for truth. While I won't go into detail, there are extensive criteria for what constitutes a reliable source, a published source, and indeed, a source in itself. The function of "Verifiability" in this regard is to establish the reality of this outside world of sources and the method for connecting to it (via citation).



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NPOV is the pillar of all content policy, working in “harmony” with “No original research” and “Verifiability”. Together, these three core content policies sit atop a whole body of related policies, guidelines and essays, which all work to define the contours of the project: the precise rules of a statement’s formation and the threshold of statement inclusion; the arrangement of and relation between statements; and what constitutes the “source” world beyond the encyclopaedia formation and how to approach it. While outside battles for truth are explicitly rejected — “The threshold for inclusion in Wikipedia is *verifiability, not truth*” (Wikipedia Contributors, 2011d) — Wikipedia nonetheless has a whole body of forceful statements whose function is to establish the truth of any particular statement; a truth of what is neutral, non-original, published, reliable, attributable, and verifiable.

A Return to Truth

Recognising Wikipedia’s *other* relation to truth, its regime for establishing the truth of neutrality, non-originality, verifiability and so on, permits a reframing of the initial debate about the abandonment of truth. Most notably, Wales’ and Reagle’s position that collaboration in Wikipedia is successful because NPOV permits a “sidestepping” of philosophical debates about truth needs to be reversed: Collaboration in Wikipedia is possible precisely because there is a clear regime of truth in place for sorting and filtering competing contributions. Rather than abandoning the truth, collaboration is possible because the truth of how to contribute is in place and well established. (As we saw, iterations of the NPOV are co-extensive with the history of Wikipedia, extending even to Wikipedia’s precursor, Nupedia.) While this might seem like a minor adjustment, it isn’t. Those who celebrate Wikipedia’s abandonment of the truth do so because they see in this abandonment a form of collaboration largely devoid of major antagonism. There is in this position the recognition that the quest for truth can divide people and lead to heated and often irresolvable conflicts. If the problem of the truth can be avoided, formerly divided people can be brought together: “Someone who believes that truth is socially constructed, and somebody who believes that truth is a correspondence to the facts of reality, they can still work together” (Wales, cited in Reagle, 2010, p. 53). More than this though, it is the dream of Wikipedians that people with radically different “points of view” — not different definitions of the truth, but different versions of it — can all be brought together under the umbrella of neutrality. Once it is recognised that even neutrality requires its truth procedures, the dream of universal collaboration through neutrality must be abandoned. This isn’t at all to suggest that Wikipedia’s truth-based collaboration is evil or wrong, just that it exists because of and not in distinction to the truth. And because Wikipedia’s knowledge cannot be divorced from truth, neither can it be divorced from all the messiness that comes with contests for it.

Conversely, we can also see that those who lament Wikipedia’s abandonment of the truth have misdiagnosed the problem. The cases mentioned above (Connelly and climate change; Messer-Kruse and the Haymarket affair) are not instances of recognised experts in possession of true knowledge being shunned because *the actual truth* doesn’t matter in Wikipedia. Rather, these instances involve a clash of truth regimes and related expertise. They are episodes where the truth of Wikipedia is in conflict with the truth of the scientist or the truth of the historian and where the expertise of these individuals plays off against the expertise possessed by Wikipedia’s editors. Rather than dismiss Wikipedia for abandoning the truth, we would be better served by attending to the procedures in which the truth of Wikipedia is established. It is from such a vantage point that we might begin to understand how power is distributed throughout the project; from where authority derives; how some contributions are accepted over others; and how the project maintains order and coherence in the face of its “spontaneous division of labour” (Shirky, 2008, p. 118) and “ad-hocratic” (Bruns, 2008, p. 25; Konieczny, 2010) mode of governance. If we wish to avoid the hype about collaboration without replicating conservative arguments about the death of the expert, we must return to the truth of Wikipedia.

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