Wikipedia: Example for a Future Electronic Democracy? Decision, Discipline and Discourse in the Collaborative Encyclopaedia

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A number of online projects aiming to bring citizens closer to political decisions have appeared over recent years.¹ These projects originate from public authorities seeking to come closer to their citizens, as well as small groups trying to make existing institutions more democratic. The idea of a possible “electronic democracy” is as old as the Network itself, but its realisation remains today at an embryonic stage, limited as much by technical problems² as by a lack of political will. The idea of an electronic agora, where citizens can debate and vote, is very often included in notions of a modern representative democracy moving toward a more direct democracy – or what might be called “participatory democracy” or “strong democracy” after the model described by Barber (1984).

This article describes the mechanisms of a successful product of the internet involving mass collaboration, namely, the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia.³ Wikipedia relates to the world of electronic democracy in the sense that it gives us the successful organisational mechanisms of decision-making processes, and involves millions of people. As such, it could be taken as an example for future projects. As we shall see, the practice of computer technology in Wikipedia has resulted in a pragmatic and unplanned construction, a decision-making process that deviates from the standard direct democracy model (one person-one vote, numerical calculation of votes), and takes rather the form of debates and consensus that, if one looks for historical examples, could be likened to the old method of the palaver or the modern techniques of some left libertarian circles. It should be emphasised that the Wikipedian practice has been built gradually through progressive user-experience. A pre-arranged organisation would have been unable to foresee and cope with the many difficulties facing such a complex project as the construction of a collaborative encyclopaedia, as we shall later argue.

In the first part of the paper we shall analyse the decision making process (DMP), including debates and consensus, which Wikipedia employs, and make a connection with the Habermasian model of rational discourse.
In the second part, we analyse the disciplines (in the Foucauldian sense) which underlie and permit this DMP. We find that, on the theoretical plane, despite the harsh criticisms Habermas claimed against the writings of Foucault, we can see a rather complementary relation between the establishing of rational discourse in Wikipedia and the effects of its discipline. Then, in third part we show the resistances that face the decision-making process and the disciplines, and consider the reactions that have emerged against such resistances. These findings lead on to a discussion of the normativity of Foucauldian disciplines and the possibility of their heterogeneity. Finally, we examine the possible implementations of the Wikipedia system to electronic democracy projects.


Wikipedia has developed an original decision-making process (DMP), mainly thanks to a new technology of electronic editing called Wiki. A wiki is a piece of web-based software which generates web pages that may be modified or edited by anyone. This technology enables the communal writing of texts, and from this communal work a DMP has arisen based on debate and consensus. The DMP has been proven to be efficient not only with communal editing but also, and more surprisingly, with other functions, such as the creation of internal rules and with the nomination of users for added responsibility for the site.

1.1 In the Writing of Articles

The best way to explain the decision-making process in article editing is surely to show how a wiki web page works. There are in fact several pages in one wiki page, each of them represented by a tab at the upper end of an article page:

For the DMP, three tabs are of interest: ‘article’, ‘discussion’, and ‘edit this page’. The tab ‘article’ simply shows the article. The tab ‘edit this page’ redirects to a web-based editor enabling users to modify the ‘article’ page. Last, the tab ‘discussion’ refers to a wiki-page dedicated to discussions, debates and consensus-making in relation to the article.

Most of the time, the decision-making process is not even communicative. A new edit will be accepted or rejected through what we
can call a passive consensus: the new edit stays in place, is deleted ('reverted': each version of an article is recorded so you can come back to an older version), or modified. This non-communicative process can go on indefinitely while Wikipedians disagree with one another over whether an edit should stay as it is. At times some users engaged in a disagreement stay in a non-communicative practice and decide to reverse each other’s edits in an infinite circle. This practice, called an edit war, is recognised, restricted and forbidden by the rules of Wikipedia.¹ In order to solve their differences of opinion, Wikipedians must then enter into a process of active consensus. This is a communicative process and works upon our so-called debate/consensus decision-making process.

![Diagram]

**Figure 1: the decision-making process in the editing of articles on Wikipedia²**

This DMP takes place on the ‘discussion’ page attached to each article. Here the disagreeing parties will present their arguments and debate on what edits should remain. It is a custom, as well as a policy of Wikipedia, that parties in conflict should find an agreement by themselves. But the debate is also structured by internal rules. Indeed, an article must follow certain rules of style and content, and the decision-making process must end in
agreement with these rules. Therefore, arguments in debates are often based on and legitimated by the aforementioned rules. The most structuring rule of article content is the policy of Neutral Point of View (NPOV), which asserts that Wikipedia articles should present all significant facets or competing positions on a given subject in an unbiased way.\(^7\)

We need to say at this point that this method is a success: thousands of edits are created every day by thousands of users, and the conflicts which overflow the debate/consensus DMP, which we shall discuss later, are relatively limited in number compared to the number of edits per se. We shall see now the mechanisms of rule creation.

1.2 In the Making of the Rules

Rules for Wikipedia have not been established ex nihilo, but are a product of early practice (Firer-Blaess 2007b; Sanger 2005). The making of the rules has developed from a tension between the form of Wikipedia – a wiki – and its aim – to build an encyclopaedia. The medium is not the message, but it goes into resonance with the latter to create original practices. While the wiki form was stressing a more ‘anarchic’ and ‘let it be’ way of doing things, of allowing people to do what they want and of not applying any written rules, the aim of making an encyclopaedia stressed the need of policies and guidelines.

In 2003, Wikipedians agreed on the process of communal editing, forming a consensus between ‘pro-rules’ Wikipedians and ‘anti-rules’ Wikipedians, resulting in an original set of policy and guidelines. Thus, the rules of Wikipedia are decided in common. They follow the same debate/consensus DMP as in the editing process. They are called policies and concern matters of style and content, of behaviour in the editing process, of copyright and other legal matters between Wikipedia and the ‘real world’ legal system, as well as of the enforcement of these very policies. Most of the time, a policy comes to be when some Wikipedians realise that something is not working well or could be improved. A policy proposal usually emerges from a discussion in the village pump, the general forum of the Anglophone Wikipedia.\(^8\) If the community has shown enough concern, a user will create a ‘policy proposition’ page, and advertise the policy proposal by putting an ‘advert’ section in sensitive pages.\(^9\)

The policy proposition page serves as a forum where a debate/consensus DMP takes place. Bit by bit, Wikipedians add their view onto the proposal page, and debate with one another. The process of making a rule is usually quite extensive (lasting several months) and contains numerous discussions. Once the community thinks a consensus has emerged
from the discussion, a *policy page* is finally created (again in a communal way, and following the editing DMP). These policy pages have the status of *official policy*, and therefore can be claimed in any DMP and enforced. Like most other Wikipedia phenomena, things are unfixed, and the policy pages stay open to amendments and modifications following the latest DMP edit.

![Figure 2: the process of rule-creation in Wikipedia](image)

Rules today appear rather stable. We can count the 5 *pillars of Wikipedia*, which are the structuring rules. All in all, there are fifty rules concerning specific subjects, and more than 200 *guidelines* that indicate the best way to deal with precise matters. Generally, one need only read the five pillars in order to acquire a good understanding of the behaviour to follow with Wikipedia.

1.3 *In the Nomination of the Wikipedians with Special Powers*

The Wikipedian community has decided to create a small hierarchy for organisational issues. It implies the nomination of Wikipedians who may be granted additional powers, for instance, that of blocking the editing of a page when conflicts go awry, or the possibility of blocking a particular user. The process of nomination is close to an election in modern democratic systems, yet with a notable difference, namely, the replacement of voting with consensus.

Wikipedians with additional powers are trusted users who usually have a long experience of editing in the encyclopaedia project. For a user to be nominated, one needs first to present one’s candidacy to a dedicated wiki-page. Usually the candidate will ask other trustworthy Wikipedians to sponsor their nomination with a ‘cover letter’ written on the page. Then, the community debates on whether (s)he should be granted nomination. Questions are then asked and former acts of the candidate are checked and discussed. At the end of the page, fellow Wikipedians finally give their view on the nomination – favourable, neutral, against.

This nomination process lasts seven days. At this time, a ‘special user’ with supplementary powers called a ‘bureaucrat’ reviews the discussion to see whether or not there is a consensus for promotion. Consensus here is
quite difficult to assert, and seems to be a compromise between the quality and the quantity of the different views, “but as a general descriptive rule of thumb most of those above 80% approval pass, most of those below 70% fail, and the area between is subject to bureaucratic discretion”.\textsuperscript{11} When the consensus is favourable, the user is directly promoted by the bureaucrat, and given his or her legal and technical powers.

\textbf{Figure 3: nomination process of Wikipedians with special powers}

It is quite striking to see that from different situations the same DMP prevails in Wikipedia: editing, rule-making, nominating. In contrast to the modern democratic system, the means of decision are not the vote but rather consensus: votes are even explicitly excluded from Wikipedia.\textsuperscript{12} The Wikipedia DMP is based on the weighing of a point of view by the perceived quality of the argument (see figure 4). This, among other things, maximises the involvement of users. It is not enough to have points of view; one must also make them explicit and rational. Finally, the Wikipedia DMP not only enables the making of decisions, but positively constructs them. Often in the talk pages, long and heated debates take place, and from the debates solutions previously not thought of begin to appear. This is a different situation from representative democracy, whereby citizens have to vote on solutions created by experts. On Wikipedia, by contrast, the agents are the makers and the deciders.

\textbf{1.4 A Rational Discourse?}

We have seen so far the threefold decision-making processes of Wikipedia. Let us now approach the debates occurring within this DMP. If decisions come from a democratic process, nothing tells us about the quality of the debates and, thus, the extent to which they are indicative of progress. A recent study suggests that these debates, nevertheless, have positive elements which create practices approaching a rational discourse.
Hansen, Berent and Lyytinen (2007) have recently shown that we could assimilate the Wikipedia DMP system within the model of the rational discourse of Jürgen Habermas. In his Theory of Communicative Action (1984), Habermas describes a type of action by which the discursive possibilities of personal and social emancipation are maximised. This discursive action is also called *rational discourse*. The rational discourse is an ideal-type that can never be attained, but it can be approached in practice. For Hansen et al., discourses that take place in Wikipedia approach Habermas’ rational discourse, albeit with some limitations.

Habermas distinguishes between three forms of personal action in society: (i) instrumental action; (ii) strategic action; and (iii) communicative action. While the first two types of action are used to reach a rather selfish subjective aim, the third type, communicative action, aims to achieve a level of mutual understanding between actors – it is an “inter-subjective” goal. It is this communicative action which is made possible by rational discourse. A rational discourse can be formed under five conditions: (i) the actors consciously pursue a cooperative search for the truth; (ii) through a formal structure (with rules) (iii) excluding the use of force; (iv) in accordance with the rules of an ideal speech situation (another Habermasian principle); and (v) engaging in open dialogue and with sufficient duration.

For Hansen et al., Wikipedia meets these five conditions. Conditions 2, 3 and 5 are easily satisfied: the debates are structured by the rules of Wikipedia; violence or pressure does not exist; and the debates are open to everyone with an internet connection and have no time limit (often the debate takes months). The cooperative search for the truth (condition 1) can be considered as part of the rules of Wikipedia, especially with the rule of the *Neutral Point of View* (NPOV) seen above. The ideal speech situation (condition 4) requires that anyone can access the dialogue without discrimination, under the condition that one uses a rational argument.

These five principles are the necessary but not sufficient conditions for the establishment of a rational discourse. To identify such a discourse, Habermas has constructed a typology of speeches that can be found in a discussion approaching rational discourse. There is the *theoretical discourse*, a statement of truth based on evidence and logic; the *practical discourse*, based on social norms, statements about what is appropriate and socially acceptable; the *aesthetic critique*, founded on good taste, on ‘standard values;’ the *therapeutic critique*, questioning the sincerity and honesty of a claim; and finally *explanatory discourse*, which consists of clear and intelligible claims made to explain a fact, theory or previous speech. The validity of a statement can be challenged by one of these speeches and a dialogue with these types of discourse can be established. Thus, for Habermas, if a dialogue includes
mostly these types of speech, then it can be regarded as approaching rational discourse. If Wikipedia approaches rational discourse, then, for Hansen et al., Wikipedia is a tool for emancipatory potential in terms of Habermas’ critical theory.

Hansen et al. go on to study the content of the debates within Wikipedia to check their hypothesis. To what extent are discourses of a rational type present in the debates of Wikipedia? Hansen et al. here focus on the debates about the Armenian genocide article, which can be regarded as one particularly sensitive to the presence of non-rational discourse, devoting considerable space to the passions and with a large number of instrumental and strategic actions. But, in short, the authors counter-intuitively (but certainly in keeping with their hypothesis) find that “[w]hile much of the interaction observed in the article’s talk page is patently strategic, each of the [communicative] forms of discourse outlined by Habermas can be observed there as well” (2007: 6). They also find that theoretical discourse in particular is used. Participants on the talk page also often use practical discourse by reminding others of the rules of Wikipedia, using therefore a clear disciplinarian act (using the Education practice described below). Interestingly, users also use therapeutic discourse in order to counteract strategic actions, by questioning the sincerity of the other editors as to whether they are looking for the truth or trying to impose their view. Here again, the legal apparatus of Wikipedia is used in order to legitimate such therapeutic discourse, through the invocation of a Wikipedia policy, namely, the “assumption of good faith” policy (ibid.: 7). In conclusion, the researchers write:

> [O]ur analysis does show that early in the life of the article, major theoretical discourse occurred. As these truth claims were addressed over the life of the article, practical discourse was also mixed in (as evidenced by the ready elimination of vandal activity), as was therapeutic discourse in the discussion pages (as editors question each others’ intentions). The current discursive activity mostly focuses on explicative discourse, such as grammar and phrasing correction (ibid.: 8)

Why then can such an article, as controversial as it is, be the subject of rational discourse? The authors briefly explain that the rules and structure of Wikipedia promote such discourse. For instance:

> One of the reasons for such clarity (i.e. good style and grammar in the debates) may lie in the process for resolving disputes that
has been established at Wikipedia. While intervention by an Administrator or the Wikipedia Arbitration Committee is an extreme option for unresolved issues, these avenues take into consideration the previous efforts at resolution pursued by the parties to a conflict. Thus, if events escalate to necessitate third party engagement, the clarity and commitment to dialogue reflected in previous discussions can have a bearing on the outcome of the dispute (ibid.: 7).

These are the mechanisms of regulation and discipline which allow the emergence of such a discourse. We should then highlight the beneficial and emancipatory effects of certain types of Foucauldian subjectivation, some of which we will examine shortly.


These mechanisms of subjectivation, or normalisation, that lead actors to behave in a certain way, abound in Wikipedia. Wikipedia has original mechanisms of normalisation, which we will call disciplines. We can divide these disciplines into two parts: hierarchical discipline, and non-hierarchical discipline, which we will call rhizomic with reference to Deleuze (1989). Wikipedia’s rhizomic disciplines are relations between agents that are not structured by a specific plan. Lacking any hierarchical pyramid they randomly connect discipliners and disciplined, the agents being able to move from the first to the second role and vice versa depending on the time and situation. Wikipedia also contains a standard hierarchical normalisation structure, but without proper pyramid levels and favouring specialisation by horizontal tasks rather than by vertical levels of responsibility.

2.1 Rhizomic Mechanisms

2.1.1 The gaze of Wikipedia: Hyperpanoptic

Here are the words of Julius, cited by Foucault:

In times past, the great challenge of the architects was to solve the question of how to give the largest possible number of people access to the spectacle of one event, one gesture, one single man […] This question, which began in the ancient greek society insofar as the latter was a community which participated in strong events that was forming its unity –
religious sacrifices, theatre or political speeches – still continued to dominate western civilisation until the modern days. The question was the same for churches. [. . .] Currently, the fundamental problem for modern architecture is just the opposite. One wants the largest number of people to become a spectacle to one single individual in charge of their surveillance (Foucault, 2006 [1975]: 607-608, my translation)

We could say that with Wikipedia the main problem has been to create an architecture where the many do not see the one nor the one the many, but where the many can see the many. Wikipedia’s system of surveillance enables anyone to watch the acts (the edits) of anyone else. The group does not nominate wardens; everyone is or can become a warden. Modern discipline has been trying to diminish the scope of ‘private life’. Wikipedia makes it disappear: there is no edit in the online encyclopaedia that cannot be found and identified.

I have named this architecture a ‘hyperpanopticon’ in previous papers (Firer-Blaess, 2007b). Like the Bentham/Foucault panopticon, it permits one to see every action in a given area. The prefix ‘hyper’ refers to the addition of new dimensions: first, a quantitative dimension, in that compared to the panopticon the number of eyes of the hyperpanopticon is dramatically increased, which leads to an intensification of surveillance as such; second, a qualitative dimension, in the fact that it is not a happy few that sees everything, but the entire group that can see the actions of everyone, a change with important ethical implications.

The Wikipedian hyperpanopticon is intrinsic to the MediaWiki software – the programme that runs the Wikipedia website. It is a software body made up of large databases and user-friendly interfaces. These databases list all edits made to Wikipedia, and are accessible to all through certain web pages of Wikipedia. They all show a listing of edits, giving the name of the amended section, time and date of publishing, authors’ identities (the user name if the author is listed, or else an IP address), a short description of the edit, and finally its ‘weight’ in the data. The data access pages provide various tools, allowing them to focus on certain time periods, an article or author, and also to compare different versions of the same article at different times.14

The hyperpanopticon solves two problems attributed to the ancient techniques of panoptical surveillance. The first is the cost: indeed, in a panoptical system surveillance is a specialised division of labour that brings a certain cost as one has to pay the guards or watchers. In the Wikipedian system the task of monitoring is not specialised and is
distributed among numerous benevolent agents. The second problem is an obvious ethical one, given that with the division of labour the specialisation of surveillance creates a very unbalanced power relationship that is potentially repressive. On the contrary, Wikipedians have no fixed relationship concerning surveillance (we will see this in greater detail shortly).

The multiplication of the eyes involved in the hyperpanopticon makes surveillance very effective in Wikipedia. It has been calculated that flagrant ‘sabotage’, such as insults within an article, is detected and removed, on average, in 1.7 minutes on average (Foglia, 2008: 57). Finally, in and of itself, the hyperpanopticon is not only a surveillance tool, but is also very useful for the decision-making process. It enables Wikipedians to recognise and trust one another during the debates. The hyperpanopticon creates a “relationship of the gaze” among Wikipedians, which fuels the DMP.

2.1.2 ‘Soft Disciplines’, Soft Normalisation

We call ‘soft discipline’ the techniques of teaching and making the individual comply with the rules, without him perceiving enforcement. Soft discipline is a legitimate form of normalisation, an internalisation of the rule in the thinking and practices the individual freely chooses. Most compliance with the rules of Wikipedia is achieved through these processes of normalisation. Normalisation is often a process of teaching as well as of self-learning: Wikipedians usually invite one another to read a policy or guideline page. They also ask questions in order to acquire more information and to understand how to apply a rule.

This process of normalisation is diffuse in Wikipedia and consequently difficult to categorise. We give here a few examples: the processes of welcoming, of adoption, of education, and of reward.

Welcoming: the Wikipedian community shows itself right at the beginning to the newcomers. When a user registers with Wikipedia (which gives him a fixed username, instead of an IP address, as well as several new tools and options), he receives a welcoming message from the community. More than a first communicative bonding, the message gives him the first hints about how to behave, as well as redirections to the main rules of the encyclopaedia. The user is kindly invited to read them, and to put questions to the author of the message. Indeed, some regular Wikipedians group themselves to form a ‘Welcoming Committee’. This committee is in charge of sending all new registered users these messages, and to help the newcomers when prompted.

Adoption: the adoption programme is a new policy of Wikipedia created in September 2006, “as a programme designed to help new and
inexperienced users". The programme gives willing adopters and adoptees a platform to meet. Adoption is a kind of mentorship: it implies an older Wikipedian supporting and helping a newcomer, monitoring his or her edits, giving advice and answering any questions. This new programme does have quite a low number of participants compared to the total sum of newcomers, but it has seen great success among its members and is expanding as a result.

*Education:* this practice is the most pervasive and omnipresent of all. It is not an official Wikipedia programme like welcoming and adoption, but remains a very common practice. It implies the sending of a message to a user when she has broken a rule, which happens very often concerning newcomers. The message is usually less than a warning and more a reminder of the rules: Wikimedians are used to seeing ‘newbies’ behaving in the wrong manner, and know that they will learn by trial and error. This is all part of the normalisation process. For instance, if a user downloads a picture on a Wikipedia article that contains a copyright (which is not permitted by the rules of the site), one Wikipedian will surely send him what one calls a ‘template’, that is, a ready-made message concerning pre-defined matters – in our case this template would contain the rules about picture uploading and legal rights. Templates follow a gradation between a reminder and a warning. If a Wikipedian persists in transgressing a rule, (s)he is sent gradually more and more authoritative messages, before (s)he is punished. In this way, the most authoritative message is the boundary between the practice of normalisation and the practice of punishment.

Finally, *reward:* Wikipedians showing particularly good behaviour can receive ‘medals’ called *Barnstars*. Gratification still follows in a non-hierarchical way, as anyone can give out barnstars to anyone. There is a great amount of different barnstars, around eighty, each having a different meaning. They are awarded for excellent or very useful edits, the fighting against vandalism, good adoption, good support, and good civility. Barnstars are a way of motivating Wikimedians in an environment that can easily be stressful. The good behaviour is also highlighted, which therefore encourages fellow Wikimedians to follow such behaviour.

In all these processes, there is no real separation between the normalisers and normalised. Wikimedians tend to co-normalise themselves, each one being able to take both roles at any one time. Soft normalisation is the main way of making Wikimedians comply with the rules. Nevertheless, it is not enough, and mechanisms of enforcement based on a hierarchical structure complete the system. They are nonetheless mechanisms of crisis, used quite rarely.
2.2 Hierarchical Discipline: Judge and Punish

When Wikipedians happen to fail to solve their differences in the decision-making process – so that the editing process ends up with practices that are not accepted on Wikipedia (for example, poor arguments, edit wars, insults, and so forth) – the Wikipedians have a complex and progressive dispute resolution process (DRP) that focuses first on a communicative/consensual mode, but which can ultimately go all the way to a court case to enforce its decisions. The DRP contains a set of gradual processes that tries to avoid going to the last step of a judgement procedure. The *Dispute Resolution* is an official policy and gives a series of advice for using when one faces a seemingly irresolvable dispute. These steps can be roughly classified in three groups, from the least to the most authoritarian and energy consuming: (1) individual practices; (2) community practices; and (3) official judgment.

2.2.1 Preventing judgment: the dispute resolution process

The first group, that of ‘individual practices’, classifies things one can do alone. These are simple pieces of advice and things to do which try to clear a dispute within the debate/consensus DMP practice. They are more reminders of the classical DMP than extra policies: focusing on the content of the dispute and not on the personality of the other editor, ‘staying cool’ and taking some time to reflect, rationally talking with the other party, and in the last resort proposing a truce with the other editor in order to be clear of mind.

The second group of practices goes to a level higher in authority and classifies things that can be done when the classical DMP has failed, with the help of the community. Outsider Wikipedians can be asked for help, according to the nature and intensity of the dispute. For instance, first, one can ask for an ‘editor assistant’ if one is unsure of the rules concerning the conflict; second, one can ask for the ‘third opinion’ of a Wikipedian about a dispute concerning only two people; and third, when the dispute concerns precise encyclopaedic content, one can ask for a ‘subject matter’ discussion.

If the dispute relates to a frequent issue there are specific ‘noticeboard’ pages on which one can ask for help – for instance, there is a ‘biographies of living people’ noticeboard, a ‘fringe theory noticeboard’, and a special page dealing with incivilities.

The third and highest practice involving the community – the most structured one that should be used in the last instance – is the process of *mediation*. As in real-world juridical conflicts, parties in a dispute (when they both agree) can ask for a third party to try and find an arrangement. There is an informal and a formal mediation process. The informal one is organised
by an ‘unofficial’ club that calls itself the mediation cabal,\textsuperscript{17} constituted of volunteer Wikipedians. By contrast, the formal mediation process is organised by the ‘official’ Mediation Committee.\textsuperscript{18} The Mediation Committee is composed of Wikipedians who are not only volunteers but also have been chosen by the community (following the same DMP nomination seen in the first section). There is no rule dictating whether one should ask for the mediation cabal or the mediation committee. However, the more serious a dispute, the more often it goes toward official mediation. When one of the parties is unwilling to go to mediation, or when the mediation has failed, the dispute can go toward the last and highest body of the DRP, the Arbitration Committee.\textsuperscript{19}

The Arbitration Committee “only deals with the most serious disputes and cases of rule-breaking”. We have seen that the Wikipedia organisation tries to avoid recourse to the Arbitration Committee (also called ‘ArbCom’) as much as possible. Wikipedians are reluctant to clear conflicts by legal enforcement (note that the process is called Arbitration and not ‘judgement’). Cases are intended to be kept at a low number (unfortunately, statistics are not yet available). Nevertheless, the ArbCom process looks in many ways like the process of a real-world judicial body. The function of Arbiter is particularly serious; contrary to the usual debate/consensus nomination process, Arbiters are chosen by polls, and then appointed by Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, in accordance with the votes.\textsuperscript{20}

As always in Wikipedia, cases are public, and a wiki-page is dedicated to each case. The process begins with a Request for Arbitration. From here arbiters look at the admissibility of the case (i.e. has the dispute resolution process been rightly followed? Have other ways of resolution been tried before the request? Is the case serious enough that it cannot be settled without arbitration?) If the case is received, Arbitration begins. Arbiters create a wiki-page and ask parties to the conflict, alongside possible witnesses for the depositions of complaints and defences, and any other commentaries and testimony/evidence. Arbiters can also lead an investigation and look into the archives of Wikipedia (the history pages of articles and talk pages). This having been done, arbiters give themselves a week to rule the case and publish their decisions. Decisions are presented in a somewhat juridical way: the statement first refers to the rules and jurisprudence which pertains to the case, after which time decisions are made. Decisions have res judicata and shall be enforced. For a case to be taken by the ArbCom, the breaking of the rules must be deemed serious, so are the decisions of the ArbCom.

2.2.2 Punish

If prison was and still is the universal and modular punishment of the
modern world, the universal punishment on Wikipedia is the Ban. A ban is an interdiction (as well as a technical impossibility) of editing on Wikipedia. As with sentences to prison, bans can be of different lengths depending on the seriousness of the offence. It also adds a ‘spatial’ modality: one can be restricted to writing a single article, or on one topic.

The Wikipedian Rule assumes apriori good faith toward all users; this apriori is that everyone wants to create an encyclopaedia of good quality. When there is evidence that a user has been editing for other reasons (personal motivation, lobbying, etc.), the sentence is usually the harshest: the user suffers an indefinite and general ban. Apart from the breaking of trust in good faith, lots of decisions are taken not to prevent users to write on Wikipedia but to make them accept the rules. A good number of cases deal with incivilities and failure to conform to the debate-consensus DMP; in such cases the ban will usually be a few months.

This section intends to show which mechanisms of discipline exist in order for Wikipedians to comply with the rules. The structure of these mechanisms is very different from the modern discipline described by Foucault. Modern discipline was constructed around the concentric circles of the panopticon with the pyramid of hierarchy (Foucault, 2006 [1975]: 205). Roles were fixed, whereas with the network structure of Wikipedia, most roles change from one user to the next. The discipline of Wikipedia contains a majority of rhizomic mechanisms, which means that anyone can take the role of discipliner or disciplined following the circumstances; this is the case for the roles of watcher/watched, normaliser/normalised, conflict-resolver/party to a conflict, rewarder/rewarded. This rhizomic discipline is completed with a hierarchical form of discipline that contains fixed roles. This is the case for serious mediations of a conflict, for legal procedures, for punitive procedures. We assume that rhizomic mechanisms of discipline have a more important role. The gaze and the procedures of normalisations (especially education) are omnipresent, pervasive in the practice of Wikipedia, while structured mediations and legal procedures are quite rare compared to the thousands of debates taking place every day. Furthermore, the Wikipedians try to use them as little as possible. The hierarchical power of administrators is more present, but mechanisms of nomination and recall (loss of the status of administrator) seem to ensure that an oligarchy is not forming (Konieczny, 2009), and that the acts of Admins reflect the will of the community.

We shall now see the resistance encountered in the previously studied decision-making processes and disciplines.

A power relationship is the act (or ‘play’, or ‘struggle’) of an agent toward another human being aiming to enforce upon him a practice he could have avoided. The discipline we have described above is then a power relationship, as it implies the agents will respect the rules. According to Foucault, a relationship of power goes in both directions, as a person embodies a part of freedom in doing the things asked of him or her, and can either answer the call or resist it. Discipline and normalisation can never be complete, and counter powers tend to take root. Just as, according to Foucault, the panopticon doesn’t succeed in eliminating resistant practices, the hyperpanopticon cannot avoid resistant practices despite the multiplication of the eyes of the gaze and the consequent normalisation. In Wikipedia one has the power of discipline, but also the different practices of resistance of some users against this discipline. Games of power and counter-power are constant in the disciplinary practices of Wikipedia.

Practices of resistance are any practices that consciously disrupt the DMP and go against Wikipedia’s policies. Vandalism \textit{per se} (editing an article in order to lower its quality) is in a way a ‘naive’ and benign resistance, because it can be easily and rapidly reverted. We shall focus here on less visible but more serious practices of resistance, which are the ones that attempt to distort the DMP. First, we see a technique of individual resistance, called \textit{sockpuppeting}. Second, we discuss a collective resistance that we call \textit{lobbying}.

3.1 Sock Puppets

The Wikipedia Debate/Consensus DMP is quite sensitive to the number of people who are part of the debate: the more people share a view, the more it is likely to be adopted. From this fact, a practice of resistance has emerged called \textit{sockpuppeting}. It aims to disrupt and cheat with the DMP by multiplying individual accounts, and ‘playing’ different users in the debate. Next to ‘classical’ sockpuppetting, similar practices have been identified: \textit{Meatpuppetting} consists of recruiting family and friends to create an account for the purpose of influencing a decision; and the inventive \textit{Strawpuppetting} includes the use of a sockpuppet to create a fake ‘opponent’, making poor claims in order to weaken the argument one is against.

Wikipedia’s DMP has shown itself to be quite resistant to these strategies: the debate/consensus style weighs individual points of view not only in relation to the quality of the argument but also to the recognition and popularity of the user. Consequently, the voice of new users will usually be given less weight: Wikipedians are aware of the practice of sockpuppeting,
and will become suspicious if new users enter covertly in a debate to support a minority position.

![Figure 4: weight of an argument depending on various factors](image)

A second defence mechanism is a counter-strategy that uses discipline. Sockpuppeting is strictly forbidden by the rules of Wikipedia and severely punished (usually with an indefinite ban). Thanks to the hyperpanoptical surveillance, when one suspects a sock puppet, one can request special police operatives, called checkusers. Checkusers are very few and extremely trusted Wikipedians; they are given a tool that bites the deepest into the privacy of users, as it can localise the computer that has been used. With this tool, checkusers can compare localisation of editions and unmask sock puppets.

### 3.2 Lobbies

Individuals can, of course, seek to degrade the NPOV policy for any personal, political, religious, and other reasons. More serious is the resistance coming from big organisations, public or private, for their personal purpose. We shall call them lobbies: they seek their own interest and do not care for the global quality of the encyclopaedia. The lobby problem emerged while Wikipedia was becoming popular; now the online encyclopaedia is the third most visited web-site, after Facebook and Google, which means it is the foremost information website on earth. From 2005, dozens of companies and sects have been shown to try to delete or lower criticisms on their related article page: Wal-Mart, Exxon-Mobil, Shell, Microsoft, as well as the Church of Scientology, and the Vatican. Several State Intelligences have also tried to modify sensitive matters, like the CIA and the Australian intelligence.23

Wikipedia could be distorted by powerful lobbies. One can imagine the creation of entire departments within big organisations, devoted to
overwhelming the debate/consensus DMP and to shaping articles at their will. The answer to such a threat comes from a Wikipedian: in August 2007, Virgil Griffith, a programmer at the California Institute of Technology, released a tool called Wikiscanner on his website. It is a publicly searchable database that links millions of anonymous Wikipedia edits to the organisations from where the edits originated. Therefore, Wikiscanner makes it possible to look for organisations and see their edits. One can consider it an extension of the hyperpanopticon that focuses on lobbies which try to modify sensitive matters. As Virgil Griffith says, “Overall – especially for non-controversial topics – Wikipedia already works. For controversial topics, Wikipedia can be made more reliable through techniques like [Wikiscanner].” The aim of Griffith was “to create minor public relations disasters for companies and organizations [he] dislike[s],” and in practice it can certainly slow down disinformation attempts from the lobbies. Media coverage has been abundant on this issue since the tool has been released, and editions from both private and public organisations are now scrutinised.

The fight against lobbies will not be solved only by extending the possibilities of surveillance. It will also need the strict application of the NPOV, the debate/consensus DMP, the citation policy. Even if organisations take much effort to modify the free encyclopaedia, their tasks will be quite difficult if Wikipedians find good arguments supported by NPOV and citation policies, if lobby-users are punished when they try to pass in force, and so on. As long as the project finds users willing to build a truth-related, quality encyclopaedia, the governance of Wikipedia will support them and their task.

3.3 Theoretical Implications: On the Normativity of Discipline

We brought up this topic of resistance because, in the Foucauldian logic of discipline, resistance is normally seen as the good side of the coin against the bad dominative discipline. We cannot really deem Wikipedia to be like this. Why? The hypothesis is that a discipline is not intrinsically charged with a specific normativity, but that its normativity depends both on its function and its nature.

Foucault stays normatively (ethically) neutral in his writings on the subject, but the form and style of his writing, as well as the historical period during which he wrote, cannot but suggest a normative stance for the reader. Reading Discipline and Punish, we cannot but feel outraged against the alienating technologies of power, dominating the people. Nevertheless, Foucault never gives normative reasons for criticising them, while he uses
what Nancy Fraser calls a “normative-sounding terminology” (Fraser, 1989: 27), which means that it sounds critical while there are no normative grounds to legitimate the critique. Moreover, concerning Foucault, power is not only repressive in that it does not just say “no to what are defined as illicit desires, needs, acts, and speech” (ibid.: 26), but also creates all these things. Power is indispensable to any practice, so it would be useless to criticise or to judge something that cannot be otherwise. However, if power is indispensable to human relations, we could affirm that its modalities can change and give different normative effects to one another. For instance, we can consider that the modern discipline described by Foucault serves norms that come from without, estranged from the will of the people; decided by and serving dominative forces such as states, economic forces, traditions. But in Wikipedia, norms come from within, decided on by the Wikipedians, and they are there to serve a DMP that makes it possible for everyone to express themselves on an equal footing and in a near-rational discourse. The functions of modern discipline is domination and productivity, while the function of Wikipedian discipline is the creation of a free encyclopaedia and more precisely the application of decisions whose formation strongly approaches the democratic model.

The Nature of the discipline also concerns normativity. Mechanisms of modern discipline base themselves on the domination of a minority of watchers, teachers, above the majority. On the contrary, Wikipedia by and large uses rhizomic types of disciplines; power is far more equally distributed. The nature of modern discipline is domination of a hierarchical form; the nature of Wikipedian discipline is equalitarian and rhizomic. Finally, it is probable that the rhizomic nature of Wikipedian discipline fosters and supports the Wikipedian rational discourse. The hyperpanopticon creates an atmosphere of common trust between the agents since they can know everything about past edits and the comments of their fellows. Here the destruction of privacy dissolves the possibilities of suspicion. Free from it, Wikipedians can focus on the types of speech that create rational discourse. We also think that the rhizomic mechanisms of normalisation bring a feeling of equality which helps the creation of rational discourse, maximising the condition of non-discrimination toward speeches included in the Ideal Speech Situation and thereby toward rational discourse. Last, the self-managing steps of the Dispute Resolution Process appears to force the agents to use rational speeches in order to settle their disputes, since continuing a fight would make the DRP move to a higher level of involvement, eventually dispossessing the parties to the dispute of the answer to its resolution.

This hypothesis – namely, that rhizomic discipline supports rational
discourse – will need to be refined, both empirically and theoretically. Foucauldian and Habermasian thoughts are not easily combined and future work will need to clarify this theoretical position.

Conclusion: Is Wikipedia a Relevant Model for Electronic Democracies?

Wikipedia and electronic democracy projects have in common the establishment of a mass-scale decision-making process. Could the Wikipedian method be applied to the various e-democracy projects mentioned at the beginning of our article? A thorough review of these projects shall be our next task. We must also raise the substantive differences between these two types of project, which could involve differences between the organisational forms and discourses. To build a free encyclopaedia is not the same as to govern, which is politics in the purest sense of the term. As the first fundamental difference, we note the importance of the choices involved and the potential for conflicts that this entails. The search for the truth within an article is important, but certainly much less than a political choice that would have material and human consequences. The search for consensus is not accepted, consciously or not, by all agents or even by the majority, and the state of mind can vary greatly between different democratic and national cultures. We can therefore assume that debates can surely take place, but that consensus building would be much harder to achieve if not impossible. Perhaps, then, the use of a majority voting system would be required in cases where consensus is not formed.

One could also argue that the timing for both projects is different, for while there is no urgency to write an article, it is sometimes urgent to take material decisions. However, we think that an electronic democracy could only take care of the legislative system, and that the executive one, including law enforcement and the countless micro-decisions that it entails (in the form of decrees and regulations in particular), could be left to the standard executive power. Now, what is particularly criticised in the current democratic system (and especially in France) is the voting of laws that have been proposed because of a precise event and a fleeting emotion. Good laws take time to form and reach maturity, so we see no objection in the fact that a decision would take months to be agreed upon, as is the case with Wikipedia.

There is the question of the frequency of the decisions. Modifications of an article by passive consensus can be numerous on any given day, and of course we cannot conceive the same about laws. But there would be no problem were a bill to be rapidly and frequently modified. Concerning the ‘voting’ of the laws itself, the example of the DMP concerning the Wikipedia
rule-making would fit – i.e. the debates are long and the text changes many times, but ultimately only one act comes to fruition which cannot be changed without a new law-making procedure.

Finally, we think Wikipedia gives us the tools for the different cases of democratic choice: the article edition DMP is applicable for the construction of a bill, the DMP concerning the creation of rules within Wikipedia for passing laws, and finally the DMP concerning the election of Wikipedians with special powers, may apply to elect the executive powers. The Wikipedian experience of resistance to the discipline provides a great example of the possibilities of counter-measure (especially with regard to the lobbies). We do not deny their usefulness in the democratic process of real politics, but their actions, if they comply with the rules, could become more transparent, even if we can never prevent bribery from occurring.

The construction of electronic democracies will certainly occur in a pragmatic way, by trial and error, as has been the way of Wikipedia. Perhaps the designers and the Multitude alike will find it useful to see Wikipedia's mechanisms as examples to build upon, and to construct a reliable system that would become the best advance in democratic systems since the construction of liberal democracy.

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**Endnotes**

1 A list of such projects is available at: www.metagovernment.org/wiki/Main_page

2 For example, the problem of how to provide a totally secure identity to every citizen while conforming to the demands of data protection.

3 In this article, I will discuss the Anglophone Wikipedia, which contains the highest number of articles and sees the highest number of visitors and contributors.

4 For more details, see www.en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki
The policy of the Three Revert Rule has been instated in order to avoid edit wars: it is forbidden to revert and to edit the same thing more than three times a day. People trespassing this limit, or who participate to an edit war by other means, face sanctions from the community.


Other policies structuring debates are the verifiability policy, instating that each claim should be quoted with a verifiable and reliable source, and the prohibition against original research (sources must have undertaken a peer review process). Of course these policies need interpretation, and much of the DMP in edition turns around such interpretations.


For instance, the ‘centralised discussion’ page, which groups topics of which Wikipedians should be aware. See www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Cent


www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Requests_for_adminship#About_RfA

www.en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Polling_is_not_a_substitute_for_discussion

Professor at the University of Berlin in 1830, and former colleague of Hegel.

A full description of these interfaces is available in Firer-Blaess (2008: 18).


Here Wales plays the role of, as he likes to say, the ‘Queen of England’. He keeps this power of nomination in case the things were ‘going wrong’, but he has never from now refused to go against a decision of the community.

An interesting example is the recent ‘homeopathy’ case: Here, a Wikipedian, ‘DanaUllman’, has been banned for one year because he ‘has engaged in advocacy of homeopathy on Wikipedia’, therefore breaking the assumption of good faith. Other parties to the conflict have been banned for a few hours or weeks because of incivility and personal attacks.

Bibliography


