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Participation and deliberative discourse on social media – Wikipedia talk pages as transnational public spheres?

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the potential societal function of Wikipedia beyond serving as an encyclopedia. That is, it assesses both theoretically and empirically whether talk pages (TP) – Wikipedia discussion sites that accompany the encyclopedic entries and provide spaces for debates among Wikipedia editors – may function as transnational public spheres. Despite the increasing number of studies on citizen engagement and participation in the age of social media, Wikipedia as an example of the participatory internet has received little research attention in this regard. This study redresses this research gap in two steps. Drawing on Habermas’ concept of the public sphere and Fraser’s and Eriksen’s modifications thereof, Wikipedia’s – specifically the TPs’ – modus operandi is explored to evaluate whether TPs may serve as spaces for transnational political opinion formation. This theoretical exploration is complemented with an empirical assessment of a TP dedicated to the EU. The case study addresses if/to what degree Wikipedia editors have appropriated the TP to function as a transnational public sphere. Findings indicate that Wikipedia TPs can – and do – serve as general transnational public spheres.

KEYWORDS

Wikipedia; SM-CDS; participatory internet; transnational public sphere(s); Wikipedia talk pages

1. Introduction

The collaboratively created online encyclopedia Wikipedia is one of the most visited websites globally (Alexa, 2018). Unsurprisingly, Wikipedia’s prominence has sparked research in and beyond linguistics and discourse studies. Past research has addressed policy creation processes and site governance (e.g. Konieczny, 2010; Van Dijck, 2013), Wikipedia editors and their motivations (e.g. Lund, 2017; Sundin, 2011), the platform’s collaborative authorship processes (e.g. Borra et al., 2015; Wilson, 2014) and Wikipedia’s genres and styles across the site’s different language versions (e.g. Mederake, 2016; Schmied, 2012). Moreover, several studies have examined the representation of particular issues across different language Wikipedias and the negotiations about these representations on Wikipedia discussion sites (e.g. Callahan & Herring, 2011; Gredel, 2017; Page, 2014).

Still, despite the fact that linguistic research has begun to assess ideological trends in negotiations about and representations of various issues on Wikipedia, the possible
societal significance of these digitally mediated negotiation processes and the associated findings have not been addressed sufficiently. That is, while there is research on the role of social media (and specific social media sites) with regard to citizen participation, democratic bodies and processes (e.g. Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; Klinger, 2018), Wikipedia’s potential in this respect has not yet received in-depth attention (but see O’Sullivan, 2009). This lack of contextualisation persists even though one type of Wikipedia subsite – its discussion spaces – might be particularly suited to support the development of transnational public spheres. Thus, this paper lays the groundwork for future studies of Wikipedia in critical discourse studies and beyond by addressing the following questions:

Can Wikipedia talk pages (TP), i.e. Wikipedia discussion sites that accompany the encyclopedic entries and provide spaces for debates among Wikipedia editors, function as transnational public spheres and what are potential limitations with regard to this?

If these TPs can function as public spheres in theory, is the TP accompanying the Wikipedia article on the EU used as such?

That is, in addition to examining one particular TP concerning whether it has been appropriated as a public sphere, this paper aims to present a framework for how to conceptualise the societal implications of TP negotiation processes and to shed light on Wikipedia’s general social significance and function beyond encyclopedia.1

2. Theoretical background and past research

2.1 From CDS to social media CDS (SM-CDS)

One aspect unifying CDS’ numerous manifestations is the understanding that language use carries out ideological work. Language use (i.e. discourse) is viewed as a form of social practice – a means of constructing and maintaining but also challenging and subverting the societal status quo and its power structures. Furthermore, discourse and other, non-linguistic social practices are viewed as inextricably connected – they are understood as mutually constitutive. Hence, in addition to viewing discourse as shaping (social) reality/practices, discourse is understood as shaped by the broader social practices (Wodak, 2001b, p. 5).

In CDS, ‘critique’ refers to the idea of engaging in research that goes beyond explanatory critique of a social problem. That is, CDS researchers generally share the view that investigating language use can provide an insight into the workings of society/ies and allow an insight into how social problems are (re)created and reflected in discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 4–5). But beyond this, CDS researchers also aim to determine what the social optimum is and how to effect social change to achieve this ideal (Fairclough, 1992, p. 79).

Starting from this understanding that (A) critical research is ‘socially committed’ (Blommaert, 2005, p. 6) and (B) discourse and other social practices are inextricably linked, it becomes clear that discourse material must not be viewed in isolation from its co(n)text as this would lead to an incomplete understanding of the examined phenomenon/social problem and how it is discursively (re)created or contested. What is more and particularly important for this paper, failing to account for contextual information on the medium from which discourse material is taken – its affordances and the technology of mediation, its place and function in society – would lead to a limited understanding of
the potential social significance of the discourse material (and of the discourse and discourses realised in this material).

In connection with this, Wodak proposed a four-tier contextualisation model, which incorporates the examination of discourse material and its intertextual and interdiscursive links (2001a, p. 67). Moreover, Wodak highlights the importance of addressing ‘the extra-linguistic social/sociological variables and institutional frames of a specific “context of situation” and taking into account the socio-cultural, historical and political context which the discursive practices are embedded in and related to’ (2001a, p. 67). While many traditional media, such as newspapers, have been examined regarding these contextual layers, social media platforms still require investigation as well as theorisation with respects to all of these.

Such an exploration of social media (SM) is indispensable not least because of the complex communicative affordances that characterise SM sites such as Facebook but also Wikipedia, the collaboratively created encyclopedia. On SM, users may

(a.) work together in producing and compiling content; (b.) perform interpersonal communication and mass communication simultaneously or separately – sometimes mass performance of interpersonal communication and; (c.) have access to see and respond to institutionally (e.g. newspaper articles) or user-generated content/texts. (KhosraviNik, 2017, p. 582)

These affordances of SM communication identify Wikipedia as a social media platform. First, Wikipedia editors (‘Wikipedians’) collaborate to create content. Second, in order to coordinate efforts, they converse on special discussion spaces provided by Wikipedia (e.g. talk pages) and, simultaneously, they communicate information to readers of the encyclopedia via encyclopedic articles. Finally, additionally to user-generated content, Wikipedians have access to and recontextualise external source material.

KhosraviNik’s three hallmarks of SM communication also illustrate that SM mark a paradigm shift in how information and content is created and disseminated (see, for instance, Fuchs, 2014; KhosraviNik, 2017, 2018). While, in the top-down communication structure of traditional media, an elite group directs information at society at large, SM technologies are different in that non-elite individuals can actively engage with one another and simultaneously create content that may reach a massive audience. Here, the fact that participation in content production is not limited nationally is also worth noting, as it constitutes another difference to traditional news media (for the most part).

While this shift has implications for the critical study of SM (data), in principle, the basic tenets of CDS hold true: We may examine discourse material from SM in order to glean an understanding of ideological trends and social problems. Still, the characteristics of SM platforms and data – so different from traditional media – might impact the significance and meaning of our analyses. Therefore, contextualisation is particularly important. As Unger et al. recommend, CDS researchers ought to account for ‘the media practices and the affordances of the technologies that allow social media data to be produced and shared’ (Unger et al., 2016, p. 281).

Furthermore, KhosraviNik argues that SM-CDS especially requires a ‘contextualisation level which embeds both the text and the medium’ in the broader social context, i.e. beyond focusing on SM affordances, researchers should explore how SM relate to society (2017, pp. 4–5). Hence, while the starting point for this contextualisation may be Herring’s open-ended list of medium and situation factors (2007), the SM platform
under investigation also requires contextualisation beyond itself, i.e. the way it connects/relates to society including a theorisation and assessment of the function the site can fulfil in this society. To give an example, it bears investigation if the communicative paradigm shift associated with SM (from a small number of institutional players who produced/disseminated content to a larger number of non-elite individuals who can engage with one another beyond national borders) might have implications concerning, e.g. political activism, the legitimisation of people/institutions in power or at least the negotiation of opinions on transnational planes. Indeed, this paper focuses on the assessment of a SM platform regarding this broader element of contextualisation – it homes in on Wikipedia discussion site’s potential to boost transnational political will formation or, at least, opinion formation.

2.2 Public sphere(s) online?

Democratic societies depend on functioning public spheres as democratic decision-making hinges on public legitimation. That is, only if the electorate consents to and legitimises its representatives, the deciding bodies and their decisions, can we speak of a functioning democracy (Wodak & Wright, 2006, p. 253). A key requirement for such processes of legitimation to take place are spaces where citizens can share information, engage in debate, form opinions and, ultimately, consent to or object to decisions, practices and structures (Habermas & Pensky, 2001, p. 110).

As cooperation beyond national borders has become increasingly important, spaces that serve as transnational public spheres have been acknowledged as crucial even by the EU (e.g. Commission of the European Communities, 2001, p. 11) whose lack of such a sphere has been lamented by a number of CDS researchers (e.g. Triandafyllidou et al., 2009). The internet as a virtual space that is, potentially, globally accessible, has inspired research in this regard and various studies have assessed its potential to function as a transnational public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Dean, 2003; Papacharissi, 2016). Still, a sizable part of these studies views the internet as a homogenous (metaphorical) space, when actually it reflects the complexities of and multifaceted activities in society where the whole range of thinkable practices takes place. Moreover, these studies do not necessarily focus on SM platforms or take into account that public spheres do not exist a priori but are created by users – the internet might merely provide spaces that can serve the emergence of public spheres.

In the age of the participatory web specifically, individuals may have the opportunity to use spaces on the internet as they choose, i.e. appropriating a SM platform as a public sphere is possible (cf. Jones, 2008, p. 430). However, it must be noted that many SM platforms are provided by corporations whose goal is not the democratisation of the web, whose goal is not the provision of spaces that are adaptable as public spheres. Thus it becomes clear that SM platforms need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis concerning whether they can function as transnational public spheres. Additionally, seeing as public spheres do not exist a priori but need to be created by users, it is not enough to assess if a site allows the appropriation as a public sphere but whether the users actually do so.

Before turning to such an assessment, the question arises what characteristics define a functioning public sphere. Habermas defines the public sphere as a network for the
communication of information and opinions where anybody may participate in rational debate until consensus is reached (1992, p. 436; Poster & Aronowitz, 2001, p. 103). Key prerequisites are access to spaces that allow the development of a public sphere and the protection of participants’ basic civil liberties in order to permit debate without fear of persecution (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2008, p. 25).

While Habermas’ overarching public sphere presumes that everyone shares the same degree of access and right to participate, Fraser tackles the issue of access by embracing the existence of multiple public spheres (1995, p. 291). Indeed, in societies characterised by systemic inequality, the ideal of every citizen being able to participate in an overarching public sphere is virtually unattainable. In light of persistent inequality and exclusion, a multiplicity of public spheres which, altogether, then permit everyone access to at least one public sphere is arguably preferable to Habermas’ unified but extremely discriminatory public sphere (Fraser, 1995, p. 295; Wodak & Koller, 2008, pp. 3–4). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that not all public spheres are equally influential (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 11).

Fraser also addresses the question of topics appropriate for the private versus the public sphere and contends that categorisation in this regard is ideological rather than natural (Fraser, 1995, p. 288). Since what has previously been considered private can shift into the public domain and vice versa (Fraser, 1990, p. 71), the subject of a debate should not be used as the basis for arguments whether a particular space functions as a public sphere.

Finally, public spheres can be classified regarding the function they serve – whether a public sphere serves to permit opinion formation only, whether it allows will formation of even political action. Here, Eriksen distinguishes between general and strong public spheres. While strong public spheres aim at will formation which ought to translate into political action, general public spheres are widely-accessible fora that provide space for deliberation and opinion formation ‘not aimed at achieving particular results’ (Eriksen, 2005, p. 345, 349; Wright, 2007, p. 1170).

3 Wikipedia and the public sphere

3.1 Talk pages as transnational public spheres?

Wikipedia, the collaboratively written encyclopedia, is operated by the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation (Wikipedia:About, 2019) and is thus not subject to the detrimental effects of commercialisation with market activity and particular economic interests impeding the development of a public sphere (Papacharissi, 2010, pp. 123–124). Another general advantage for the development of a functioning public sphere is that Wikipedia is not hosted by a political state or institution which might censor debates and content in accordance with a particular political orientation (cf. Wright, 2007).

Regarding site structure, Wikipedia consists of encyclopedic articles and discussion pages, i.e. a talk page (TP) accompanies each encyclopedic article. These TPs are threaded discussions accessible to any interested Wikipedia visitor and they provide space for contributors (i.e. anybody who chooses to move from reading to participating in content creation) to resolve controversies – especially editing controversies – pertaining to the article they accompany (Wikipedia:Talk Page guidelines, 2019). Thus TPs might be particularly
suited to serve as transnational public spheres where private citizens may exchange information, form opinions and participate in (rational) debate.

**Participation and access**

As a prime example of the participatory web, Wikipedia relies on private individuals to contribute content and invites ‘anyone’ to participate (Wikipedia:List of policies and guidelines, 2019). That is, principally, anyone with the necessary (digital) literacy skills and access to the internet (and Wikipedia) can participate in article creation and TP debates. While this open invitation is conducive to deliberative discursive practice, there are media specific elements that impede this apparent inclusiveness.

First, there is Wikipedia’s hierarchy and banning/blocking/protection policy. On Wikipedia, particular contributor groups have different rights and access to different areas/functions of Wikipedia (Wikipedia:User access levels, 2019). This caveat to Wikipedia’s unreserved invitation for ‘anyone’ to participate notwithstanding, TP debates are usually open for anybody to participate in debate. That is, while editor status might affect the degree of influence a contributor may exert, anybody who wishes to can at least join the debate in most cases (see Wikipedia:Blocking policy, 2019).

Second, while Wikipedia has about 120,000 contributors who add regularly to the site (Wikipedia:Wikipedians, 2019), Wikipedia exhibits a contributor bias in that there is disproportional participation of particular members of society. The typical Wikipedian was found to be male, ‘[to have] a college degree, [to be] 30-years-old [sic], […] and [to live] in [the] US or Europe’ (Wikimedia Foundation, 2011b, p. 3). Indeed, 45 per cent of all edits are made from five Western European countries, which suggests that Wikipedia’s contributor bias corresponds with the global digital divide (Graham et al., 2015, p. 1174). What is more, only approximately ten per cent of Wikipedians are women (Wikimedia Foundation, 2011b, p. 30; Wilson, 2014, p. 885). Hence, an already powerful social group – well-educated and wealthy males from the West – is overrepresented on Wikipedia. As this group produces the majority of Wikipedia article content (and, arguably, Wikipedia TP discussion material), the representation of certain issues on Wikipedia might be skewed and reflect this group’s collective biases. Furthermore, the encyclopedia is particularly widely received in Western societies (Zachte, 2017) which leads to a feedback loop: Wikipedia content – with a male Western bias due to the skewed contributor demographics – is fed into these societies, which then again feeds back into the platform, and so on.

While Wikipedia’s contributor bias is a caveat concerning its function as a public sphere, in principle, Wikipedia encourages participation and does not limit access to a particular subgroup of society. Having said this, internet access and the protection of civil liberties, such as freedom of expression without state incursion, are privileges not shared globally. That is, although Wikipedia might welcome participation, editors from particular countries might not be afforded the ability to participate fully in critical debate.

Another issue connected to participation and, specifically, participant groups, is Eriksen’s argument that a public sphere dedicated to arriving at a ‘collective opinion’ can only emerge when there is a common self-understanding, a collective identity (Eriksen, 2005, p. 345). At first glance, Wikipedia does not meet this criterion – Wikipedia contributors do not share a common denominator, e.g. share a national background. However, it may be argued that Wikipedians do form a collective – a Community of Practice (CoP). A CoP is defined as a ‘group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion
about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (Wenger et al., 2010, p. 4). Wikipedians meet these criteria: the community shares the site’s overarching aim of creating an encyclopedia on the basis of consensus among contributors and they face certain problems, share information and insights into topics in the process of compiling the encyclopedia. Wenger et al. further discuss CoPs as sharing ‘a set of frameworks, ideas, tools information, styles, language’ (2010, p. 29). Again, Wikipedia matches this understanding. Wikipedia has a body of policies, which constitutes the community’s framework and directs user behaviour concerning article editing as well as interaction on the TPs (see Kopf, 2019a). Moreover, Wenger et al. also mention styles and language as part of the shared aspects of CoPs. In this context, van Dijk finds that Wikipedians exhibit this hallmark of CoPs and actually share a jargon (2010, p. 24).

On the whole, while Wikipedians from various backgrounds might not flock around a collective identity (apart from possibly identifying as Wikipedians), they flock around a topic they are all interested in. Moreover, they have the common goal of creating an encyclopedia and, to do so, they use Wikipedia-specific language and are guided by Wikipedia’s site structure and rules among which is consensus-orientation. Thus, Wikipedians’ form a CoP which aims for and aids the arrival at a shared ‘collective opinion’ (Eriksen, 2005, p. 345).

Summing up, in terms of participation and accessibility, even though Wikipedia suffers from an imbalance in the sense of who does and can contribute, Wikipedia TPs can still be appropriated to function as public spheres for individuals from numerous countries who wish to engage in debate. What is more, even the view that Wikipedians do not share enough common ground to engage in collective opinion formation may be relativised as, at least, there is a CoP – according to Wikipedia itself: a ‘Wikipedia community’ (Wikipedia community, 2019).

**Rational debate**

Wikipedia TPs’ main function is to facilitate debate. However, Bohman notes that some internet platforms ‘may increase interactivity without preserving the essential features of dialogue, such as responsive uptake’ and are thus inadequate in terms of providing space for a public sphere (2004, p. 135). That is, users may post but not necessarily in response to one another, e.g. Twitter users stating opinions but not necessarily engaging with each other. KhosraviNik also finds that generally ‘there is little or no argumentative content resembling a productive deliberation’ on SM sites (2018). Thus the question arises whether Wikipedia TP postings are actually interactive and can be considered true debates.

Concerning this question, Wikipedia’s consensus-driven modus operandi deserves mention again. Wikipedia relies on community consensus – it is ‘the primary way decisions are made on Wikipedia, and it is accepted as the best method’ (Wikipedia:Consensus, 2019). TPs serve as spaces for the community to discuss controversial issues until such consensus is reached and the article subject to debate is edited accordingly. Arguably, attentive listenership and responsive uptake are indispensable in a setting where decisions towards a common goal – compiling an encyclopedia – have to be taken consensually.

In connection with the public sphere, Habermas also refers to the idea of *rational* debate, defined as non-violent determination of what is true and right (1990, p. 152;
His concept of communicative rationality adds to a more comprehensive understanding of rational debate:

communicative rationality recalls older ideas of logos, inasmuch as it brings along with it the connotations of a noncoercively unifying, consensus-building force of a discourse in which the participants overcome their at first subjectively based views in favor of a rationally motivated agreement. (Habermas, 2007, p. 315)

As mentioned above, Wikipedia hinges on consensual decision-making. Hence, regarding one aspect – consensus building – the website meets Habermas’ core criterion of communicative rationality, which can be viewed as a prerequisite for rational debate. Secondly, Wikipedia debates meet Habermas’ element of non-coercion since Wikipedians cannot exert pressure on fellow-editors and force interlocutors’ compliance.

The third important criterion is the idea of a ‘rationally motivated agreement’. Here, Wikipedia’s body of rules creates the ideal conditions for communicative rationality and, by proxy, rational debate: Wikipedians are required to make compelling, well-founded cases for their desired edits and any claims could not be based on emotion alone but would have to be verifiably supported and adequately sourced. This is because of Wikipedia’s Neutral Point of View (NPOV) policy, which stipulates that Wikipedia ought to represent ‘fairly, proportionately, and, as far as possible, without bias, all of the significant views that have been published by reliable sources’, i.e. the ‘best and most reputable authoritative sources available’ (Wikipedia:Neutral Point Of View, 2019).

Finally, a connected point is Wikipedia’s conduct policy – in the context of TP debates the platform mandates a degree of civility (Wikipedia:List of policies and guidelines, 2019). This is, of course, not the same as rationality. However, urging interlocutors to retain a modicum of civility might also support rational debate and prevent a devolution of arguments into disrespectful angry fights.

**A general transnational public sphere**

On TPs, Wikipedians from all over the world (see caveats above) may engage in debates that aim to share information, give opinions, defend their views and attempt to persuade interlocutors. That is, in theory, TPs may be appropriated to serve as transnational public spheres. However, Wikipedians’ collaboration to create an encyclopedia does not require concerted formation of will and subsequent political action. Thus TPs may serve as fora for individuals to form opinions – as general transnational public spheres (Eriksen, 2005).

Notable weaknesses of TPs as such public spheres are the contributor bias and the contributor hierarchy – the former means that Wikipedia is another platform where the powerful societal norm group is overrepresented. The latter means that the editors are not on equal footing: certain, e.g. unregistered, users might not have their contributions valued as much as established Wikipedians. Additionally, different public spheres are not equally influential and TPs might not be massively impactful. However, Wikipedia’s considerable reach deserves mention here – although TPs are not as widely received as the article pages, the results of the opinion formation processes taking place on TPs are received by readers accessing Wikipedia articles.

Interestingly, in some regards Wikipedia might be even better suited to give rise to a functioning public sphere than some media which have been considered part of the traditional public sphere (e.g. newspaper and TV). Apart from hardly allowing non-elite
individuals to participate, numerous of these traditional media ‘are commercial enterprises like any other’ to the detriment of a functioning public sphere (Habermas, 2006, p. 421) while Wikipedia is operated by an NPO and invites broader participation than traditional media. Furthermore, Wikipedia TPs might actually meet Habermas’ notions of rational debate and consensus-orientation because Wikipedia relies on consensus-orientation and TPs require users to truly interact, to reason and to provide sources to support their arguments.

3.2 Case study – the talk page on the ‘European Union’

The following case study complements the theoretical assessment of Wikipedia TPs as public spheres with an empirical assessment of a specific TP. It illustrates that the Wikipedia community indeed appropriates TPs to become public spheres – here the TP accompanying the Wikipedia article on the European Union.

Data and method

The examined corpus consists of 118,175 word tokens focused on debating the nature of the EU on the TP that accompanies the article on the EU (126 discussion threads produced between 2001 and 2015). Using AntConc, I identify all occurrences of ‘eu’ collocating with ‘sovereign*’ (span: 5 tokens). This collocation was chosen since the EU’s status regarding sovereignty has been controversial both on this TP (see Kopf, 2019b) and outside of Wikipedia (e.g. Richardson & Mazey, 2015; Schout & Wolff, 2012). Consequently, debates on this afford the opportunity to observe how particularly controversial issues are treated on a Wikipedia TP – whether these controversies are limited to article editing or go beyond this and include, e.g. deliberation and the negotiation of opinions beyond editing decisions. Altogether, there are 32 co-occurrences of ‘eu’ and ‘sovereign*’ as part of 13 discussion threads dedicated to debates about the EU’s sovereignty.

As the identified 13 debates are examined to find out if this particular TP was appropriated to function as a public sphere, I assess whether (1) there is consensus-orientation and responsive uptake and (2) there are traces of a Community of Practice to be found on this Wikipedia TP. I also examine if (3) the TP debates contain aspects of discussion that may be characterised as rational debate and whether (4) even though TPs are intended for editing debates, Wikipedians actually engage in deliberation/negotiation of opinions beyond article editing.

These four elements inform my analytical focus. Concerning (1), I home in on whether Wikipedians address, refer and react to each other’s contributions) and how. Concerning (2), I focus on the presence/absence of Wikipedia-specific jargon and in-group marking (first person plural with unambiguous reference to Wikipedians (e.g. ‘we, Wikipedians’). Regarding (3) I observe the presence of evidence-based argumentation versus unsupported claims and (4) I examine the content of these debates with a focus on whether they solely deal with the issue of the EU’s sovereignty for the purpose of article editing or if they serve a more general opinion formation process.

Data discussion

As mentioned above, in theory, Wikipedia’s consensus-driven modus operandi (MO) encourages or even requires responsive uptake. This particular Wikipedia TP indeed
exhibits both consensus-orientation and the associated dialogic character. Regarding consensus-orientation, on this TP, Wikipedians’ debates generally aim at arriving at the common denominator. That is, Wikipedians debate various terms/associated concepts as applicable to the EU (e.g. country, (con)federation) and try to reach consensus even when they ultimately have to resort to the lowest common denominator – by defining the European Union as a union (see a more on this in Kopf, 2019b). Moreover, returning to the given smaller data sample, Wikipedians repeatedly explicitly ask for and confirm the common denominator, i.e. the transitory consensus, e.g. ‘may we agree that the EU lacks a unified economy in the modern sense?’ and ‘I think we are all agreed that the EU is not a sovereign entity’. Additionally, Wikipedians attempt to arrive at consensus by polling and voting, e.g. one of the threads examined in this study consists of a survey of (dis)agreement on various descriptions for the EU (e.g. from the vote on describing the EU as federation: ‘Very strongly oppose. A federation is a type of sovereign state, and the EU is not a state’). Lastly, Wikipedians explicitly refer to the website’s consensus-driven MO, for example, the following two postings are statements issued by Wikipedians in response to a non-consensual edit made to the article on the EU: ‘although “international organization” was regarded as one valid definition of the EU (one point of view), there was no consensus to regard this as a neutral point of view’. Here the poster even cites Wikipedia policy – the neutral point of view – to support their argument. The second posting is notable as it alludes to Wikipedia’s hierarchy and how it might affect editors’ ability to shape content:

[the] newly introduced term “international organization” describes the status quo not in a sufficient way. The former lead was approved by several highly credible editors and is the result of monthlong [sic] discussions. The former version has been stable for more than a year now. Any altering of the introduction must therefore be discussed at [sic] the talk page first.

As this discussion of Wikipedians’ consensus-orientation suggests, Wikipedians indeed engage with one another. Viewing how TP postings relate to one another proves this point, e.g. one thread consists of 37 postings and is a multilogue between 6 Wikipedians – all response postings exhibit responsive uptake and are sequentially multilogic. In fact, all of the 13 threads examined exhibit this interactive structure, which is linguistically realised in several ways. First, by directly quoting a preceding posting: ‘Calling the EU “simply an administrative bureaucracy” is an over-simplification’ or paraphrasing it [a]s to your point that the current new treaty may […]’. Another indicator of interactivity is direct address and explicit reference to the negotiation process: ‘Excuse me: I am not playing games, and have other better things to do than to waste my time quibbling minutiae with you’. In this context, it is worth noting that the Wikipedians frequently refer to interlocutors by name: ‘To [anonymised], first: it not [sic] “implies that the EU is sovereign”’ and ‘[anonymised], I am sure the official position […]’. Furthermore, there is explicit expression of (dis)agreement with preceding postings: ‘I totally disagree with the above’ and ‘I agree, there would be […]’. Finally, Wikipedians use metacomments to organise the interaction, e.g. ‘Since we would appear to be in agreement, I presume your comments are addressed to [anonymised]’ and ‘sorry didn’t specify that, [the posting] was [directed] at [anonymised]’. Thus Bohman’s misgivings regarding a possible lack of interactivity online and the connected inadequacy of online platforms to function as true public spheres can be put to rest in the context of this Wikipedia TP.
The TP data also confirm that the Wikipedia community can be classified as a CoP with its own jargon and thus, Eriksen’s abovementioned concern about a lack of communality can be allayed. Wikipedia jargon is omnipresent on the examined Wikipedia TP as indicated by, e.g. numerous references to Wikipedia policy: ‘[…] could be interpreted as being a failure of WP:NPOV because you have (unwittingly) failed to […]’ and ‘[t]his is too much WP:OR for something with so many sources available’.

These quotes also show that the Wikipedia community explicitly refers to a common set of conduct and content rules that guides their activity. To provide more examples: ‘Technically under the rules of Wikipedia I could make a big stink about this’ and ‘due to the consensus model of Wikipedia editing you had to be entertained’. Another hallmark of a CoP is that the community self-identifies as belonging to the group ‘Wikipedians’ and uses the first person plural to mark this in-group, e.g. ‘as wikipedians [sic] we ought to be calling it what it is’.

Regarding rational debate, on this TP, Wikipedians themselves enforce a degree of rationality. First, Wikipedians regularly provide supported claims – either drawing on reliable sources and making arguments from authority or at least providing reasoning to back claims, e.g. in the following, the sections in italics exemplify how EU publications and evidence from everyday life (currency, etc.) serve as ‘data’ used to support a claim (Toulmin, 2003):

the ultimate conclusion of ever closer union, can only be unification. Whether this is a fantasy, or is realistic is besides the point it is still the aim of the European Union as stated in black and white in the Treaty of Rome. Having a single supreme court, having a single currency etc is strong evidence of this intention. In fact on the European Union’s own website it says under the OBJECTIVES section that the aim is closer unification [italics added]

Second, discursive rationality is illustrated by Wikipedians’ demanding (or pointing out the lack of) fully developed arguments (i.e. claims supported by evidence and sources), e.g. ‘[you] have to provide a clear and explicit source’, ‘you haven’t provided a reliable source’ and ‘it is clear you have not convinced [sic] us, were [sic] is your argument’. Third, Wikipedians regularly debunk fallacious or incomplete arguments: ‘it is falsely describing the EU as a confederation without evidence to back up that claim’, ‘[t]his is gibberish, not to mention a logical fallacy: does such a union imply a state?’ and ‘not convinced by the reasoning put forward’.

Finally, this TP is used for opinion formation processes. Although TPs are intended for discussions about editing decisions, the community eschews this policy to a degree and uses this TP to exchange (political) opinions and to attempt to convince their interlocutors of their views beyond what is required for consensus on article development. While there are attempts by Wikipedians to end debates by refocusing attention back on article editing only, these attempts are not successful, to give examples – in a thread of 37 postings, two refer to the potential irrelevance of the debate for article editing: ‘Forgive me for asking, but how does [this] discussion relate to the content of the article? This talk page is not a general discussion about the EU’. Another Wikipedian agrees that the debate went beyond article editing: ‘Much of the talk wasn’t [relevant to article editing]’ but even so, the debate continuous unhindered for another 15 postings. Moreover, instead of being limited to mere editing debates, discussions on the EU’s sovereignty move into broader political debates:
Scotland could leave the UK, if there was a referendum and Scotland declared independence against the wishes of Whitehall, there would be no war and Whitehall would have to concede on the principle of democracy.

To give two more examples: ‘[o]bviously this is just my opinion, but I think some views expressed her [sic] regarding “sovereignty” of the EU are based on a pre-2009 concept of the EU’ and ‘I’m still convinced that the EU is more like a state’. The first posting comments on an issue only indirectly related to the EU, i.e. Scotland’s situation. The latter two examples give opinions on the EU’s status – neither example strictly and only deals with the subject matter of the Wikipedia article in question or is limited to mere editing-related aspects of the Wikipedia article on the EU.

To conclude, this TP is indeed a space of transnational public debate and opinion formation – it exhibits the traits associated with a general transnational public sphere. However, it is also worth noting that the express goal of TPs is Wikipedia article editing and some Wikipedians do attempt to limit debates to this aspect – while they were not successful in the data examined, this might not be the case for other TPs/debates.

4. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the new communicative paradigm presented by SM, this paper homed in on Wikipedia as a SM platform and explored – both theoretically and empirically – if and to what degree Wikipedia TPs can function as transnational public spheres. My assessment has shown that, in theory, Wikipedia TPs’ features allow appropriation as general transnational public spheres. My empirical assessment of TP data has confirmed that Wikipedians indeed appropriate the TP accompanying the article on the EU to function as a transnational public sphere to an extent. That is, Wikipedia TPs, this page especially, may serve as space(s) where private individuals can engage in public debate and opinion formation processes on a transnational plane.

Among the limitations concerning this are Wikipedia’s contributor bias and hierarchy, and the fact that TPs are intended for article editing and ultimately serve the creation of an encyclopedia. Thus Wikipedia TPs will probably not develop into strong publics that serve political will formation or even political action. Still, in contrast to traditional news media which privilege a select few institutional actors who may engage in public opinion formation, this study has shown that SM sites such as Wikipedia can complement existing public spheres as they permit transnational and public debate among ordinary citizens. Future research ought to address if other SM sites can (or already do) function as public spheres – possibly even as strong rather than general public spheres. Moreover, more research ought to be carried out on Wikipedia TPs and other Wikipedia discussion sites specifically, e.g. in the form of a large-scale assessment of numerous Wikipedia discussion sites and whether/how they might be appropriated to serve as public spheres. In this context, a more in-depth examination of the technological affordances of Wikipedia and how these affect Wikipedia data precisely would also be beneficial.

To touch upon broader implications for the study of SM and SM data in CDS, this study has once again underscored the importance of contextualisation as well as theorisation of the medium and data. Regarding theorisation, rethinking a particular SM platform may shed light on a societal function that exceeds the site’s original purpose and thus, insights
gleaned from data analysis ought to be interpreted with an eye to this potential added societal significance. Regarding the contextualisation of data in light of this theorisation, this study has shown that exploring a SM site’s broader modus operandi is central to making sense of the data but also to uncovering their potential societal significance. Here, especially the exploration of Wikipedia’s goals, policies and how they affect discussion data has shown that such debates may have a function beyond merely leading to an encyclopedic article. Finally, regarding the contextualisation of the medium under investigation, this paper exemplifies how the close examination of the context surrounding the medium might bring to light possible limitations regarding a site’s function. Here, a particularly notable limitation is Wikipedia’s producer bias and the above mentioned feedback loop of power.

Notes

2. The internet enables activities reaching from, e.g. buying/selling goods to dating to v/bloggning.
3. With some exceptions, e.g. contributors must not be paid for their editing activity.
4. It should be noted that, unfortunately, the last in-depth Wikimedia survey on editor demographics was conducted in 2011.
5. What is more, Wikipedia enjoys a notable degree of trust (Wikimedia Foundation 2011a).
6. Or, at least, do not know if they do.
7. Although one could argue that humankind, facing global challenges such as climate change as a collective, does indeed share a common ground in Eriksen’s sense.
8. For a more in-depth discussion and critique of rationality, rational discourse and politics online consult, e.g. KhosraviNik (2018) and Papacharissi (2015).
9. It is questionable if such an exchange divorced from emotion is even possible as Habermas et al. acknowledge (2016, p. 813; see also Papacharissi (2015)).
10. The exception is attempts to exert peer pressure on interlocutors.
11. WP:NPOV means Wikipedia’s Neutral Point of View policy; WP:OR refers to the policy of excluding original research.

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Notes on contributor

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