

New Media & Society

<http://nms.sagepub.com>

Journalistic objectivity redefined? Wikinews and the neutral point of view

Einar Thorsen

New Media Society 2008; 10; 935

DOI: 10.1177/1461444808096252

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/10/6/935>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *New Media & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://nms.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/10/6/935>



Journalistic objectivity redefined? Wikinews and the neutral point of view

EINAR THORSEN

University of Teesside, UK

Abstract

Wikinews is a news website which allows anyone with internet access to publish and edit journalistic content directly on its site without prior authorization or registration. This article examines the way in which Wikinews contributors negotiate its 'neutral point of view' policy, which differs from the traditional sense of journalistic objectivity in the way that it is both defined and implemented. The study encompasses a detailed review of 2332 news articles and their associated 'talk pages', published in the period from November 2004 to July 2005. Close textual analysis is used to conduct a qualitative study of a selection of these Wikinews articles, their documented editorial history and referenced sources, so as to offer a thorough critique of the 'neutral point of view' policy, as assessment is made of the importance of the Wikinews model for online journalism more widely.

Key words

citizen journalism • collaboration • dialogic interaction • neutrality • objectivity • online journalism • Wikinews

INTRODUCTION

Wikinews (<http://en.wikinews.org/>) is one of many websites pioneering innovative uses of the internet to write and publish news. What sets this site

apart from other alternative news sites is the unique collaborative process in which content is created and its close association with, as opposed to rejection of, traditional journalistic norms. Instead of embracing the trend within citizen journalism of subjective reporting, as seen in weblogs (blogs) and sites such as Indymedia (www.indymedia.org), the contributors strive to retain familiar notions of 'truth' and 'accuracy' associated with traditional journalistic objectivity – rationalized through their own conceptualization of neutrality – as detailed in their 'neutral point of view' policy. Moreover, this notion of neutrality is positioned by Wikinews as an improvement to the traditional sense of journalistic objectivity, in the way that it is both defined and implemented.

Given the tremendous success of its sister project Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>), which uses a similar model to produce encyclopaedia content, it is difficult to ignore the potential influence that Wikinews may prove to have upon journalistic norms and practices. Many commentators argue that Wikinews is a potential milestone for citizen journalism due to the collaborative nature of its news production, although they remain sceptical about how it might work in practice (see for example, Dube, 2004; Glasner, 2005; Rosen, 2005; Yeomans, 2005). Scholars have yet to conduct much detailed analysis of Wikinews, with Allan (2006) and Bruns (2006) being two notable exceptions. Regardless of this, elements of the Wiki model have already been adopted already by another citizen journalism site, OhmyNews (<http://english.ohmynews.com>). The editing process was also briefly trialled by the *Los Angeles Times* on 17–19 June 2005 in the editorial section on its website (<http://latimes.com>; see Allan, 2006; Martinez, 2005). Wikinews itself has gained a strong following and is, according to *Alexa* traffic ratings (www.alexa.com), beginning to close the gap on other internet based news alternatives such as Indymedia. The manner in which Wikinews (and indeed Wikipedia) covered the bomb explosions in London on 7 July 2005, showed that the contributors are able to react to events quickly and produce a high standard of journalism, including a large amount of original eyewitness reports and photographs (see Kiss, 2005; Till, 2005).

This article explores the neutral point of view policy as a challenge to traditional journalistic norms, addressing the research question:

How do the Wikinews contributors negotiate its neutral point of view policy?

In response to this question, the focus of this article is a detailed critique of the policy. This critique is informed by a critical analysis of the documented Wikinews policies and guidelines, as well as a review of the various discussion pages, live chat transcripts and mailing lists that were used to arrive at these formulations. The study also encompasses a detailed review of 2332 news articles and their associated talk pages,¹ published in the period from

November 2004 to July 2005. In particular, this article will focus on the development of five of these news articles and the sources cited by them in order to provide a qualitative basis for an analysis of how the community mediates the changes necessary for an article to achieve a neutral point of view. In total this selection covers 133 revisions of the five news articles and 15 source articles. The articles chosen represent conflicts or ways of reporting that typify Wikinews and have all been used at various points by the Wikinews community as examples that illustrate their own activity, both positively and negatively. Three of the chosen articles illustrate neutral point of view disputes, while the other two illustrate how the neutral point of view is implemented when there is no such dispute. The non-disputed articles also contain examples of original reporting.

THE WIKINEWS MODEL

The Wikinews model is a fresh approach to journalism which involves citizens in a seemingly non-hierarchical, collaborative news production cycle. Anyone with internet access can write, publish or edit articles directly on the Wikinews website using a web browser. All changes take effect immediately, without prior approval from others. The Wikinews website covers current affairs which are of interest to their users on the local, national and global scales. In addition, contributors are encouraged to write about issues where they feel traditional media coverage is inadequate. Wikinews is supported by the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation, which is responsible for several other projects including the increasingly well-known online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia.

The Wikinews project launched an English-language demonstration site in November 2004, which was moved into live beta testing the following month. The content is produced by an ad hoc group of volunteers who assume the roles of journalists, editors and readers (although one does not dictate the other, so people can read without having to contribute). News articles are considered to be collaborative efforts, regardless of the number of contributors who have worked on them. All Wikinews content is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 license which, unlike the GNU Free Document License governing Wikipedia, requires attribution to Wikinews as author of the material. News articles are typically a synthesis of other news sources, but also can be based on original reporting or a combination of the two methods. News items are protected from further development after two weeks, after which they are only open to non-content amendments carried out by administrators. The talk page which accompanies every article remains open.

The Wikinews community has produced guidelines for how to write to an accepted standard and how to behave towards other contributors (especially when editing their contributions). Most of these policies are adopted from

the Wikipedia project, although new policies can be proposed on a special part of the website named the ‘Water Cooler’, or on relevant discussion pages. The latter process is typical for amending an existing policy. In addition, discussion can take place on email groups or Internet Relay Chat (IRC), although policy can be created only on Wikinews itself. Policy is adopted through consensus, often formally reached by the use of polls (following a discussion of arguments for and against). In theory, all users are given equal status in defining policy, although in order to vote in polls a user must be registered (which also entitles them to apply for status as a Wikinews accredited reporter). Administrators have the additional ability to protect, delete and block users (as well as reverse such decisions) and can create pages with dynamic content through Structured Query Language (SQL)² queries. Bureaucrats are administrators with the privilege to give other Wikinews users administrator access. In real terms, the established users and administrators appear to have greater influence on policy creation.

All of the policies, apart from the core policies, are fluid and can be altered if consensus changes following presentation of new arguments. The core policies are defined on the Wikinews: Policies and Guidelines page as follows:

- Do not promote any particular viewpoint (i.e. neutral point of view).
- Do not revert any article more than three times in 24 hours.
- Cite your sources.
- Avoid copyright violation.
- Be respectful of others.

There is no quorum required for a decision to be made. Typically a deadline is set for people to make their contribution to an argument or vote in a poll. Usually the deadline is set by the person initiating the change, which leaves the system open to abuse. Indeed, some people have implemented unilateral changes or not given sufficient notice for people to engage in the debate. Such instances have sparked major conflicts and thus the community has attempted to establish a norm to give at least 48 hours, or preferably two weeks’ notice, before implementing changes to structure or policy. Norms and established practice are also considered policy, despite not necessarily being adopted formally.

NEUTRAL POINT OF VIEW

Historically, objectivity and impartiality have been intrinsic parts of traditional journalistic practice (Kaplan, 2002; Mindich, 1998; Schiller, 1981; Schudson, 1978). While the theoretical ideal of objectivity often has been considered problematic (Hackett, 1984; Rosen, 1993), the concept remains central to debates surrounding online journalism (Allan, 2006; Hall, 2001; Pavlik, 2001). In practical terms, the invocation of a neutral point of view policy is justified

in terms of providing a greater service to the public, in much the same way as traditional journalists have reasoned objectivity and impartiality (see for instance Lichtenberg, 2000).

However, the neutral point of view policy is essentially pluralistic and demands interpretative action from the reader, as demonstrated by the following excerpt:

[W]e, the creators of Wikinews, trust readers' competence to form their own opinions themselves. Texts that present multiple viewpoints fairly, without demanding that the reader accept any one of them, are liberating. (Wikinews, 2005f)

The policy document rejects the idea of 'a single unbiased, "objective" point of view' (Wikinews, 2005f). Instead, contributors should seek collectively to produce a fair representation of all available points of view. Moreover, it is not enough to simply represent a series of conflicting opinions. These need to be attributed, moderated and any formal markers of bias removed before they collectively can be considered neutral.

At this stage the original formulation of a neutral point of view by Wikipedia founder, Jimmy D. Wales, is worth quoting at length, since it underpins the whole policy and governs the basis upon which others shape their own understanding of the concept.

The neutral point of view attempts to present ideas and facts in such a fashion that both supporters and opponents can agree. Of course, 100% agreement is not possible; there are ideologues in the world who will not concede to any presentation other than a forceful statement of their own point of view. We can only seek a type of writing that is agreeable to essentially rational people who may differ on particular points. (Wikinews, 2005f)

Interestingly, the neutral point of view is described by Wales as being a process rather than an actual ideal that is really achievable. Such a process can be understood as a dialogic interaction between various truth-claims, whereby 'official monologism' containing a 'ready-made truth' is rejected for a heteroglossic notion of reality (see Bakhtin, 1984; Morris, 1994; Morson and Emerson, 1990). However, the important qualification in Wales's statement is that anyone who does not agree with the community consensus, or at least the way in which this is being represented, is effectively positioned as an 'ideologue'. This is an interesting problematic, as there is no clear definition of who is 'rational' or rather, ostensibly non-ideological.

Wikinews admits that it reflects an 'Anglo-American-centric point of view' and thus negotiates a neutral point of view based on such liberal capitalist 'orders of discourse' (see Fairclough, 1995, 2003). Any discourse from a different sphere, culturally, politically or geographically, may be considered

ideological or biased and hence might be rejected. However, this is not to say that this discourse within its own sphere is not legitimate. In other words, the neutral point of view or consensus of one discursive sphere may differ considerably from the neutral point of view from a different discursive sphere. Moreover, the neutral point of view as a concept is itself a discursive construct and thus necessarily ideological. Hence neutrality can be understood only in terms of the dialogic interaction of the people who actually read or contribute to Wikinews.

The neutral point of view policy states: 'Nearly every view on every subject will be found among our authors and readers' (Wikinews, 2005f). However, the policy does not qualify that this is necessarily limited to people who have internet access, have heard of Wikinews and have chosen to take an active interest in contributing to the content of the website. It is important to point out that even though someone has chosen to read Wikinews, this does not mean that their point of view is necessarily represented by the website. The policy calls for people from 'other countries' to remove any evidence of cultural bias that they encounter. Although there may be some diminutive examples of this, it is fair to suggest that there is considerable distance between theory and practice. In order to expand the points of view represented, contributors are asked to consider all aspects of a story and 'speak for the other side'. Although the policy text acknowledges that contributors' rendition of another's viewpoint may be considered 'substandard', it fails to stipulate that they are only really able to represent the points of view that exist within their discursive sphere. This is not to say that contributors' attempts at representing conflicting points of view is futile, rather that the wording of the Wikinews policy is perhaps overly ambitious.

Even if we consider the neutral point of view policy as a laudable ideal, there are a number of power relations that will influence the mediation of neutrality into something that is never entirely agreeable by everyone. Making a compromise in order to reach consensus is not necessarily making something agreeable; it merely suggests that there are competing truth-claims which are considered not worthy of extensive deliberation. If no consensus is reached, information will simply be omitted. Depending on the scale of the disagreement, the story may end up being deleted in its entirety. 'Neutrality' may become biased when it irons out so much of someone's view or interpretation that it ceases to be a fair representation of the event. This is particularly difficult to gauge, since experienced and assertive contributors are more likely to gain consensus for their interpretation. Thus neither 'common sense' nor consensus is actually unbiased, in the sense that they both represent subjective interpretations by a group of individuals (see Allan, 1998b). This is epitomized further by the qualification that contributors 'need not give minority views *as much* or as detailed a description as more popular views'

(Wikinews, 2005f; emphasis in original). Arguably, such a rejection or proportional representation of information is in fact similar to asserting a point of view or at very least consistent with the hegemony of Anglo-American discourse in relation to that particular story.

Arguably the most difficult aspect of the neutral point of view policy relates to original reporting (typically interviews or eyewitness reports, but this can extend to watching press conferences or webcasts). Given that such information is usually exclusive to Wikinews and the individual reporter, it is difficult for anyone else to verify the 'neutrality' of the report. Thus in relation to original reporting, it is virtually impossible to obtain a plurality of alternative facts, apart from speculative conjectures. In order to mitigate some of this tension, contributors assist each other with providing additional background information from published sources, and the creator of the story is requested to supply the community with their original notes, audio recording of interview or similar raw material. Beyond this, contributors are requested to use 'common sense' in their interpretation and framing of stories that are based on original reporting. However, given the ideological nature of 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1971), it is difficult to see how this could contribute towards the formation of a neutral point of view.

WRITING FROM A NEUTRAL POINT OF VIEW

Having discussed the neutral point of view policy, this article now turn its attention to how it was operationalized by the contributors. Evidence from most of the articles analysed indicate that the person who initiates a story is the one who contributes most of the content. With some minor exceptions, the role of the other contributors appears to be fact-checking and ensuring that the article loosely follows the style guide. In some cases information has been added to the story, but then typically to expand on or back up existing truth-claims. To this end, the role of most Wikinews contributors is comparable to that of a copy editor in traditional newspapers and wire services. However, the Wikinews community is not forced to subject a story to such copyediting and thus articles may escape thorough review before they are published.

This section focuses on five Wikinews articles that exemplify the work and disputes prevalent on the Wikinews website. Across these five news items there were 30 unique contributors. Seven of them were anonymous, although it is typically unclear if any of them were registered members who had not logged in when making changes (thus their contributions being only associated with an ambiguous internet protocol [IP] address). While 133 revisions of the original articles were registered, most of the contributors made no more than five changes, leaving seven people responsible for the majority of amendments. Eight of the contributors ('DouglasGreen', 'Cspurrier', 'Dan100', 'David Vasquez', 'Pingswept', 'Simeon', 'Amgine' and

‘Eloquence’) made changes to more than one of the stories analysed. All of these contributors have the status of ‘administrator’, while ‘Eloquence’ also has the status of ‘bureaucrat’. This illustrates the small number of people actually involved in editing each of the articles. Moreover, only two or three of them were involved at any one time in resolving how an article would be written best from a neutral point of view. Considering that about one-third of the contributors on the articles analysed were administrators and only five had made fewer than 100 contributions overall, it is fair to assume that most of them were aware of, and versed in, the neutral point of view policy.

Removing points of view

The most obvious way of understanding the mediation of a neutral point of view is to examine the news text as it appeared immediately before and after a ‘NPOV dispute tag’.³ Two ways of removing a point of view were found to operate within news articles that were tagged as conflicting with the neutral point of view policy. First, ‘value-laden’ words that are considered to reflect the subjective evaluation of the reporter could be removed. Typically, these occur when describing utterances by use of linguistic devices other than the direct quotation of words, or when attributing actions to a particular actant based on allegedly ambiguous evidence. The latter can occur also when actions are attributed selectively to one actant, thus on a larger scale giving a partial account of events. Second, a point of view can be removed by deleting whole paragraphs in dispute or through adding further points of view in order to obtain an overall, ostensibly neutral balance. These are more radical changes and occur when there are conceptual disagreements about how the story should be relayed.

The first way of removing a point of view is well illustrated in articles 1 and 2, described below. Both of these had neutral point of view disputes which were resolved through relatively minor corrections.

Article 1: ‘Amnesty report’s criticisms rejected by Bush administration’ (Wikinews, 2005a)

Description: Original headline accused of being untrue. Text accused of being even more biased than the sources.

Sources: Fox News (two articles), OneWorld and Reuters.

History: Published 5 June 2005 at 23:08 and since edited 38 times by 14 different contributors.

Article 2: ‘Peruvians sue Newmont Mining Company over mercury poisoning’ (Wikinews, 2005e)

Description: Original article accused of unbalanced claim relating to US responsibility in pollution and ambiguity in relation to statements made about globalisation. Talk page includes a debate about nature of NPOV policy.

Sources: Miami Herald, Denver Post, Associated Press and the Mineral Resources Forum.

History: Published 8 March 2005 at 03:01 and since edited 26 times by 8 different contributors.

Article 1 effectively contained one verb and one adverb that were considered untenable descriptions of the reactions of US officials. The dispute tag was originally put in place by ‘DouglasGreen’ at 01:41 on 7 June 2005 and removed by ‘MrJones’ at 20:57 on the same day. Only two edits were made in this period. The changes that enabled the article to be considered neutral are italicized in the below quotations, while the POV and NPOV prefixes indicate ‘point of view’ and neutral point of view respectively.

[POV] Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International *made comments that inflamed U.S. officials by comparing* the United States detention facility at Guantanamo Bay to a Soviet-era gulag ... Bush administration officials *responded with disdain to this comparison.*

[NPOV] Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International *compared* the United States detention facility at Guantanamo Bay to a Soviet-era gulag ... Bush administration officials *condemned the comparison.* (Wikinews, 2005a)

In addition, other changes labelled as trying to improve the neutral point of view were made to the same article. However, the above corrections effectively resolved the dispute as highlighted by ‘DouglasGreen’.

Looking at Article 2 we find that similarly small corrections were able to resolve considerable disagreements. ‘Carlosar’ felt that this article at one stage moved away from the event and the accused company, to describing the alleged actions of US companies in general. He also raised a point regarding the lack of substantive evidence supporting the claim that the exclusive causes for pollution are ‘profits and globalization’. Although the latter point was rejected, the article evidently achieved consensus for the neutral point of view by changing the references from ‘US firms’ to ‘international businesses’ and rewriting another sentence to reflect a similar sentiment:

[POV] In today’s global economy, many *US firms* have looked overseas to maintain their profits ... These same lessons are being learned again *as the emerging trend of outsourcing US mining operations continues in* developing countries.

[NPOV] In today’s global economy, many *international businesses* have looked overseas to maintain their profits ... These same lessons are being learned again *by modern era mining, especially the emerging trend of outsourcing US mining operations to* developing countries. (Wikinews, 2005e)

Interestingly, the second sentence in the above quotations was later removed as part of another neutral point of view dispute. This time there were three objections raised towards a paragraph making an historic connection to the 19th-century gold rush and the alleged environmental degradation that it caused. The initial request by ‘Amoore’ to have it removed was refuted by ‘Anonymous (67.80.8.96)’, which led ‘Carlosar’ to suggest a rewrite. Eventually ‘Pingswept’ demonstrated how the passage could have been written from an opposing point of view by referencing the exact same event.

Thus 'Pingswept' achieved general consensus for removing the paragraph in its entirety and proceeded to do so at 01:38 on 9 March 2005. The person who wrote the original text, 'Howrealisreal', later provided four references to peer reviewed journals that supported the historical connection, although no action was taken to include these in the finished article. 'Howrealisreal' also argued that the exclusion of this particular reference was more of a point of view than its inclusion. This exemplifies how the neutral point of view is not required to obtain absolute approval by all contributors. Rather, the majority or most determined contributors are able to assert their interpretation of how the story should be framed. It is conceivable that the paragraph could have remained, based on the evidence that 'Howrealisreal' provided, had they been more forceful in asserting their desire for its inclusion.

Finally, the neutral point of view can be achieved by adding information to counterbalance a particular line of argument, as seen in Article 3:

Article 3: 'Argentinian [sic] workers preparing to defend control of factory' (Wikinews, 2005b)

Description: Original article criticised for relying too much on 'leftist sources'.

Sources: Grupo Alavío, UpsideDownWorld.org and Toronto the Better.

History: Published 26 April 2005 at 13:58 and since edited 40 times by 5 different contributors.

This was tagged as disputed by 'Anonymous (68.226.5.146)' at 00:17 on 28 April 2005. 'DouglasGreen' edited the article seven times before removing the dispute tag at 01:43 on 30 April 2005. No one else contributed to rewriting the article, although 'DouglasGreen' did discuss the changes with the original author, 'Simeon', on the talk page. The article was disputed since 'DouglasGreen' felt the story was relying too heavily on 'leftist sources', certain claims were unsubstantiated and no opportunity was given to refute the accusations laid against them. 'Simeon' staunchly defended the original article, although encouraged 'DouglasGreen' to make any changes that he felt were necessary to achieve a neutral point of view. 'DouglasGreen' altered the story by removing a paragraph that made general claims about death threats and physical attacks against workers, despite the claims in question being appropriately attributed and confirmed by two separate sources. Further to this, he added a paragraph at the end of the article to counterbalance the allegations against Jorge Sobisch, Governor of the Argentine Province Neuquén. These changes went unchallenged, although the exact effect that they had on the framing of the story in terms of achieving a neutral point of view is unclear.

Refining and excluding source information

While revisions to existing Wikinews texts are typically overt and usually can be directly traced to attempts at providing neutrality, the differences between Wikinews and its sources are sometimes more ambiguous. For example, such

differences can simply be an attempt by Wikinews contributors to rewrite a point in their own words, rather than replicating other news sources. Were Wikinews to reproduce the exact text of another news source, it would almost certainly be in violation of that provider's copyright (since the material would then be attributed to Wikinews under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 license). This means that community members will rewrite sentences, even when it is not necessary, in order to uphold a fair use policy. Moreover, sentences may be rewritten in order to create a more 'natural flow' between points extracted from different sources. For these and related reasons, it is frequently difficult to point to sentences which have been specifically rewritten to achieve neutrality.

The Wikinews style guide states that the most important information should be at the start of the article, in an 'inverted pyramid' style, thus it follows that the reporter is required to make subjective judgements about which parts of the story are of greater significance. This sequential representation can be understood as the hierarchy of credibility of sources within the text (see for example, Becker, 1967; Fishman, 1980). As a consequence, the narrative structure carries both ideological and discursive importance in relation to defining an event from a neutral point of view.

One example of how this operates between Wikinews and its sources can be found in Article 2. Of interest here is the narrative position of the quote from James Otto, an environmental law professor at the University of Denver School of Law. The original source of this quotation was the *Miami Herald* (Hecht, 2005) where it was cited in paragraph 15 and 16. He was the fifth person to be allowed a direct voice within the piece and was cited in context of the mediation between the plaintiffs and Newmont Mining Company. The Wikinews article provides the same quotation, but relates it to the development of a global economy and public health concerns. Cited in the fifth paragraph, it is the first out of only two people allowed a direct voice in the story. Through changing the narrative position of this quotation, Wikinews arguably places a greater importance upon the contribution from an environmental law professor than that of the other people cited in the *Miami Herald* article. Coupled with the new context in which his remarks operate, in the present author's reading this implies that the Wikinews story is more concerned with the environmental impacts and impacts of pollution on public health.

Article 1 also contains differences in the hierarchy of credibility, compared to its sources. In this instance, Amnesty's executive director, William Schulz, is quoted as defending the comparison between Guantanamo Bay and the Soviet gulag. The comments were made originally at the start of an interview between Schulz and Chris Wallace of the Fox News channel, the transcript of which was used as a source by Wikinews (2005b). The news article on the

Fox News website (2005a) positioned the quotation in the second paragraph of its news report. It then continues to provide a series of emotive arguments refuting the claims by Schulz, including statements from President Bush and former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld. The article concludes by criticizing the analytical methods deployed by Amnesty in writing its annual report. Wikinews made direct quotation of some of Schulz's remarks in paragraph 4, although in this instance they are framed more as allegations against the USA and a defence of his original remarks. In contrast, Reuters (Santos, 2005) cited the remarks fully in paragraph 16, almost at the end of its story, concentrating instead on the need for investigating allegations made about Guantanamo Bay. Thus within Wikinews the narrative position and representation of Schulz' remarks are closer to that of Fox News, although in the present author's interpretation the sentiment of the article is comparable to that of Reuters. Indeed the Wikinews story is framed as a defence of the remarks from Amnesty, as opposed to the Bush administration's rejection, as the headline suggests. Importantly, none of the quotations from representatives of the US administration were included in the Wikinews report.

The omission of these quotations was not an isolated instance. Analysis of the chosen news items showed that Wikinews consistently excluded information reported in their sources, particularly direct quotations from individuals involved in the story. This is an apparent contradiction to the pluralistic notion of a neutral point of view and is particularly problematic, since the points of view excluded by Wikinews were known to the contributors. Thus the exclusion of such points of view is evidence of its subjective evaluation of the appropriateness or relevance of these views. Wikinews allows for a distinction between minority and majority views within the neutral point of view policy. That is, points of view should be given narrative space according to their proportional representation among experts on the subjects or parties concerned. However, there is no such justification for the exclusions that were identified as part of this analysis. Moreover, no policy or process exists to determine what can be considered to be minority or majority points of view.

Article 3, for example, excludes information from *Toronto the Better* (Trigona, 2004), which explains how the workers in Argentina are running the factory currently under a temporary two-year permit from the government which is about to expire. This information is of ideological importance for all parties involved in the story: it legitimizes the current occupation of the factory by the workers, and explains the reason why the workers are being threatened with eviction at this point. Including this information would have generated a greater narrative closure around the first part of the story. *Toronto the Better* also gives extensive information about other factories which illustrates the breadth of the conflict between these workers' cooperatives, the government and previous owners. Interestingly, *Toronto the Better* also quotes the general secretary of the Ceramists' Union,

Raul Godoy, as stating that the important development is how the cooperatives are now working together to change the law in order to protect their expropriation of the factories. The workers' movement appears in *Toronto the Better* to be much better organized and more influential in the dispute, compared to the brief reference made by Wikinews.

Similarly, within Article 2 Wikinews excludes a series of quotations from representatives of the Newmont Mining Company and ignores important measures taken to support the people affected by the reported mercury spillage. In particular its source, the *Miami Herald* (Hecht, 2005), mentions \$10 million which was spent on cleaning up the spilt mercury and continuous monitoring of the environment, \$30 paid per kilogram of mercury that was recovered by the local residents and a five-year medical insurance plan for people exposed to the mercury in order to provide follow-up care at local clinics. There is no apparent reason why this information should be excluded from the Wikinews story. Another important distinction that is drawn by the Mineral Resources Forum is that the Newmont Mining Company is only co-owner of the Yanacocha gold mine. Two other organizations, Minera Buenaventura of Peru and the International Finance Corporation, have part ownership (United Nations Environment Programme, 2002). However, this is not mentioned in either *Miami Herald* or Wikinews, thus their articles appear to vindicate these companies in relation to the reported events. However, the non-reporting of information and particular statements do not exclusively affect the Newmont Mining Company. The *Miami Herald* contains six quotations from local people with direct experience of the mercury spillage. Not one of these is reproduced in Wikinews. Thus the people affected by the disaster are prevented from having an active voice within the Wikinews report, their views instead represented by statements from their lawyer. Again, there is no apparent reason as to why these quotations should be excluded, while comparable quotations from 'expert sources' are carried. It clearly suggests that a greater importance is placed upon professional people or members of the elite than on the local residents, despite their first-hand experience of the disaster.

Article 4 also makes some references to other sources, and one final example is worth highlighting here since it fundamentally changes the framing of the original source.

Article 4: 'Entrepreneur's RFID Chip Implant to Open Doors, Start Car' (Wikinews, 2005c)

Description: Contains original reporting and secondary sources. No disputes.

Sources: MSNBC, Verichip, The Register and Compiler, totalling 4 articles and a press release. Wikinews reporter, IlyaHaykinson.

History: Published 24 March 2005 at 21:01 and since edited 13 times by 6 different contributors.

The Wikinews text in Article 4 refers to the work by a named professor of the University of Reading in the second paragraph. This information is

provided to give historical context to the story and is reported as if his work is representative of the scientific field. However, the source of this information was in fact an article that was highly critical of his work. Apart from quoting other academics describing the named professor as a 'buffoon', 'irresponsible', 'idiot' and 'unrealistic', the article also proceeds to ridicule the scientific experiments of his career (*The Register*, 2000). None of these qualifications were made in the Wikinews text, neither was there any indication that an alternative point of view of the professor's research existed. Thus rather than just removing a point of view, the Wikinews article in this instance actually reverses the point of view inherent in its source, from one condemning the professor's research to one that is distinctly sympathetic of his work.

Original reporting

Selective inclusion of material was also evident within the news items based on original reporting. On the talk page of Article 4, for example, are the transcripts of two email interviews with Amal Graafstra, the person on which the article is based. The interviews, conducted by Wikinews reporter 'IlyaHaykinson', contain a great deal of information that was excluded from the final story. For example, Graafstra justifies why he had the radio frequency identification chip implanted, he gives examples of practical uses elsewhere in the world, but at the same time shows a lack of knowledge about the product itself. None of this was reported, neither were the dangers of the operation or the ease of which Graafstra was able to have the procedure done. Although this information would not necessarily have changed the balance or neutrality of the article, it clearly illustrates the extent to which news production is a selective process. That is, subjective evaluation of what information is required to anchor preferred conceptions of news values.

Despite being based entirely on the eyewitness reports of a Wikinews reporter, Article 5 also was subjected to having sentences rephrased or removed as they were deemed to express a point of view.

Article 5: 'Iraqi Elections Kept Low-Key, but Secure, in Paris' (Wikinews, 2005d)
Description: Contains original reporting, but no secondary sources. No disputes.
Source: Wikinews reporter, Submarine.
History: Published 29 January 2005 at 18:45 and since edited 16 times by 8 different contributors.

Although the article was never in dispute, 'Simeon' removed the following statement on 3 February 2005 at 08:34, as it was deemed to be unnecessary and speculative:

Apparently, the French government thought that discretion was better in this case than a showy display of force, which could perhaps have attracted groups protesting the US occupation of Iraq. (Wikinews, 2005d)

Interestingly, other sentences preceding this statement were not removed, although as demonstrated below, arguably they contain ambiguous statements and expressions of a point of view not attributed to anyone:

Most inhabitants are not even aware of its presence ... Despite the discretion, the sight of police guarding a polling station is striking in a country where elections are a calm affair on a Sunday. (Wikinews, 2005d)

The final paragraph contrasts the security measures outside the polling station with past use of military troops in France following the attacks on public transportation in 1995 by the Armed Islamic Group, as well as those outside of embassies. Clearly, drawing such comparisons is moving from eyewitness reports to analysis and hence indicative of a point of view. Indeed the original author seems to imply that the security levels are lower than what could be reasonably expected of such an event, despite not substantiating such claims with any verifiable sources.

Articles 4 and 5 illustrate that the neutral point of view policy is being applied to news articles with original reporting. Just as with synthesis articles, information is being excluded or rewritten to diffuse any apparent points of view. However, it is clear from both synthesis articles and cases of original reporting that the implementation of the neutral point of view is inconsistent and more likely to reflect the individual contributors' interpretation than a unified concept.

CONCLUSION

This article has focused on how Wikinews' neutral point of view policy is operationalized by its contributors. The neutral point of view is negotiated through two core stages: the definition of the policy text and its implementation. Active redefinition of policy is a slow process whereby the community discusses best practice and the most effective way of self-governance. Since the neutral point of view policy is a non-negotiable concept inherited from the Wikimedia Foundation, the community is able to change only the terms that define how the contributors should interpret and apply the policy in their reporting. There are some manual procedures intended to ensure that the policy is implemented, most notably the dispute resolution page and arbitration committee. However, the Wikinews model does not contain any computer-automated processes and none of the contributors has any formal obligation towards the Wikimedia Foundation. To this end, the smooth running of the website is made possible only through the goodwill and active enthusiasm of all the contributors to the project.

Despite the neutral point of view being a fixed principle and the policy text itself being subjected to fewer changes than other regulations, the interpretation of this policy and its application to Wikinews journalism is

variable. This second stage of negotiating a neutral point of view covers how news texts are produced in order to conform to the pre-determined policy. Such implementations of policy can be identified by considering how points of view are attributed (or not), in order to create an apparent overall balance of neutrality. In this stage Wikinews was found to be removing value-laden words and minimizing modal expressions. Words, sentences and paragraphs in dispute were either rewritten or removed. In certain cases information was added to counterbalance an argument, thus ostensibly achieving a theoretical sense of neutrality overall. Wikinews articles were given an objective, formal and dispassionate tone by its contributors. That is, they encompassed a pragmatic representation of events and their actants, supposedly balanced according to their proportional representation within the given discursive sphere.

Although disagreements over the appropriate application of a neutral point of view were resolved often without being tagged as disputed, contested points were often ambiguous and not obvious, requiring further explanation. This uncertainty appears to have increased the chances of a conflict. Disagreements over both the definition and implementation of the neutral point of view policy have made active contributors leave the project. Such conflicting interpretations are not surprising, especially in light of the complex nature of 'neutrality', as detailed by this study. These complexities are intensified by the awareness that the community has of such debates and the way in which it attempts to compensate for these discrepancies through asking contributors to use 'common sense' in their application of policies and guidelines. Common sense relates to the shared practical and rational judgement by a group, based on their largely mutual experiences (Gramsci, 1971). Thus it follows that common sense too can differ between discursive spheres in exactly the same way as a neutral point of view.

In the policy governing the neutral point of view the Wikinews community asserts that it does not exist naturally, but must be constructed through the active interpretation of its contributors. Given the heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1984) nature of 'neutrality' in the Wikinews doctrine, it might be more accurate to consider it a 'wiki point of view', thus retaining a notion of dialogic interaction within Wikinews, but breaking away from close connection to traditional debates around objectivity and impartiality. Essentially, Wikinews epitomizes Bakhtin's (1984) assertions that

truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction. (Bakhtin, 1984: 110; emphasis in original)

Uniquely, the sense of 'reciprocal relationship between addresser and addressee' that conditions the language of news (Allan, 1998a: 127), can in the case of Wikinews also lead to a tangible change in the text itself. That is, the

addressee may not only negotiate the word in the traditional sense, but also change the word in the originating text and thus assume the role of addresser, hence creating a new set of relations within dialogic interaction.

Bruns (2006) argues in his study of Wikinews that there is a 'deliberate discouragement of discussion' of news content on Wikinews. He suggests that the 'engagement between different viewpoints' is vital, but 'must happen in another forum' closely associated with the original news report. In particular, Bruns points to the success of blogs and news sites which attach a discussion directly to the news item as examples of better ways of engaging in debate.

The aim in such debates is not necessarily to come to a synthesised, neutral conclusion which eradicates all differences of opinion, but simply a full representation and acknowledgement of all reasonable points of view. (Bruns, 2006)

However, there is no reason to suggest that this aim is incompatible with the Wikinews model. Arguably, the wiki model forces an even greater engagement in dialogue between Wikinews contributors than commentary attached to news stories and at times blog entries, which seems to encourage a broadcast of personal opinion often without consequence or impact on the original text. That is, since the news discussion on Wikinews is essentially about changing the news text itself, contributors are forced to take a more active role in a productive dialogue by evaluating claims and counterclaims about news content. Although there are undoubtedly many examples of such productive dialogue within commentary attached to news stories or blogs, these are more often a summary of opinions and not necessarily responding to each other in a critical dialogue.

Of course, the extent to which Wikinews has been successful in generating such discussions on a greater scale is debatable. Indeed, as Bruns (2006) suggests, the presence of the neutral point of view policy may be a contributing factor in suppressing such a development. However, the policy does not extend to the talk page, and perhaps as Wikinews develops, the use of this page might also evolve. The kind of commentary-based discussion that Bruns feels is lacking is possible, although thus far the community has not pursued such functionality with any enthusiasm (see Bawolff, 2005; Wikinews, 2005g).

This study has provided insights into only one part of the Wikinews model and by no means should it be considered a final critique of its epistemology or position as an alternative to traditional conceptions of journalistic objectivity. Further empirical and comparative research into websites utilizing wiki technology in the production process is encouraged, in order to understand fully the different production methods and quality of output achieved, in particular where there is no neutral point of view policy governing the content. Of equal importance is Wikinews' status as an online community – or

even an online public sphere, given the extent to which the site encourages people to evaluate critically news and current affairs. Moreover, this study has not examined in detail the motivations of contributors to partake in (unpaid) wiki-style reporting, or the power relations between such contributors. The apparent flat structure of Wikinews actually figures a hierarchy of people based on their experience, knowledge, tenacity and technical privileges, as well as the quantity and quality of individual contributions.

This study has demonstrated how the current implementation of the neutral point of view is clearly inconsistent and more likely to reflect the individual contributors' interpretation than a unified concept. To this end it is not far from traditional interpretations and implementations of objectivity. The extent to which holding on to this notion of neutrality will assist or hinder the continued success of Wikinews depends on the contributors' ability not only to recognize its limitations, as they do in the policy text, but also to find ways of mitigating these limitations in the implementation stage, so as to preserve and build on the unique dialogic interaction made possible by the wiki technology.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the *New Media & Society* editors and anonymous reviewers, as well as Stuart Allan, Janet Jones and Lee Salter for their insightful feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

Notes

- 1 'Talk page' is the term used to describe the content on the *Discussion* tab, which together with the tabs *History* and *Edit this page* accompany every page on Wikinews.
- 2 Wikinews is powered by the MediaWiki software, which is a dynamic web publishing platform written in the PHP scripting language and built upon a MySQL relational database management system. The software is free and open source, distributed under the GNU General Public License.
- 3 In order to flag an article as disputed, anyone can place the following tag at the start of an article: `{{npov}}`. This is then replaced automatically by the following text: 'The neutrality of this article is disputed. Please see its talk page and try to resolve any actionable objections.'

References

- Allan, S. (1998a) '(En)gendering the Truth Politics of News Discourse', in C. Carter, G. Branston and S. Allan (eds) *News, Gender and Power*, pp. 121–35. London: Routledge.
- Allan, S. (1998b) 'News from NowWhere: Televisual News Discourse and the Construction of Hegemony', in A. Bell and P. Garrett (eds) *Approaches to Media Discourse*, pp. 105–41. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Allan, S. (2006) *Online News: Journalism and the Internet*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1984) *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics. Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 8 (ed. C. Emerson). Manchester: University of Manchester.
- Bawolff (2005) 'User talk:Bawolff/idea/COMMENTS', *Wikinews*, URL (consulted July 2005): http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/User_talk:Bawolff/idea/COMMENTS

- Becker, H.S. (1967) 'Whose Side Are We On?', *Social Problems* 14(3): 239–47.
- Bruns, A. (2006) 'Wikinews: the Next Generation of Alternative Online News?', *Scan* 3(1), URL (consulted July 2006): http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=69
- Dube, J. (2004) 'The Potential for WikiNews: Collaborative News by All', *CyberJournalist.net*, URL (consulted May 2005): <http://www.cyberjournalist.net/news/001760.php>
- Fairclough, N. (1995) *Media Discourse*. New York: Edward Arnold.
- Fairclough, N. (2003) *Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge.
- Fishman, M. (1980) *Manufacturing the News*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Fox News (2005a) 'Amnesty Chief: "Gulag" Not the Best Analogy', *Fox News*, 5 June, URL (consulted July 2005): <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,158555,00.html>
- Fox News (2005b) 'Fox News Sunday' Transcript: Amnesty Int'l USA Chief William Schulz', *Fox News*, 5 June, URL (consulted July 2005): <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,158626,00.html>
- Glasner, J. (2005) 'All the News That's Fit to Wiki', *Wired News*, 22 April, URL (consulted May 2005): <http://www.wired.com/news/ebiz/0,1272,67286,00.html>
- Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (trans. Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hackett, R.A. (1984) 'Decline of a Paradigm? Bias and Objectivity in News Media Studies', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1(3): 229–59.
- Hall, J. (2001) *Online Journalism: A Critical Primer*. London: Pluto Press.
- Hecht, P. (2005) 'Peasants in Peru Near Showdown on Mercury Spill', *Miami Herald*, 5 March, URL (consulted April 2005): <http://www.minesandcommunities.org/Action/press570.htm>
- Kaplan, R.L. (2002) *Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity, 1865–1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kiss, J. (2005) 'Wikinews Supercharged by London Bombings Coverage', *dotJournalism*, 13 July, URL (consulted Aug. 2006): <http://www.journalism.co.uk/news/story1443.shtml>
- Lichtenberg, J. (2000) 'In Defence of Objectivity Revisited', in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds) *Mass Media and Society* (3rd edn), pp. 238–54. London: Arnold.
- Martinez, A. (2005) 'Editor's Note: To Our Readers', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 June, URL (consulted August 2005): <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/editorials/la-ed-ednote12jun12,0,3840544.story?coll=la-news-comment-editorials>
- Mindich, D.T.Z. (1998) *Just the Facts: How 'Objectivity' Came to Define American Journalism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Morris, P. (ed.) (1994) *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Morson, G.S. and C. Emerson (1990) *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Pavlik, J.V. (2001) *Journalism and New Media*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rosen, J. (1993) 'Beyond Objectivity', *Nieman Reports* 47(4): 48–53.
- Rosen, J. (2005) 'Big Wigs Confer: Part Three', *PRESSthink*, 26 January, URL (consulted May 2005): http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2005/01/26/bkm_iii.html
- Santos, L. (2005) 'Amnesty USA "Don't Know for Sure" about Guantanamo', *Reuters*, URL (consulted June 2005): <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/>
- Schiller, D. (1981) *Objectivity and the News*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Schudson, M. (1978) *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*. New York: Basic Books.

- The Register* (2000) 'Home Truths: Bionic Man Takes the Metal Mickey', 4 July, URL (consulted May 2005): http://www.theregister.co.uk/2000/07/04/home_truths_bionic_man_takes/
- Till, F. (2005) "'Citizen Journalists" Move to Centre Stage after London Bombings', *National Business Review*, 14 July, URL (consulted August 2006): <http://www.nbr.co.nz/article/citizen-journalists-move-centre-stage-after-london-bombings>
- Trigona, M. (2004) 'Argentine Workers Take Over Factories to Save Jobs', *Toronto the Better Directory*, URL (consulted May 2005): <http://www.torontothebetter.net/2tgbd-argentinafac.htm>
- United Nations Environment Programme (2002) 'San Juan, Choropama and Magdalena, Peru – Mercury Spill of 2 June 2000', *Mineral Resources Forum*, URL (consulted May 2005): <http://www.mineralresourcesforum.org/incidents/Cajamarca/>
- Wikinews (2005a) 'Amnesty Report's Criticisms Rejected by Bush Administration', 5 June, URL (consulted June 2005): http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Amnesty_report's_criticisms_rejected_by_Bush_administration
- Wikinews (2005b) 'Argentinian Workers Preparing to Defend Control of Factory', 26 April, URL (consulted May 2005): http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Argentinian_workers_preparing_to_defend_control_of_factory
- Wikinews (2005c) 'Entrepreneur's RFID Chip Implant to Open Doors, Start Car', 24 March, URL (consulted May 2005): http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Entrepreneur%27s_RFID_chip_implant_to_open_doors%2C_start_car
- Wikinews (2005d) 'Iraqi Elections Kept Low-Key, but Secure, in Paris', 29 January, URL (consulted July 2005): http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Iraqi_elections_kept_low-key%2C_but_secure%2C_in_Paris
- Wikinews (2005e) 'Peruvians Sue Newmont Mining Company over Mercury Poisoning', 8 March, URL (consulted May 2005): http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Peruvians_sue_Newmont_Mining_Company_over_mercury_poisoning
- Wikinews (2005f) 'Wikinews: Neutral Point of View', URL (consulted May 2005): <http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/NPOV>
- Wikinews (2005g) 'Wikinews: Water Cooler', URL (consulted May 2005): http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Wikinews:Water_cooler/proposals/Archive/6#User_comments
- Yeomans, M. (2005) 'The Birth of WikiNews', *Citizen Kane*, URL (consulted May 2005): <http://citizenskane.blogspot.com/2005/04/birth-of-wikinews.html>
-

EINAR THORSEN is Lecturer in New Media and Multimedia Journalism at the University of Teesside, and a PhD candidate in Journalism Studies at Bournemouth University. His thesis focuses on civic engagement and citizen voices on the BBC News website during the 2005 UK General Election. He has co-edited *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives* (with Stuart Allan, Peter Lang, forthcoming, 2009) for which he contributed a chapter on the reporting of climate change. Other research includes articles on the history of BBC News Online and the development of public service policies in an online environment.

Address: School of Arts & Media, University of Teesside, Middlesbrough, Tees Valley TS1 3BA, UK. [email: e.thorsen@tees.ac.uk]
