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Representation and the problem of bibliographic imagination on Wikipedia

Abstract

The astonishing thing about Wikipedia is that despite the way it is produced, the product is as good as it is and not far worse. But this is no reason for complacency. As others have documented, Wikipedia has its representational blind spots, produced by the nature of its editorial community and their discursive conventions. Attempts are underway to alter these conventions and create a better representational balance, but a lack of bibliographical imagination promises to hinder efforts to do so as it leads to the under-use of a substantial library of material that would help fill representational gaps in ways that adhere to Wikipedia's strictures on what constitutes a reliable source. Here I present an extended example of the Wikipedia article on the Philippine-American War, an important, but often over-looked conflict, to illustrate the unfortunate effects that accompany a lack of attention to the kind of sources used to produce narratives for the online encyclopedia. I argue that this lack of attention is a result of a failure of bibliographical imagination and that it makes Wikipedia's stated aim to represent all the world's knowledge even further removed from reality than ever before.

Introduction

It is a commonplace now to note that Wikipedia, established in 2001, has turned the world of encyclopedias upside down. Statistics on its remarkable early growth, its status as the sole non-commercial organization listed among the most highly visited websites and its links with that other giant of the Internet, Google, have firmly put Wikipedia on the map of the world's (or most of the world – China and a few other countries continue to ban the site) information infrastructure.

Wikipedia attained its current preeminence through two unique affordances. The first is that by basing itself on the wiki model developed by Ward Cunningham in 1995, it allowed for collaborative online editing with what appeared, at first, to be low barriers to entry and with no central mediating authority. Its second important affordance was its preservation of even the smallest change to article text, enhancing in this way its usability by making it possible to reassure beginning editors that it was impossible to destroy the article they were contributing to. It also provided evidence about how the article had been modified and by whom, which in turn would allow for (hopefully) reasoned debate over these changes.

Given these affordances Wikipedia grew tremendously over its first decade or so of existence. It also became the focus of attempts to understand its operation from a social point of view as well as to what extent it refigured in a positive or negative way the epistemology of knowledge dissemination in the digital age. While Wikipedia was lambasted by some over its quality as an information source (McHenry 2004; Carr 2005; Gorman 2007), others praised the opportunities it gave for the opening up of the knowledge construction process to a wider range of people and in a richer fashion than had been possible before.

Tkacz, for example, explicitly noted that Wikipedia was a technology that could “open up or make visible political processes [of knowledge production] that have in the past best been described by the metaphor of the black box” (Tkacz 2007, 5). “If the edit function revealed ‘knowledge as dynamic,’ the history function adds ‘this is what knowledge used to look like’” generating a visibility to knowledge not available in older reference technologies (Tkacz 2007, 9).

For Hartelius “the site challenges traditional ‘monologic’ expertise’ so that it embeds within its process of article creation, “a contentious struggle over authority” (Hartelius 2010, 506-507). Dialogue is at the

heart of Wikipedia editing, a dialogue that can never be complete due to the mechanics of the site. Furthermore, on Wikipedia truth “arises from multiple interactions between utterances within the discourse community” with the “ongoing dialogue [becoming] a performative argument explicating the kinds of things about which an expert can offer accurate information” (Hartelius 2010, 514).

Damien Smith Pfister too argued that Wikipedia represents a challenge to “traditional models of expertise,” specifically by enabling multiperspectivalism. This concept, which he borrowed from Herbert Gans, originally referred to a kind of journalism “that draws in the opinions of the many in an attempt to better encompass available opinions” (Pfister 2011, 227). He locates this work in Wikipedia not “necessarily in the main entry but in the edit history and talk pages ...” (Pfister 2011, 227). But equally important to Pfister’s account is the disruption of information routines and their replacement with “the ability to contribute to Wikipedia” not necessarily through “subject matter expertise ... but in the ability to generate new ways of thinking about information” in a persuasive manner (Pfister 2011, 225).

And finally, Sean Hansen and his collaborators argued that Wikipedia allows for rational discourse between its editors, which they define as “discursive action through which progress toward emancipation from unwarranted societal control” can take place (Hansen 2009, 38). According to the authors, Wikipedia achieves this by approximating an ideal speech situation in which all participants can put forth or question a proposal without coercion. They point to the Wikipedia article on the controversial topic of the Armenian genocide as evidence that this does in fact occur.

Despite its potential for positive change in the way people approach the labour of knowledge production and dissemination in Wikipedia, we should be cautious about accepting such changes as automatic or even long-lasting. The history of other encyclopedic forms, as Joseph Reagle reminds us,

has seen both conservative as well as progressive visions behind their creation (Reagle 2010). Much depends on social context and social change within the community. In the case of Wikipedia there has been an increase in bureaucracy with a consequent flowering of a jargon all its own as well as a plethora of rules to be followed. Wikipedia is now said to be a much less friendly place than before and perhaps less progressive as well.

We can trace the roots of this problem back to the early days when the encyclopedia came under attack by educators for its supposed inaccuracy. John Willinsky has pointed out that these attacks were perhaps not the best position for the outside community to take, it being rather “shortsighted to view a massive social phenomenon of this scale” solely on these terms. Rather, because “so many people are working together out of an interest in helping other people learn, whether about Walmart or Wittgenstein, [it] should be assessed on a number of grounds” (Willinsky 2008, 1270) and, I would add, should have been applauded, or at least encouraged. Like Willinsky, Don Fallis notes there are other issues that need to be taken into account in what he referred to as an epistemic evaluation of an information source. The extent to which Wikipedia exhibited characteristics of power, speed and fecundity, corresponding to how much, how fast, and how many people can obtain knowledge from a source all came out in Wikipedia’s favour. Fallis concluded that “... despite legitimate concerns around its reliability, it probably is epistemologically better ... that people have access to this information source” (Fallis 2008, 1669). Furthermore, although inaccuracy is an important component in need of evaluation, Wikipedia was not irremediably inaccurate, doing quite well when compared to more traditional encyclopedia sources as Britannica (Giles 2005; Chesney 2006; Rosenzweig 2006; Rector 2008).

The more infamous gaffes involving people such as John Seigenthaler (accused, on Wikipedia, of killing former President John F. Kennedy), a long-standing article on the Bicholim conflict hoax (an

imaginary war between Portugal and the Indian state of Maratha), as well as the false premises under which a Wikipedia editor and member of the encyclopedia's Arbitration Committee, Ryan Jordan, presented himself on Wikipedia (he claimed to be a tenured professor of theology when in fact he was a 24 year old university drop-out), did nothing to help its reputation either (Seigenthaler 2005; Lih 2009). But it did start a process of reform that was mostly for the good (an emphasis on the need for verification and a separate policy on the biographies of living people being two examples). Unfortunately, it also had disturbing consequences for those wishing to see Wikipedia's epistemological progressiveness reach fruition – the development of a mindset among some Wikipedia editors that saw its future in doubt unless the encyclopedia became more like its print predecessors in terms of what was acceptable content and what was not. Formed into an Association of Deletionist Wikipedians, the mission of these editors was described by Ernic Salor as the achievement of “a better and higher quality encyclopedia by removing all that is not necessary or useful” (52). Their motto “Wikipedia is not a junkyard,” meant that they favoured the deletion of articles not meeting their standards, including size (very small, one or two sentence articles being a favourite target for their wrath), as well as lists. The deletionists were quickly joined in what was essentially a debate over the future of the encyclopedia, by an Association of Inclusionist Wikipedians who argue that “Wikipedia is not paper” in so far as it does not suffer the space constraints of a print encyclopedia and hence there is no need to apply selection criteria about content because over time problems with that content will be cleaned up.

Salor noted that the implications of this split for the wider Wikipedia community were considerable and “might hinder the future of the whole project” (52), observing that Wikipedia had to perform a delicate balancing act “between being welcoming to outsiders and satisfying the needs of experienced editors” describing the task as “time consuming” and requiring both “cooperation and goodwill” (53).

However, as the Wikipedia community began to stress the quality of its articles, rather than just their quantity, the friendliness of the site towards new editors declined. Aaron Halfaker et al demonstrated that although the number of new editors arriving at Wikipedia continued to be the same, the number of those who stayed on past their first edit dropped. The authors also showed that part of the reason for this decline was the negative reactions they received from the existing community, specifically the deletion and reversion of their work. Rather than heeding Salor's warning that creating an atmosphere welcoming to beginners and strict enough for more seasoned editors would require both time and goodwill, Halfaker notes that much of what needed to be communicated in a tactful and nuanced manner was left instead to more or less automated tools that worked on a binary basis of reject or accept (Halfaker et al 2013).

The existence of a deletionist mindset within Wikipedia has tilted Wikipedia in a more epistemologically conservative direction, which is further compounded by the already existing narrow composition of the "editor class" and the continued existence of huge blind spots in the encyclopedia's coverage. In recent years much discussion has been given to this topic and both problems make Wikipedia's slogan to be the repository of the world's knowledge a rather hollow boast.

Jimmy Wales himself acknowledged in an interview conducted in 2016 that approximately 85% of Wikipedia's editors were male despite efforts over the preceding five years to reduce that figure by 25% (Selyukh 2016). Others have investigated the reasons why women tend not to edit, while Tripodi's recent study argues that the disparity extends beyond the number of female editors to the notability attached to female biographies on Wikipedia (Ford & Wajcman 2017; Tripodi 2021). But gender is not the only skewed demographic on Wikipedia. Class, cultural, and geographic imbalances are also issues of concern (Graham et al., 2014; Hargittai 2015; Kumar 2017).

Although Wikipedia has tried to change the composition of its editors, especially in terms of gender and racial imbalance, by edit-a-thons and other programmes the problems appear to have deep structural roots (Luyt 2018). Leigh Gruwell, makes the observation that “digital discourse communities like Wikipedia are not isolated entities: rather, they exist within a larger network of overlapping discourse communities rooted in material and digital locations” (Gruwell 2015, 120-121). Coming from different discourse communities means that members will have different norms and assumptions and, because Wikipedia is dominated by a particular constellation of gender, class and culture, it means that those coming from other discursive communities, whose norms differ from the majority of Wikipedians, will experience problems. Gruwell focuses on the issue of gender, arguing that the difficulty of recruiting more women may be due to the norms and rules of Wikipedia which “often run counter to feminist ways of knowing and writing ...” (Gruwell 2015, 125). But the same logic applies to other groups as well. Maja van der Velden, for example, notes a tension in the relationship between indigenous people and Wikipedia because “Wikipedia’s design does not allow for Indigenous communities to use Indigenous concepts and structures to tell a story and to present and organize knowledge” (Velden 2013, 311).

Heather Ford’s case study of how one attempt by Wikipedians to try to accommodate differing cultural constructions of what constitutes a good source of knowledge came to grief provides an instructive example of van der Velden’s argument. Ford documented the fate of an article on the Indian game of *surr*, written for the Wikipedia Oral Citation Project established by Achal Prabhala in 2011. Lacking many written sources to describe the popular game, it was an ideal candidate for the project and would have resulted, if successful, in a massive epistemological shift that would have helped to accommodate other ways of knowing. But as Ford concludes it was “an enormous challenge, not only to Wikipedia, but to Western ideals about who has the authority to represent facts” (Ford 2015, 195) and perhaps not surprising, given the current defensive and conservative posture on Wikipedia, it failed to gain traction.

While the discourse community of Wikipedia officially welcomes “anyone” to edit, even though as we have seen there are still difficult barriers to entry, as the example of *surr* suggests, it is much stricter on judging what it values as a reliable source, as it is from the choice of sources that Wikipedia constructs its regime of truth (Tkacz 2012). For most Wikipedians a source is considered reliable and hence able to warrant the truthfulness of a claim only if it is in written form. The idea that writing embodies truth is an old one in the European tradition, although as Michael Clanchy has demonstrated, it was not always the case (Clanchy 2013). But for the past thousand years the printed word has won out over the verbal. Other characteristics of a reliable source for Wikipedia are that it has been written by a credentialed expert. But credentials do not necessarily refer to the possession of advanced degrees, they are also conveyed through occupation, for example, a journalist or a popular author can produce a reliable source. Furthermore, it must be noted that in many cases it is only the criteria of the source being in print that really matters so that there is much fuzziness in defining what is reliable. In an article examining national histories on Wikipedia, Luyt and Tan (2010, 718) found many dubious sources seemingly chosen merely because they were easily available free of charge on the Internet. In these cases, the author of the source was seldom questioned.

The deeply rooted domination of the written word over the spoken is certainly a limiting function on who is allowed to participate on Wikipedia and, as the debate over the *Surr* article suggests, what knowledge can be accommodated. But while *surr* is undoubtedly underserved by written sources, many topics pertaining to marginalized communities around the world are in a less precarious state. Over the course of the past half century there has developed a written literature, much of it scholarly in nature, but certainly not all inaccessible to a wider audience, that seeks to provide perspectives on the marginalized true to the conditions of their lives. Keeping to the field of history, the 1970s saw the rise of labour and social histories of the working class, later moving to incorporate the previously hidden

experiences of gender and race in class-based societies, both in Europe and increasingly the rest of the world (Hobsbawm 1959, Thompson 1963, Genovese 1974, Ginzberg 1980). And today it is not so difficult to find books expressing new views of themes only a short time ago clouded by colonialism and eurocentrism.¹ The use of such sources would help Wikipedia better fulfill its claim about universal knowledge even in the face of a less than diverse editor base. Such sources comply with the dominant epistemological foundations of Wikipedia, even in the strictest sense – they are in print as well as authored by credentialed experts and published by organisations seen as having a social stamp of legitimacy. Unfortunately, they tend not to be used.

Luyt and Tan (2010, 719) suggested that Wikipedians don't use the best source for the job because many of those sources are locked up in digital “knowledge vaults” owned by the Elsviers of the world. Others are available only from the dusty book stacks of academic libraries, a place anathema to many who have elevated Google to an almost God-like status (Hillis 2013). But even when easily available they may be overlooked, or not even sought out, because of a general view of knowledge as decontextualized and compartmentalized facts. Such an attitude allows for sources to be seen as mines producing “informational nuggets that require no further explanation” and further that since “the meaning of a text lies solely within itself” that “one text is as good as another ...” in providing those “nuggets” (Luyt & Tan 2010, 720). It is the product of a certain kind of education that privileges rote learning from standardized textbooks, a discourse labelled by Crismore as “textbookese” (Crismore 1984, 281).

Thwarted by paywalls, not understanding the need to contextualize sources, and permeated by an ideology that sees the online world as containing all that is of value means that there is little or no

¹ See, for example, Toby Green's recent history of West Africa for an example (Green 2019).

incentive for Wikipedians to thoroughly explore the world of sources. Another way to put this is that they lack a curiosity to examine the bibliographical universe and its history to any great extent – in other words they lack a bibliographical imagination.²

This lack of a bibliographic imagination means that tapping into more difficult to access resources in order to widen the scope of Wikipedia’s knowledge base, in other words, its epistemological frontier, is hampered. Furthermore, there is little reason to think that the lack of bibliographical imagination is only a characteristic of the current dominant editing culture so that the problem confronting those interested in getting Wikipedia to deliver on its promise to provide access to all the world’s knowledge is therefore even more complex. In the rest of this article I examine how the lack of a bibliographical imagination leads to unfortunate effects that limit rather than extend Wikipedia’s potentiality. The means I use is an extended examination of the Wikipedia article on the Philippine-American War, an article that started life in 2004 and is now listed as B-class (“mostly complete and without major problems but requires some further work to reach good article standards”)

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Philippine%E2%80%93American_War;

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Content_assessment).

The Philippine-American war on Wikipedia

² This notion of bibliographical imagination is of course related to C. Wright Mills’s concept of the sociological imagination. Writing in the 1950s Mills in his book of the same name provided both a critique and praise of sociology as a key means for individuals to understand their place in society. He described the sociological imagination as a quality of mind that would help people “to use information and develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves” (Mills 1970, 11). It was to be found in studies that linked “the problem of biography, of history, and of their intersections within a society” (Mills 1970, 12). David Michelski has deployed the concept of bibliographical imagination, also derived from Mills in an article exploring the linkages between personal experiences of information environments in the nineteenth century and the engineered and historically situated infrastructures that enabled them (Michelski 2001). I use the idea of bibliographical imagination here merely as a short hand to describe a mindset that is both curious and critical about sources and the context of their production.

Before embarking on this task, however, the basic contours of the history of this very important yet also still often neglected war need to be understood (Silbey 2007; Miller 1984). In May of 1898, as part of its wider war with Spain, the US Navy, under Commodore George Dewey staged a mock attack on the aging Spanish fleet based at Cavite, near Manila. This entire fleet was sunk. The Americans suffered only a few wounded sailors. Dewey did not have orders to take Manila itself and not enough soldiers to do the job anyway. On the other hand, revolt had broken out among the Filipinos and an Army of Liberation led by Emilio Aguinaldo soon surrounded the city along with the remaining Spanish forces. In the meantime, thousands of American soldiers were on their way across the Pacific Ocean and the existence of a successful Filipino rebellion was not enough to keep the United States from claiming the Philippines as its own. The American takeover was assisted by the Spanish desire to surrender to them, rather than the Filipinos, after which the resulting peace treaty saw the colony exchanged for US\$20 million. Under the pretense that the Filipinos were not a nation but a collection of disunited tribes too savage to govern themselves, the Americans launched their invasion. Surprisingly, for them, the Filipinos didn't just fold up and crumble, but when confronted with the superior force of the US Army turned to guerrilla warfare. And this precipitated, like such warfare tends to do, the dehumanization of the weaker party and the targeting of the civilian population as actual or potential supporters of that same side. The war was only won (officially in 1902, but with continuing unrest and sporadic revolt until 1913 and even later) when the US Army established a scorched earth policy, and fulfilled promises made earlier to allow local elites to collaborate with the new regime.

Matthew Jacobson has argued that the virtual invisibility of the Philippine-American War in American historical memory today performs important ideological work by keeping similar aggressive and brutal wars (the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s and the Indian Wars of the 19th century, fought in the American west), separate, thereby making it possible to suggest that each was “merely” a historical aberration (Jacobson 2000). Given this history it is not surprising that future generations, Filipino and

American, see the war as controversial. Wikipedia has not escaped this debate. The talk pages associated with the Philippine-American War article contain several comments claiming that the article is anti-American. For example, an anonymous user (that is, one who either doesn't have an account or isn't signed in) declared in 2007, without any supporting evidence that "many of the sources that are being used as references are written by authors that have obvious agendas themselves. Some of the historians are Filipino nationalists who write with an anti-American/Pro-Filipino POV" (Anon., 1st shots of the war, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Philippine-American_War/Archive_3#First_Shots_of_the_War, accessed July 22, 2021). No titles are mentioned; no authors examined. In 2009 another user put a POV template (a warning message), again without providing a single piece of evidence except to state that "there are few references that are either pro-actions or maintain a NPOV themselves (RightCowLeftCoast, POV flag, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Philippine-American_War/Archive_3#POV_Flag, accessed July 22, 2021). The idea that any single source could be without a POV and hence NPOV is a demonstration of a widespread misunderstanding about how NPOV is supposed to work, but that is a discussion for another time.³ The point here is that the controversial nature of the subject, coupled with the mostly American community of editors, produces a situation where unsupported comments like this need to be taken seriously by those striving to create an encyclopedia article that follows NPOV standards. In these two examples it was relatively easy for other, more knowledgeable editors to intervene. In the first, user Uthanc responded by noting "that [Filipino] nationalist historiography is now standard for Philippine history books ... and some of the American sources (especially contemporary or near-contemporary ones) may well be anti-Filipino, so it cuts both ways ..." (Uthanc, 1st shots of the war, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Philippine-American_War/Archive_3#First_Shots_of_the_War,

³ Neutral Point of View (NPOV) is the name given to one of Wikipedia's key policies, along with Reliable Sources (RS) and No Original Research (NOR). NPOV mandates that all articles be written in such a way that they represent "fairly, proportionately and, as far as possible, without editorial bias, all the significant views that have been published by reliable sources on a topic" (WP:NPOV, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view). Those disregarding NPOV policy are labelled by Wikipedians as exhibiting POV (Point of View).

accessed July 22, 2021). In the second example, a number of other editors asked RightCowLeftCoast to provide specific areas that he/she believed to be problematic and after receiving only generalities in reply removed the tag.

The problem of handling the epistemic bias, a kind of “tyranny of the majority” in terms of what gets to count as valid knowledge, in an article on a topic such as the Philippine-American War, where basic historical assumptions are engrained into the dominant editing community (in this case that the US was essentially a benevolent colonizer and that for irrational reasons people are always critical of its actions) at the expense of the views of others, outside or on the margins of that community, is more difficult if editors are either more committed to “setting the record straight” or selectively target sources or claims that they disagree with. And it is here that the problems of a lack of bibliographical imagination come to the fore.

Take, for example, the treatment of Gavan McCormack. User Philip Baird Shearer ruled in 2008 that a paragraph describing a view that the Philippine-American War was an example of genocide needed to be removed because the source used (McCormack) was “unreliable” and that the section of the chapter where the assertion was discussed was not available as a Google Books preview. The editor then proceeded to list a series of conditions that he wanted fulfilled before the paragraph could be re-inserted (Philip Baird Shearer, Gavan McCormack, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Philippine-American_War/Archive_3#Gavan_McCormack, accessed July 22, 2021). No one came forward here to defend McCormack despite such a defense being rather easy to mount – if one possessed a modicum of bibliographic imagination.

To begin with the source in question is said to be a book. It is not a book. It is a chapter in an edited book by some of the key figures in genocide studies. The lead editor, Ben Kiernan, is the A. Whitney

Griswold professor of history at Yale University and founding director of the Genocide Studies programme, as well as featuring among the most important holocaust and genocide scholars today (Bartrop and Jacobs 2010). McCormack himself is no slouch either, being a professor emeritus in the history department of the Australian National University and a specialist on East Asian history. Furthermore, if just one editor had checked the book or perhaps even emailed the author they would have been found that the chapter in question contains the following: "...this phase of the Japanese war in China constitutes a major link in the history of twentieth-century counter guerrilla warfare that began with the U.S. efforts to crush nationalist resistance in the Philippines after the war with Spain at the beginning of the century and ended with the Russian attempts to crush Chechnyan resistance. The case for viewing such counter guerrilla operations as genocide, rather than as covered by 'military exigency,' seems plain enough," clearly support for the claim of genocide made in the Wikipedia article (McCormack 2003, 274). And finally, one must ask, since when did the availability of information through Google preview amount to a legitimate justification to remove both a source and the entire paragraph that the source supported? Google Books preview should have been the start of the editor's process of verification, not the end. In this case, both the user removing the source and the paragraph and all those editors who didn't have the willpower or confidence to combat these weak reasons for removal lacked the necessary bibliographical imagination to properly edit the article. Now, one could argue that regardless of how much bibliographical imagination the editor had, he or she might have removed that source because of the general editorial bias against statements believed to be "anti-American," but the point here is that the community as a whole exhibited a lack of imagination in so far as no member tried to mount a defense.

Bibliographic imagination is essentially the curiosity to learn more about the universe of sources on any particular topic and it results in a personal or communal map of that universe or information space of that topic, including what might be considered its epistemological boundaries. The size of this map

depends very much on the level of bibliographical imagination held by the individual (Luyt 2012). We can conceive of this boundary as two circles. The larger circle includes all the reliable sources that have been written on a subject, its bibliographic universe. Inside this circle is another representing those works that Wikipedians are aware of and consider to be reliable sources – their personal information spaces, bounded by whatever level of bibliographic imagination they possess. It is these sources that are the focus of debate over truth claims. And just as many kinds of editors would make Wikipedia a richer place, so too would a widening of the sources used for debate. In fact, a Wikipedia article could only really be said to attain NPOV status if that smaller circle was extended as widely as possible. Not all the sources would necessarily need to be accommodated, but ideally they need to be considered; to be part of the dialogue over what the article is to contain.

The Philippine-American War article provides a good example of what goes wrong when the collective information spaces of Wikipedia's editors is far too small. It comes from a discussion over the claim made at one point in the history of the article that 1.4 million Filipinos died during the conflict. The discussion began in 2007 with a typical declaration that the article was “extremely anti-American” (Judgesurreal777, POV, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Philippine-American_War/Archive_4#POV, accessed July 22, 2021). But rather than remaining at the level of generalities, another user, Aristotle1990 specifically questioned the accuracy of the death toll. He quotes a long text written by Max Boot that appeared in *Commentary Magazine*. Boot had written a chapter on the Philippine-American War for his book, *The Savage Wars of Peace* and was surprised at the figure presented by Wikipedia. The estimates he had seen came from the works of William Setton, Stanley Karnow and Walter Lefebvre and were lower than 1.4 million. He claimed that since these authors were all liberals they could not be accused of downplaying casualties. So where did the 1.4 million figure come from? Boot noted that the Wikipedia article cited a work by E. San Juan Jr. “posted on an obscure website” which identified him as “recently Fulbright Professor of American Studies ... and visiting professor of

literature and cultural studies at National Tsing Hua University" in Taiwan, which for him was "not exactly a pedigree that instantly screams out that he has any special expertise on the Philippine War." Investigating further he found that San Juan relied on Luzviminda Francisco's *The Philippines: end of an illusion*, but that it was not to be found at the Library of Congress or the New York Public Library (Francisco 1973). From Amazon.com, however, he discovered another book by the same author published by the Foundation for Nationalist Studies "which doesn't have a web site" – the final nail in the coffin for Boot in regards to Francisco as a reliable source. After presenting this extensive excerpt from Boot, Aristotle1990 concludes "I'm sorry, but regardless of whether you strongly hate Boot, who is indeed a conservative, he is likely more qualified than the author of the source given for the sentence..." and enumerates three points: that the 1.4 million figure is inaccurate, that labelling the conflict genocide is also inaccurate, but despite this, there was a need to include this point of view as a minority position in the article because the author of the source was a scholar (Aristotle1990, POV, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Philippine-American_War/Archive_4#POV, accessed July 22, 2021).

Aristotle1990's uncritical acceptance of Boot and the inability or unwillingness of the rest of the Wikipedia community to challenge or nuance the conclusion that he draws from Boot's argument clearly shows a lack of understanding of the bibliographic universe surrounding the Philippine-American War. It worthwhile to examine Boot's discourse in detail to illustrate this point.

To begin with, Boot implicitly defines his own epistemological boundaries when he labels Karnow and Lafeber as somehow representative of left-wing opinion. Perhaps in the United States they are seen as left-wing, but in other places the spectrum of political opinion is much greater so that these scholars appear centrist only. However, labelling these scholars as left-wing makes it appear that his use of their figures is a concession to other views, cutting off anything more radical as beyond the pale.

Having already narrowed the limit of respectable expert opinion to the mild liberalism predominant in the United States Boot proceeds to undermine San Juan himself by denigrating the high status a Fulbright professorship implies and that a scholar of American studies may in fact consider the Philippine-American War a legitimate topic for his or her work. In doing so, Boot himself displays a remarkable ignorance of even the “mainstream” American academic community, which considers the Fulbright a prestigious award and the topic of the Philippine-American War a key issue in American studies (Kaplan & Pease, 1993; Kaplan 2002; Kramer 2006; McCoy & Scarano 2009). As for the "obscure website" a check for the article on the Internet finds that it was published by *Bulatlat*, an online news magazine that has been around since 2001 which labels itself as “an alternative news agency” that aims to "contribute to the advocacy [of the rights of the people] and to the struggle for change” (Bulatlat 2021).

Boot continues to narrow the range of acceptable expert opinion by examining the catalogues of only the Library of Congress and New York Public Library, in this way casting doubt on Francisco’s reliability. While there may be something to say about using the Library of Congress as a proxy of authority, why was the New York Public Library chosen? Why not the Library of the University of the Philippines or Cornell University Library, famous for its extensive collection of southeast Asian material? The book is certainly available at both of these institutions. Francisco is also reduced in importance by casting doubt on the reliability of the publisher of her other work: the Foundation for Nationalist Studies. But again, a quick look at the Foundation's record suggests that it has a significant publishing record, having to its credit works by renown scholars of the Philippines as Renato Constantino, Walden Bello, and Temerio Rivera.

Boot, despite his one chapter on the Philippine-American War, clearly does not have a firm understanding of the nature of the entire community producing expert knowledge on the Philippines. That the Wikipedian community embraced him as an expert (and his name appears frequently in the

talk pages as a source for the Philippine-American War article outside of this example) implies an equal lack of understanding and a lack of bibliographical imagination. Boot's criticism was the basis of Aristotle1990's successful argument to revise the article. Today the sentence that aroused his ire has been removed and the casualty figures are presented as a range from 34,000 to a million people. In this case the inclusion of a range of numbers rather than a single total was probably in the best interests of the article's credibility and a reasonable reflection of expert opinion, but it is a solution that was the product of a very flawed process which does not leave one with a sense of confidence about Wikipedia. It is an example of the right decision made for the wrong reasons.

The bibliographic imagination should do more than seek out a wide range of sources, it should examine the context of these sources wherever possible. Who are the authors and why did they write what they wrote? My next example illustrates how a failure to do this can also affect the quality of Wikipedia. It is found in the third talk page archive under the heading "First shots." In 2008 user Uthanc wanted to remove the phrase "one common view" from the paragraph describing "the Grayson incident" because in his/her opinion it was "universally accepted the [it] started the fighting" (Uthanc, First shots, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Philippine-American_War/Archive_3#First_shots, accessed July 22, 2021).⁴ This view was disputed by Boracay Bill who declared that "I think 'universally accepted' is true for the Filipino universe" which led him to find another source to back the claim (that is, that William Grayson, by means of his shot, ignited the war). So far this was a perfectly reasonable course of action. What came next was not so reasonable when seen in relation to the bibliographical universe of the Philippine-American War. Let us examine this in more detail.

⁴ The Grayson incident was a reference to the events that ignited hostilities between the Filipino revolutionaries and the US Army. The current version of Wikipedia cites Donald Chaput's article in the journal *Nebraska History*, which clearly states that William Grayson, a private, was the first to fire a shot in the war (Chaput 1980). Grayson's unit had been engaged, along with much of the US Army in the Philippines, in a tense stand-off on the outskirts of Manila for some time. According to Grayson's account, the Filipinos had been gradually encroaching on American positions and he shot the soldier after issuing a command ordering him to stop moving forward. Whether this was the case or whether the shot was fired without provocation is unlikely to be ever known for certain (Silbay 2008, 64-65).

We first must note that Uthanc already added a source to support the statement that “It is believed that American aggression led to the first shot that led to the war” – Renato Constantino’s book, *The Philippines: a past revisited*, published in 1975. Although Boracay Bill did not say that the source was suspect in his eyes because it was written by a nationalist Filipino historian, this was likely his reason for embarking on a search for another source to back the claim up “independently” (Boracay Bill, First shots, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Philippine-American_War/Archive_3#First_shots, accessed July 22, 2021). Of course, having more than one source for any claim is always a good idea in any kind of research effort, so one cannot really fault the editor here either. However, in a subsequent sentence Boracay Bill writes about one book he examined in his quest for another good source, Dean Worcester’s *The Philippines: past and present*, published in 1914 (Worcester 2014). Unfortunately for Boracay Bill, the book, although it mentioned the incident did “not name Grayson” (Boracay Bill, First shots, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Philippine-American_War/Archive_3#First_shots, accessed July 22, 2021).

Equally unfortunate, however, is that the book reveals the limits of the editor’s understanding of the bibliographic universe of Philippine history. For if it is true that Constantino is a Filipino nationalist historian, at least he was a historian writing with the benefit of some distance from the events of the war. Worcester was a zoologist by training and a key player in the subsequent colonization of the Philippines, at first as a member of the governing Philippine Commission, later as Secretary of the Interior. Throughout his career in the Philippines his aim was to applaud the American regime and denigrate those Filipinos who resisted it. Easily he was the most hated senior figure in the colonial administration. Even Americans in the colony feared him as he was a master of blackmail against his enemies, keeping detailed dossiers on all key or rising figures in the administration (McCoy 2009, 97-104). His book, like all his many writings on the Philippines, was an exercise in propaganda aimed to

convince American voters and policy-makers that the US should retain the Philippines as a colony.⁵ In this regard, the publishing of *The Philippines: past and present* may be seen as a preemptive (and generally successful) strike against another book on the role of the United States in these early years of colonization, James Blount's critical examination of *The American Occupation of the Philippines* (Blount 1912). If that would not be enough to convince most level-headed editors to steer clear of the book, the fact that Worcester had numerous business interests in the Philippines, including an attempt to monopolize the rearing of beef cattle on the Bukidnon plateau in Mindanao, and was worried that Filipino independence would put these in jeopardy provide ample grounds to be cautious (McCoy 2009, 213-214).

When laid out in this way it is clear that any use of Worcester's book is fraught with peril for the unwary. But even if the information was not widely known, a cursory examination of the book makes it clear that Worcester had a very large axe to grind. Consider these chapter titles: "Insurgent 'cooperation'", "Did we destroy a Republic?", "The premediated insurgent attack" – in fact the two-volume book has hardly in its 1024 pages one good thing to say about the Filipinos.

Worcester is an excellent example of why Wikipedia, as part of its No Original Research (NOR) policy cautions editors about the use of primary sources, which it defines as "original materials that are close to an event, and are often accounts written by people who are directly involved." The policy allows their use "but only with care because it is easy to misuse them"

⁵ In this regard, Mark Rice has shown the lengths to which Worcester would go to "win" his arguments. A famous series of photographs taken by Worcester and used by him in the various talks he gave about the Filipinos to audiences across the United States purported to show the evolution from savagery to civilization of one particular unnamed individual. This individual was, according to Worcester a savage head-hunter when first encountered but, through the work of American police officers, he became an upstanding model of a "civilized" man. The reality was very different. The photo was of Don Francisco Muro, a leader of his community who had visited Spain and had testified to the Philippine Commission about corruption in his province. And, most importantly, the photos were all taken in the same year – 1901 (Rice 2010).

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No_original_research, accessed July 22, 2021). There are two examples of such abuse (undoubtedly unintentional) of Worcester's book in the Philippine-American War article. The first occurs in the section on Filipino atrocities where a long quote from the book is included to provide an example. Given Worcester's amply documented bias against the Filipino revolutionaries this is hardly a good use of the source. The second problematic use of the book is its use to discuss the remnants of the revolutionary forces who fought on long after the official ending of the war in 1902. Their activity in the article is described in the first sentence as "brigandage" with the source for the claim being Worcester. Further on in the paragraph another sentence tells us that "these movements were all dismissed by the American government as bandits, fanatics or cattle rustlers." The source is again Worcester's book and the *San Francisco Call* newspaper edition for the 12th October, 1911.

What is amazing is not that one editor decided that these sources were in any way "reliable" in the rather large universe of potential sources on the topic of the war, but that no other editor debated their appropriateness. And Worcester is still cited not just in the Philippine-American War article, but in other articles on contemporary Philippine history as well. Certainly, the lack of debate or even questioning of such a source reflects a lack of bibliographical imagination on the part of Wikipedia's editors.

Likely these sources were chosen because, being online, they were easy to access, although Blout's work is also available online, suggesting that other factors are at work as well. But this ease of access, combined with a lack of bibliographical imagination, leads to results such as these – results that are unnecessary, as well as unfortunate. In this example, there are excellent sources available that provide some insight into what the pulanjes and the various other movements felt they were doing when they took up arms against the American colonial state (Sturtevant 1977; Iletto 1979). These sources appear

nowhere in the article. Adding to the problem is that there are a host of other primary source materials used in other parts of the Wikipedia article which pose similar problems to Worcester (see Table 1), none of which have received any attention in the talk pages

Looking at the Philippine-American War article as a whole we have a plethora of unexamined primary sources (Worcester and many others), some secondary sources that are inadequately examined (McCormack) and yet other secondary sources that are given far too much weight in determining the epistemological boundaries of the bibliographical universe of the topic (Boot). However, it must not be inferred that the article does not include any decent sources. The works of Leon Wolff (1960), David Silbey (2007), Brian Linn (2000) and Stuart Miller (1984) are all present. What is problematic is that they do not account for more of the citations used to justify the article's claims. Fortunately, Wikipedia's constantly evolving nature offers some hope that in the future the particular problems I have identified with the Philippine-American War article may be rectified, but so far they have not.

Implications

The astonishing thing about Wikipedia remains that despite the way it is produced, the product is as good as it is and not far worse. But this is no reason for complacency. As others have documented, Wikipedia has its representational blind spots, produced by the nature of its editorial community and their discursive conventions. Attempts are underway to alter these conventions and create a better representational balance, but a lack of bibliographical imagination promises to hinder efforts to do so as it leads to the under-use of a substantial library of material that goes some way to filling these gaps in ways that adhere to Wikipedia's strictures on what constitutes a reliable source. And even if the editorial community is substantially altered, if bibliographical imagination does not expand as well, issues of representation will likely remain unresolved.

The Wikipedia community should learn from other amateur hobbyist groups. These do not claim expert status, but equally they do not shun expertise and even attempt to embrace it when possible. Consider amateur ornithologists. Their aims tend to differ from professionals, but they do not disavow the knowledge that these professionals have discovered during their research. Instead, they incorporate into their practice understandings of bird anatomy, behaviour, ecology and so on. In fact, the history of interaction between the two groups has been a close one, with amateurs providing the professionals, through mass observation exercises, data of extreme value (Guida 2019). Wikipedians could learn much from the kind of positive relationship between amateur and professional here. At the end of the day, if Wikipedians are going to write history articles, for example, then it behooves them to become conversant with the ways of historians and their literature. The same applies for all the varied topics in the Wikipedia universe. There is no other way to insure the success of Wikipedia as a readily available source of knowledge over the long-term.

However, the fault does not lie entirely with Wikipedians. Although they certainly need to expand their bibliographical imaginations in order to obtain a better understanding of the world of written sources and the variety of perspectives on many of the topics they write about, the challenge of doing so is exacerbated by their being a product of an educational milieu that has generally neglected to teach in a sustained manner how to be critical about sources. Earlier in this article I noted that the attitude of seeing texts as undifferentiated “information nuggets” can be traced back to a discourse that Crismore refers to as “textbookese” which dominated many educational institutions of the time and likely continues to do so today. Part of the problem then stems from the kind of education Wikipedians receive.

William Deresiewicz, in his description of what the liberal arts ideally impart to students, comes close to articulating what a bibliographically imaginative Wikipedian should know. He writes that “when you study the liberal arts, you learn how knowledge is created. You don’t acquire information; you debate it. How do we know it is true? What further questions does it raise? What are the promises that underlie the discipline in question ... and what are the methods by which it proceeds? You learn, in other words that there is no ‘information,’ strictly speaking, there are only arguments” (Deresiewicz 2014, 150).

Sadly, the liberal arts have been losing out for some time now to other subjects seen as more practical and in tune with the needs of the (corporate) economy. And when they are taught to students it is not in the setting that Deresiewicz recommends. Instead of being “conducted in small classrooms by dedicated teachers” they are taught in large impersonal halls by stressed, and in many cases, part-time faculty (Deresiewicz 2014, 149). A liberal education is not a cheap education and here of course one comes face to face with the ever-present reality that like many other public institutions higher education has been the target, since the 1980s, of the forced austerities imposed by neo-liberal ideology.

However, we need to constantly remind ourselves that the neo-liberal project is not only about austerity. The bigger picture is that it works to re-distribute wealth on a massive scale to a small minority of the population. The recent news coverage of billionaires not paying taxes, and in fact the perverse phenomenon of the richest among us growing wealthier even at a time of global disaster illustrates quite clearly that the world is a much richer place than the prophets of neo-liberalism would have us believe (Eisinger 2021; Makortoff 2021). The money is there. A better re-distribution of this wealth to public institutions, including higher education, is what is needed. Such a redistribution if applied properly, would help create a future generation of bibliographically imaginative Wikipedians able to fulfill more of its promise to be the world’s repository of knowledge.

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