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The nature of historical representation on Wikipedia: dominant or alterative historiography?

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Abstract

Given their ease of use and capability for interactivity new media are seen as having the potential to make visible previously marginalized voices. The online presence of the writing of history is increasing, and this potential would be a welcome development for the field as it would create a much richer set of easily available historical perspectives. However, this article suggests that the achievement of this promise is fraught with difficulty and that a more likely outcome is a mapping of the status quo in historical representation onto the new media. To illustrate this I present an analysis of the Wikipedia accounts of Singaporean and Philippine history. For Singapore, alternative historical visions are not as developed as in the Philippines and this is reflected in the nature of the respective Wikipedia accounts. At the end of the article I suggest that a possible means to achieve something more of the promise of digital media for history is for information professionals to take a keener interest in Wikipedia with an eye to helping include accounts of documented historical perspectives that are ignored by mainstream historiographical traditions.

Introduction

Increasingly history has an online presence. From timelines to interactive historical maps as well as online archives and document repositories, history has embraced new media. Wikipedia is a part of this trend with numerous pages devoted to historical topics (Spoerri, 2007). Wikipedia allows (i.e. demands) collaborative production of texts, raising the question of what kind of history is produced as a result. With the level of interactivity and ease of use of new media it has been suggested that digital media and especially Wikipedia has a potential to include voices or perspectives less frequently heard (Konieczny, 2009; Elersbach & Glaser, 2004; Hansen, Berente & Lyytinen, 2009; Elvebakk, 2008). This article examines Wikipedia history pages for Singapore and the Philippines with the aim of assessing the extent to which this is the case. Only two Wikipedia histories have been chosen in order to allow a thorough analysis and presentation of the texts. Many Wikipedia studies focus on massive data sets. This study does the opposite, focusing on a smaller number of cases with the aim of analyzing them intensively. Singapore and the Philippines were selected because of the economic and political importance of the countries, but also because they provide contrasting historiographical traditions. Whereas Singapore's recorded history is shorter and has been less open to alternative interpretations, this is not the case with the Philippines, where even European history stretches back centuries and debates on historiography have taken place since the 1960s, but especially in the years leading up to the Centennial of the Philippine Revolution in 1998 (Nagano, 2007). The basic premise is that

Wikipedia history pages represent a collective vision of the past (Pentzold, 2009), one that is shaped by the dominant historiography of the country or region so that the potential of digital history-writing is more or less circumscribed according to pre-existing social visions of what constitutes valid or accurate historical representation. The following two sections describe these representations for each of the countries under discussion.

Historiography of Singapore

C.J.W. – L. Wee (2003) wrote that both popular and much academic history-writing about Singapore takes the narrative form of a “Whiggish telos of economic development, progress, modernity, and modernization” (p. 142). This tale extends from the colonial past to the present, blurring the usual lines drawn between colonial and post-colonial regimes. The reason for this is that the colonial government, rather than being a despised political order, is seen as essential in establishing the conditions under which Singapore could progress (good town planning, free trade, low taxation, and a governing structure based on rational principles, rather than the “fetters” of traditional custom). What really demarcates Singaporean history, from the mainstream point of view at any rate, are the moments of crises that the country has faced in the recent past. One of these periods extends over the 1950s and early 1960s, a period of time that provides, according to the critique of Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli (2008) “the cornerstone of the PAPs early history” (p. 18). In their view, the narrative of Singapore’s past is commonly viewed as a linear tale of increasing prosperity and progress “in which a unified actor – the nation moves forwards in time” (Lysa & Jianli, 2008, p. 40), but is only assured of ultimate success after the PAP (People’s Action Party) wins its battle with the Communists “through sheer nobility of purpose, political courage and acumen” (Lysa & Jianli, 2008, p. 47). This takes place in the 1950s and 1960s. Loh Kah Seng (1998) also argues that the recent past of Singapore has been conceived as a series of crises that in the dominant narrative speak to the present of the need for discipline and self-confidence. In this way moments of crisis have contributed to an ideology of “fragility”; the view that Singapore must perpetually be on guard because of its small size and vulnerable geographic and economic position. Loh identifies two of the crisis moments, the Japanese occupation, and communism and communalism in the 1950s and 1960s, as especially important. He also argues that post-1965 represents a kind of “end of history” for traditional Singaporean historiography as the emergence of the PAP as the ruler of an independent Singapore represents the beginning of a period of “unmitigated success” for the country (Loh 1998).

Historiography of Philippines

For Geoff Bankoff (2001) the dominant approach to history-writing in the Philippines divides the past “along cultural lines: an indigenous period followed by a Spanish and then an American one” (p. 541), all prior to independence. But these divisions are also rungs on a hierarchical ladder. Each culture is superseded by another that is more modern as measured by the development of democratic institutions and capitalist competitiveness. However, climbing the ladder has not been smooth, according to the traditional historiography. In fact, the “tutelage” of the Americans is seen as necessary because Spanish colonialism had become an obstacle to the forward movement towards modernity. Hence “while the Spanish period is irredeemably

associated with colonial oppression, the years of American occupation are much more ambiguously portrayed” (Bankoff 2001, p. 541).

The notion that much Philippine history sees the nation as a progressing from primitiveness to modernity as manifested in a sequence of stages is also the basis of Reynaldo Ileto’s (1988) critique of Philippine historiography. But for Ileto, the teleological force underlying Philippine historiography is a movement towards maturity, of the Philippines and Filipinos gradually taking their place among the people and nations of the modern world, following the path blazed previously by Europe (Ileto 1998, p. 240-241). He characterizes this history, both leftist and liberal versions, as pre-occupied with selecting events from the past and arranging them into a linear sequence that he describes as a Golden Age (pre-Spanish), a Dark Age (Spanish), and either “suppressed nationalism” or “democratic tutelage” (the Americans) (depending on whether the writer is of the left or liberal perspective). This kind of history assumes “a necessary development from a point in a past to the present and everything in between is either taken up in the march forward, or simply suppressed ...” (Ileto, 1998, p. 135).

But the historiographical traditions of the Philippines are not monolithic. Vincent Rafael and Ileto, for example, have provided works that present a Filipino “history from below” (Rafael 1988; Ileto 1979). And these have not remained confined within academic circles. Ileto reminds us that alongside the official celebrations to mark the centennial of the 1898 Revolution, a number of unofficial or alternative readings of Philippine history were on display ranging from activities marking the continuation of the Mindanao independence struggle to remembrances of peasant heroes such as Papa Isio who died fighting the Americans for a meaningful land reform. This is a very different historiographical terrain from Singapore where a monolithic history has generally not enjoyed much competition until recently and which tends to remain in the realm of the academic. It is not that Singapore lacks the events and personages that could disrupt the “linearity” of the dominant narrative; it is that in the face of economic prosperity for the majority, there has been less need to find alternative historical resources to mount oppositional programs.

Alternative histories

It is important to emphasize that the dominant historiographical traditions of Singapore and the Philippines are not wrong, merely that they are not the only ones that could be constructed. As Berkhofer notes, traditional conceptions of history assume that good historical works “are accurate representations of an actual past, ideally as photographs are popularly thought to be of their subject” (Berkhofer, 1995, p. 28). But the process of writing history is more complicated. For W.H. Walsh: “The historian and his reader initially confront what looks like a largely unconnected mass of material, the historian then goes on to show that sense can be made of it by revealing certain pervasive themes or developments. In specifying what was going on at the time he both sums up individual events and tells us how to take them” (Walsh, 1974, p. 136). In other words, historians construct their work out of the plentitude of artifacts surviving from the past, they select and arrange certain items in order to make what would otherwise be an incoherent jumble of events into something with a structure; a narrative. History therefore cannot be a perfect representation of the past. Alan Munslow elaborates on this point by clarifying history

writing as the creation of “the past as history”, noting that the past itself can never be fully recovered (Munslow, 2007). From our point of view, the significance of these insights lies in the fact that they imply that any one historical account is by itself incomplete. It is but one selection and arrangement of the evidence and can always be complemented by accounts that select and arrange the evidence in different ways. In the case of the dominant story of Singapore’s history the selection and arrangement of evidence has produced an account that privileges the economic and political over the social and cultural; that emphasizes the role of elites over the masses, ignores the lives of marginalized groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and the environment, and tends to simplify the web of global connections that Singapore has relied on over the years (Lau, 2004). One could conceive of histories that select and arrange the evidence in ways that privilege or centre attention on these aspects of the past to produce histories very different from the dominant narrative of progressive economic success; creating histories that look at the world from the bottom rather than the top. Karl Hack and Jean-Louis Margolin, for example, would rather we view Singapore history as a series of discontinuities rather than a story of linear progress (Hack & Margolin, 2010). Other historians have, mostly recently, also produced work that moves beyond the mainstream (Loh, 2007; Barr & Trocki, 2007; Aljunied, 2009; Dobbs, 2003; Warren, 1986, 1993). Similarly, there are other ways of dividing Philippine history, and perhaps the divisions are not so useful to begin with. One could argue that there was in fact a great deal of continuity between the late Spanish and American periods. Iletto argues just this point when he examines the responses made by government to the cholera epidemics of 1882 and 1902. The first of these occurred under the Spanish regime, the second under the Americans. But whereas the Americans were keen to portray their intervention as a scientific and humane response in comparison to the superstition and cruel proceedings of the Spanish, Iletto rather sees continuity as both involved the displacement of medical systems seen as at least benevolent in the eyes of the rural and urban poor with ones alien and fraught with risk (Iletto 1988). The narrative of progressive modernization could also be challenged with the perspectives of the conquered, exploited, or otherwise marginalized people (for example, peasants, workers, indigenous communities) receiving attention. Again Iletto looks “beyond the pueblo centre”, to the terrain of the rulers, be they Spanish, American, or elite Filipino, to argue that outside this ordered history there existed a largely hidden “Other”. In the eyes of the elite, when encountered, this “Other” assumed the monstrous form of the bandit or *tulisan* but which Iletto identifies as “many small but authentic communities ... led by non-principalia [elites], non-pueblo dwellers, who towards the end of that century were forming their own image of community and nation” (Iletto 1988, 145). Professional historians have produced such histories and over a longer period of time than for Singapore and with a greater degree of popular success (Constantino, 1975; Scott, 1982; De Beavoise, 1995; Holt, 2002).

The question then is whether history as written in the online media of Wikipedia reflects a multitude of historical perspectives or whether it adheres to the dominant historiographical approach of each country. To answer this question, the overview articles for both History of Singapore and History of the Philippines were examined, as well as all of the country history articles linked to these pages through the navigation box. The Wikipedia version used as a source was dated October 14, 2010 for both countries while in the accounts that follow quotes drawn from Wikipedia are identified according to the sub-article they appear in.

Singapore History on Wikipedia

Wee's (2003) "Whiggish" history is clear to see in the first part of the Wikipedia account. Sir Stamford Raffles, an officer of the British East India Company, is credited with "the founding of modern Singapore" (Wikipedia, Founding of Modern Singapore) which "rapidly proved to be a spectacular success" (as measured by the growth of the population and monetary value of trade) (Wikipedia, Founding of Modern Singapore). Raffles is also credited with the beginnings of orderly town planning as he 'arranged to organize Singapore into functional and ethnic subdivisions' (Wikipedia, Founding of Modern Singapore). In its account of subsequent decades, the teleological focus on economic progress continues as "Singapore grew to become one of the most important ports in the world and a major city" (Wikipedia, Singapore in the Straits Settlements) based on the "entrepot trade which flourished under no taxation and little restriction" (Wikipedia, Singapore in the Straits Settlements). But Wikipedia doesn't dwell entirely on the economic prosperity of the colony. Mention is made of the plight of the Chinese coolies who "flooded Singapore looking for work" and aspiring to "make their fortune" but for whom the future was likely "a life of low-paying unskilled labour" (Wikipedia, Singapore in the Straits Settlements). The miserable conditions under which they lived are also mentioned briefly in Wikipedia: "most people had no access to public health services and diseases such as cholera and smallpox caused severe health problems" (Wikipedia, Singapore in the Straits Settlements). What is missing though is any link between the seemingly paradoxical conditions the bulk of the population endured compared to the overall prosperity of the colony. That the latter depended on the former as much as it did British law and order or Singapore's favoured geographical position keeps the Wikipedia account compatible with the broad contours of economic success that is characteristic of Singapore's dominant historiography. It is not surprising that once the foundation of Singapore's economic success is laid in the late nineteenth century, history apparently ends. The Singapore mutiny of 1915 and a quote by Lee Kuan Yew comprise the bulk of the coverage of the first three decades of the twentieth century, giving the impression that the only thing changing in Singapore was the growing value of its trade (the dramatic economic events of the 1930s are not covered at all).

What interrupts this mostly static state of affairs is the Second World War. In the dominant historiographical tradition this is the start of a period of troubles not transcended until the advent of PAP rule in the 1960s. A great deal of attention is given to the war, not surprisingly given the popularity of military history. An entire section is devoted to the Battle of Singapore; a smaller section discusses life under the Japanese. This section stresses the hardship that the middle class faced under the new regime, hardships that large portions of the population likely experienced as common-place under the British as well: "Resources were scarce during the occupation ... The Japanese issued ration cards ... the amount of rice for adults was reduced by 25% as the war progressed" (Wikipedia, Japanese Occupation of Singapore). What also emerges in this section is the passivity of the population under the Japanese. The people are presented only as victims of Japanese aggression after the departure of the British, lacking any means of defense. The resistance movements that are mentioned are Z Force and Force 136, military groups left behind by the British to carry on espionage and sabotage against the Japanese. There is no mention of the role of the Malayan communists despite their effectiveness in resisting the Japanese and the indigenous nature of their leadership.

With the re-occupation of Singapore by the British, the colony continues to face a troubled period of history where political progress (i.e. the transition to independence) is matched by a formidable series of problems. A quick examination of the article's table of contents clearly illustrates this. We find the following list of sections: First Legislative Council (1948-51), Maria Hertogh riots (1950), Second Legislative Council (1951-55), Anti-National Service Riots (1954), Internal self-government (1955-62), Hock Lee bus riots (1955) and the Chinese middle-school riots (1956). The actual text reveals other obstacles to progress: the wartime destruction of infrastructure, food shortages, disease, crime, unemployment and "workers discontent" leading to "massive stoppages" (Wikipedia, Post-war Singapore). Here also we have the first mention of the communists, presented as an obstacle to political progress rather than as resisters of Japanese occupation: "since the left-wing groups were the strongest critics of the colonial system, progress on self-government stalled for several years" (Wikipedia, Post-war Singapore). A similar obstacle, but on the opposing end of the political spectrum, was the Singapore Progressive Party, labeled as "a conservative party whose leaders were businessmen and professionals and were disinclined to press for immediate self-rule" (Wikipedia, Post-war Singapore). The Wikipedia account suggests that it was only after the defeat of the Communists and the creation of a new political party, that political progress could continue. That party was of course the PAP and its election victory in 1959 is the capstone sealing the beginning of the end of the time of troubles as "the government embarked on a vigorous program to address Singapore's various economic and social problems" (Wikipedia, Self-governance of Singapore).

Problems do continue to crop up throughout the 1960s though. The most traumatic of these was the expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965, but the period also included the MacDonald House bombing of 1965 and the 1969 race riots. But the 1960s and even more so the 1970s are also seen as a time of rapid progress. The account treats us to a litany of successful government policies: investor incentives, the expansion of education, public housing, labour regulation, nationalization of key firms, and the establishment of Singapore's armed forces. The succeeding three decades are treated similarly, the overall theme being "further economic success" with Singapore emerging as "one of the world's most prosperous countries" (Wikipedia, Republic of Singapore). Interestingly, from the late 1980s we again see periodic episodes of crisis, reminding us of Loh's notion of Singapore's recent historiography as a sequence of occasional crises in an otherwise placid tale of progress: Operation Spectrum (1987), which is discounted as "a puzzle" since those involved "did not fit the stereotype of the 'agitators' whose activities were so troublesome to the PAP in the 1950s and 1960s" (Wikipedia, Operation Spectrum), the East Asian currency crisis of 1997 and the Singapore embassies attack plot of 2001.

Philippine History on Wikipedia

The Wikipedia account of Philippine history differs markedly from its Singaporean counterpart in that there are significant divergences from the dominant narrative as well as similarities. The pre-Hispanic polities of the Philippines receive favourable treatment both in terms of the extent of coverage and in generally positive portrayal of their economic and cultural characteristics. That most of these entities relied on various forms of slavery for their operation is glossed over suggesting that Iltis's notion of a "Golden Age" is at work here. But if the pre-Hispanic world is a "Golden Age" there does not appear in Wikipedia evidence of a fall as the Spanish period is

depicted as a time of economic progress. We are told that “Manila became the most important centre of trade in Asia between the 17th and 18th centuries” (Wikipedia, History of the Philippines 1521-1898) and that “the opening of the Philippines to world trade rapidly developed the Philippine economy” (Wikipedia, History of the Philippines 1521-1898) bringing prosperity to “everyday Filipinos” who benefited from “the rapid increase in demand for labour and availability of business opportunities” (Wikipedia, History of the Philippines 1521-1898). The Spanish also “created the municipal organization that was later adopted, revived, and further strengthened by the Americans and Filipino governments that succeeded” them as well as bringing “aspects of European life, ie. the Spanish menu, religion, festivals, stone houses, manner of clothing and fashion ... and Georgian calendar, Latin script ... and theocentric art, music, and literature” (Wikipedia, History of the Philippines 1521-1898). But this was not a one-way street as the colonists “adapted to oriental culture, learning to eat rice as their staple and use soy sauce, coconut vinegar, coconut oil, and ginger” (Wikipedia, History of the Philippines 1521-1898). Far from being a dark age, the Philippines under the Spanish is portrayed as undergoing progressive modernization, both economically and politically. What then leads to the Revolution of 1898? The Wikipedia account tells us that it was exposure to the “international community” that sparked the growth of Filipino nationalism coupled with “abuses by the Spanish government, military, and the clergy” (Wikipedia, Philippine Revolution). European ideas, in particular are seen as important: “New ideas, which the friars and colonial authorities found dangerous, found their way into the Philippines, notably Freemasonry, and the ideals of the French and American Revolutions and of Spanish liberalism” (Wikipedia, History of the Philippines 1521-1898). In this account we can perceive the “blockage” in the progressive modernization of the country that Bankoff and Iletto see as a key component of the Philippine historiographic tradition, as well as the Eurocentric focus on the ideas animating the Revolution. It is also clear that the account we are reading identifies heavily with a vaguely defined middle class as it is they who are portrayed as the key actors in the unfolding drama of the Revolution. A product of the “material prosperity” produced by Spanish colonialism, the middle class was “able to buy and read books” so that from this class came “the leading intellectuals ... who stirred the very first flames of the revolution” (Wikipedia, Philippine Revolution). That it was the middle class who was the active “ingredient” of the revolution is further confirmed by the account’s treatment of Andres Bonifacio and the Katipunan.

According to Iletto (1998), Bonifacio is seen as a problematic figure precisely because he does not fit into the middle-class ilustrado-led revolution that most accounts of Philippine history emphasize. He is commonly seen as a “man of the people” and the revolutionary organization he founded, the Katipunan, is also seen as a vehicle of the masses. In the Wikipedia account this is very clearly expressed on a number of occasions where it is explained that the Katipunan “consists mainly of the masses” (Wikipedia, Philippine Revolution); that it “attracted almost the lowly of the Filipino class” (Wikipedia, Philippine Revolution) and that “most of the Katipuneros were plebian although several wealthy patriots joined the society” (Wikipedia, Katipunan). The Katipunan was a secret society and so much attention in Wikipedia is given to a description of its rituals, but little of its actual ideology.

The active role of the middle class and the intellectual passivity of other classes in the Wikipedia account of the revolution can be seen as one of the “suppressions” that Iletto believes are characteristic of the dominant approach to Philippine historiography. Having the middle class as

the active “ingredient” of the revolution means that the forward momentum of historical modernization is maintained as the middle class are themselves the product of the modernization that took place in the Philippines under Spanish colonialism. To emphasize a peasant or worker intellectual base to the revolution would violate this historical narrative. That this is not done puts the Wikipedia account clearly on the traditional side of Philippine historiography.

But having written this, we must turn to the events that have been labeled, depending on the perspective adopted, the Philippine Insurrection or the Philippine-American War. Here the traditional historiography comes under a great deal of strain, in fact, it ruptures Wikipedia’s attempt to build a unified account. What is instead recorded are two different perspectives on the conflict. For example, in providing an account of the Filipino revolutionary leader Emilio Aguinaldo’s dealings with the United States we are presented with actual quotes of Aguinaldo and his American counterpart, Admiral Dewey (Wikipedia, Philippine Revolution). Aguinaldo claims that Dewey promised him that the Philippines would be independent after the defeat of the Spanish while Dewey declares that he did no such thing (Wikipedia, Philippine Revolution). It becomes clear that the Philippine-American War is a topic of great contention when we find the text telling us directly that it is “Filipino historian Teodoro Agoncillo writing ... that the American attitude towards Aguinaldo ‘showed that they came to the Philippines not as a friend, but as an enemy, masking as a friend’” (Wikipedia, Philippine-American War) rather than invoking the expertise of the historian in a footnote or making a statement devoid of attribution altogether. This is not the only case either. The same phrase is invoked for E. San Juan Jr. who, we are told “alleges that the death of 1.4 million Filipinos constitutes an act of genocide on the part of the United States” (Wikipedia, Philippine-American War), and that “Agoncillo writes that the Filipino troops could match or even exceed American brutality ... regardless of Aguinaldo’s orders” (Wikipedia, Philippine-American War).

This is the only section of Wikipedia’s account of Philippine history where this device is resorted to. It is also the only one that uses quotes so extensively, as if trying to let the reader decide on the interpretation of the past by presenting what is seen as the “the evidence”. We have already noted the quoted statements of Aguinaldo and Dewey, but there are many others. The First Philippine Commission is allowed to tell us that “the indispensable need ... of maintaining American sovereignty over the archipelago is recognized by all intelligent Filipinos” (Wikipedia, Philippine-American War). Similarly, war correspondents tell us in their own words of the atrocities they encountered in the countryside after we are told that the harsh regime the Americans imposed ensured that “peace prevailed in every part of the Philippines, not a bullet was fired, 1000s of lives were saved” (Wikipedia, Philippine Revolution).

With these literary devices we can see the account of the Philippine-American War breaking up into two versions. The first stresses the honorable intentions of the United States and that the military measures adopted, while harsh, saved lives in the long term. The other narrative speaks of United States duplicity and the horrible scale of the conflict. In this section, the traditional historiographical account parts ways with Wikipedia as the events of this period of history are irreducible to the linear narrative.

Once the war is concluded, this opening to multiple narratives quickly closes again. We learn that the Second Philippine Commission (1900-02) established “a judicial system ... and a legal

code to replace antiquated Spanish ordinances” (Wikipedia, Philippine-American War) while the “municipal code provided for popularly elected presidents” (Wikipedia, Philippine-American War) so that “political development in the islands was rapid” (121). Other developments that are highlighted include the purchase and redistribution of friar estates and the arrival of the Thomasites “who firmly established education as one of America’s major contributions to the Philippines” (Wikipedia, Philippine-American War). The march of progress, in this case, political, continues ... with one exception. Mention is made of those groups who continued to resist the Americans after the official cessation of hostilities. Again, the device of shielding the writer from attack by directly referring to the historians from whom the information is taken (in this case Renato Constantino) is deployed. According to Wikipedia, Constantino believes that “the war unofficially continued for nearly a decade ... since groups collectively known as the Irreconcilables remained active” (Wikipedia, Philippine-American War). Pulajanes are also mentioned, not as one particular sect but as a collective name for “quasi-religious” armed groups ... mostly composed of farmers and other poor people led by messianic leaders” (Wikipedia, Philippine-American War). Once again, but for a shorter time, we have multiple perspectives or narratives. The first recounts a story of political modernization and the resumption of progress after the ending of Spanish obfuscation, but the second brings to the fore, even if only dimly, continuing resistance and discontent among at least part of the population.

We encounter the same pattern in the rest of the account (that is, history from the 1920s to the present). Adherence to the traditional historiography is followed by outbreaks revealing normally silenced or muted events. Of the Commonwealth period the account notes that “the new government embarked on ambitious nation-building policies in preparation for economic and political independence” (Wikipedia, Commonwealth of the Philippines). At the same time “tenant farmers held grievances often rooted to debt caused by the sharecropping system” (Wikipedia, Commonwealth of the Philippines). After the Second World War, and “in spite of the years of Japanese occupation, the Philippines became independent exactly as scheduled ... on July 4, 1946” (Wikipedia, Commonwealth of the Philippines), but it is also noted that “the economy remained dependent to the United States. This was due to the Bell Trade Act ... which was a precondition for receiving war rehabilitation grants” (Wikipedia, Commonwealth of the Philippines).

The coverage of the Marcos regime continues this pattern. Bankoff suggests that the traditional historiographical approach views his regime as another aberration or blockage, similar perhaps to the Spanish period (Bankoff 2001). This is not the case with the Wikipedia account. Marcos is credited with significant economic success. His first term in the 1960s is noted for its “increased industrialization and the creation of solid infrastructure all over the Philippines” and that “during the martial law years the Philippines economy grew a significant amount ... with the creation of various roads, hospitals, power plants, and other public services” (Wikipedia, History of the Philippines 1986-present). But at the same time, it is noted that the Philippines stalled in its march to political modernization with Marcos beginning “his second term by creating a personality cult of sorts around himself” with Corazon Aquino finally marking “the restoration of democracy in the country” (Wikipedia, History of the Philippines 1986-present) in 1986.

Discussion

The aim of this article has been to compare and contrast the digital narratives of Singapore and the Philippines as found on Wikipedia with the dominant historiographical tradition of each country. In the case of Singapore, this tradition is heavily entrenched and extremely durable (Lysa & Jianli, 2008; Hack & Margolin, 2010). In contrast, historiography in the Philippines is a more contested terrain, especially, since the 1990s (Nagano, 2007; Iletto, 1998). The different historiographical traditions have a significant effect on the nature of the Wikipedia account of each nation's history. For Singapore, as we have seen, Wikipedia essentially recounts the dominant narrative. Singapore's history is a tale of ever increasing success marred only by the events of the Second World War and the crisis-filled 1950s and 1960s. The arrival of the PAP signals the end of this period with the country set back on the rails of economic progress with only the occasional crisis to mar what would otherwise appear to be an "end of history". In the Philippine account, the contours of traditional historiography are certainly present in the recounting of the origins of the Philippine Revolution. But the traditional historiography is complicated both in its portrayal of the Spanish period and even more so in the account of the Philippine-American War where we can see multiple perspectives very clearly. The period after the war continues mainly in the traditional vein, but occasionally brings to the surface alternative narratives. And the Marcos regime is not viewed a second blockage, but as a conflicted period of economic progress as well as setback.

Historical narratives are not created in a vacuum. They rely on institutions and intellectual infrastructure provided by societies which are shaped to meet certain political and economic needs (Trouillet, 1995; Ferro, 2003). This is especially the case with Wikipedia which bans what is termed "original research" and must rely on published secondary sources. This raises two issues of import for information professionals. The first concerns the promise of digital history. This promise is predicated on the capability of digital technology and the Internet to accommodate a multiplicity of voices. In a way, the capabilities of digital media represent an extension of the liberating potential of the printing press, or at least the possibility of such an extension. Certainly much of the rhetoric surrounding these technologies relies on this promise. But as the comparison of Singapore and Philippines Wikipedia pages suggest, this promise is difficult to achieve. Far easier is a mapping of the status quo onto the new media. Philippine history on Wikipedia has a multiplicity of voices greater than that which exists for Singapore because in the non-digital world these alternative narratives have already been constructed and have achieved at least a certain degree of visibility.

Of course, Wikipedia is only one example of new media. One could argue that in other corners of the Internet, alternative historical narratives are available. But the issue goes beyond availability to visibility. Wikipedia is today a key component of the Internet universe. Most searches will include a number of hits to the site as a matter of course. And it is very well known. That Wikipedia does not fulfill the potential for the presentation of a multiplicity of viewpoints seriously reduces the ability of new media to deliver on its promise. At this point, I am reminded of Patrick Wilson's belief that the official ideology of librarianship should be Pyrrhonian skepticism, that is the idea that the chief duty of the librarian, or in today's context, the information professional, should be not to pass judgment on knowledge claims, or to provide the "correct" answer to patron inquiries, but to report on the status of those claims; that is

whether they are contested or not and by whom. In this way the information professional's aim becomes to provide maps for the knowledge claims of the various disciplines. When we realize that at least certain libraries have begun to take an interest in working to improve Wikipedia by helping to edit articles (Lally & Dunford, 2007; Zentall & Cloutier, 2008; Pressley & McCallum, 2008), the possibility for the extension of the role of "skeptical librarian" to the digital world of Wikipedia becomes conceivable. These projects aimed initially at broadening access to special collections held by the libraries involved, but they could be expanded to include attention to alternative viewpoints as well. Of course, it would not necessarily be an easy task. Even with their limited scope (adding external links to existing Wikipedia pages for the most part), obstacles were encountered by the participants. In this regard all of the authors note that it is important to understand and abide by the wider Wikipedia culture if contributions are to be accepted. It appears especially important that the work is done by registered individuals rather than anonymously or in the name of the library and that creditability is built up through a series of small edits rather than jumping in with dramatic changes right from the start. In terms of history it would be important to adhere to Wikipedia's guidelines not to include original research, but this should not be much of a problem, given the large amount of published material available, especially to those working for academic institutions.

Despite the obstacles, all of the projects were, in the end, successful and this is encouraging. It suggests that information professionals (and historians themselves for that matter) could not only work to improve the general quality of Wikipedia articles, but to explore plausible and documented alternative historical narratives with an eye to making sure that these voices are not lost in the clamour of dominant historiographical traditions. In this way the promise of digital technology to allow for multiple voices would be closer to realization.

Conclusion

In this article I have examined the Wikipedia accounts of Singaporean and Philippine history. I have shown that in the Singapore case the account follows closely the dominant historiographical tradition while this is not so for the Philippines. I have argued that this is due to the greater visibility of alternative historical narratives in the Philippines and that it represents a set back to the claims of those who advocate new media as a means to widen the availability of alternative voices in society. One means to restore this promise would be for information professionals to actively participate in attempts to get these voices incorporated into Wikipedia accounts.

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