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## **“A wound that has been festering since 2007”: the Burma/Myanmar naming controversy and the problem of rarely challenged assumptions on Wikipedia**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The Burma/Myanmar naming controversy on Wikipedia stands as an exemplary debate at least in terms of the politeness and civility of discourse. It was also one of the longer running debates on Wikipedia beginning almost at the same time as the creation of the article in 2003. But this debate has other lessons for those interested in one of the world’s key pieces of information infrastructure.

**Design:** My approach to the study of the Wikipedia talk pages devoted to the Burma/Myanmar naming controversy is qualitative in nature and explores the debate over sources through textual analysis.

**Findings:** Editors brought to their work a number of underlying assumptions including the primacy of the nation-state and the nature of a “true” encyclopaedia. These were combined with a particular interpretation of NPOV (Neutral Point of View) policy that unnecessarily prolonged the debate and, more importantly, would have the effect, if widely adopted, of reducing Wikipedia’s potential to include multiple perspectives on any particular topic.

**Originality/value:** The study clearly shows how editors tend to uncritically reproduce the dominant assumptions of their societies. When combined with positivist readings of NPOV policy, this has grave implications for Wikipedia’s potential to open up representation to a wider set of knowledge producers and perspectives. Much of this potential cannot be realized if the assumptions of editors, especially their flawed understanding of NPOV, cannot be challenged effectively.

### **Introduction**

Central to Wikipedia’s operation are the debates taking place on its talk pages. It is on these pages that editors thrash out the arguments underpinning the site’s representation of knowledge on any

given topic. Hence, talk pages provide an important resource for those interested in Wikipedia as a social phenomenon as they record the tensions, struggles, and conflicts taking place within (Tkacz 2007, Kriplean 2007, Goldspink 2010, Konig 2013, Fullerton 2014). But talk pages are not uniform. Some contain very little content suggesting that the articles to which they are attached are attracting little attention or what attention they are receiving does not generate much controversy. Other talk pages are voluminous, recording the engagement of numerous editors over substantial periods of time. In this article I will examine a particularly long running talk page debate over the choice of Myanmar or Burma as an article title. This debate ran from 2004 to 2015, completely overshadowing discussion on other aspects of the article and helping to generate 13 talk page archives. It spawned a large number of move requests and requests for mediation and in general consumed vast amounts of editor time and energy. At the same time, this was not a particularly acrimonious debate. The co-founder of Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales, noted in a comment he left at the page in 2007 that he found the “discussion to be delightful, rational, kind, thoughtful, and respectful ...” (Myanmar, Archive 3, Thank you, Jimbo Wales 05:57, 28 Sept 2007). I imagine Wales’ appreciation would have extended right down to the very last talk page entry.<sup>1</sup>

But if the Burma/Myanmar naming controversy provides an exemplary model for civil debates on Wikipedia it has further lessons to teach. One of my aims is to demonstrate the embeddedness of Wikipedia within the wider societies of its contributors in terms of the assumptions they bring to their debates. In particular, I will show how the notion of nation-state sovereignty is a strong force in shaping the views of many editors, despite much talk of globalization and the shrinkage of the world by new media technologies. I will also demonstrate that a number of Wikipedia’s editors tend to have a fixed idea of what constitutes an ideal encyclopaedia.

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<sup>1</sup> This appears to be in contrast to the debate studied by Jemielniak over whether Gdansk or Danzig was the appropriate name for that east European city, a debate that was also much shorter in duration (2001 to 2005) (Jemielniak 2014, 59-84).

The Burma/Myanmar naming controversy is also an example of how NPOV, one of the key pillars of Wikipedia policy is shaped at the level of everyday editing. Here it serves as a warning, for although NPOV potentially allows for multiple perspectives on a topic, the way it was defined in this debate, drastically reduced this potential. In the case of the Burma/Myanmar naming controversy the policy served to merely support, together with certain technological affordances of the encyclopaedia, the basis ideological assumptions of nation-state sovereignty and traditional encyclopaedic forms.

Such a development does not bode well for the future of Wikipedia; at least for a Wikipedia open to multiple perspectives on what counts as knowledge. Given the increasingly important role of Wikipedia in the world's global information infrastructure this should be of serious concern to all.

### **Anatomy of a debate**

A Wikipedia entry for Myanmar was created on October 17, 2001 by contributor Manning Bartlett (one of the "pioneer" generation of Wikipedians). Foreshadowing the debates to come, this stub focused exclusively on the issue of the country's name: "Burma is the former name of the country now known as Myanmar. The United States Government does not officially recognize the military government of Myanmar, and hence has not formally recognized the change of name (which occurred in 1989). The UN, however, officially recognizes the new name" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Myanmar&oldid=238232>).

The entry was not significantly expanded beyond this point when the first comments on the name of the country started to appear in the talk pages. But as the article drew an increasing number of edits after 2003 there was also increasing criticism of the name. In March of 2006, the first Request for Move (RM) took place. Launched by user Pelagius (Myanmar, Archive 1, Requested Move, 20:26 14 March 2006), the aim was to change the title to Myanmar (Burma). The arguments used reflect much of what was to come later. Supporting the change were those who argued that Burma was a more familiar name. Opponents of the change argued that putting Burma in parentheses would

suggest that it was a disambiguation (that is, Burma, by the Wikipedia naming convention would be seen as a type or subset of Myanmar rather than as an alternative name). Opponents of the change also argued that Wikipedia should not be in the business of choosing names; its task was descriptive, not prescriptive.

While the 2006 RM was not successful, another attempt held between September 26 and October 2, 2007 did endorse the article's title change to Burma. In the introduction to this second RM, user Husond noted that "the fresh turmoil in this country has apparently reignited the discussion on whether should this article here be named Myanmar or Burma" (Myanmar, Archive 4, Requested move, 08:09 26 Sept 2007). Husond's "turmoil" was a reference to the events that later become known as the Saffron Revolution as it involved Buddhist monks, whose traditional robes were saffron coloured, protesting against the regime. Reflecting the outrage of many around the world at the time, Husond wanted the name of the article changed to Burma, arguing not only was it the most common English name for the country, but also that "the name Myanmar has never been recognized by the Burmese opposition" (Myanmar, Archive 4, Requested move, 08:09 2 Oct 2007). Subsequent debate focused on how to determine if the claim that Burma was commonly used was in fact the case. Initially it was suggested that a list be made of "how every government or international organization in the world" (Myanmar, Archive 4, Requested move, Polaron 00:35 27 Sept. 2007) referred to the country. Thereafter followed much debate on which institutions should be included with the United Nations, for example, being excluded because the names it used "are chosen by the states themselves" (Myanmar, Archive 4, Requested move, Hemlock Martins 00:40, 27 Sept. 2007). Very quickly Google was brought to bear witness; it being noted that "Myanmar receives 42,600,000 hits ... and Burma ... a mere 7,120,000" (Myanmar, Archive 4, Requested move, Regimund 00:25, 27 Sept. 2007). Those opposing the move were also quick to argue that the name change was a POV (Point of View issue, that is, in violation of Wikipedia's tenet that articles take a neutral stance – NPOV). Editor Slipgrid wrote, for example, that "I imagine this is an issue because President Bush called it Burma at the UN. He did that for political reasons. We shouldn't introduce

the Presidents politics here. This sounds like an attempt for diplomacy through Wikipedia, which I think is a bad idea” (Myanmar, Archive 4, Requested move, Slipgrid 14:57, 27 Sept. 2007).

On the other hand, user Plexos wrote, contra Slipgrid, that “At the end of the day Wikipedia ought to do what is *\*right\**, not what is political, just what is right, and it is right to oppose murderers ... It was changed to Mynamar by force of the gun so the title should still be Burma” (Myanmar, Archive 4, Requested move, Plexos, 15:04, 28 Sept 2007). Plexos was joined by a few other editors, but predominantly the debate revolved around the argument about which name was most commonly used in English and how to measure that usage. Closing the RM, user Duja declared that the result of the proposal was Move to Burma” noting however that there were “equally valid arguments on both sides of the debate” (Myanmar, Archive 4, Requested move, Duja 8:09, 2 October 2007). Duja also noted that the political atmosphere contributed to the outcome, suggesting that Myanmar “would likely be accepted per similar precedents if there’s a democratic government” (Myanmar, Archive 4, Requested move, Duja 8:09, 2 October 2007).

Duja’s decision was full of consequence. Almost immediately editor Tocino opened a new RM, arguing that “the article was named Myanmar for a very long time until suddenly Myanmar came into the news and activists changed the name without a consensus (Archives 5, 23:15, October 3, 2007), but this was speedily closed by Hemlock Martinis who noted that “we just did this. A decision has already been reached” (Myanmar, Archive 5, October requested move, Hemlock Martinis, 00:30, 4 October 2007). If requests for move were decided simply by counting pro and con positions held by individual editors then it was clear that the switch in names from Myanmar to Burma was supported by the majority. But it was not an overwhelming majority and hence could not be seen as a consensus by any means. And, as noted by Tocino, it was a vote taken during a time when the country was the centre of news attention, suggesting that the results may have been influenced by media coverage of the Saffron Revolution, which in the West was predominantly anti-state in nature. Of course, RMs are not treated as simple votes. An administrator is also supposed to weigh

the merit of the arguments put forward so as to make a decision based not just on the popularity of any particular position. It would appear that Duja made his decision to close the debate on that basis, ignoring the substantial minority disagreement, but this was not seen as legitimate by many. At issue was how to define a consensus and Duja's decision was the cause of much rancour in the years to follow.

In May 2008, a request for comment (RFC) was opened. The rationale was that it was necessary in light of the lack of consensus over the article name "that the question be put to a wider audience". Discussion was to last two weeks "after which the consensus will be assessed". It was noted that this wasn't to be construed as an exercise in voting although "the numbers of people advocating either position is a significant factor" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Request\\_for\\_Comment/Myanmar\\_vs\\_Burma](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Request_for_Comment/Myanmar_vs_Burma)). A number of alternative solutions were documented at this juncture all involving splitting the article into two – one for Burma and one for Myanmar. Each article would cover a specific period of time so that the question became what year to divide the two articles by. Three dates were suggested 1989 (government declaration of martial law), 1962 (the first military coup), and 1948 (independence). But none of these alternatives, nor the original choice between either Myanmar or Burma, achieved a wide level of consensus so on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June, user Smedumbyankee suggested that the dispute be taken to the Wikipedia Mediation Cabal (Wikipedia: Request for Comment/Myanmar vs Burma, Steps to take for resolution, Smedumbyankee,17:07 8 June 2008), a group of Wikipedians "providing information mediation" since disbanded ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Mediation\\_Cabal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Mediation_Cabal)). After another two weeks in which the opposing sides on the naming issue were requested to detail their arguments, three "experienced users" (the Cabal) evaluated the claims. Of the three mediators one found the arguments for the name Burma more persuasive while another argued that there was no consensus and hence the status quo should prevail. The third mediator found in favour of Myanmar. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Mediation\\_Cabal/Cases/2008-06-08\\_Burma/Consensus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Mediation_Cabal/Cases/2008-06-08_Burma/Consensus)).

Somedumbyankee prophetically summed up the outcome: “This may stick for awhile, but I doubt it’ll provide the lasting solution I was hoping for. ‘No consensus’ isn’t really a decision, so it’s basically a 1-1 tie with 1 person abstaining. I doubt that anything but an unanimous decision would have put this to rest though” (Wikipedia: Mediation Cabal/Cases/2008-06-08 Burma, Post-Cabal Discussion, Somedumbyankee, 21:46 25 June 2008). A decision was then reached to submit the issue to official mediation. A request was made, but rejected by the Mediation Committee as eight of the 21 listed editors significantly involved with the article either ignored or disagreed with the attempt ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Requests\\_for\\_mediation/Rejected/36#Burma](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Requests_for_mediation/Rejected/36#Burma)). An attempt at structured mediation in July 2008 was equally unsuccessful.

After that, no further attempts to move the article were made until the end of 2011 (although the debate continued to rage on the main Burma talk page and another talk page/article specifically set up to discuss the issue). In October of that year, editor regentspark opened a RM, arguing that three years had passed and “the world has changed since then and Myanmar has increasingly entered the common lexicon” (Myanmar, Archive 9, Requested move: Burma → Myanmar, regentspark 13:55, 12 October 2011). But for Wikipedians interested in expressing their views on the issue, consensus remained as difficult as ever to achieve. At the end of the two weeks, fish+karate summed it up by noting that “it is very hard to see a common thread in favour of one name or the other. Which is the more commonly used name differs by country and by publication” (Myanmar, Archive 9, Requested move: Burma → Myanmar, fish+karate 14:39, 26 October, 2011). As a result the decision was to maintain the status quo and keep the article at Burma.

Another RM was opened in August 2012 by user P.T. Anfrette (Myanmar, Archive 10, Request for comments, P.T. Anfrette, 23:03 August 8, 2012) and closed by tariqabjotu who wrote a lengthy rationale of his reasoning to keep the name at Burma, noting that “while it is quite obvious that ‘Myanmar’ enjoys wide usage, I see greater evidence that ‘Burma’ is more widely used in English language ... It is predominant globally, but it seems that ‘Myanmar’ has predominant usage in fewer



places and to a lesser degree than 'Burma' does in those places where it does (especially the UK)" (Myanmar, Archive 10, Request for comments, tariqabjotu 02:41, 26 August 2012).

This was enough to preserve the status quo for another three years until in August 2015, Shhhhwww!! opened the most recent RM by arguing that the reforms taking place in the country made it necessary to hold a new debate. It was at this point that a decision was reached for a change to Myanmar where it remains up until today (Myanmar, Archive 13, Requested move 7 August 2015, Shhhhwww!! 01:48, 7 August 2015).

### **Rarely challenged assumptions: the sovereignty of the nation-state and the ideal encyclopedia**

While much of the debate focused on whether Burma or Myanmar was the most common name for the country in the English language, it is unlikely that the debate would have taken on the proportions it did without a deeper difference between the editors for which the debate over which name was used more often was a proxy. This difference revolved around which institution was the legitimate representative of the country's people – the government and state apparatus or the major opposition political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). While the state government declared in 1989 that the country over which it ruled was to be called Myanmar in English this was contested by the NLD and its charismatic leader, Aung San Su Kyi. As part of a wider policy of persuading the outside world to isolate the regime, the NLD wanted its allies and supporters to continue using Burma when referring to the country. But on Wikipedia, it was not enough to argue for such a position (although as we shall see, some did), as it would easily be labelled as advocating for a point of view (POV) or, in other words, taking a less than neutral stance towards the topic at hand.

Propping up this argument against the use of Burma was the entrenched notion that the nation-state is the fundamental and natural unit of the international system and as such an autonomous and independent entity associated with the control of a particular territory (Krasner 2001). So strong

has been this notion that it has given rise to what Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002) refer to in the case of the social sciences as “methodological nationalism” which they define as “the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world” (302). Such a view has developed over the last three or four centuries and in many cases takes the form of what Michael Billig (1995) refers to as “banal nationalism” a “collection of ideological habits (including habits of practice and belief)” that tend to be invisible and are often overlooked, but which are essential to the reproduction of the system as a whole. The notion of sovereignty as an ingrained belief seems to fall in this category. In the case of Wikipedia it is clearly part of many editors’ arguments as to why Burma is not suitable as a name:

“Can somebody please name me an example of another sovereign nation where the de facto government declares an official English name and it is not used as the article title? Anyone? All POV judgments aside, the government is the government, and they decide what the country is called. Honestly, if there is a coup in Tanzania tomorrow and the new leaders rename it Pepsi Presents New Zanzibar, that should be the article’s title. Why all this nonsense?”

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Burma/Myanmar> Talk: Burma/Myanmar, Archive 4, Wikipedia is contradictory sometimes, 209.196.230.72, 00:57, 11 March 2010).

“Though most of us must agree that those who named the country Myanmar are a bunch of thugs, this gives us no right to supercede their decision because they do exercise authority over that country. Whatever is de jure is always very debateable, but whatever is de facto is easily agreed upon. Aung San Suu Kyi does not rule Burma – this gives her no right to decide on the name. The government of a country has every right to call their country whatever they want” (Myanmar, Archive 1, Debate: Myanmar or Burma, Jiang 22:04, 5 Jan 2004).

While many editors had views similar to these, there was some resistance to the standard story of the supremacy of the nation-state. This was enabled by a wider Western discourse that describes the Burma/Myanmar government in extremely unflattering ways and which in turn is a product both

of the very real failure of the regime to create prosperity in a region of the world celebrated for its economic success and its equally real brutalization of the population (Holiday 2005, 606; Than 2007). But it is also the product of an exiled opposition that has been able to greatly influence US and to a lesser extent EU politics. In the absence of any clear geopolitical or economic issues of importance, concern for human rights in the country has topped the policy agenda in the West (Steinburg 2007, 220; Than 2007, 492). What this has meant in the case of Wikipedia is that for a substantial minority of editors the state in control of Burma/Myanmar was not legitimate because it had not been elected to power and because it was not legitimate it was not in a position to engage in name changing exercises. According to this perspective, only an elected government representing the will of the people concerned could do this. For these editors, supporting the use of the name Myanmar was tantamount to support of an unelected military regime busily engaged in brutally suppressing its people:

“The government is not a legitimate one; it was established through bullets and not ballots, and has kept under house arrest the rightfully elected leader of the country. I see no reason why we should use their name for Burma just because they have guns and their opponents don’t” (Archives 7, Section break 1, Hemlock Martinis 03:09, 17 Jan. 2008).

Of course, many of the world’s governments fail this kind of legitimacy test, yet do not end up the subject of such intense debate on the talk pages of Wikipedia as Burma/Myanmar has. For those governments the strength of the ideology of national sovereignty is enough to guarantee their exalted position despite any number of faults and misdeeds. What makes Burma/Myanmar different was the almost unique combination of a powerful discourse of human rights being the primary lens through which the country is viewed in the West, coupled with the opposition’s insistence that the country be known by a different name. These two factors allow for the challenging of nation-state sovereignty in this case.

Allied to the ideology of the nation-state is another, even less examined assumption within Wikipedia: that somehow, if the name Burma was retained, it would become an inferior encyclopaedia: “I have contributed to this site for five years; I have never been so disappointed. This site will lose its chances of gaining professional credibility if users here demonstrate that an article about a nation-state can be completely hijacked by a handful of users canvassing for support with simplistic emotional appeals, ignoring or even falsifying the facts at hand” (Myanmar, Archive 7, Survey, 172, 02:39 25 Jan. 2008). Often editors, arguing against the use of Burma, explicitly compare Wikipedia with an encyclopedic ideal, often capitalized for emphasis: “The ‘protest’ argument for Burma has no place in an Encyclopedia” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Burma/Myanmar>, Talk:Burma/Myanmar/Archive 1, 72.130.227.8, 18:57, 27 Feb. 2008) and “Insisting on using ‘Burma’ rather than ‘Myanmar’ when you know that the country has changed its official name, seems to me to constitute taking a political stance against the current regime. That’s fine and something we could expect academics interested in the region to do, but its not something that an Encyclopedia should do” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Burma/Myanmar>, Archive 4, Outsider’s perspective, 145.116.9.68, 12:40, 27 Feb. 2009).

Here the ideal form of an encyclopaedia is one that presents straight-forward facts to its readers. There is a belief that these facts are readily and unproblematically available to Wikipedia editors, a belief that can only be enabled by reliance on other unchallenged assumptions, such as the natural primacy of the nation-state in world affairs. These common-sense notions of the world, established by dominant ideologies and discourses, are key to the maintenance of a notion that there can still exist an encyclopaedia capable of amassing in a simplistic fashion all of the world’s “facts”, including the one correct name for Burma/Myanmar.

An examination of the meaning of the names bears this out. Bertil Lintner, a prominent journalist who has written a great deal about Burma/Myanmar over the past few decades suggests that they mean the same thing. Burma or Bama is, however, colloquial while Myanmar is more formal. Lintner

quotes the *Hobson-Jobson Dictionary*<sup>2</sup> to prove his point: “The name (Burma) is taken from Mranma, the national name of the Burmese people, which they themselves generally pronounce Bamma, unless speaking formally and emphatically” (Lintner 2003, 174). But Lintner goes on to relate that the debate over names is actually much older than the 1989 official name change. He recounts that when the Burmese independence movement coalesced in the 1930s one of the decisions its members faced was to what to call themselves. The name they chose was the Dohbama Asiayone (Our Burma Association) rather than the alternative Dohmyanma Asiayone. These nationalists reasoned that the Burmese kings used to call their territory Myanmanaingngan which specifically did not include the territory inhabited by groups other than the Burmese (ie. the Kachin, Karen, Shan and many others) so that from their perspective the term Bama was more appropriate as it included these groups with the polity, even though the polity itself was an invention of the British (Lintner 1999).

What is the logic of motivating the government’s name change then? It has consistently argued that the name Myanmar is more inclusive of the ethnic minorities. But this does not bear much scrutiny, if Lintner is correct in his assessment. Gustaaf Houtman, senior teaching fellow at the Department of Anthropology/Religious Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, agrees, noting that “neither Myanmar nor Bama, from which Myanmar and Burma are derived, are neutral terms, as both are strongly associated with the Burmese language, the language of the ethnic majority” (Houtman 1999, 49). Houtman offers a number of alternative explanations for the government’s insistence on the use of Myanmar. The first of these involves the association the armed forces have made between the colloquial language and subversion. From this perspective, the name change aims “to play up the contrast between a literary centrally controlled concept over which the army can assert control (tradition), and the varied grass-roots colloquial concept of the people (foreign)” (Houtman 1999, 50-51).

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<sup>2</sup> The *Hobson Jobson Dictionary* is a famous compilation of Anglo-Indian words and phrases first published in 1886 by Henry Yule and Arthur Coke. A second edition by William Crooke appeared in 1903.

But also at work here is the army's vision of itself as have achieved "the final liberation of Burma from colonialism" with the change in name "demonstrating that it had the power to take back from the British all the names that symbolized their rule ..." (Houtman 1999, 47). The result of this exercise has been the further politicization of the names themselves so that as Robert Taylor notes "the dimensions of political conflict in Burma are symbolized by the inability of the most visible antagonists to agree on the name of the State when speaking and writing in languages other than that of most of the population of the country itself" (Taylor 1998, 33).

What this suggests is that there is good evidence to support the claim that whether we use Myanmar or Burma reflects differing perceptions of the world and hence some compromise over the article's name should have been the aim of the debate rather than incessant attempts to choose one over the other. The ideology of the sovereign nation-state and a vision of an ideal fact-based encyclopaedia, however, have stood in the way of recognition that the two names, Burma and Myanmar, represent different and opposing groups and that both ought to be seen as titles for the country article. And although it is true that the body of the article itself includes a discussion of the naming controversy, choosing one name over the other for the title is, nevertheless, the taking of a position and an attribution of legitimacy to that position.

There is one final piece to this puzzle and that is the role played both by the textual structure of the online encyclopaedia itself. It was suggested on more than one occasion that both names be included in the title by way of parenthesis or other means; the first was as early as 2003: "have both entries redirect to one called 'Burma/Myanmar'; this would seem to solve the problem ..." (Myanmar, Archive 1, Debate: Myanmar or Burma, IMSoP 04:04, 15 Nov. 2003). In 2006 a similar suggestion for Myanmar (Burma) was put forward as a RM. It achieved only limited support mostly due to its lack of apparent aesthetic appeal: "One or the other, not both – a parenthetical title/alternate title looks shoddy" and the technical issue that brackets and slashes in a title were used in Wikipedia as means to disambiguate topics, or in other words, as a means to let readers

chose the topics they are interested in when a title could potentially refer to more than one subject (ie. Mercury (element) and Mercury (mythology))

(<https://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:disambiguation>). The idea was floated occasionally in later discussions, but the same arguments were put forward to stop its implementation. Here we can see not only wider ideological concerns at work but stylistic considerations and above all, issues of affordance. The structure of Wikipedia presumed that each article would have just one title. And there appears no easy way to circumvent this. Wikipedia's "code" in effect acts as a powerful enforcing mechanism (Lessig 2006).

### **Implications**

After reading the entire collection of talk page archives associated with the Burma/Myanmar debate the thought will probably enter most people's head that it represents a great waste of time, time that the editors could have put to more productive use (actual editing of this or other articles, or engagement with debates on other issues). This is not to say that debate over the issue was not important. Rather it is the duration of the debate and its inability to develop a consensus or deeper understanding of the issue that appears problematic. Such feelings are only enhanced when the conclusion is reached that in fact there is a good case to use both names in the title. But there are other implications to this debate, other than opportunity cost.

To begin with, this examination of the Burma/Myanmar debate clearly demonstrates Wikipedia's embeddedness within the wider societies of its members. As Alevizou notes, the world of digital and networked representations of knowledge requires their location "within the totality of relations that produce them" (Alevizou 2006). The assumption of the primacy of the nation-state was only challenged because of a wider dominant discourse of human rights surrounding Burma and the existence of a powerful opposition movement. Certainly this combination can be criticized as Michael Aung Thwin does when he argues it represents another example of western ignorance and hypocrisy in dealing with other societies and political systems (Thwin 2001). But for our purposes, it

is more useful to look at it as a call for Wikipedia to exercise a greater level of self-reflection about how its editors go about supporting these claims. It is likely that in many cases unexamined assumptions are brought to bear as evident truths rather than entrenched dogmas or at least questionable claims.

The second, and perhaps more important implication is that Wikipedia's NPOV policy does not function in a straightforward manner. NPOV stands along verifiability and a prohibition on original research as key policies establishing Wikipedia's epistemological foundations. NPOV is not about crafting an encyclopedia that somehow transcends subjectivity, but rather one that marks difference between groups, albeit assigning them different weights according to their credibility as expressed through a collection of "reliable" sources (Mai 2016). As one of Wikipedia's earliest policies (a version was also part of Nupedia), it was developed according to co-founder Jimmy Wales as a means to allow people with very different mindsets to work together by sidestepping arguments over epistemology. It ideally works by distancing editors "from the truth-battles of the outside world, that is, from contests of truth that take place outside of Wikipedia (Tkacz 2012), Truth of Wikipedia, 90). And it allows as a result "an inclusiveness, where competing truths – reconfigured as conflicting "points of view" – can all be subsumed into the encyclopedia mode ..." (90).

It is clear that NPOV could certainly strongly support a reading in which both names Burma and Myanmar deserved recognition within Wikipedia. That it did not suggests a more complex relation between the policy and individual editors.

Other studies have also noted this complexity. Together these studies suggest that rather than a simple policy statement, NPOV, like the encyclopedic content it tries to shape, is not amendable to a simple singular interpretation. Instead it is used in "power plays" (Kriplean et al. 2007), and "echoes" rather than "prescribes community practices" (Forte and Bruckman, 2008).



Matei and Dobrescu in their own study of conflict and ambiguity within Wikipedia also show how policy is caught up in power struggles, arguing that “while Wikipedia projects an external image of ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ knowledge, the very meaning of neutrality and objectivity in its core policy is constantly disputed. Neutrality is profoundly altered to refer to ambiguous, precarious, and ever-shifting definitions, moving with the social processes that produce them” (49).

The Burma/Myanmar naming controversy suggests that at least some of these social processes are related to the “common-sense” or in other words, hegemonic ideas, editors bring to the encyclopaedia. This is not a pleasant notion to contemplate. One of the benefits of Wikipedia is its potential to transcend the limits of traditional encyclopaedias. Pfister, for example, argues that digital media, including Wikipedia enables multiperspectivalism, the ability to make visible a multitude of viewpoints, rather than just one (Pfister 2011), while Alevizou, following Pierre Levy, argues that digital technology allows for the creation of a cosmopedia which, unlike earlier encyclopaedias, “is highly dialogical and transgressive of its own boundaries” so that it becomes impossible for a final closure of knowledge to take place (Alevizou 2006). For Tkacz, Wikipedia represents “a new and positive visibility of the production of knowledge which can allow the surfacing of other ways of knowing far better than earlier technologies (Tkacz 2007).

On the other hand, authors have noted that Wikipedia has not altogether escaped the confines of earlier encyclopaedic structures and operation. Sundin, for example, tell us that “Wikipedia is clearly anchored in the ecology of what could be called the established media” (Sundin 2011) while Jemielniak observes that “the participants in many conflicts seem to assume a positivist mode of establishing facts ...” (2014). And Rene Konig argues that Wikipedia tends to reproduce offline hierarchies of knowledge although conceding that space has been opened for the representation of alternative views (Konig 2013).

It would seem that although the potential for more democratic forms of knowledge representation do exist within Wikipedia, it is in tension with practices that privilege older less, democratic ways of

knowing. In this regard, Joseph Reagle reminds us that “while reference works are often thought to be inherently progressive, a legacy perhaps of the famous French *Encyclopedie*, this is not always the case” (Reagle 2011, 15). And he provides a number of examples to back up his claim, from George Gleig’s dedication of the third edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to combatting the anarchy and atheism supposedly being spread by the *Encyclopedie* to the national dictionary project proposed by the French Academy in the seventeenth century (Reagle 2011, 15). Further inspection of the historical record also reveals that scattered amongst these conservative works are those tending in the opposite direction. Earlier encyclopedias can exhibit democratic tendencies in their approach to the representation of knowledge. An interesting example of this is found in Featherstone and Venn’s description of the *Encyclopedia Acephalia* (The ‘headless’ encyclopedia) produced in Paris during the 1930s and 1940s: “an encyclopedia produced without an ordering principle or classificatory hierarchies” (8). Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopedie* with its ingenious use of cross references to encode hidden meanings provides another example of this tendency (Zimmer 2009).

From this perspective it is not surprising to find in Wikipedia a conflict between more democratic ways of deciding how and in what forms knowledge is to be represented and those less so. The historical record suggests that the potential for openness to alternative perspectives on knowledge is always latent within technologies of knowledge representation; a potential that may or may be achieved at any given moment in time. What moves to the fore from this point of view is not the technology per se, but the struggle over its appropriation and use.

Returning to the Burma/Myanmar naming controversy we can now see the debate as an example of attempted appropriation: certain editors, wishing the article to conform to what they perceived as the proper norms of encyclopedia content attempted to equate NPOV with a singular, factual, and objective stance on the issue at hand, the name of the country. Overlooked by these editors was the history of NPOV and its ability to compromise between alternative perspectives. That these editors did not succeed was due to the wider human rights discourse that forms the dominant perspective

on the country in the West. This too is problematic as the proponents of the name Burma relied more on arguments derived from this discourse or, alternatively, hard to prove or sustain arguments about which name was used more, rather than advocating for a more tolerant interpretation of NPOV policy.

It is this lack of appeal to NPOV as a means of compromise over epistemological positions that is most disturbing about this long-running debate. Instead of moving closer to the potential of multiperspectivalism, Wikipedia, in the case of the Burma/Myanmar naming controversy moved in the opposite direction.

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