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Brendan Luyt

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Debating reliable sources: writing the history of the Vietnam War on Wikipedia

Brendan Luyt
Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & Information,
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to use selected discussions appearing on the talk pages of the Wikipedia entry on the Vietnam War to shed light on how the wider epistemological context of this online encyclopaedia affects the nature of debate about sources and subsequently how this knowledge could be used to improve information literacy instruction.

Design/methodology/approach – My broad approach to the study of the Wikipedia talk pages on the Vietnam War is qualitative in nature and explores the debate over sources through a textual analysis.

Findings – Although much of the debate over sources is conducted without acrimony, the level of analysis one finds in the talk pages is rather shallow while the attention of individual contributors is not overly concentrated.

Originality/value – There have been few studies of individual Wikipedia entries and their talk pages, rather the focus of most of the literature has been on a broad overview of the entire encyclopaedia or a concentration on a set of entries for a particular topic area.

Keywords Social media, Wikipedia, Information literacy, Encyclopaedias, Vietnam War

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Sources lie at the heart of the Wikipedia project. Olof Sundin (2011) notes that although Wikipedia "is often used as an example for how traditional expertise is contested in contemporary participatory media […] Wikipedia is clearly anchored in the ecology of what could be called the established media". In order to judge whether a particular knowledge claim should appear in its pages, Wikipedia relies on a policy of verifiability. That is, rather than judging the absolute truth value of a claim, a published, preferably academic source is seen as supplying sufficient warrant. Such sources are seen as "reliable" to the Wikipedia community and allow it to escape likely endless debates on the accuracy of contentious claims (although as we shall see, debates on other matters continue). A great deal of latitude is given Wikipedia editors in their day-to-day tasks of editing the encyclopaedia (Konig, 2013), so that determining what is a reliable source is in many cases an act of interpretation. Hence, one would expect a great deal of debate over the nature of individual sources. But surprisingly debate tends not to focus on the actual sources used, but the claims themselves. Wikipedia editors, at least for many history articles, look at sources as interchangeable "mines" of factual information, rather than as literary instruments aimed to persuade readers of the truthfulness of their claims (Luyt and Tan, 2010). This notion parallels the findings of Purdy (2009) that Wikipedia editors tend not to use sources as examples or counter-examples, but rather as "gestures of connectivity" with work outside Wikipedia. Nevertheless, there are occasions where the source assumes a more unique

nature. In some cases the uniqueness of the sources comes to the fore as a direct quote in the text of the paper. In other cases, it remains buried in the paper's talk pages.

In this paper, the focus of attention is on those occasions where the sources achieve greater than normal visibility. More specifically, I aim to use selected discussions appearing on the talk pages of Wikipedia's Vietnam War article to comment on how the wider epistemological context of Wikipedia affects the nature of the debate about sources and through that, the actual choice of sources. The Vietnam War article was chosen for the extent of its talk pages (22 separate archived talk pages ranging in date from 2005 to 2013) which, given its controversial nature, is not surprising, and its importance as a global event that has shaped the course of world history in significant ways. My aim is by no mean to make generalizable statements or "iron laws" of behaviour, but merely to explore a particular case. The points raised here likely do not exhaust the richness of Wikipedian behaviour towards sources, but neither is it likely that these same behaviours are limited solely to this one paper. What I write about here is a subset of a larger whole. I also wish to emphasize the voice of the editors themselves, to present their arguments, as far as limitations of length allow, as a whole. Hence my choice to organize this paper by discussion rather than themes. In what follows I present four discussions involving 22 individual editors held over varying aspects of the Vietnam War at times ranging from 2006 right up to 2013. These discussions were not chosen randomly, but instead for their interest as examples of how Wikipedia handles and debates sources. Given that the talk pages of Wikipedia are clearly a public forum that can be seen be all, the participants are already engaged in very robust debate on the issues, and that they are not from a particularly vulnerable population it was deemed unnecessary to obtain explicit permission to quote from these discussions.

Classifying Chomsky: the first discussion

The work of Noam Chomsky comes in for discussion twice on the talk pages for the Vietnam War. In the first debate the question is whether his views on the war should be included. The first reaction, by Cripiper, was to label these views as dated, claiming that "this was how it was depicted in the 1960s" (Archive No. 5, Chomsky's view, Cripiper, 16:43, 3 September 2006) and that today "you would struggle to find a mainstream historian" who expressed similar views.

The notion of a "mainstream" in historical interpretation of the war was then picked up by another editor, Fyntan, who argued that "Chomsky is nowhere in the mainstream. I think he'd agree that amongst western intellectual opinion he is in a small minority" (Archive No. 5, Chomsky's views, unlabelled comment). Fyntan went on to note that "the accuracy […] of a point of view is not determined by the views of western intellectuals" and that regardless of the accuracy of his view, it needed to be included as Chomsky is "the leading American dissident who has written volumes on the topic" (Archive No. 5, Chomsky's views, unlabelled comment). Cripiper, in turn, seized on the comment about western intellectuals to further claim that Chomsky "is not taken seriously in Asian intellectual circles either" (Archive No. 5, Chomsky's views, Cripiper, 16:38, 3 September 2006) due to his alleged "defence of the Pol Pot regime" in Cambodia. Furthermore, for Cripiper, Chomsky was "an opinion-giver not a historian" (Archive No. 5, Chomsky's views, Cripiper, 16:38, 3 September 2006). Nevertheless, he/she was willing to concede that the article could include material on his views – in the anti-war section.

Claiming that it was "100% POV"[1], Fyntan took issue with this description of Chomsky's work writing that "if you think Chomsky is an 'opinion-giver' rather than an empiricist I suggest you correct your misapprention [sic] by reading some of his work.

It is extremely well referenced" and that he has "never seen any evidence that Chomsky denied the genocide in Cambodia" (Archive No. 5, Chomsky's views, unlabelled comment).

Under pressure to provide evidence for this claim, Cripiper then moves from the view that Chomsky is an "opinion-giver" to crediting him with being a "good linguistic theorist" but that this still does not provide him with the necessary expertise to write on the war – he is still not "a good historian". Cripiper's evidence for Chomsky's support of Pol Pot is a review he wrote of Francois Ponchand's book *Cambodia: Year Zero* and Chomsky and Herman's *After the Cataclysm*. Alternatively, Cripiper suggests "an internet search for 'Noam Chomsky deny Cambodia genocide'" (Archive No. 5, Chomsky's views, Cripiper, 17:45, 4 September 2006).

But this is not enough for Fyntan: "I have tried to follow your directions for finding evidence that Chomsky denies the genocide in Cambodia and I haven't been able to. I did the goggle search that you recommended but not one of the articles that I read provided a quote attributed to Chomsky in which he denies that genocide has occurred there". At this point Cripiper is "rescued" by another contributor who provides from the internet "a long ass article [Bruce Sharp's 'Averaging wrong answers: Noam Chomsky and the Cambodia controversy'] and I have read all it before" (Archive No. 5, Chomsky's views, 178.138.26.42, 00:42, 6 November 2006).

Endorsing the article in a further post, Cripiper notes that he/she has "skimmed" through it, "but […] it appears to be extremely well researched, referenced, and footnoted, and appears to contain all the information you are looking for" (Cripiper No. 27).

Unfortunately the article was not as clear as it could be when it comes to claiming Chomsky to be a genocide denier, as Fyntan notes in the next contribution to the discussion: "the long ass article contains everything you say, research, footnotes, etc., etc., but not one single quote in which Chomsky denies the Cambodian genocide" (Archive No. 5, Chomsky's views, Fyntan, 11:33, 17 November 2006). He/she provides a synopsis of the argument so that others do not need to "waste their time". But Cripiper does not let go of the issue: "The point is that Chomsky derided Francois Ponchaund's work, which has stood the test of time, as American propaganda". He/she then tries to cast aspirations on the character of Fyntan: "It speaks volumes that you choose to discourage people from reading a lengthy and detailed discussion of the issue rather than let them make up their own minds" (Archive No. 5, Chomsky's views, Cripiper, 11:46, 17 November 2006).

This is the last we hear of Cripiper. His characterization of Chomsky's work was attacked by Bernard, L., an editor who according to his user page has made significant contributions to Wikipedia's article on Noam Chomsky. Bernard, L. provided direct quotes to show that Chomsky did not deride Ponchaud's work, but pointed out various errors in the book. He also noted that the review was "concerned more with distortions of Ponchaud's work by Jean Lacouture which were amplified and spread by the media" (Archive No. 5, Chomsky's views, Bernard, L., 17:07, 18 November 2006).

The last word in the section went to Fyntan who acknowledged Bernard, L.'s contribution, concluding that "this page is a completely lame duck without his views, he is the most important voice to dissent from the US view of the war" (Archive No. 5, Chomsky's views, Fyntan, 9:47, 21 November 2006).

What does this discussion reveal to us about how Wikipedia's editors use sources and perhaps about the wider editing process? The first point we need to consider is the use of the term "mainstream" as a means of censorship. Debates about the accuracy of sources cannot be directly supported by Wikipedia policy, which stresses only the need to use reliable sources to demonstrate verifiability of a claim. Nevertheless, suppression

of viewpoints continues by labelling work and authors as mainstream and hence worthy of inclusion or non-mainstream and not so worthy. This is made possible because while Wikipedia policy advocates inclusion of contending views, as long as reliable sources are used, it also requires that marginal views, that is, views not held by many experts, should not be over-represented. This creates a space for censorship as the ability to define a marginal view is a difficult task unless the editor is intimately familiar with the literature, which most are not (Luyt, 2012; Luyt and Tan, 2010).

Given this "loophole" censorship or attempted censorship becomes a distinct possibility. Wikipedia, as de Vugt (2010) notes, represents "the ordering of what could be said about our world, driven by the antagonisms which find their way in to the project in the form of the constant revision of the text" (p. 70) – in other words, the politics of knowledge does not rest at the Wikipedia portal entrance. The case of Chomsky's views on the Vietnam War (that the USA was actually the victor in the war because it successfully destroyed Vietnamese communism's ability to serve as an example of how to organize a society in ways alternative to capitalism) is a clear example of the importation of these tensions into the Wikipedia project. Even more so are the claims made regarding his supposed denial of the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia. Here Cripiper and the anonymous editor responsible for supplying Sharp's article mirror a wider distortion that has plagued the reception of Chomsky's and Herman's book *After the Cataclysm*. It cannot be stressed enough that in this book Chomsky did not deny the Cambodian genocide. The point of the work was instead to note the different reactions of American media to mass killings in communist and non-communist states in Southeast Asia, specifically Cambodia and East Timor (formerly part of Indonesia). Chomsky noted through an empirical study of the media output on the two events, that communist Cambodia received the lion's share of attention, thus providing a confirmation of his model of mass media production in capitalist states where media is privately owned. The aim and results of Chomsky and Herman's study have been repeatedly caricatured as suggesting that US media practices direct forms of censorship and of offering support of Khmer Rouge atrocities.

And this brings us to the second point that the discussion over Chomsky highlights – that the level of analysis employed by both sides of the debate is at a rather shallow level. At no point do the protagonists bring in third-party sources to buttress their respective claims. The closest that the editors come to bringing in relevant third-party sources is a vague statement that "many of my profs were a bit suspicious of him and some didn't like him at all" that appears in the second debate over whether Chomsky's work was a reliable source, a debate which repeated much of the claims and counter claims of the one we have just examined in detail (Archive No. 15, "Was US foreign policy defeated?", Maxim, K., 19:12, 13 April 2008). If the editors had delved a little more deeply into the sources they would have discovered something more substantial about Chomsky's role in the academic world, where he is an important voice in communication and political studies. He was, for example, declared the world's top public intellectual in 2005 (Campbell, 2005) and is one of the most frequently cited authors in the world today (MIT News, 1992). But none of this work was done and so the discussion peters out inconclusively. And in the version I consulted, Chomsky's work is not referenced, a definitely regrettable omission, from the point of view of the comprehensiveness of the views on the war covered. Damien Smith Pfister argues that a key difference and benefit of the development of what he refers to as many-to-many media technologies is that it encourages a participatory model of expertise that is, in part, based "on the ability to generate new ways of thinking about information in a way that is persuasive to other editors and/or readers" (Smith, 2011). But the debate over

Chomsky clearly illustrates that this is by no means a well-developed expertise among the editors of Wikipedia, where, for even an important article such as the Vietnam War, the level of analysis regarding an important scholar remains at a low level of sophistication, in terms of using information sources in new and creative ways.

Communicating ineffectively: crucible Vietnam as a source

Our second extensive example revolves around a particular book, *Crucible Vietnam: Memoir of an Infantry Lieutenant* by AT Lawrence. This source was used to develop a table presenting yearly casualty statistics for the duration of the war by an unregistered user. At the time these changes were being prepared the article was locked, meaning that all potential edits by non-registered users, had to be approved by a senior administrator, in this case, Celestra. The unregistered user, who we will refer to as Editor A, was having much trouble formatting the table, but had finally succeeded when another editor, Fifelfoo, entered the debate: "citing a memoir for combat death statistics? Really? Of an inferior infantry officer? That isn't appropriate sourcing. Lawrence isn't a historian, or a demographer" (Archive No. 20, Edit request on 22 March 2012, Fifelfoo, 22:42, 1 April 2012). Coming to Lawrence's defence, Editor A noted that he was a graduate of the US Naval War College and that the actual data came from a senior official, now retired, at the US Department of Defence's Statistical Information Analysis division. All to no avail: "It doesn't count for anything" responded Fifelfoo, "Mate's rates' histories do not belong in Wikipedia" (Archive No. 20, Edit request on 22 March 2012, Fifelfoo, 00:28, 2 April 2012). Celestra then interjected to ask if Fifelfoo had "any policy-based reason not to consider this a reliable source?", also noting that the source was published, "so some editorial review is implied" and that it was certainly verifiable (Archive No. 20, Edit request on 22 March 2012, Celestra, 14:40, 2 April 2012). Sus Scrofa quoted a paragraph from WP:RS[2] that, he suggested, would allow the use of the source while Fifelfoo in turn provides the policy guidelines Celestra asks for. WP:IRS, WP:RSIN, WP:HISTRS and WP:MILMOS#SOURCES[3] are cited in defence of his claim that "the use of an inappropriate source: an autobiography, for historical statistics is not acceptable" (Archive No. 20, Edit request on 22 March 2012, Fifelfoo, 1:53, 3 April 2012).

But Editor A argues that Wikipedia views as reliable sources held in "multiple academic libraries" and that a search of WorldCat shows the Lawrence book in the holdings of more than eight distinguished libraries around the world. He/she also points out that the statistics are not to be found in any other published source and that the editor's motivation is "simply […] an interest in improving the Wikipedia Vietnam War article but that "sometimes I feel people spend so much time thumbing through rules and regulations to find a justification for saying 'no' instead of looking from another perspective and saying 'why not'? There is insightful info here, and there is really no need to denigrate the Lawrence book simply because it has the word 'memoir' in the title" (Archive No. 20, Edit request on 22 March 2012, 72.197.57.247, 3:35, 3 April 2012).

But these appeals continue to fall on deaf ears. Fifelfoo argues that "while a report compiled for Congress by an instrument of government has credibility as a primary source, inherent in the source from publisher's responsibility to produce facts, and the CRS's access to government material; former Lieutenants do not have such a responsibility, and we can't trust their statements about where they got their facts from. If you want to become a cliometric historian, then go forth and publish in the scholarly journals" (Archive No. 20, Edit request on 22 March 2012, Fifelfoo, 7:28, 3 April 2012)[4].

Editor A gives up at this point, but is replaced by another Lawrence champion whom we will refer to as Editor B. Editor B tries to show that Lawrence "did more than

just fight out of a foxhole" (Archive No. 20, Edit request on 22 March 2012, 72.197.86.130, 10:13, 3 April 2012). Fifelfoo repeats the view that none of Lawrence's achievements as enumerated by Editor B are related "to statistical demography or history" but adds that "if you think his book is scholarly, can you point to appreciative reviews of the work in the scholarly journals?" (Archive No. 20, Edit request on 22 March 2012, Fifelfoo, 5:56, 5 April 2012). Editor A obliges, but the reviews are taken from Amazon.com. The discussion ends at this point. Neither the Lawrence book not the table appear in the latest version of the article consulted.

One of the interesting things about this particular discussion is the use of policies. Celestra, the senior administrator tries to use policies as a means to bring specificity to the charges Fifelfoo levels against the Lawrence book. Fifelfoo cites policy names, but does not delve into any great detail over their content. And Celestra does not press the issue. Sus Scrofa quotes a large chunk of policy which on the surface at least would seem to support the use of the Lawrence book, but even he/she does not use the quote to press the claim, bringing to bear instead an entirely different argument, namely, that because there is "no great dispute" over the statistics it would be acceptable to use the source. Editor A also directly quotes Wikipedia policy in order to present the records of WorldCat as evidence of the book's reliability, but this is a far weaker argument than one based on the text quoted by Sus Scrofa: "Unless restricted by another policy, primary sources that have been reliably published may be used in Wikipedia, but only with care, because it is easy to misuse them" (Archive No. 20, Edit request on 22 March 2012, SusScrofa, 16:29, 2 April 2012). What are we to make of this? Christopher Goldspink, in a study of the linguistic features of Wikipedia talk pages found that in many cases, editors either ignored ea ch other's statements or did not reflect to any great degree on what the others were saying. This would appear to be the case here. Celestra should have asked Fifelfoo for the specific parts of the policy he believed disqualified the Lawrence book. Instead Celestra entirely disappears from the debate. Similarly, Sus Scrofa's quote should have been picked up by Editor A as offering good support for the use of the source, but it is not referred to again in the discussion. Instead he/she tries to develop arguments that attempt to persuade the reader of the authoritativeness of the author. But this is not going to work with an editor such as Fifelfoo.

And here we come to a second informative point about this debate: the differing backgrounds of the editors and resultant difficulties in communication. All communities develop vocabularies, rituals and other symbolic devices to allow them to function as social entities, as well as to create a sense of identity among members. Wikipedia brings together individuals, many of whom have some training in various academic communities. On the one hand, this is a good development. It could potentially enable a more multidisciplinary, or as Smith Pfister refers to it, a multi-perspectival approach to subject matter much needed, in today's increasingly narrow world of specialists (Smith, 2011). But on the other hand, getting these individuals to effectively communicate across disciplinary boundaries poses certain challenges stemming from the fact that they do not share common assumptions about things like what constitutes a good source. Hence we have Fifelfoo condemning the use of memoirs as a source of facts vs others, coming from different communities, who see no reason why such a source should be barred.

Crucible Vietnam continued: tension between knowledge's
Crucible Vietnam features in another narrative of the Vietnam War I wish to discuss. In this case the author cites his book in order to correct the given date of arrival of the Ninth Marine Expeditionary Brigade. Slatersteven, an editor with much Wikipedia

experience, to judge from his user page, acknowledges the accuracy of that date, but writes that "it's not good form to cite yourself" (Archive No. 18, Annotations – No. 5 is incorrect and needs to be corrected, Slatersteven, 21:13, 19 March 2011). While *Crucible*'s author (72.197.57.247) apologizes for his actions he notes in his defence that "I feel that the accuracy of these details, as well as correct casualty figures are so important for us Vietnam Vets and for the historical record, which will be here when we are gone" (Archive No. 18, Annotations – No. 5 is incorrect and needs to be corrected, 72.197.57.247, 4:36, 20 March 2011). And he is supported by another "anonymous" editor who writes that "it's very good form for a Vietnam Vet to cite himself. Who else is going to know more about the Vietnam War? […] do I believe what the academic pedants who were never in Vietnam have to say about the war? No. And as Lawrence says, after Vietnam vets are gone, who's going to tell the real story? Hollywood?" The same editor gives an example of what he/she believed is the inaccurate captioning of a war plane and notes "a history professor with a PhD would be clueless while a Vietnam vet in the USAF would know" (Archive No. 18, Annotations – No. 5 is incorrect and needs to be corrected, 66.122.184.111, 6 April 2011).

Lawrence is not the only veteran to be the object of talk page discussion. An article published in the *Chico News and Review* in the Letters to the Editor section is used to support the claim that the USA did not lose the war in Vietnam. Slatersteven "suggests that this would fail RS" (Archive No. 17, US won the Vietnam War, Slatersteven 21:54, 31 July 2010), while Wikipedia administrator and long-time editor W.H. Mitchell provides the specific Wikipedia policy the source allegedly violates (WP:NEWSBLOG)[5], unless "that person was an established expert on the topic" (Archive No. 17, USA won the Vietnam War, W.T. Michell, 23:56, 1 August 2010). To this, another, unregistered, editor rejoins: "So Vietnam vets are not experts on the Vietnam War?" arguing in a latter posting that "actually they are. You should talk to Vietnam veterans sometimes. They know stuff you would find incredible, stuff that isn't in the history books […] What these vets tell me is totally different than what we read in the history books" to which Sus Scrofa replies: "sifting through anecdotal evidence to arrive at historical truth is a job for historians and not Wikipedia. Participants in an event are also not neutral observers and are prone to obvious bias regarding their own side" (Archive No. 17, USA won the Vietnam War, Sus Scrofa, 12:58, 5 August 2010). The discussion then moves beyond talk of sources at this point, but returns to them towards the end of the section when an unregistered user comments that "the article needs more input from Vietnamese people, North and South" claiming that much of the reportage on the war was done by US journalists "and so the neutrality of the press was breached". The editor goes on to recommend a number of novels that bring to the fore different "points of view". These sources, however, are summarily dismissed by Slatersteven: "Novels are fiction, even if based on real events. As such they would fail RS" (Archive No. 17, USA won the Vietnam War, Slatersteven, 12:25, 1 November 2010), thus ending the discussion.

There are two issues of interest in these examples. The first revolves around the distinction between the knowledge of academic historians and that of Vietnam veterans. As well as being distinct, the editors perceive them hierarchically – one is better than the other. This perception mirrors the observations of Hartelius (2011) who writes of a "tension between academic historians and memory" (p. 70). By memory, Hartelius refers to the collective memory of a society – a group interpretation of the past that is produced and circulated in the form of ritual and ceremonies, and mediated through various media. Hartelius argues that memory relies on a particular form of

expertise, that of the witness who is able to create a persuasive account of the past through rhetorical appeals to lived experience. Historians are also in the business of producing persuasive accounts, but they do so, like other academic communities, through adherence to commonly accepted ways of working on problems (pp. 78-80). Hence the tension between the two forms of knowledge. The knowledge of memory is embodied in the person of the witness while historical knowledge is created through the appropriation of a particular set of rules in the course of creating an account of the past.

It seems almost inevitable that the two forms of knowledge would collide in the case of a controversial subject such as the Vietnam War. The probability of tension is heightened by the importance the voice of the Vietnam veteran has taken on in dominant framings of the war in the USA. Sturken (1997) tells us that recent cinematic representations tend to construct the veteran as possessing a certain "wisdom and truth" (p. 86) developed as a result of the hardships they faced and the sense of betrayal they felt afterwards. Similarly, Beattie (1998) describes how the cultural construction of the war as something unique to US history privileged the veteran's voice or at least those voices speaking a particular message of the need for American unity (pp. 75, 95). Given these developments it is not surprising that the debate on the article in Wikipedia exhibits this tension between the two forms of knowledge.

The second point of interest in this example is related to the distinction observed between collective memory and historical accounts of the past in that it also involves the status of another kind of knowledge – the knowledge embedded in fictional accounts of the past.

For Slatersteven, the dividing line between fiction and history is clear cut. The former is somehow "made up" or "artificial" while the other is "truthful". But as Hayden White has demonstrated, such a black and white division is problematic. White argues that historians, just as much as novelists construct their histories, that is, they arrange past events in a particular sequence, highlighting some and neglecting others in order to make the strangeness of the past, its unfamiliarity, familiar. White (1978) suggests that this process is achieved by "emplotting" events on to one of a number of socially understandable narrative structures: romance, tragedy, or comedy, for example. In this way "the original strangeness, mystery, or exoticism of the events is dispelled, and they take on a familiar aspect, not in their details, but in their function as elements of a familiar kind of configuration" (p. 86).

For White (1978), the revelation that historians are producing narrative accounts of the past according to literary conventions "in no way detracts from the status of historical narratives as providing a kind of knowledge" (p. 85). But it also opens the mind to the possibility that literary works themselves may contain a kind of knowledge of the past, complementary to historical work. With such awareness, the blanket exclusion of novels from Wikipedia, as Slatersteven attempts to enforce, becomes less defensible.

Disrupting information routines: north Vietnamese land reform
The fourth debate over sources takes us to the issue of north Vietnamese land reform efforts in the 1950s. An edit war over the extent of deaths associated with those reforms was in progress. Marching into this strife, Paul Siebert, an editor who seems to specialize in verifying sources on Wikipedia, attempts to reconcile the warring camps by appeal to "top quality reliable sources" trusting that the "information from them would allow us to resolve the dispute" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Paul Siebert, 18:44, 2 January 2013). The sources he cites are a 1972 paper on the topic by Gareth Porter, another article appearing in *Pacific Affairs* by Edwin Moise, and a final piece by Balazs

Szalontai published in *Cold War History*. Likely to his surprise, those sources do not magically put an end to the debate. The expertise of Moise is questioned by Stumink who has discovered that he is a mathematician and not presumably a historian (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Stumink, 1:58, 3 January 2013). But it is TheTimesAreAChanging (TTAAC) who launches a sustained critique. Porter is labelled a "communist genocide denier" for a book he wrote on Cambodia so that "if he is accepted as a credible source in this instance, then we must also accept his 'estimate' that the Khmer Rouge killed a few thousand people" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, TTAAC, 14:24, 3 January 2013). Porter is also attacked as "not being a historian and lacking appropriate language skills" while Moise, on the other hand, is accused of relying "on official sources such as the Communist Party newspaper" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, TTAAC, 14:24, 3 January 2013).

In response to these comments, another editor, Slatersteven, urges that the disputed sources be brought to the attention of the Reliable Sources Noticeboard (RSN). But this does not appear attractive to the warring parties. Paul Siebert instead quotes Moise who apparently writes that the highest estimate of deaths was given by former US President Richard Nixon (500,000), "while a "standard estimate, by Bernard Fall, was that about 50,000 were executed" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Paul Siebert 19:13, 3 January 2013). Paul Siebert goes on to argue that "we have an authoritative opinion (I believe no one doubts the article published in a peer-reviewed scholarly journal is a top quality reliable source) that 50,000 was a standard estimate by 1976". He also notes that other reliable sources also use this figure. Not content to champion his own sources, he then provides a critical commentary on the ones currently in use, noting that most are not reliable due to their lack of peer review, popular nature, or biased viewpoint. Siebert also specifically addresses two of TTAAC's criticisms. First, in regard to notability, he argues that peer-review itself implies notability. He handles the criticism of Communist Party data in the same way, appeal to peer review: "we cannot decide by ourselves which methodology is correct or not". At the end he asks others to present reliable sources to back up their criticisms and notes that he is not in favour of presenting a range of estimates "because the data from good quality publications have much more weight than questionable or biased sources" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Paul Siebert, 19:13, 3 January 2013).

But his appeals fall on deaf ears and so Paul Siebert decides to present his method for selecting those particular sources. He claims to have been open to any estimate at the start of his search, but that Google Scholar lead him to these sources "[…] the procedure I used to select sources was absolutely neutral and transparent. Gscholar gave me no references to *Life* or politically biased sources and it would be quite natural to use the above listed sources. In contrast I have no idea about the procedure you used to find sources, and I have some reason to suspect that procedure is far from perfect, so the set of sources you rely upon is very biased (that they are of questionable quality is obvious)" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Paul Siebert, 22:05, 3 January 2013).

TTAAC then brings into the argument an article by Stephen Morris appearing in the *National Interest* in 1989 which is used to label Porter as "a communist propagandist" while Moise is alleged to have made massive errors and hence is outdated. In return Paul Siebert examines the cites in Google Scholar and finds the Morris article "to be almost ignored by the scholarly community" with the "only good source" criticizing him for supporting the Khmer Rouge after 1979 in order to advance the anti-Vietnam agenda of the US Government. But, "more importantly" Paul Siebert notes, is that TTAAC ignores the "main thesis: the sources provided by me are the only

sources that meet all best quality secondary sources criteria" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Paul Siebert, 00:52, 4 January 2013) so that from his point of view "I think we can stop our dispute" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Paul Siebert, 1:06, 4 January 2013).

But of course that is not the view of TTAAC who restates his/her opinions yet again. After the numerous attempts to discredit Porter's work on Vietnam by labelling him as a genocide denier, Paul Siebert replies that: "We are discussing not people, but sources" and "we discuss based on their own merit and Porter's work on Vietnam meets all RS criteria – his conclusion about Vietnam has been used by many authors, and, importantly, they were confirmed independently" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Paul Siebert, 1:03, 5 January 2013). Then, rather unexpectedly, TTAAC writes that the real issue "is not with your sources but your proposed text", helpfully providing a paragraph he/she believes would allow for a compromise, but which specifically notes that Moise considered that "communist newspapers provided a […] more accurate account". There follows a list of seven sources (Archive No. 21, Edit war, TTAAC, 2:57, 5 January 2013). This generates new activity from other editors. Slatersteven suggests a shorter paragraph that provides a range of estimates (1,500-100,000 executions "with an upper limit of 900,000" from all causes of death") (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Slatersteven, 11:35, 5 January 2013). TTAAC agrees with this sentence but notes that the longer paragraph was to allow for a compromise with Paul Siebert. Stumink suggests 200,000 for the executions, but otherwise likes the paragraph. And a new editor, Zeraful cites *Political Violence in Southeast Asia* to suggest that the paragraph include a mention that "some of the events in north Vietnam during the 1950s was extraggated [sic] by the US and South Vietnam in order to alienate the nation" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Zeraful, 11:21, 6 January 2013), but this is shot down by Stumink: "since that would be undue" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Stumink, 15:07, 6 January 2013).

Paul Siebert's comments, however, immediately shatter the consensus building around the new paragraph, despite his polite reference to "good faith attempts", for he "cannot" agree with the arguments presented by the other editors. He challenges the notion that Moise uncritically used Communist Party newspapers, commenting: "I don't know if you read Moise (I have serious reasons to suspect you didn't) and outlines Moise's argument for claiming that the land reform resulted in fewer causalities than believed (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Paul Siebert, 21:02, 6 January 2013). And when a veteran editor, Darkness Shines, expresses the view that the contested sources should be brought to the RSN (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Darkness Shines, 17:31, 7 January 2013), Paul Siebert replied "I'll do that" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Paul Siebert, 20:02, 7 January 2013), thus ending the discussion.

This debate is an extended illustration of Pfister's argument that Wikipedia "destabilizes familiar information routines", that is, changes the criteria we use to judge expertise, albeit, I would argue, without replacing them with much that could be construed as progressive. Paul Siebert constructs himself as a model information searcher (according to his user page he has a PhD so this is perhaps not so surprising). He claims no biases, uses the information technology of choice for Wikipedia editors (Google Scholar) and applies the criteria of peer-review as a means to filter potential information sources. And the sources he finds I think would be viewed by the majority of librarians or scholars as decent enough: *Pacific Affairs* is a scholarly journal with a long history of publishing the work of illustrious scholars. *Cold War History* is a more recent journal, but is also seen as publishing quality work while Porter's work appeared in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* which is seen as a leftist journal, but one which adheres to standards of rigour in scholarship.

Certainly, he is confident of his work: "These sources are top quality sources, and the info from them would allow us to resolve the dispute" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Paul Siebert, 18:44, 2 January 2013). He tries to shut down debate by appeal to the nature of his sources, the second time, quite directly: "I think we can stop our dispute" (Archive No. 21, Edit war, Paul Siebert, 01:06, 4 January 2013). The reaction he got must have been surprising each time, but is a clear example of Pfister's destabilization at work. Considerations other than peer review loom large in the alternative information routines of TTAAC and his friends: the wider reputation of the author being high on the list. Porter allegedly supported the Khmer Rouge and hence all of his writings are to be questioned. Communist parties, allegedly by their inherent nature, always distort the truth, and hence materials produced by them are also to be questioned. Reputation of the author is the wider measure by which individual sources are to be judged. The problem with this information routine is that it allows little room for error. Once identified with an error, all work by the same author becomes suspect. It also requires some effort to execute properly. Here again, the shallowness of attention given to these debates by Wikipedia editors is glaring. Nobody bothers to verify the claims made by TTAAC about Porter. And Moise's use of Communist Party newspapers is not challenged until very late in the debate. It is Paul Siebert, champion of the more traditional information routine, who digs deeper into the sources than anyone else, using contextual knowledge to argue against the inclusion of RAND reports (this particular report was not highly cited in Google Scholar and RAND itself, being heavily obligated to the US Government, cannot be considered an unbiased agent). He also appears to have actually read the Moise article and provides an outline of the argument showing that it does not rely uncritically on Communist Party newspapers. He also qualifies Porter's errors regarding the Khmer Rouge, noting that little information was coming out of Cambodia at the time and hence many were fooled.

Up to now I have painted a rather negative picture of these Wikipedia debates over sources. But all is not negative. To begin with, this particular debate was conducted, for the most part, without much acrimony. Not all the debates were similar in this regard and certain contributors were consistently acerbic in tone. But here we have a good example of Wikipedia's potential to enable collaboration and interaction between people scattered globally. To a certain extent, Wikipedia represents, when it is at its most successful, a digital version of the coffee houses that Habermas (1991) describes as the site of a developing public sphere in the European eighteenth century – a place where people can put aside status differences and, at least potentially, engage in rational, logical debate over issues of mutual concern.

The debate also illustrates how Wikipedia's editors have developed tools to enable such debate. Some of these include policy guidelines, bots, and, in this case, what amounts to a tribunal of wider Wikipedia opinion; the RSN. However, the RSN is not without its problems. It depends on interested editors responding to requests for assistance. In this case, four editors make contributions. Three make one contribution each, while it is the fourth, Itsmejudith, who sustains the debate with four substantial comments. Most of the text is produced by the original protagonists of the debate, who repeat their previous arguments. The RSN also depends on editors able and willing to provide good arguments pro or con the various sources brought to their attention. Raquel Baranov wrote: "I read many books about Pol Pot's Cambodia that mentioned Porter. Noam Chomsky wrote books about Pol Pot's Cambodia. I consider them both RS on Cambodia" (Wikipedia: Reliable Source/Noticeboard/Archive No. 140, "Is Porter's article a reliable source about Vietnam's land reform?", Raquel Baranov,

02:06, 8 January 2013) – a statement not likely to be convincing to those holding opposing views. Similarly, comments such as provided by another editor: "Porter has been largely discredited along with what I'd call the 'house of Chomsky'" (Wikipedia: Reliable Source/Noticeboard/Archive No. 140, "Is Porter's article a reliable source about Vietnam's land reform?", Vєcrumьа, 05:21, 11 January 2013) has little ability to persuade those with contrary opinions. On the other hand, Shirgley brings to the discussion new evidence: a link to a page of Porter's book, and from this argues that Porter was interested in examining "the methodologies for country deaths rather than uncritically accepting them, it is one of the most high quality sources you could use" (Wikipedia: Reliable Source/Noticeboard/Archive No. 140, "Is Porter's article a reliable source about Vietnam's land reform?", Shirgley, 5:22, 8 January 2013). Itsmejudith, however, supplies the greatest amount of analysis, arguing that Porter's argument is reasonable and has not been refuted by other historians, but that technically the work does not meet the standards of WP:HISTRS because it is unknown whether Porter was an academic historian at the time he wrote. Itsmejudith suggests posting the question on Wiki project Vietnam for further advice on what Vietnamese historians have to say on the topic, but this course of action does not appear to have been taken.

Reading the postings regarding the Porter book on the RSN brings to the fore the wider strengths and weaknesses of the encyclopaedia. Wikipedia is flexible enough to generate tools to help resolve disputes about knowledge claims and broaden the debate, but if the agents involved in that debate are unwilling or unable to agree on the principles of source selection, stalemate and gridlock develop. In this particular case, we find in the most recent version of the article no mention of Porter, Moise, or Szalontai, even though these are, as Paul Siobert maintained among the best secondary sources available. What we find instead are three not so informative sources. The first is a collection of oral histories put together by Christian Appy. This is a very interesting book, but the pages referred to in the Vietnam War citation do not mention land reform nor the executions of landlords.

Also employed is a translation of a 1953 Vietnamese Politburo directive which does not discuss the actual number of executions during the period of land reform, but fixes the ratio of executions "in principle" to "one per one thousand people of the total population of the free area", but explicitly also notes it does not "mean that every village will execute landlords according to this ratio" (p. 243). The document also stresses that although the Party wants to execute all "those who deserve execution "it cannot do so for fear of alienating the people. Furthermore, it admonishes local cadres that "executions are intended for the most reactionary who have committed the most crimes, who have killed people, who have caused damages to the revolution, and who are hated most by the people" (p. 244). If the landlords are young and "hopefully can be successfully re-educated, however, or if their children are in the army, executions "can be commuted to imprisonment if the masses approve" (p. 244). Not only does the document not discuss the actual numbers killed by the land reform policy, it suggests that the policy was not to be carried out indiscriminately and mechanisms of leniency were available. Given the numbers claimed by the article to be killed, these points should have been included in any balanced account.

The final reference is to a book entitled in English "A history of the Vietnamese economy" edited by Dang Phong of the Institute of Social Sciences in Hanoi. This is written entirely in Vietnamese, making the sceptical reader wonder if it was read at all by TTAAC who used it to claim a certain number of landlord deaths. And even if TTAAC could read Vietnamese, given the controversial nature of the claim, the

reference is not the best to use in this case, since most of the readership will have no understanding of the language.

The history of the substitution of these three sources for the others generally agreed on through the RSN is an interesting one – the switch was made on 19 February 2013, only a month or so after the RSN debate. The comment accompanying the change was merely: "Use original sources". This time there was no Paul Siebert to intervene and the change remains up to the time of writing.

Perhaps the key lesson here is that despite Wikipedia's claim to require reliable sources and to stand aloof from the debates over knowledge claims, the politics of outside invariably intrude and that those interested in presenting their version of truth need to be constantly vigilant to see that it is not lost among old talk pages and revision lists. This parallels one of the key findings of Bilic and Bulian who conclude from their study of Wikipedia editors working on articles related to Kosovo in different language versions of Wikipedia that "either consensus nor conflicts are stable behavioural patterns on Wikipedia" (2014). Nathaniel Tkacz (2007) notes that Wikipedia represents a new regime of truth, one that is buffeted by the force of the politics of knowledge, but in which early interpretations and alternative knowledge claims are continuously presented through the archive of talk pages comes as cold comfort to those whose viewpoints are superceded (Tkacz power, visibility, etc., p. 14).

Conclusion

Wikipedia, despite its faults is a positive development. As a community engaged in the volunteer creation of an encyclopaedia freely available to all it goes against the trend of information commodification that has marked our age. And as an intellectual endeavour, even if many times conducted at a shallow level, it runs counter to much that is anti-intellectual in our society today (Postman, 1985). For these two reasons alone, Wikipedia is worthy of support by information professionals.

But Wikipedia also represents an opportunity. In an age that questions the necessity for the existence of large collections of printed materials and where competition for professional space pits the more traditional skills of librarians against more technical information technology professions and the increasing do-it-yourself, trend in information provision, Wikipedia could be the focus of a sustained revitalization of the role of information professionals through an expansion of what is already seen as part of the discipline: information literacy.

Traditionally, information literacy has focused on the narrow cultivation of certain skills involving how to plan and execute a search for information (Kapitzke, 2003a, b; Sundin, 2008). It has not contributed much to the notion that the searcher of information could, given today's technologies, also be a provider or disseminator of information (Huvila, 2011; but see Elmborg, 2006). But as the case of Wikipedia shows, this is the delivered promise of the new internet technologies. By neglecting the potential productive capacity of users information professionals overlook an educative niche that could be useful to them in solidifying their professional identity. Teaching users of information systems how to contribute to knowledge dissemination as well as use that which they find would be a useful and rewarding contribution to society.

As this paper has demonstrated, many Wikipedia talk pages likely suffer from shallowness in their argumentation that makes much of the discussion that takes place superfluous and unproductive. As well as making the process of writing more cumbersome than it ought to be, this weakness makes it all too easy for misrepresentation of viewpoints to influence decisions about what to include and not

include in the encyclopaedia. By developing awareness in students of what approaches to participation in online debate are constructive and which are not, perhaps some of the shallowness and the consequences it produces may be alleviated in future generations of Wikipedians.

Similarly, the inculcation of a better appreciation of how academic knowledge is produced and how it is distinguished from and similar to other forms of knowledge would be a useful component of an information literacy geared not only to create educated users of information, but also disseminators of information. Here, Latour and Fleck's classic works on the use of citations and the process of scientific work more generally could prove useful in presenting these lessons (Latour, 1987; Fleck, 1979).

Armed with a better appreciation of how knowledge is produced, potential editors of Wikipedia could participate more effectively in debate and understand better the reasons for Wikipedia's policy on reliable sources. It might also help develop more tolerance for other forms of knowledge so that instead of summarily dismissing the oral testimonies of Vietnam War veterans, for example, the response might be to advocate a section or an entire article to those recollections, thereby addressing the divide between professional history and collective memory, as well as catering to a need among those who lived their lives in what is our past.

Finally, by opening up to students the existence of multiple knowledge's, enhanced information literacy also brings to the fore the possibility or desirability for various less than adequately represented groups to make sure their voices are a part of Wikipedia's articles, rather than banished to talk pages. Such awareness could lead to greater rates of participation in the work of the encyclopaedia, no doubt a positive development for both Wikipedia and the information professions.

Notes

1. POV stands for "Point of View". A key foundation of Wikipedia writing is its insistence that articles exhibit a Neutral Point of View (NPOV), or in other words are not biased towards any particular perspective. If a text is labelled POV it is therefore seen as deficient and in need of immediate correction.

2. WP:RS refers to WP:IRS, the Wikipedia policy statement on Identifying Reliable Sources; WP:HISTR refers to Identifying Reliable Sources (History), and WP:MILMOS#SOURCES refers to the Wikipedia Manual of Style for Military History. WP:RSIN is likely a typographical error, perhaps the author meant to refer instead to WP:RSN (Reliable Sources Noticeboard), which is discussed later in the text.

3. WP:IRS refers to the Wikipedia policy statement on Identifying Reliable Sources; WP.

4. CRS refers to the Congressional Research Services, a government agency dedicated to providing policy and legal analysis to the US Congress.

5. WP: NEWSBLOG refers to the paragraph on the subject of newspaper and magazine blogs contained in the Wikipedia article on the verifiability of claims (Wikipedia: Verifiability).

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Further reading

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About the author

Dr Brendan Luyt is an Associate Professor at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and
Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests focus on the
social and policy landscape of information access including the history of information
institutions, Wikipedia as a social phenomenon, and issues in scholarly information and
communication. Dr Brendan Luyt can be contacted at: brendan@ntu.edu.sg