ADIEU WIKIPEDIA: UNDERSTANDING THE ETHICS OF WIKIPEDIA AFTER GAMERGATE

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Introduction

This essay explores the possibilities for using the ethical thought of Emmanual Levinas to better understand ethical behavior within the Wikipedia project.

At its inception, the free encyclopedia project Wikipedia was hailed by some as an example of a productive method capable of breaking from entrenched systems of power and privilege. However, as the project has matured it has has to deal with the ways these forms of power and privilege have reproduced themselves within its community. In particular, Wikipedia has struggled with a well documented gender gap in its editor base; according to the best estimates available, fewer than 16% of Wikipedia contributors identify as female (Hill and Shaw). Wikipedia's problematic gender dynamics were further highlighted when, in January 2015, the site's arbitration committee (or Arbcom) ruled to exclude editors deemed "disruptive" from participating in the article documenting the still-unfolding campaign of anti-feminist harassment dubbed "gamergate." This action was reported in the press, somewhat inaccurately, as a "feminist purge" of Wikipedia (Hern), largely because of the Arbcom decided to include some high profile Wikipedia editors working to prevent gamergate related harassment in its sanctions.

While initial press reports may have over-emphasized the impact of the gamergate arbcom decision, the engagement between Wikipedia and gamergate is still a useful case as it demonstrates how Wikipedia shies away from an understanding of its own ethical guidelines that would foreground the obligation to an embodied other, as found in the work of Levinas. Instead, we see how the project interprets these guidelines in a way that emphasizes procedural fairness and follows Habermas' prescription for establishing a just discursive environment, as described in previous work (Hansen, Berente, and Lyytinen). This procedural focus may, in part, explain Wikipedia's continued difficulty in addressing power, privilege and exclusion in its community.

Wikipedia and Gamergate

Before beginning to analyze the implications of the Wikipedia/gamergate encounter, it is perhaps best to briefly recount the history of "gamergate" and its interactions with Wikipedia. The self-styled "gamergate movement" began in August 2014, when an ex-boyfriend of feminist game developer Zoe Quinn published a blog post that claimed, among other things, that Quinn had advanced her career by sleeping with other men in the gaming industry, including journalists who had reviewed Quinn's game *Depression Quest.* In response to these claims, since debunked, a loose coalition of (mostly male) gamers began to protest what they claimed was an unethical collusion between feminist and anti-racist activists and gaming journalists to promote progressive content in video games. These complaints became more visible after the actor-turned-libertarian-activist Adam Baldwin (mostly known for his role on Joss Whedon's *Firefly*) tweeted his support for them using the hashtag #gamergate. This term quickly became the consensus moniker for the movement, which attracted media attention mostly because of the proclivity of some of its members for using graphic threats of rape and assault against feminist designers and journalists. In addition Quinn and others were the victims of personal information releases (or "doxxing") and other forms of harassment by gamergate affiliated internet users.(Dewey)

On September 5, 2014 established Wikipedia editor "Mckaysalisbury" created an article stub for an article documenting gamergate on Wikipedia. The very earliest revisions of the article appear to have been composed by gamergate supporters, mostly editing anonymously or using newly created Wikipedia accounts. These early versions make claims such as "GamerGate is an ongoing issue in the video game community, mostly surrounding corruption within the game blogging industry" and listing incidents where gamergate supporters had been banned from commenting on websites "for opinions." Two of these early revisions have since been redacted from the page history for violating Wikipedia's "biography of living persons" policy, which forbids potentially libelous material from being posted on Wikipedia.

These early, gamergate sympathetic versions do not last very long. A little over six hours after the creation of the initial stub article, they are replaced by a version authored by veteran Wikipedia article NorthBySouthBaranof. This version states:

> In August 2014 gaming culture engendered a complicated and manifold controversy [1] known as GamerGate (partially promulgated on Twitter with the hashtag #GamerGate) involving journalistic ethics and misogyny[2] in gaming culture which itself went viral.[3][4] The controversy began attracting mainstream media coverage,[5] including the business press[6] and TIME magazine.[7] The controversy began with the release of private information about the game developer Zoe Quinn, and expanded to include the video journalist Anita Sarkeesian, the latter of whom has received death threats.[8]

This begins a battle over the article's content that will continue for the next three months. Editors sympathetic to gamergate rapidly become frustrated by Wikipedia's verifiability policy, which holds that Wikipedia simply reports facts that have been documented by outside "reliable sources." Since the balance of reliable media outlets describe gamergate as a reactionary and misogynist movement, they have difficulty swaying the article to describe it otherwise. In addition, a cadre of experienced

Wikipedia editors, took it upon themselves to prevent what they saw as skewed editing on the part of gamergate aligned Wikipedians. Five of these editors, NorthBySouthBaranof among them, were dubbed "the five horsemen" by gamergate activists working on 8chan and reddit, who discussed methods for removing them from the article editing process (Williams).

On November 27, 2014, a request for action by Wikipedia's Arbitration Committee (Arbcom) was filed by wikipedia user The Devil's Advocate. Arbcom, which serves as Wikipedia's dispute resolution organ of last resort, was asked by The Devil's Advocate to take action to resolve what he saw as biased collusion on the part of gamergate opponents. He writes, "While editors with fewer contributions, as far as I know only those who are or are seen as favorable to the GamerGate side, have been routinely sanctioned or blocked, the established editors who are unfavorable to the GamerGate side and are the source of a lot of the conflict continue unimpeded." ("Wikipedia") This Arbcom case would ultimately find against the editors identified as "the five horsemen" (along with a variety of other editors, including The Devil's Advocate himself) banning four of them from editing "any page relating to, (a) Gamergate, (b) any gender-related dispute or controversy, (c) people associated with (a) or (b), all broadly construed."

It was this ban of the five horsemen that lead to Wikipedia being criticized for purging feminist editors. Understanding the rationale given for this decision will help us better understand Wikipedia's sense of its own ethical commitments.

"Wikipedia Is Not A Battleground:" The Ethical Importance of Civility for Wikipedia

While the arbcom cited a variety of Wikipedia policies in their decision on the gamergate case, one in particular was presented by the committee as key to their decision, and used in the rationale for almost all of the actions taken to discipline editors. This was the "Wikipedia is not a battleground" policy, one of the core "What Wikipedia is Not" policies that defines the scope of the project via exclusion. The policy reads, in part, "Wikipedia is not a place to hold grudges, import personal conflicts, carry on ideological battles, or nurture prejudice, hatred, or fear. Making personal battles out of Wikipedia discussions goes directly against our policies and goals." ("Wikipedia:What Wikipedia Is Not - Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia") This policy was named as the second of 14 principles enumerated by Arbcom as informing their decision, and all of the editors sanctioned by the committee were found guilty of "battleground conduct." ("Wikipedia")

The use of the battleground policy in the gamergate decision highlights an ethical dilemma for Wikipedia. On the one hand, the use of the policy is clearly an attempt to maintain Wikipedia as a space where differing viewpoints can be represented and synthesized. Along these lines, Hansen et. al. have argued that Wikipedia represents "an approximation of rational discourse" as theorized by Habermas. They write that Wikipedia attempts to create a space where the sort of "communicative action" described by Habermas can occur. For Habermas, communicative action is ethically desirable since it "refers to the situation in which 'the actions of agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding.'" (Hansen, Berente, and Lyytinen) In order for mutually-based

communicative action to thrive, actions taken by agents in pursuit of a unilateral agenda, so-called "strategic actions" must be limited.

It is exactly this limitation of strategic action on the part of Wikipedia editors that the battleground policy seeks to achieve. The policy itself defines it's purpose in terms of preventing editors from pursuing individual goals, whether those goals are "personal conflicts" or "ideological grudges" in ways that would damage their fellow editors, or the larger Wikipedia project. In the case of the gamergate article, the evidence selected by the arbcom in finding editors guilty of "battleground conduct" also helps demonstrate the prevention of "strategic action." In some cases, this evidence consisted of showing that the editor in question had repeatedly inserted text into the article that promoted the view of his or her preferred "side," especially when this text was sourced to texts that were not considered "reliable." For example, NorthBySouthBaranof was found to have engaged in battleground conduct for inserting material sourced to a Salt Lake Tribune editorial that included a quote stating that the threats Anita Sarkeesian received would seem to support Sarkeesian's point about a link between some video games and violent attitudes toward females" ("Wikipedia"). In other cases, the evidence showed that the editor in question had strong language or insults to attack opposing editors. For example user Ryulong, another of the "five horsemen" and the only user banned from Wikipedia by the gamergate arbcom decision, was banned in part for telling another editor to "Stop bitching about neutrality because things aren't going the way of the gater" ("Wikipedia"). In both cases, editors were found guilty of battleground conduct for pursuing their own strategic goals at the expense of project goals.

While neither Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales nor the Wikimedia Foundation are directly involved in the operation of the arbcom, which consists of volunteers elected from the editing community, their statements on the interaction between gamergate and Wikipedia can still shed light on the ethical framework guiding the arbcom decision. Both Wales and the Wikimedia Foundation made statements that stressed the need to limit strategic actions on the part of users for the good of the larger community. The Foundation, in a statement released in response to the press coverage of the gamergate arbcom decision, repeatedly stressed the need to prevent "disruptions" to that "Wikipedia can remain a civil, productive place for all editors."

Wales, in a series of tweets written in September 2014 (during the thick of edit warring on the gamergate article) compared the conflict to "a controversy at Wikipedia about a breed of dog" in which "virtually all the editors were activists."(Wales, "1/I Remember a Controversy at Wikipedia about a Breed of Dog. When I Looked into It, Virtually All the Editors Were Activists.") He suggests that the model set by that case, in which "all the activists on all sides were topic banned"(Wales, "2/What Eventually Happened, as I Recall, Is That All the Activists on All Sides Were Topic Banned. To Their Dismay.") and then "the Wikipedians were able to write a neutral article that more or less satisfied everyone" (Wales, "3/And Then the Wikipedians Were Able to Write a Neutral Article That More or Less Satisfied Everyone.") could set an example for the ongoing gamergate article. The way Wales' comments divide "activists" pursuing their own agendas from "Wikipedians" pursuing the collective agenda of a "neutral" article is particularly telling. It shows again how the ethical framework of Wikipedia divides individual strategic action from collective action.

Gamergate as point of failure for Wikipedia's Habermasian ethics and a potential contribution from Levinas

While Wikipedia may benefit from maintaining a "civil and productive" space for editors, the case of gamergate shows the ethical limits of this approach. For one, it limits the ability of Wikipedia to protect editors who are hounded into incivility by determined provocateurs. NorthBySouthBaranof, in his presentation of evidence to the arbcom in the gamergate case, argues that "Gamergate supporters have targeted long-term editors, creating multiple pages which are "hit lists" including dozens of long-term Wikipedia editors who have opposed them. This has included implied and explicit threats, abusive vandalism, miscellaneous garbage and other personal attacks"("Wikipedia"- Gamergate Evidence) and providing links to the evidence of this behavior. Elsewhere, Wikipedia user Mark Bernstein, who was not named in the arbcom case, but who was aligned with the anti-gamergate editors (and who wrote the blog post that started much of the press coverage of the arbcom case) explained the situation this way: "Those topic-banned were indeed not topic-banned because they were harassed: In many cases, they were topic banned because intolerable harassment drove them to be impolite on-wiki to people who were threatening their lives, health, careers, and honor elsewhere. Sanctimoniously to demand ideal deportment at all times from persons placed in such circumstances is to expect too much, which is precisely the reason Gamergate adopted these tactics in its attack on Wikipedia." ("User Talk")

More importantly, the gamergate article represents a case where the line between individual strategic action and the collective goals of the project were blurred in an important way. As both Reagle (Reagle) and myself (Famiglietti) have previoulsy shown, Wikipedia relies on it's policies of "Verifiability" and "Neutral Point of View" to establish a workable definition for the otherwise unreachable "neutrality" the project sets as it's goal. The Neutral Point of View policy holds that Wikipedia does not seek neutrality in the form of some perfectly objective truth, removed from all points of view, but rather in the form of a fair reporting of "all of the significant views that have been published by reliable sources on a topic."("Neutral Point of View - Wikipedia") Verfiability holds that the encyclopedia's "content is determined by previously published information rather than the beliefs or experiences of its editors."("Wikipedia: Verifiability")

However, in the case of gamergate, the ability of these policies to set a collective goal larger than individual strategic actions was frustrated by the fact that the mass media had overwhelmingly, and correctly, reported on the gamergate phenomenon as an outburst of violent misogynist thuggery. This left Wikipedia trapped between its own content policies and the gamergaters, who were able to use their technological savvy, and their demographic similarities to Wikipedia's own core editing population, to cause trouble for the encyclopedia, including hounding the editors who opposed them into acts of incivility, as documented above. The arbcom decision, then, becomes an outcome of this basic breakdown of Wikipedia's ability to define its own collective project in procedural terms in this case.

It is here that we can find a productive contribution from existing work comparing the ethics of Habermas and Levinas. In his piece "Speech and Sensibility: Levinas and

Habermas on the Constitution of the Moral Point of View," Steven Hendley makes the case that the two thinkers' "differing conceptions of the moral significance of language need not be seen as opposed to each other." Instead, he argues, "they can be conceptualized as complimentary accounts of the ways in which a moral point of view onto life is inextricably bound up for us with our capacities as linguistic creatures, animals with logos." (Hendley 1)

Hendley's compliment of Habermas with Levinas allows us to more clearly see the point of failure in Wikipedia's handling of gamergate. He writes that an approach to communicative ethics that entirely hews to the procedural mandates given in Habermas is unable to "answer *why* we should be moral, why the procedures of communicative rationality which constitute the moral point of view should be understood as unconditionally authoritative for us, as meriting our respect even to the point of the sacrifice of other strategic interests we may have in our lives."(Hendley 10) It is here that he argues the thought of Levinas can make a contribution, by providing exactly this impetus for moral action. He writes, "For Levinas, to speak is to do more than to undertake a particular mode of action with distinctive procedural commitments. It is to come into proximity to the face of the other to whom my speech is addressed who, in that proximity, emerges for me as the one with the authority to command my consideration, the one whose 'always positive value' enables me to make sense of why it is important to give the other the unconditional sense of consideration my communicative commitments demand of me."

It is this sense of unconditional sense of obligation to embodied others that Wikipedia's purely procedural ethics lack. Without such a sense, the arbcom, and indeed the project as a whole, is unable to distinguish between the hounding of editors by gamergate activists and the sometimes uncivil responses by those same editors to being hounded.

While this lack may seem a dire problem for Wikipedia, let me close on a reason why I believe it might be mended. While Wikipedia's codes of conduct may currently lack this Levinas inspired sense of commitment to the Other, there are important parallels between Wikipedia's codes and Levinas' thought which might make it possible to restore this sense to the project. For Levinas, "ethics precedes ontology." As he explained to one interviewer, Levinas understood the "the priority of being, this insistence on the oneself" implied in ontology to be "something like a threat against all others, a war inherent in this affirmation of oneself" (Lévinas and Robbins 105). Instead of starting from being, Levinas took the relationship to the other as the starting point of his philosophy. Later in the same interview he explains, "the recognition of the other happens beyond being, beyond essence" and that "the true humanity of man begins in this recognition, before any cognition of being, before onto-ology"(Lévinas and Robbins 106). Just as Levinas secures his ethics in a recognition of the other prior to being, so too Wikipedia secures its epistemology in such a recognition. In an early draft of the NPOV, Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales explains the rationale for the policy this way: "Perhaps the easiest way to make your writing more encyclopedic, is to write about _what people believe_, rather than _what is so_. If this strikes you as somehow subjectivist or collectivist or imperialist, then ask me about it, because I think that you are just mistaken. What people believe is a matter of objective fact, and we can present _that_ quite easily from the neutral point of view [emphasis in original]" ("Wikipedia").

This parallel, the fact that both Levinas and Wikipedia take the Other as foundation to their ontology and epistemology, suggests that their work might be usefully hybridized in the future.

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