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TECHNOLOGY MEETS POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY: THE DISCOURSE OF HEBREW WIKIPEDIA DELETION PAGES

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Introduction

On Election Day 2015, a video of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was broadcast on TV, urging last minute voters to hurry because “Arab voters are flocking in huge quantities to the polls.” The statement drew widespread criticism and public discussion. Shortly thereafter, the entry “Arab voters are flocking in huge quantities to the polls” was uploaded to the Hebrew Wikipedia. A few days later it was proposed for deletion. On the deletion discussion pages, editors debated whether the statement was worthy of being included in an encyclopedia.

This entry is only one of many that have been proposed for deletion on the Hebrew Wikipedia since its inception in 2001. The deletion policy and debates whether to include or exclude articles from Wikipedia raise intriguing questions regarding the constructed meaning of the new open source based, “free” and “collaborative” encyclopedia and its boundaries. In this study we analyze deletion discussion pages on the Hebrew Wikipedia in order to examine the ways in which definitions of “worthy” and “unworthy” encyclopedic knowledge are negotiated in contemporary discourse, reflecting local perceptions regarding the role of Wikipedia and its meanings, as well as broader cultural perceptions of the relation between technology and epistemology in an age characterized by an ongoing tension between modernist and postmodern conceptions of truth, knowledge, and authority.

Technology, Encyclopedic Boundaries, and the Challenges of Wikipedia

Questions regarding what knowledge is considered important enough to be included in encyclopedias, as well as how this knowledge should be organized and presented, have been an issue of controversy throughout the course of history (Kenny, 1991; Loveland, 2013). While many of these questions remain relevant in the case of Wikipedia, some unique characteristics of the popular online encyclopedia, as well as a variety of

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sociocultural changes, have complicated the issue of demarcating (and studying) the encyclopedia's boundaries in significant ways.

First, while the editors of traditional encyclopedias were forced to exclude items due to economic constraints and space limitations, Wikipedia entries are composed by volunteers for free in a potentially limitless internet environment, thus at least in principle freeing editors from such constraints. Second, while encyclopedias since the 18th century were customarily viewed as representing authoritative knowledge produced by experts (Sullivan, 1990), Wikipedia operates within a sociocultural atmosphere characterized by greater ambivalence, and sometimes downright skepticism, toward traditional sources of authority and knowledge (Van Zoonen, 2012). Third, whereas in traditional encyclopedias "deleted" entries were simply not included in the published volumes – with relatively little information made public regarding the process whereby decisions regarding inclusion and exclusion were made – on Wikipedia, even when a particular entry is deleted, the negotiations that took place regarding the article's fate remain available on the site and are accessible by any internet user – thus providing a rich source for examining the actual process of boundary construction.

In its early stages, Wikipedia was relatively devoid of selectivity with regard to content. With time, however, it became clear that content must be regulated if Wikipedia were to fulfill its function as an important source of knowledge. Accordingly, various policies and guidelines were implemented in order to standardize processes for content composition, editing, and exclusion (Jemielniak, 2014). One example of these guidelines is Wikipedia's deletion policy, which is the focus of this study. While specific policies differ across countries and languages, reflecting different perceptions of Wikipedia's role, broadly speaking items that are considered unimportant, unsuitable, or irrelevant may be proposed for deletion by Wikipedia editors. In such cases, the item is moved to a deletion discussion page, in which a debate is carried out over its fate, eventually decided by vote.

Method

The sample of discourse examined in this study was collected from Hebrew Wikipedia deletion discussion pages, which are divided into 27 different categories with 452 total entries. The corpus included at least one entry (randomly selected) from each category, with more entries included from categories in which many entries were present. Both entries that were deleted and those that "survived" the deletion vote were analyzed. The analysis combined the methodological tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g., Machin & Mayr, 2012), argumentation analysis (e.g., Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2009), and Foucauldian procedures of exclusion (e.g., Foucault, 2002), focusing on discursive strategies for justifying the decision to delete (or keep) the sampled entries.

Findings and Discussion

A variety of discursive strategies for justifying decisions on Wikipedia entries were found, demonstrating the ways in which the Wikipedia community defines, challenges, and reconfigures social boundaries regarding the limits of "legitimate" knowledge. One recurring theme raised by interlocutors involved the subject matter itself – with entries suggested for deletion often described as "taboo," "esoteric", or "lacking clear classification." Such definitions reflect the ongoing influence of modernist conceptions of

encyclopedic information, in which explicit hierarchies of importance and moral value are articulated.

Similarly, decisions regarding inclusion or exclusion were often justified based upon legitimation strategies grounded in traditional sources of authority (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Thus, for example, worthiness of inclusion in Wikipedia was often legitimated by referring to a topic's acceptance by traditional institutions ("it was on the news"), and a topic's relevance was often constituted based upon comparison to the classification regimes of modern printed encyclopedias ("this entry is not encyclopedic because it's about a passing fad"). At the same time, such definitions were also contested, with appeals made to popularity as justification for encyclopedic importance.

While many of the justifications were constructed as universal, the local cultural situatedness of the Hebrew Wikipedia was evident both in the nature of the entries debated and in the legitimations made. Thus, for example, a debate arose regarding the inclusion of fallen Israeli soldiers, with the argument made that "Wikipedia is not a memorial site." Such debates often reflected hegemonic perceptions associated with Israeli elites, in line with the demographic profiles of most Hebrew Wikipedia editors, who are commonly male, Jewish, and relatively highly educated.

The study's findings illustrate the dynamic nature of power struggles over the production and institutionalization of knowledge in a constantly evolving technological and sociocultural environment. The analysis helps expose the mechanisms used by individuals and groups to fight over definitions of reality, and the meaning and status of contemporary encyclopedic information and knowledge in a given time and culture.

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