Platforms of memory
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The limits of an ‘open’ past: Memory work on Wikipedia and the downing of flight MH17
When it comes to historical reliability, Wikipedia is not to be trusted.
(anonymous editor, 6 July, “Pro-Ukrainian Bias,” Archive 23)

On July 17, 2014, Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17, flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was shot down over Hrabove, Donetsk, Ukraine. All 283 passengers and 15 crew members were killed which made it the deadliest case of a commercial airliner shoot-down in history. A large part of the passengers consisted of families, with eighty children under 18. Also on board were top researchers and delegates of the 20th International AIDS conference in Melbourne. Most of the deceased were Dutch (196), Malaysian (43), and Australian (27) (Dutch Safety Board, 2015, p. 23).29 Unsurprisingly, the tragedy sent a ripple of grief throughout the world and the Netherlands in particular. A national day of mourning was announced and Dutch public broadcaster NOS covered live the ceremonial repatriation of the bodies. Together with the grief, however, came expressions of anger that culminated in two questions: What happened on that day in July? And: Who should be held accountable for this tragedy?

These questions were hard to answer due to the complex political situation in Ukraine. The country was in the midst of an enduring military conflict after the exile of the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Yanukovich and the consecutive Russian annexation of the Crimea. Pro-government (Euromaidan) forces and pro-Russian separatists, the Lugansk People’s Republic (LPR) and the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR), battled heavily against each other. However, Western media soon reported that an S-11 BUK missile, which is produced and used by the Russian Army, had been used to shoot the plane out of the sky (Sienkiewicz, 2015, pp. 208-209). In response, the Russian government denied any involvement and pointed fingers at over-active Ukrainian fighter pilots (Davidson & Yuhas, 2014; AFP, 2014). The Ukrainian government argued that the incident was a case of aggression toward Ukraine by Kremlin-backed separatists, following the shooting of military aircraft in the days before (Finley, 2014; Sienkiewicz, 2015; Dutch Safety Board, 2015).

Against this backdrop of political tension and doubtful information, a Wikipedian with the nickname “Reedy” started the English Wikipedia page “Malaysia Airlines Flight 17” (“Page information”). On the day of the tragedy, also 73 pages in other languages on the event were started (Wikidata, 2016). The English page alone had over a million page views within three days of its creation, according to Wikipedia article traffic statistics (2016). This illustrates that Wikipedia functions as a “mediated center” and is one of the main turn-to information providers within the “networking communication model” (Bilić 2015, p. 1259). This is not to say that Wikipedia editors quickly agreed on what had occurred. The contentiousness of the event can be traced in the page’s metadata. In two years’ time, as of June 23, 2016, it was edited 6,113 times (75% major edits) by 1,017 users, including bots and anonymous users (Wikihistory, 2016). This high editing is in line with the finding that

29 The Dutch Safety Board (DSB) was the primary official investigative body regarding the downing.
traumatic events are amongst the most-edited pages in Wikipedia (Ferron & Massa, 2011, p. 1326).

This chapter investigates how the politics of Wikipedia as a platform (Gillespie, 2010) coalesces with the politics of memory work. Similar to science and journalism, the online encyclopedia strives to provide truthful reconstructions of reality. Its editorial policy is based on a set of values revolving around objectivity, verifiability and neutrality. I argue, however, that Wikipedia is anything but a neutral space of knowledge production. Rather, I demonstrate that another value, “openness,” offers an ideology that guides and constitutes the platform’s technological design, guidelines, and the practices of its contributors (Tkacz, 2015). Although openness suggests that anyone can participate, entries are never finished, and editing Wikipedia is fully transparent, Wikipedia editors paradoxically have to adhere to strict rules and guidelines. These are created, amended, and enforced by editors high up in Wikipedia’s hierarchy who have access to tools that can prevent others from editing. As a result, the ideology of openness is continually contested and redefined among editors.

This leads to the question how the ideology of openness shapes memory work on Wikipedia. On the platform, the process of memory work involves the practices of gathering, re-assembling, combining, paraphrasing, critiquing, and quoting sources on a given topic, using mediated, second-hand material. It is a collaborative endeavor which implies co-creation, discussion, debate, and disruption. Three defining interlinked traits of Wikipedia that are shaped by the ideology of openness will be scrutinized: the interactions between editors, the platform’s policies and guidelines, and its technological features.

I first discuss Wikipedia’s ideology of openness, which is inscribed in the platform’s policies, technology, and ideals. I zoom in on the community dynamics and hierarchies of the platform, while regarding Wikipedians—registered and active contributors to the platform—as a “community of practice” that simultaneously interprets and reinforces this ideology. I then move on to show how Wikipedia functions as a key platform of memory within a new media ecology. Whereas all platforms present themselves as open, neutral, egalitarian, and progressive (Gillespie 2010), I will outline how Wikipedia’s distinctive set of practices, its community dynamics, politics and technologies shape memory work on it. Concurrently, these produce idiosyncratic representations of contentious past events.

This theoretical lens is then used to analyze the creation process of the MH17 wiki and the themes of controversy within it. By means of a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the wiki’s archived talk page where discussion about edits and sources takes place, I scrutinize the discursive strategies that Wikipedians use to settle disputes, value sources, and edit the page. I identify three overarching discourses that editors use to legitimize, position, and politicize their memory work: 1) objectivity and neutrality, 2) reliability and verifiability, and 3) technological access and authority. Within the ideology of openness, what counts as objectivity and neutrality, reliability and verifiability, and ultimately, access and authority within Wikipedia is constantly renegotiated and reasserted. Scrutinizing these mechanisms allows us to understand how Wikipedia filters the past, and thereby stabilizes it. Especially
concerning politically contentious past events, such as the downing of flight MH17, this limits the possibility of an ‘open’ past.

The ideology of openness: rules, guidelines, and hierarchies

Wikipedia makes a firm claim that “anyone with Internet access can write and make changes” (About page). This ideology of openness resonates among commentators and scholars alike. Since its launch in 2001, the platform has been praised for its “communal evaluation,” “fluid heterarchy,” “ad hoc meritocracy” and “open participation” (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008, pp. 24-26). A wiki (from *wikiwiki*, meaning fast in Hawaiian), the name of a Wikipedia entry and the guiding principle of the platform, is viewed as open, incremental, organic, tolerant and transparent (Cunningham, 2007; Pentzold, 2009). The platform’s modularity and granularity would allow for “collaborative production” (Shirky, 2008) to quickly complete large projects, while a self-correcting “soft security” (Pentzold, 2008) secures quality standards. Some scholars even argue that Wikipedia’s participatory nature has far-reaching consequences. Sullivan (2009, p. 10), for example, asserts that the platform does not “merely announce a new kind of dissemination of existing knowledge, but a change in the very nature of knowledge itself” because it is rooted in bottom-up, peer-produced knowledge, based on merit instead of institutional authority.

The origins of this overt optimism can be traced back to Wikipedia’s proclaimed ideology of openness. In principle, anyone can write and edit wikis, which are thus open-ended. However, Wikipedia’s proclaimed ideology of openness is ambiguous. It invites participation; yet, it also heavily guides and restricts it. As Tkacz (2010, p. 50) argues, the success of Wikipedia “is not because everyone is free and there are no rules, norms or pressures, but precisely the opposite.” Wikipedia’s guidelines and content policies “form the core of the organizational process on Wikipedia” (Bilić, 2015, p. 1264) and reify its ideology. Even though they have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Tkacz, 2010, 2012, 2015; Van Dijck, 2013), it is therefore worth to reassess them in the context of memory work.

Wikipedia outlines five “pillars” on which the platform is built. It considers itself an *encyclopedia* that is written from a *neutral point of view* and based on *free content* that anyone can use, edit, and distribute. It is a place *without firm rules* where editors treat each other with *respect and civility*. Next to these pillars Wikipedians should adhere to three principles when adding content (“core content policies”). First, there is the principle of neutral point of view (NPOV), which implies “representing significant views fairly, proportionately and without bias.” Second is the principle of verifiability (VER), meaning that all information “must be attributed to a reliable, published source”. And third, there is the principle of no original research (NOR), which means that articles may not “contain any new analysis or synthesis of published material that serves to advance a position not clearly advanced by the sources.” These core policies and goals the Wikimedia foundation outlines, aim at aiding contributors to reach consensus. This “does not mean unanimity (which, although
an ideal result, is not always achievable); nor is it the result of a vote. Decision-making involves an effort to incorporate all editors’ legitimate concerns, while respecting Wikipedia’s policies and guidelines” ("consensus").

Wikipedia’s rules and guidelines shape the platform’s community of practice (O’Sullivan, 2009). That is, editors form a group that pursues these ideals and preferred actions which shape the content of wikis. At the same time, these principles are continuously reinterpreted: What belongs in the encyclopedia? What is a neutral point of view? What are legitimate concerns in reaching consensus? The answers to these questions are not set in stone. Rather, certain norms emerge out of editor’s sayings and doings. As Pentzold (2010, p. 716) points out, Wikipedians “primarily understand their collective as an ethos-action community tying community membership not to admission procedures but to the personal acceptance of a set of moral obligations and rules of conduct.” Editors are constantly being evaluated, rewarded, and punished by their peers. On the platform “every action” is a “monitored performance” (p. 714). That is, every edit is tracked and saved, and users can build up trust by adhering to the ethos of the community. As a consequence, “the right action and the right thinking then become crucial for determining the community’s boundaries” (Pentzold 2010, p. 716). This relates back to the concept of practices as a performed, organized set of “sayings and doings,” which are mutually shaping each other (Nicolini, 2017, p. 21).

These ideals, moral obligations, right ways of thinking, and principles are enforced through Wikipedia’s highly hierarchical organizational structure and the distribution of access to technological tools. They “serve as guidelines for contributors, instruct the algorithmic logic of bots, and anchor the encyclopedia’s quality standards” (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 140). Rules and hierarchies are inscribed in the platform’s design, making it a sociotechnical system that distributes “permission levels to types of users [and] imposes a strict order on decision making over what entries to include or exclude, what edits to allow or block” (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 136). This comes down to granting certain users more power over/than others. However, to describe “Wikipedians in bipolar categories of humans and nonhumans doesn’t do justice to what is in fact a hybrid category: that of the many active users assisted by administrative and monitoring tools, also referred to as ‘software-assisted editors’” (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 139).

User access levels are determined by three factors: whether or not the user is logged into an account, whether the account has a certain age and number of edits, and whether or not certain rights are provided manually to an account, which can only be done by users with appropriate authority (“User access levels”). While in theory anyone can become a Wikipedian, the process of building up authority and acquiring higher permission levels and access to technological tools is actually interminable and complex.

Experienced editors with good standing in the community can become “Administrators,” which grants them additional rights (see fig. 7.1). Users can only be promoted to this after consensus is reached in community discussion and through the process “request for admin-
ship.” Additionally, users can be granted special “flags” such as Oversight (hide revisions) and Checkuser (check accounts and editing activity of IP addresses). These are only given when users have confirmed their identity and signed a confidentiality agreement with the Wikimedia foundation. Hence, the allocation of tasks and rights is a combination of merit (making good and many edits), proper standing, and strict adherence to Wikipedia’s rules and policies. In most cases, users with a higher permission level can overrule users lower in the hierarchical structure of Wikipedia (see Fig 1). They can do so because these editors receive access to technological tools that allow them to ban users, protect articles from editing, or create and implement bots that co-construct wikis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Permission level</th>
<th>User group</th>
<th>Tasks and rights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Blocked users</td>
<td>Edit their own ID/talk page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unregistered users</td>
<td>Not logged in (“IP users”); edit not protected or semi-protected pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New users</td>
<td>Editing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Registered (or auto-confirmed) users</td>
<td>Editing, send emails to other users, add pages to watchlist, set preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Bots</td>
<td>Minor editing, monitoring, blocking, spell-checking, policing, banning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administrators</td>
<td>Editing monitoring, (un)blocking, spell-checking, policing, banning, page deletion, page protection, access fully protected Wikis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bureaucrats</td>
<td>Promoting users to administrators or bureaucrats. Remove users from admin and bot user groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stewards</td>
<td>Full access, right to change user rights and groups, battling vandalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Developers</td>
<td>Maintaining software</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>System administrators</td>
<td>Server access, full permission</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7.1 – a schematic overview of Wikipedia’s hierarchical structure


Wikipedia’s community rules, policies and ideology do not remain undisputed. The combination of Wikipedia’s hierarchical structure and its use of bots, makes some users “worry about their site becoming a semi-automated, impermeable operational system that prohibits discord and favors consensus at the expense of a variety of opinions” (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 139). Similarly, O’Sullivan (2011) critiques the platform’s “increasingly bureaucratic ‘policing’ of its content, as for example with NPOV, means it is in danger of merely mirroring the typical knowledge economies of the West” (p. 48).
Next to administrative roles, Wikipedians with high authority can be on special committees and advisory boards like the Arbitration Committee, which resolves serious disputes among Wikipedians. Also, Wikipedians can reward each other with Barnstars and other digital prizes for good behavior and work (e.g. “the random act of kindness barnstar,” “the civility barnstar,” “editor of the week,” “the barnstar of diplomacy”). Likewise, users can be given indicators of bad behavior. These rewards and indicators show on the individual user’s page (fig. 7.2).

Wikipedia’s hierarchy and punishment and reward systems are means to discipline and control the community of practice. Ultimately, this shapes and steers interaction and content creation, according to specific interpretations of factuality, consensus, objectivity and neutrality and on the basis of hierarchy and acquired authority. Accordingly, emotion, interpretation, and subjectivity are not advocated within the community.

The “real wisdom of Wikipedia,” writes Van Dijck (2013, p. 136) can thus be found “not in its crowds but in its crowd management.” Likewise, Tkacz (2015, p. 49) notes: “Wikipedia is collaborative not because it has no hierarchies, but because it has policies that mediate between different and, indeed, often conflicting views, seemingly absorbing different perspectives into a single frame.” In the end, “[d]ecentralized organization can only exist if certain principles are especially forceful” (Tkacz, 2015, p. 85). Wikipedia is the encyclopedia that anyone can edit, but, paradoxically, this can only be the case because the freedom to edit is limited. Openness on Wikipedia, therefore, is more an ideal than something that is practiced. These tensions are an important aspect of the discursive construction of what counts as “truth” and “facts” on Wikipedia. Norms about what counts as an objective fact about or how to truthfully reconstruct the past are constantly debated among editors.
Wikipedia and memory work

Memory work is central to Wikipedia’s community of practice and as a platform itself. Through Wikipedians’ practices and the platform’s digital archive, the past is re-presented and carried into the future in specific ways. Wikipedians gather, re-assemble, combine, paraphrase, critique and quote sources on a given topic. They use mediated, secondary material and annotate and re-present this in the cultural form of a wiki. These are essentially collages of existing bits and pieces of mostly online material that is collaboratively pieced together in a coherent way. Wikipedians are also encouraged to archive the websites used as references in their articles via the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine. This prevents dead links and allows users to revisit the original website of the source (“Wikipedia: citing sources”).

The information in wikis originates from multiple sources throughout the Web. It is de-contextualized from its origin and re-contextualized on the platform. At the same time, the platform is highly linked—through millions of hyperlinks—which allows it to emerge at the top of search results. This allows for a more abstract way of seeing Wikipedia as an important node within an information network stored in digital memory. “Googling something” often ends up in reading a Wikipedia article. The platform ends up high in the Google results page and receives 60 percent of its traffic through Google searches. The close bond between the two organizations was also demonstrated when Google in 2010 donated $2 million to the Wikimedia foundation. “Wikipedia’s success,” writes Van Dijck (2013, p. 153), “is highly dependent on its frictionless compatibility with mainstream big players.”

However, this is not where Wikipedia’s compatibility to the broader media ecology begins or ends. Even before Google came to dominate the Web with their services and platforms, Wikipedia heavily relied and still relies on the output of so-called legacy media. Next to reports and official sources, broadcast media and newspapers are widely referenced on the site (something that will come back in the analysis below). Consequently, a large part of the information we find through Google search can be traced back to news media, institutional and government sources.

Another important aspect of Wikipedia pertaining to memory work is that it offers a vast archive of all edits in wikis and the discussions about them. Wikipedia’s talk pages (discussion board) is a “place where the negotiation of different, and sometimes contrasting, interpretations of the past takes place” (Ferron & Massa, 2014, p. 37). The archived revision history and talk page of an article show, in a transparent way, what was included and excluded from the page and which “individual pieces of information are selected and ordered into a coherent narration, through users’ discussion and active participation in remembrance” (Ferron & Massa, 2014, p. 29).

Wikipedia talk pages thus provide insight into the processes of negotiation and selection that precede the formation of a more or less stable wiki. As Luyt (2015, p. 6) writes: “by making it relatively easy for anyone to look ‘under the hood’ so to speak, Wikipedia allows a glimpse of collective memory at work: a messy and contingent process.” Adapting
Nora’s (1989) concept of “sites of memory” (*lieu de mémoire*), Pentzold (2009) theorizes Wikipedia as a global memory place which is “not a symbolic place of remembrance [as in Nora’s original sense, RS] but a place where memorable elements are negotiated” (p. 264). In other words, these pages show how the messiness of communicative interaction, which stands at the root of any engagement with the past, fixates in a somewhat stable form as time progresses. What Pentzold (2009) calls the “floating gap” can be seen as “the gradual passage from disputed points of view in everyday discussions to the formalized character of an encyclopaedic article” (p. 267).

Accordingly, Wikipedia articles are both influenced by the internal political dynamics of the platform as well as the external geopolitical situation. Despite what the platform claims, they are not at all value-free. Most editors of the English language Wikipedia, for example, are as much part of Wikipedia’s community of practice as they are part of a “language community” that privileges Western world views (Pentzold, 2010, pp. 714-715; Tkacz, 2015). Therefore, Luyt (2015) rightly remarks that Wikipedia is socially embedded within a “network of wider discourse” that maintains and constructs the past in the present (p. 3). The processes of assessing which sources and information are included, writing and editing, and the deliberation that underlies this memory work make Wikipedia “not only a platform to constitute and store knowledge, but a place where memory—understood as a particular discursive construction—is shaped” (Pentzold, 2009, p. 264). The mechanisms and group dynamics behind the discursive stabilization of the wiki on MH17 will be the focus of the rest of this chapter.

**Research Design**

This chapter focuses on the English wiki on the shooting and crash of flight MH17 and its aftermath. This case was chosen because the downing is a highly controversial topic that was widely covered by the media and led to diplomatic tensions between, roughly, the countries in the EU and other “Western” countries and Russia. Although there are wikis on this event in 74 languages, the English one is the most-visited and most-edited. It is the most international and editors from all over the world were and are engaged in editing and maintaining the page. This international character allows research into what binds and divides this spatially diffuse and culturally diverse group of editors, while taking into account that Western perspectives might dominate the wiki and the talk page discussion.

Wikipedia makes it relatively easy for researchers to analyze the process in which information is assessed, accepted or dismissed, reshuffled and put together again because the revision history of each wiki is available. Moreover, the talk pages document debates on the content of wikis and the discursive strategies of editors. In these behind the scenes
discourses on practices and norms editors negotiate what is legitimate knowledge and what belongs and does not belong in Wikipedia.

The main corpus for this study consisted of the wiki on the MH17 disaster and the talk page connected to it (titled “Malaysia Airlines Flight 17,” version 13 June 2016). Additionally, Wikipedia guideline articles to which discussions in the talk page referred were included. Using Wikipedia’s Wikihistory tool, it was determined when the page was edited most often and presumably moments of controversy emerged in the talk page. This resulted in the following weeks to be subjected to critical discourse analysis (fig. 7.3):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>weeks 29-52, 2014</td>
<td>roughly the first half year after the disaster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weeks 10-16, 2015</td>
<td>roughly around the time a story spread through VKontakte about the use of an air-to-air missile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weeks 22-33, 2015</td>
<td>roughly around the disaster’s first anniversary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>week 42, 2015</td>
<td>the publication of the final report of the crash by the Dutch Safety Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weeks 20-29, 2016</td>
<td>roughly around the disaster’s second anniversary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 7.3 – time periods with increased editing activity and the events that caused this**

This sampling method follows certain discursive events, resulting in “critical discourse moments” (Carvalho, 2008, p. 173). This leads up to synchronous analysis, the analysis of discourse stemming from specific moments in time, rather than diachronic analysis, the study of discourse through time (Jäger, 2004, p. 71; Carvalho, 2008, pp. 171-172). Applying critical discourse analysis (CDA) allows us to scrutinize the ideology of Wikipedia which is “embedded in the selection and representation of objects and actors, and in the language and discursive strategies employed in a text” (Carvalho, 2008, p. 170).

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

Through particular “discursive strategies” (Carvalho, 2008, p. 169) such as positioning, (de)legitimizing, and (de)politicizing, Wikipedia editors entitle themselves or others to edit in particular ways, to add information or leave things out, or to (dis)credit certain sources. In this way, editors intervene in each other’s memory work and, through that, build up, or re-assert their standing in the community. *Positioning* Carvalho (2008, p. 169) sees as the arrangement of social actors vis-à-vis each other that authorize them for particular practices. This is closely related to the construction of identity through discourse and practice. *Legitimization* describes the process of sanctioning and justifying actions on the basis of normative beliefs. *Politicization* is “the attribution of a political nature or status to

31 The results of which are available through the following URL (constantly updated): https://tools.wmflabs.org/xtools/wikihistory/wh.php?page_title=Malaysia_Airlines_Flight_17
a certain reality,” which occurs when Wikipedians accuse each other of editing that aligned with national politics. This constant form of power-play in the arena of the talk pages ultimately affects the memory work regarding the MH17 disaster. The following analysis uses examples of these discursive strategies as to show how Wikipedians position, legitimize and politicize their practices.

In order to conduct the CDA, I will apply a “toolkit” developed by Schneider (2013) which is based on the work of Mayring (2002), Jäger (2004), and Fairclough (1995). Although this toolkit is by no means exhaustive, it does provide a structured overview of a process that is often unclear and difficult to reproduce by other researchers. According to Schneider (2013), eight analytical steps guide the process of CDA: 1) establishing context, 2) exploring the production process, 3) preparing materials, 4) coding material, 5) examining structure of the text, 6) collecting and examining discursive statements, 7) Identifying cultural references, 8) Identifying rhetorical and linguistic mechanisms.

Steps one to three have already partly been taken in the previous sections and will be expanded further below. Step four involved the inductive “tagging” of passages that are theoretically interesting and/or connect to the research questions. This process familiarized the researcher with the material and instilled theoretical sensitivity towards it. All 597 talk page threads were inductively coded for main topics and themes. These ranged from images and media coverage to the neutrality of the wiki (see appendix 1 for the overview of found categories). Next, the moments of controversy were scrutinized further, by paying special attention to issues revolving around topic selection (passages about the in- or exclusion of sections), referencing (passages on what and how to reference and what sources should be included), and editing (passages on who to edit and “right” and “wrong” editing). Step five, examining the structure of the text, is to large extent included with this step since it is structured by the thread titles.

Step six further inspected those coded threads that were marked as relevant to the research questions. Particularly interesting were those discursive statements that describe what Wikipedia is and what it is not, those that engage with questions of neutrality and those that cover which sources are reliable and which are not. Step seven involved the localization of intertextuality within the talk page. This is partly automated within Wikipedia by the wide use of hyperlinking (to other wikis and external pages). Step eight included the identification of specific word groups, grammatical features, rhetorical and literary figures and direct and indirect speech. This step also involved the documentation of specific modalities (normative statements) and ‘evidentialities’ (phrases that suggest factuality).

Sources and content of the MH17 wiki

Before presenting the results of the discourse analysis of the talk page, it is necessary to briefly discuss the content of the wiki itself and the 303 sources used in it. The first thing that is striking about the wiki titled “Malaysia Airlines Flight 17” is its length. Including the
references, it consists of more than 18,000 words. Eight main topics are discussed: the aircraft (mainly technical descriptions of it), passengers and crew, the conflict in which it took place (the section is called “background”), crash, aftermath, investigation (subdivided into initial attempts at investigating the crash, cause, recovery of bodies, Dutch safety board (DSB) preliminary report, final report), reactions, and a last section on the Russian media coverage.

What type of sources are most-used and valued in the wiki on Mh17? A simple count of sources—based on these sources’ websites—reveals that newspapers are the most referenced sources in the article, followed by radio and TV websites, web-native news websites, and press agencies. This does not say anything, of course, about the ways in which the sources are used. For example, the reports by Bellingcat, a crowdsourced citizen journalism platform, are highly valued in the article. The same counts for Intelligence and information services Foreign Policy, the Levada Center, and Stratfor. The practice to use newspapers as reliable sources is explained by the Wikipedia guideline on the topic:

“News reporting” from well-established news outlets is generally considered to be reliable for statements of fact (though even the most reputable reporting sometimes contains errors). News reporting from less-established outlets is generally considered less reliable for statements of fact [ ] Editorial commentary, analysis and opinion pieces, whether written by the editors of the publication (editorials) or outside authors (op-eds) are reliable primary sources for statements attributed to that editor or author, but are rarely reliable for statements of fact. Human interest reporting is generally not as reliable as news reporting, and may not be subject to the same rigorous standards of fact-checking and accuracy (see junk food news). (“reliable sources,” emphasis mine)

These guidelines signal that on Wikipedia, objectivity and the provision of multiple points of view are valued as high as in news reporting. The italicized parts show that Wikipedia is skeptical about new players in the media ecology and has a somewhat traditional, normative view on what “good” journalism is. Hard news from well-established outlets is valued most in the wiki.

The wiki’s introduction describes what occurred on July 17, 2014, on the basis of information mainly provided by American intelligence and government sources, the Dutch Safety Board, and citizen journalistic organization Bellingcat. This part reads that the plane was shot down by pro-Russian insurgents, using a BUK missile launcher, while the Russian government blamed the Ukrainian government for the crash. Thus, immediately, the tone is set for the rest of the article. Interesting is the prominent place of Bellingcat in the introduction as a reliable source, something that was not undisputed (see below). The sections titled “Aircraft” and “Passengers and Crew” are technical and factual. Relevant to mention, though, is that in these first parts it is mentioned twice that the crash is “the
deadliest airliner shootdown incident” to date, which is factually correct, but, because of its rhetorical weight, criticized for inclusion among editors.

The section “Background” sketches the context in which the downing occurred, the Ukrainian conflict. Again, the article takes it as a fact that the plane was brought down with a missile by pro-Russian separatists. This part discusses the (inconsistency of the) Russian media, which are treated on a meta-level: the article talks about them instead of using them as reliable sources of information. The section called “Crash” is mostly based on flight data and is supported by maps and also specifies that a fireball on impact was captured on video and that bodies fell into crop fields and houses. This level of detail is consistent throughout the article which is within Wikipedia seen as a sign of quality. In the Aftermath part, a remark is made about a video that was shot shortly after the crash that shows “Russian-backed rebels” ransacking the wreckage.

The section “Investigation” is the most extensive and it mainly follows the findings of the Dutch Safety Board. Throughout, the article never directly dismisses Russian claims, but rather lets other sources debunk them, for example: “In the report published by the Dutch Safety Board, an air-to-air missile strike was ruled out.” Even though claims such as these are seemingly neutral, they are placed at the end of paragraphs that describe Russian point of views, thereby rhetorically silencing them. The section “Reactions” provides an overview of official statements by world leaders and involved organizations. Important to note here is that Australian Prime Minister Abbott is said to immediately connect the shooting to Russia, but that other world leaders’ reactions were diplomatic and not outspoken. In the last section, “Russian media coverage,” claims by Russian media are covered, including plots to assassinate Russian President Putin and mass murder Russian citizens. Although these claims are not refuted in the wiki, the fact that there is a special section on Russian media coverage shows that Russian media are treated suspiciously.

Talk page discourses

Three sets of overarching discourses emerge in the MH17 talk pages. Firstly, there is a discourse on objectivity and neutrality that mainly revolves around the inclusion of alternative viewpoints, tone of the article, and emotional and subjective content. Secondly, reliability and verifiability were discussed, which involved the assessment of sources and facticity of information. Thirdly, a discourse on technological access and authority can be distinguished. This stems from internal debates on editorial access and the ability to block and ban editors, and protect the wiki from further editing.

These discourses, unpacked below, are essentially about what a good wiki should look like and what Wikipedia ought to be. They reveal in what form the past should be represented in Wikipedia and which versions of it should be carried into the future. Moreover, these discourses reveal how certain editors legitimize, position and politicize their own and others’ practices. In other words, they show what ‘good’ memory work is, according to
authoritative editors. The discursive battles here are not fought on equal ground. Certain editors have more authority than others, based on a combination of experience, merit, good standing, and national and cultural background. Descriptions of these user characteristics will be given throughout the analysis, based on user pages. In the three sections below, each discursive theme is discussed through the analysis of concrete examples of discursive statements, cultural references, and rhetorical mechanisms during moments of controversy (steps 6, 7 and 8).

**Objectivity and neutrality**

What constitutes neutrality and objectivity is one of the most prominent issues in the talk pages of the MH17 article. Neutral Point of View (NPOV) is a policy to adhere to, an ideal at the core of Wikipedia. As a tag, it is also a rhetorical weapon at the disposal of every editor, which can be pointed at others: being accused of non-neutrality is insulting for editors. A particularly persisting issue concerning NPOV revolved around a perceived anti-Russian, pro-Western bias in various edits of the article. To many editors, the “information war”, comparable to that of the Cold War era, led to biased reporting in news media. Avoiding biased sources, therefore, became a prime concern within the talk pages. For example, editor Kudzu1 writes on September 10, 2014, that the inclusion of official Russian statements regarding MH17 in the article is a source of frustration for him: “If the Kremlin announced that the seas are made of chocolate pudding, I’m convinced a small army of Wikipedia editors would insist on adding that claim to [the] Ocean [wiki].” However, editor Cla68 dryly responds: “as long as it is made clear that it is a Russian claim, and not put in WP’s voice, I don’t see the problem” (“Ukrainian air traffic…” archive 15). This exchange exemplifies how discussions about neutrality are resolved: as long as statements are made by major parties and attributed to them, the inclusion of these statements is perceived neutral and objective.

Language use (word choice and phrasing) and the application of quotes and viewpoints are continuous topics up for debate in the context of assessing objectivity and neutrality of the article. Regarding language, an illustrative debate ensued after editors used the words “terrorists,” “rebels” and “separatists,” especially in combination with the prefix “pro-Russian,” in order to describe the perpetrators behind the downing: “Through the way we are including the word ‘terrorist’ in our paraphrase, we are creating the impression that

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32 Even though users write their own user pages, awards like barn stars or community memberships only appear when awarded or confirmed by other editors, which increases the reliability of the user pages. Moreover, user pages provide valuable insight into how users perceive their role in Wikipedia.

33 User Kudzu1, according to his user page, has been working on Wikipedia for over a decade, is American and has been awarded numerous editorial barn stars.

34 According to Cla68’s user page the user is “generally disillusioned with Wikipedia,” due to “activist ownership in certain topic areas” and because of its current system and culture.
our sentence presupposes the fact that they indeed are terrorists, which is clearly problematic,” writes editor Future Perfect At Sunrise\(^{35}\) on 20 July, 2014. Rgloucester\(^{36}\) responds:

Using ‘terrorist’ is in line with the Manual of style. WP:TERRORIST would beg to differ. As Fut. Perf. says, sources carry a POV. It isn’t our job to reflect that POV. We must adhere to WP:NPOV, unlike such journalistic sources […] All it does is add pathos.” (“terrorist,” archive 5)

A consensus is reached in the matter through reference to the guidelines on NPOV and the special wiki on the use of the word terrorist. Terrorist is deemed too charged with connotative meaning. The article now uses the words separatists, rebels and insurgents interchangeably.

Objectivity and neutrality in the context of Wikipedia is achieved through critical distance. Emotive language and details that might lead to affective responses are seen as indications of subjectivity and “point-of-view” and are therefore warded from the page. In a discussion on July 22, 2014, editor RGloucester responds to another editor’s decision to include the number of deceased children in the article: “What’s relavent [sic] depends on perspective. There is too much pathos in this article as it stands. Wikipedia is not a memorial” (“why do people keep removing,” archive 7). Wikipedia is a place for detached interpretation and reflection on the past, according to this editor. It is a place where memory work should be “factual,” but what counts as such is not set in stone. For example, later, in another thread, RGloucester asserts that specifying the number of dead children is an “attempt at sensationalism.” Instead, he argues, “we should remain neutral and encyclopaedic” (archive 7, “80 children”). The discussion that follows this post is illustrative for the type of reasoning behind the inclusion or exclusion of information in the wiki:

I’m not “trying to appeal to people’s emotions about “children”. I’m adding facts. But I’d disagree with you, that “Children are no different than anyone else. They are just people.” I think that’s a fundamentally wrong view, for all sorts of reasons. Martinevans123

\(^{35}\) This user is a highly decorated user with Administrator status, according to the user page. Interestingly, the user is also part of the community of Rouge Admin group, who are committed in their efforts to increase verifiability of sources in Wikipedia.

\(^{36}\) RGloucester is an active and influential editor of the MH17 wiki. According to his user page, the user has been editing Wikipedia for over five years and has accumulated numerous editing awards, culminating in the service award “Senior Editor III.” Also illustrating is that RGloucester is a member of Association of Wikipedians Who Dislike Making Broad Judgments About the Worthiness of a General Category of Article, and Who Are In Favor of the Deletion of Some Particularly Bad Articles, but That Doesn’t Mean They Are Deletionists (AWWD-MBJAWGCAWAIFDSPBATDMTAD). This is a club of around 500 Wikipedians committed to judge suitability of wikis for inclusion.
Why is it a fundamentally wrong view? Is there any difference in terms of dignity, value of life between a child and an adult? What else, apart from pathos, does it evoke to say that “children, women are hurt”? As if killing an adult is somewhat less culpable than killing a child? As if a child’s life is even more valuable than that of a renowned (male) surgeon who saved hundred [sic] of lives? As if the value of life is decreasing when one grows older? Psychologically you can accept whatever the media is feeding you about the “children” and “women”, and be my guest if you want to cry over the fallen leaves of Autumn, but wikipedia is [not] a place to write In Search of Lost Time.128.189.191.60 (Archive 7, “80 children”)

By alluding to Proust’s novel, the IP address editor clarifies that anything that comes close to emotion and experience does not belong in Wikipedia. Also notable is the way in which this editor responds to Martinevans123’s37 comment, who does not provide strictly rational arguments for his position in the matter. Ultimately, the issue is resolved on the basis of the fact that the ratio of deceased children is high compared to other crashes, but the word “children” is replaced by a detached phrase: “At least twenty family groups were on board the aircraft, and eighty of the passengers were under the age of 18.”

Some viewpoints are given more weight than others. As editor Geogene38 explains in a comment on July 30, 2014, if Wikipedians would report on every minority viewpoint, that, ironically, “would violate neutrality because then we’d be giving them more coverage than was warranted” (“neutrality of media coverage section,” archive 10). But even this is up for discussion, as an anonymous IP editor demonstrates on November 19, 2014:

With the help of Google Translate I have checked every version of this article in other languages. Nearly every big article in other language covers this event considerably better than the English version. Namely, no single party is blamed and alternative theories/viewpoints are discussed. The English version is pretty much an exception and I believe it is due to its editor’s POV pushing and reluctance to accept non-Western theories. (“this article in other languages,” archive 19)

By claiming that the English wiki on MH17 is “pretty much an exception” the editor effectively dismisses the page as being non-neutral and therefore unreliable. Proportionate attention and balance are said to be highly important values. However, most of the sources

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37 This user is ranked number 417 on the list of Wikipedians by number of edits and is Master Editor III.
38 Geogene’s user page shows the user’s discontent with the platform’s alleged politics: “As the Wikipedia Foundation has joined a pointless and overtly political lawsuit against the US Government, [Wikimedia v. NSA], I’m suspending my activity here until it’s resolved. I’m interested in writing an encyclopedia, but I don’t care at all how Wales and the WMF interpret the US Constitution, and I’m not interested in strengthening user:Jimbo Wales’ bully pulpit to pursue the Libertarian internet cause du jour. Unfortunately it is not possible to do one without also doing the other.”
used in the article stem from major English-speaking countries. Ironically, the discussion that follows the post above is settled by comments made by authoritative editors such as: “[t]he bottom line remain [sic] that Wikipedia in whatever language is not a reliable source” (Arnoutf) and “crowd-sourced sources are generally not reliable” (Volunteer Marek). 39

A last example of how conflicts about bias are resolved is a thread called “neutrality.” In it, editor Sceptic1954 40 initiates the discussion by arguing that the wiki is not neutral because the cause of the crash was not known yet then, while the wiki claimed pro-Russian separatist using a BUK system were to blame, based on early German and American intelligence reports. Instead, the editor argues, “[t]he first thing [the wiki] should be saying [is] that the cause is under investigation” (August 3, 2014). A number of solutions is proposed and the discussion is ultimately settled by the most authoritative editors:

The solution is to remove almost all the media and political claims and speculation. We cannot know what is true, and each of us is probably going to be influenced in our judgements by our own prejudices. By including it Wikipedia becomes a player in the propaganda war that began long before this plane crashed. HiLo48 (talk) 08:24, 3 August 2014 (UTC)

As I suggested above, would it be worth creating a section to outline all points of view, possibly split into mainstream, Russian, and other theories? CSJJ104 (talk) 09:59, 3 August 2014 (UTC)

I don’t think there needs to be any speculation in the article. Let’s stick to the facts that we do know and wait for the commission to finish investigation. Wikipedia should not be used as a weapon in information war. rampa (talk) 04:54, 8 August 2014 (UTC)

Not everything is “propaganda,” HiLo. It’s the propagandists who want you to think so since that muddies the waters. --Brian Dell (talk) 16:12, 3 August 2014 (UTC)

Contrary to your assertion the Russian POV is included in the article and it is labeled as statements of the Russian government. The article talk page is not the place to pontificate about politics or carry out polemics. Quite simply, we use reliable sources. That’s it. Volunteer Marek (”Neutrality,” archive 13, emphasis mine)

39 User Arnoutf, a “consumer behavior researcher and associate professor at Wageningen University, the Netherlands,” is a highly active and decorated Wikipedian. Likewise, user Volunteer Marek is an authoritative “Master Editor III.”

40 Sceptic1954 does not have a user page, which means the user is not part of a community and does not have rewards.
The italicized parts in the thread above indicate discursive statements with which editors explicitly position Wikipedia as something outside “mainstream” media and political discourse. This imagining of Wikipedia as something different and better than “the biased media” is used to settle disputes about bias and statements such as the one above. It also allows editors to locate Wikipedia outside the so-called “information war” and label it a haven of neutrality. However, this claim of neutrality is simultaneously applied by those in favor of including Russian views and those opposed to them, thereby actually drawing Wikipedia into the information war. This particular exchange thus demonstrates that the norms regarding objectivity and neutrality are flexible in terms of their interpretation. However, as this thread also shows, the interpretation of the guidelines by authoritative editors ultimately becomes the rule. Instead of consensus, hierarchy determines the outcome of the debate.

Reliability and verifiability

Verifiability can be argued to be the most essential policy on Wikipedia. Simply put, without reference to outside, reliable sources (RS) Wikipedia would not exist. This is why Wikipedians have lengthy debates in the talk pages about what reliable sources are, especially in the light of the many speculative reports that emerged after the crash.

Because a cloud of uncertainty surrounded the crash and the responsibility for it, conspiracy theories started to materialize all over the Web in the days after the downing. Most experienced Wikipedians are avid combatants of the spread of conspiracy theories on “their” platform. “This is not a forum,” writes Dbrodbeck. 41 He continues: “and, this is especially not a forum for crazy conspiracy theories” (19 July 2014, Cui Bono, archive 3). Wikipedians have developed an effective strategy to cope with these “fringe theories,” an Essay42 to which experienced editors often refer to in the talk pages:

> A Wikipedia article should not make a fringe theory appear more notable or more widely accepted than it is. Statements about the truth of a theory must be based upon independent reliable sources. If discussed in an article about a mainstream idea, a theory that is not broadly supported by scholarship in its field must not be given undue weight, and reliable sources must be cited that affirm the relationship of the marginal idea to the mainstream idea in a serious and substantial manner. (“Fringe theories”)

41 Dbrodbeck, according to his user page, is a psychology professor and has been editing Wikipedia for more than ten years.

42 “Essays, as used by Wikipedia editors, typically contain information, advice or opinions of one or more Wikipedia contributors. The purpose of an essay is to aid or comment on the encyclopedia and not any unrelated causes. Essays have no official status, and do not speak for the Wikipedia community as they may be created without approval. Following the instructions or advice given in an essay is optional. There are currently about 2,000 essays on a wide range of Wikipedia related topics.” (“Essays”)
One persistent theory held that the actual target of the perpetrators was President Putin, who was flying back in a private jet coming from Brazil. Another argued that flight MH17 contained the dead bodies from another Malaysia Airlines flight (MH370) that disappeared months before MH17 was shot down. Both theories were repelled from the wiki on the basis of the fringe theory policy.

Using the fringe theory guideline—fringing—to battle the spread of conspiracy theories is not an uncontested strategy. For example, critical, yet active editor Geogene (93 major edits to the MH17 wiki) writes on 21 July, 2014:

> My understanding is that WP:FRINGE is more about who advocates a position rather than the oddness of it. The plane-full-of-dead-bodies conspiracy theory was championed by the leader of the militia that controls the crash site, so it is notable no matter how ridiculous it is. Internet conspiracy theories not attributed to stakeholders in the investigation should continue to be disregarded. (“conspiracy theories,” archive 6)

Interestingly, some editors proposed to start a wiki on conspiracy theories regarding the MH17 disaster (similar to the page “Malaysia Airlines 370 unofficial disappearance theories”), because of their prominence in the global media, but the only mention of conspiracy theories in the wiki on MH17 at the moment of writing is in the Russian media coverage section:

> Large number of fakes and various conspiracy theories were distributed in Russian mass media in due course, their appearance usually coinciding with updates from the Dutch Safety Board. For example, on 15 November 2014, Russia’s Channel One reported on a supposedly leaked spy satellite photo which shows the plane being shot from behind by a Ukrainian fighter jet. (“Malaysia Airlines Flight 17”)

In general, collectively labeling a view a fringe theory instead of a conspiracy theory is an effective strategy by Wikipedians to silence alternative voices. Labeling a view or theory a conspiracy would immediately politicize the discussion. Fringing, instead, is a practice based on a specific interpretation of the verifiability principle, which allows authoritative editors to quickly settle disputes.

In addition to the treatment of fringe theories, the introduction of (the emerging) crowdsourced citizen journalism platform Bellingcat as a reliable source is illuminating with regard to discussions of verifiability and reliability on the platform. Bellingcat uses open source and social media investigation for their reports. It was founded by Elliot Higgins, who formerly worked on uncovering the use of chemical weapons in Syria under his pseudonym Brown Moses. Its first major investigation traced the BUK system that, according to
the DSB and other investigations, shot down MH17. Bellingcat’s publication caused some turmoil in the talk pages, as an edit remark on 9 September, 2014, by Geogene shows:

I reverted content sourced to Bellingcat at [5]. I don’t think a website “by and for citizen investigative journalists” are [sic] RS enough to identify the specific Russian unit that (allegedly) shot the plane down. I also think this is a lot of weight given to one source (which also applies to the BBC panorama content, although the BBC is much more RS than this.) (“Igor Ostanin,” archive 15)

Bellingcat is treated with suspicion, yet also fiercely defended, even two months later:

I think such reports by independent investigative journalists [Bellingcat blog] are significantly more reliable and informative than vague claims by state-controlled organizations, such as German intelligence, or meaningless statements by official investigators who do not reveal their data before the end of their investigation.

My very best wishes [an editor, RS] thinks that a blog is more reliable than statements made by the relevant investigative authority, which is engaged in the largest criminal investigation in Dutch history. Are editors really going to try to pretend that there is consensus for this madness? – Herzen(talk) 01:18, 14 November 2014 (UTC)

bellingcat report was picked up by multiple RS - you are protesting too much me-thinks - belingcat [sic] pointed out blatant lies from the Russians concerning where certain vehicles were - perhaps its that that drives your determination to rubbish the messenger. I like the way you don’t mention what was in the bellingcat report - just denigrate it - lowbrow stuff really. Sayerslle (talk) 01:42, 14 November 2014 (UTC) (“edit war,” Archive 22, emphasis mine)

This thread shows that the use of Bellingcat instigated a clash of opinions regarding facts presented by sources whose authority is derived from establishment (“state-controlled organizations” and legacy media) and an independent, bottom-up knowledge producer. Bellingcat is only accepted as a reliable source after much debate and, importantly, after mainstream media such as the BBC and the CNN started to take the organization’s work seriously. In the stable version of the wiki, findings by Bellingcat have a prominent place in the article.

The reliable source guideline and interpretations thereof help settle disputes, but are also criticized and contested. The common reasoning would be the following (Geogene, 12 August, 2014): “The plane was shot down. Hundreds of sources say so. Therefore, the article should say so. If reliable sources later decide that aliens did it, then we’ll change the article to reflect that. The only standard of truth is RS.” Yet, as Sceptic1954 argues in a comment on
26 August, 2014, if this “simply means we select those RS which suit our point of view and disregard others,” than this article is “as reliable as Russia Today” (“changes to lead,” archive 14). Here we see a pivotal problematic issue: how can Wikipedia be neutral and truly reliable, if the selection of sources lies in the hands of individual editors who each have their own political and cultural backgrounds? This question is repeatedly addressed in the talk pages and remains fundamentally unanswered. Only by especially forceful measures (see next section) do established editors high up in the hierarchy effectively counter this.

**Technological access and authority**

So far, the technological features and affordances of Wikipedia have not taken center stage in the analysis. However, authority in Wikipedia is intrinsically connected to access to technological features of the platform. The higher up an editor is on the hierarchical ladder, the more technologically-enabled measures are available to him or her to prevent others from editing. A pivotal, yet contested measure is increasing the so-called “protection status” of the article, implemented especially during ‘edit wars’. Because this procedure effectively prevents editors with low permission levels from editing, discussions about the implementation make up a discourse of access and authority. Although comment threads that discuss the protection status of the article are not the most proliferate, they are extensive and revolve around a number of key issues in Wikipedia: who may edit a contested topic and who is, through the platform’s technological affordances, excluded from editing and why?

The wiki on MH17 is highly edited and consensus was not reached on a number of issues, especially on the inclusion of Russian sources. This led to calls in the talk pages to increase the protection status of the article. This involves a technical restriction that allows only certain editors to add and change content to wikis. Only administrators can apply, modify and remove protection. The most common types of protection are “full protection” (only administrators can change the wiki) and “semi-protection” (only logged in and confirmed accounts may edit) (“Protection Policy”).

Increasing the protection status is an effective measure against so-called single purpose accounts (SPAs). Sock puppetry (or socking) is the use of multiple user accounts for improper purposes, which include “attempts to deceive or mislead other editors, disrupt discussions, distort consensus, avoid sanctions, evade blocks or otherwise violate community standards and policies” (“Sock-puppetry”). A SPA “is a user account or IP editor whose editing is limited to one very narrow area or set of articles, or whose edits to many articles appear to be for a common purpose” (“single-purpose account”). Within the top 20 editors of the wiki in terms of their number of edits, there are two sock-puppets. Even though their accounts are now banned, they provoked heavy discussion in the talk pages. Both

43 Within the top 20 of editors in terms of number of edits, there are two sock-puppets. Their accounts are now blocked and banned.
SPAs and sock puppets are regarded as highly disruptive and increasing the protection status of an article effectively counters this. In a nutshell, this means that editing the wiki directly only became possible for editors who were higher up in Wikipedia’s hierarchical ladder. New users and editors without a proven track record could not make edit requests anymore. Even though increasing the protection status of an article is highly effective at repelling malicious editing, it is also fiercely argued against on democratic grounds.

Another tension regarding the protection status is between speed of updates and accuracy of information. An exchange between editors 9kat, an inexperienced editor, and RGlouester, an authoritative editor, is illustrative in this matter:

Full protection is a very bad idea, and is doing more harm than good here. The article will quickly become outdated and inaccurate. With this many edits and this big an event, some editwarring is inevitable; deal with those users individually if they can’t use the talk page. The article was developing nicely overall before it was protected. It will be impossible to get changes needed through talk page requests, so potentially useful edits will simply be lost. 9kat (talk) 00:26, 20 July 2014 (UTC)

There is no deadline on Wikipedia. We need to avoid WP:RECENTISM, and holding off until the picture becomes clearer is an excellent idea. Allowing the article to become slightly outdated is better than it constantly changing based on every piece of tabloid drivel. RGlouester — ☎ 01:20, 20 July 2014 (UTC) (“fully protected,” archive 3)

Throughout the talk pages the theme of speed versus accuracy comes back. Because Wikipedia is a key player within the new media ecology, many editors felt the need to keep the site as updated as possible, yet especially in the first month after the crash misinformation, speculation, and fake news circulated.

If affordances describe the range of possible actions regarding a technological object or environment, than increasing the protection status of a wiki limits this range of action. Protection status effectively counters the disruptive or political usage of Wikipedia through, for example sock-puppets and SPAs. In the process, however, the platform becomes more closed off, less accessible, for beginning editors or those whose perspectives do not follow mainstream, Western media discourses. What is more, ‘protection’ can be perceived as an affordance of Wikipedia in itself. The catch is that this affordance is connected to hierarchy. What editors can do on and with Wikipedia is dependent on their permission levels.

Most Wikipedians attempt to be civil, neutral, and objective observers of the world around them. Yet, these codes of conduct were practiced in many different ways. Swearing and profane language did not occur in the talk pages—due to the extreme vigilance of fellow Wikipedians—yet views on terms such as objectivity and neutrality, reliability and verifiability, and authority and access vary. The messiness of collaborative construction is
structured through interpretation and indeed enforcement of policies, guidelines, rules and principles by established editors with a proven track record and a good standing in the community. Indeed, in principle anyone can edit Wikipedia, but in practice the edit process is oligarchic and often restricted. This frustrates editors up until the point that they accuse established editors of the same misconduct they are accused of, as a comment by Herzen, a starting editor, on 2 December 2014 demonstrates: “You stop your edit warring, tag teaming, continual misrepresentation, lawyering, civil POV-pushing, BATTLEGRUND, and OWN. You don’t actually [think] people to put up with all that, do you? Your editing is extremely disruptive” (“new edit war,” archive 22).

**Conclusion: memory work and the ideology of openness**

In the previous two chapters, respectively YouTube and Facebook have been conceptualized as platforms of memory. In both cases, the platforms enable, shape, and constrain memory work. They are part of memory work because the both re-present the past, as well as carry it into the future. Even though these platforms present themselves as neutral intermediaries in this process, they are active actors within it through their associated user practices, community dynamics, and technological features. Wikipedia is no exception to this. As a community of practice and as a technological site or object, it is actively engaged in the re-presentation of the past and its transference into the future. Editors filter the past and create their own version of it by choosing topics for inclusion (what does and does not belong in Wikipedia), by selecting sources that provide information on these topics, and represent these topics in a way corresponding to Wikipedia’s perceived ideology. Each of these practices is shaped by contested norms and values of the community, while the practices themselves shape these norms and values.

This chapter has shown that an ‘open’ past has its limits. Despite Wikipedia’s claims and efforts to provide a platform to which anyone can contribute, it is a hierarchically stratified place of knowledge production. The result of this is that past contentious events such as the MH17 disaster are interpreted and re-presented by a relatively small group of Wikipedians high up in the hierarchical ladder. These editors might be conceived of as new ‘elites’ in memory work; they construct the past in the present and help transfer that construction into the future.

Reaching consensus in Wikipedia might take into account “all editors’ legitimate concerns” but the actual decision-making process is oligarchical. In other words, memory work on Wikipedia is not so much done by crowds, but rather by in-crowds. Wikipedia is managed by established editors who have access to technologies to prevent others from editing and who have the social capital and the knowledge of guidelines, rules, principles, and ‘Essays’ to steer discussions and settle disputes. The knowledge of rules is therefore more important than knowledge about the topic at hand. This, in turn, stabilizes articles and interpretations of past events. The ideology of openness is thus ambiguous. On the
one hand it invites participation, but on the other hand this participation is limited and
steered into particular directions.

This does not mean that Wikipedians do not challenge the platform’s guidelines, rules
and hierarchies. Wikipedia is a specific community of practice in which an ideology of
openness is continually challenged and negotiated, but also where interpretations of it
are enforced, mainly by authoritative editors. Through analysis of the article’s talk pages,
the chapter engaged with the question how editors legitimize their selection of topics for
inclusion, negotiate neutrality, choose and discuss reliable sources, and critique, revert
and prevent each other’s edits. This process seems chaotic and indeed often is, yet, during
this process, normative stances about what a good wiki is and what Wikipedia ought to be
are formed. These stances are constructed in the talk pages and revolve around overlapping
discourses on objectivity and neutrality, reliability and verifiability, and technological
access and authority.

Many of these normative stances are carefully defended by editor Geogene, an influential
editor of the MH17, in a comment meant for new editors on October 13, 2014:

- Yes, the article is biased towards a "Western" POV; this reflects what seems to be the
  bulk of sources.
- Russian sources have a very different perspective from most of the rest of the world.
- The article is supposed to be biased towards the bulk of reliable sources.
- What “neutral” means in Wikipedia is different from what most new users assume it
  means. (see WP:NPOV)
- The NPOV tag is strongly opposed by consensus.
- The article is no place for conspiracy theories. (see WP:WEIGHT and WP:FRINGE)
- “Systemic bias” is not an excuse to override any core content policy.
- Edit warring takes place on most weekends.
  (“a summary for new editors here,” archive 19)

Hence, Geogene provides an interpretation of the rules as guidelines to abide by. A wiki is
regarded as objective and neutral when it simply states a claim made by a source, rather
than questioning the actual truthfulness of the claim. This has striking similarities with
the practice of ‘objective’ journalism (Tuchman, 1978). By ‘just’ stating what their sources
state, Wikipedians claim to be objective and neutral. This strategy is used by both editors
who want to include non-Western sources and those who do not. This makes source selec-
tion a political practice, something that is also noted by critical editors.

Proportionate attention and balance in viewpoints expressed in sources are important,
according to many editors, yet most of the sources that are deemed reliable come from
mainly ‘Western’ and established news sources or government documents. By ‘fringing’
alternative perspectives editors ward off conspiracy theories, but the downside of this
practice is that less mainstream ideas and perspectives might be quickly disregarded
as a fringe theory. Even though many editors discursively position Wikipedia outside mainstream media and government perspectives, the influence of both on the content of the article is high, which is evidenced by the inclusion of a majority of references to these sources on the grounds that they are reliable, which also gives them more rhetorical weight. Besides striving to select objective and neutral sources, Wikipedians aim for an objective and neutral tone in wikis as well. The language used to describe details of the crash and its aftermath is a precarious and much-debated issue. Distance in writing is achieved through interpretations of the NPOV principle by authoritative editors, who also settle and lock these debates. The most controversial ‘lock-down practice’ is increasing the protection status of the wiki. This technologically enabled measure is reserved for authoritative editors who reassert their standing and power within the community by means of it.

Despite the platform’s description of itself as ‘just’ an encyclopedia, it is actually much more. Notwithstanding the platform’s guidelines on the matter, it is a forum in which wikis are discussed and, through that, what Wikipedia is and what it is not. And what is even more important in light of this dissertation’s main topic, Wikipedia is a platform where the past is constantly worked and transferred into the future. This follows the strict guidelines created and (re)enforced by authoritative editors. This is why an anonymous editor writes on July 6, 2015:

So much biased crap that this is why Wikipedia will probably never really work as a reliable source of information for people. Teachers at my former school have said that Wikipedia has gotten better over the years, I’m really questioning that statement when I see articles like these. When it comes to historical reliability, Wikipedia is not to be trusted. (“Pro-Ukrainian Bias,” Archive 23)

This remark precisely points at the inherent ‘problem’ concerning Wikipedia. Time and again, Wikipedians accuse each other of bringing into discussions their own personal interpretations, which are based on their social, cultural and political context. When so many turn to Wikipedia as a place that contains a large and growing part of our public pasts—a platform of memory—we need to remember that the memory work involved in the construction of that past is as much political as any other form of memory work, despite the platform’s promise of openness. If memory work is a particular discursive activity, we can see this construction in the talk pages of MH17. This has striking similarities with the memory work in other domains, ranging from traditional media to historiography. Memory work is always caught in the dynamics of power and steered by those with access to social, cultural, and technological resources. As Bowker (2008, pp. 229-230) asserts “[m]emory practices matter because they are what carries the past along with us into the future; they are what makes our current reality true and our future—in will if not in deed—controllable […] Only an open past can unlock the present and free the future.” Despite its promise of openness, Wikipedia is not free of politics that are entangled in memory work.