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## Wikipedia and Historiography: the case of Singapore and the Philippines compared

**Abstract:** This paper explores the intellectual space of Wikipedia history-writing and raises questions about the nature of the relationship between this new virtual territory and the world of older print media history-writing using as examples the pages devoted to the national histories of the Philippines and Singapore.

**Résumé :** Cet article explore l'espace intellectuel que constitue Wikipédia dans la rédaction de l'histoire et questionne la nature du lien entre ce nouveau territoire virtuel et le monde traditionnel de l'imprimé. Seront examinées en exemple les pages consacrées à l'histoire nationale des Philippines et de Singapour.

This paper explores the intellectual space of Wikipedia history-writing and raises questions about the nature of the relationship between this new virtual territory and the world of older print media history-writing. Increasingly history has an online presence. From timelines to interactive historical maps as well as online archives and document repositories, history has embraced new media. Wikipedia is a part of this trend with numerous pages devoted to historical topics (Spoerri 2007). Wikipedia allows (demands) collaborative production of texts, raising the question of what kind of history is produced as a result. With the level of interactivity and ease of use of new media it has been suggested that digital media and especially Wikipedia has a potential to include voices or perspectives less frequently heard (Konieczny 2009; Elersbach & Glaser 2004; Hansen, Berente & Lyytinen 2009; Elvebakk 2008). This article examines Wikipedia history pages for Singapore and the Philippines with the aim of assessing the extent to which this is the case. Only two Wikipedia histories have been chosen in order to allow a thorough analysis and presentation of the texts. Many Wikipedia studies focus on massive data sets. This study does the opposite, focusing on a smaller number of cases with the aim of analyzing them intensively. Singapore and the Philippines were selected because of the economic and political importance of the countries, but also because they provide contrasting historiographical traditions. Whereas Singapore's recorded history is shorter and has been less open to alternative interpretations (Loh 1998; Wee 2003; Lysa 2008), this is not the case with the Philippines, where even European history stretches back centuries, and debates on historiography have taken place since the 1960s, but especially in the years leading up to the Centennial of the Philippine Revolution in 1998 (Nagano 2007).

The basic premise that I will argue in this paper is that Wikipedia history pages represent a collective vision of the past (Pentzold 2009), one that is shaped by the dominant historiography of the country or region so that the potential of digital history-writing is more or less circumscribed according to pre-existing social visions of what constitutes valid or accurate

historical representation. The different historiographical traditions have a significant effect on the nature of the Wikipedia account of each nation's history. For Singapore Wikipedia essentially recounts the dominant narrative. Singapore's history is a tale of ever increasing success marred only by the events of the Second World War and the crisis-filled 1950s and 1960s. The arrival of the PAP (Singapore's dominant political party) signals the end of this period with the country set back on the rails of economic progress with only the occasional crisis to mar what would otherwise appear to be an "end of history". In the Philippine account, the contours of traditional historiography are certainly present in the recounting of the origins of the Philippine Revolution. But the traditional historiography is complicated both in its portrayal of the Spanish period and even more so in the account of the Philippine-American War where we can see multiple perspectives very clearly. The period after the war continues mainly in the traditional vein, but occasionally also brings to the surface alternative narratives.

Historical narratives are not created in a vacuum. They rely on institutions and intellectual infrastructure provided by society which are shaped to meet certain political and economic needs (Trouillet 1995; Ferro 2003). This is especially the case with Wikipedia which bans what is termed "original research" and must rely on published secondary sources. This raises two issues of import for information professionals. The first concerns the promise of digital history. This promise is predicated on the capability of digital technology and the Internet to accommodate a multiplicity of voices. In a way, the capabilities of digital media represent an extension of the liberating potential of the printing press, or at least the possibility of such an extension. Certainly much of the rhetoric surrounding these technologies relies on this promise. But as the comparison of Singapore and Philippines Wikipedia pages suggest, this promise is difficult to achieve. Far easier is a mapping of the status quo onto the new media. Philippine history on Wikipedia has a multiplicity of voices greater than that which exists for Singapore because in the non-digital world these alternative narratives have already been constructed and have achieved at least a certain degree of visibility.

Of course, Wikipedia is only one example of new media. One could argue that in other corners of the Internet, alternative historical narratives are available. But the issue goes beyond availability to visibility. Wikipedia is today a key component of the Internet universe. Most searches will include a number of hits to the site as a matter of course so that it is a very well known landmark in the vast online space that has been created since the 1990s. That Wikipedia does not fulfill the potential for the presentation of a multiplicity of viewpoints seriously reduces the ability of new media to deliver on its promise. At this point, I am reminded of Patrick Wilson's belief that the official ideology of librarianship should be Pyrrhonian skepticism, that is the idea that the chief duty of the librarian, or in today's context, the information professional, should be not to pass judgment on knowledge claims, or to provide the "correct" answer to patron inquiries, but to report on the status of those claims; that is whether they are contested or not and by whom (Wilson 1983). In this way the information professional's aim becomes to provide maps for the knowledge claims of the various disciplines. When we realize that at least certain libraries have begun to take an interest in working to improve Wikipedia by helping to edit articles (Lally and Dunford 2007; Zentall and Cloutier 2008; Pressley & McCallum 2008), the possibility for the extension of the role of "skeptical librarian" to the digital world of Wikipedia becomes conceivable. Information professionals could not only work to improve the general quality of Wikipedia articles, but to explore plausible and documented alternative

historical narratives with an eye to making sure that these voices are not lost in the clamour of dominant historiographical traditions. In this way the promise of digital technology to allow for multiple voices would be closer to realization. A genuine “new world” could well be the result.

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