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POWER, VISIBILITY, WIKIPEDIA

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Abstract

According to a popular current in cultural criticism, which focuses on the danger of new technologies, new media have the potential to enhance surveillance. This article is also concerned with a type of visibility, but not one that is reducible to surveillance. Rather, the article investigates the potential for new technologies to open up, or make visible, political processes that have in the past best been described by the metaphor of the black box. In particular, I focus on Wikipedia and the production of knowledge. The article finishes by linking this new potential to a new power relation, fittingly termed 'visibility'.

Introduction

The increased surveillance potential enabled by new media technologies has often, and rightfully, been depicted negatively. When collated, the information that flows through the Internet's fibre-optic cables—including banking details, commercial transactions, email messages, search histories, blogs, social 'networking' sites (e.g. MySpace) and DIY video sites (e.g. YouTube)—are enough to construct sophisticated personal profiles of any regular user. Whilst this proliferation of archiveable information does not necessarily entail Orwellian ends, the dangers are obvious. Thus, surveillance has increasingly become an important field of academic inquiry.

This article, however, belongs to a different subset of works arranged around theoretically-loaded classifications of sight. Rather than surveillance, this article draws on a theory of 'visibility' inspired by Giles Deleuze's (2006) reading of the work of Michel Foucault. Whilst the idea of visibility shares surveillance's political charge, the term is not inherently negative. Rather, in this article I focus on what I see as a new and *positive* visibility—that of knowledge production—made possible when web and Wiki technologies are enlisted as structuring devices for the encyclopaedic form. The coalescence I am talking about is Wikipedia, and to demonstrate this new visibility of knowledge production this article describes features of Wikipedia unique to its architecture. Specifically I consider the history, discussion, rating, and edit features—but there are others that could work just as well, such as the 'protected' article feature. This laying bare of encyclopaedic knowledge production, I argue, reveals much about the

politics of both new and old ways of knowing. Implicit in this article is the notion that theories of surveillance cannot adequately explain the relations of power at work on the Internet. Whilst instances of surveillance are obviously still present, new developments suggest that this type of power relation cannot be taken as a general model for the virtual environment. In other words, the Internet is not all about surveillance. I use Wikipedia to make this point as well as to develop an alternative notion: a theory of visibility. This theory of visibility is able to account for instances of surveillance but is not reducible to it.

Wikipedia

It is now common knowledge that Wikipedia is an encyclopaedic reference like none other in history.¹ It is freely available, provided you have an internet connection; it exists, in some form, in over 250 languages; has over 280,000 contributors, none of whom require institutional affiliation, scholarly reputation, or even a knowable identity; and is by far the largest genuine encyclopaedia ever produced, with roughly five million articles *in toto* (Zachte 2007).² Wikipedia has also spawned communities of enthusiasts, called Wikipedians, who have embraced the collaborative, or perhaps stigmergic, spirit.³ Wikipedia has thus become a popular object of analysis in a range of disciplines and the focus of much media attention more generally. (The annual Wikimania conference as well as the Wikimedia 'Research' page are testament to this academic interest, see <http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research>) Wikipedians have been poked and prodded: Who are they? What motivates them? Are they qualified? (see Pink 2005); articles have been statistically measured in terms of quality and accuracy (see Voss 2005; Giles 2005); content has been scrutinised and ridiculed (see McHenry 2004); and Wikipedia has been measured against the philosophical ideals of an ultimate information source (see Sanger 2006). In this article though, my concern is with something that much of this research takes for granted: the structuring principles behind this type of knowledge formation itself. A consideration of Sanger and his essay 'The Future of Free Information' (2006) will help illustrate the difference in my approach.

One of the founding fathers of Wikipedia (along with Wales), Sanger praised Wikipedia's growth and potential, but remained reserved about the lack of an official peer-review process for new articles. After leaving Wikipedia Sanger became involved in the *Digital Universe and Citizendium* projects, both of which are peer-reviewed compendia of knowledge. Whilst these projects welcome all contributions, they combine 'public participation with gentle expert guidance' (<http://www.citizendium.org/> 2006). Basically, although anyone can participate, all articles are guaranteed by a hierarchical arrangement where institutionally ratified experts are placed at the top. Of course, it is a little more complicated than this, but as the main driving force behind *Citizendium*, it is obvious that Sanger wants to harness the

potential of new technologies, whilst retaining the old paradigms of authority and legitimacy. This is made clear in the aforementioned essay, where Sanger muses over the question of an ideal information source, arriving at two broad, overarching necessities: quality of content and accessibility. Under 'quality of content' falls the need for accuracy. Whilst Sanger realises '*what is to be counted as accurate is a thorny issue*' and notes more generally that there are important discussions to be had about the role of the expert in regard to accuracy, he nonetheless goes on to remark, 'it hardly needs argument...to maintain that some sort of robust expert involvement and leadership will increase the accuracy of a resource' (2006, p. 3). What all this reveals is that Sanger largely ignores the transformative potential that lies within these knowledge producing technologies, even though, unlike many other commentators, he is aware of them. Rather than assessing Wikipedia's potential as technological augments of *existing* knowledge paradigms, I am interested in this *transformative* potential: a potential for (1) new types of knowledges (and thus new politics) as well as (2) new ways of seeing them, new visibilities. More accurately, I am interested in the *coming together* of these two elements: a transparent mode of knowledge production—which is also a political evolution. It should be obvious from my brief introduction of Wikipedia that there are many possible avenues into the considerations I am proposing. Here I want to focus on form. In what follows, I describe particular aspects of Wikipedia's architecture that enable this 'visibility' of knowledge production: the discussion, history, edit this page and rating functions.

Edit this page (or the death of the supplement)

In his account of the publishing history of the *French Encyclopédie*, Darnton (1979) describes the method of encyclopaedic production and publication around the time of French Enlightenment. The original *Encyclopédie* had 28 volumes produced in alphabetical order. Volume release was necessarily staggered, as book production was a much more time-consuming process than today. It was harder, for example, to mobilise and co-ordinate multiple authors, determine and arrange content, cross reference with other volumes and so on (see Darnton 1979). Thus, the first (folio) version of the *Encyclopédie* was published over a period of 21 years (1751–72). During this time, there were significant developments and discoveries in many of the arts and sciences covered in those initial volumes. So much so that after obtaining the rights to the work Pancoucke released seven supplementary volumes, which took a further four years to publish. The supplement was a tack-on of sorts, a constant and awkward reminder of the flaws of the original and also of the dynamism of knowledge itself. In a different context, Jacques Derrida describes this awkward status of the supplement, which nonetheless works well in the context of the encyclopaedia. For Derrida the supplement is in one sense 'the *fullest*

measure of presence', but in another 'its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness' (1974, pp. 144, 145). The supplement is potentially destabilising, as its very being reveals a tension driven by paradox: the object is now both complete, and can never be complete. The publishers of the *Encyclopédie* would, of course, champion conclusiveness over this structural deficit.⁴

Whilst publishing/production technologies have changed significantly since the 1800s, the original-plus-supplement form has remained. With Wikipedia however, such form is anathema. We are constantly reminded by the 'edit' (which appears as [edit]) and 'edit this page' functions that articles can be modified instantly.⁵ The supplement form shatters into a million shards that are instead perpetually inserted into the encyclopaedia, forming a sort of mosaic in flux. There is no time for the supplement to form any (deceptive) unity; the 'This is complete. Now this is complete. Now this is complete...' form is replaced: change is inbuilt in the architecture. In any decent entry, for example, the user will come across multiple 'edit' buttons, situated at the beginning of each new article section/heading. For example, the article on tennis has over 20 edit buttons (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tennis>). These hyperlink buttons take the user to a separate edit page, where the particular section one wishes to edit appears in modifiable code. The user makes the alterations in this 'code page', which then updates the article page (where no code is visible). The 'edit this page' button, found at the top of an article, performs essentially the same task but displays the code of the whole article, not just one section. This reveals that a dynamic understanding of knowledge is programmed into Wikipedia's very code. Change is incorporated into the architecture, making Wikipedia much more flexible and durable than older forms, whose demise is literally written in.

History

The Wikipedia article on French author, Albert Camus, was created at 6:35pm, 7th July 2001 by a part-time cultural anthropologist and sociologist known as 'Sjc' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Camus).⁶ The article contained Camus's years of birth and death (1913–60), listed two famous works, *The Plague* and *The Outsider*, and had just two lines of text: 'French writer and philosopher, one of the principle luminaries (with Jean-Paul Sartre) of existentialism' and 'In 1957 Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature'. 'Jean-Paul Sartre', 'existentialism' and 'Nobel Prize in literature', were also hyperlinked. At the time of writing this, the article is over 3000 words long, broken into nine subsections (Early years, Literary Career, Cultural influences, Selected bibliography etc.), includes four photos, links to themed article groupings (Western Philosophy: 20th-century philosophy and French Literature), and multiple links to other related material.⁷ (Indeed, the 3000 odd words accorded Camus is deceptive as an indicator of growth, as the original article has splintered into numerous others.) Between the two versions of this article lie hundreds of

edits (over 500) by numerous contributors. Whilst this information is impressive in its own right, the 'history' function is important because it reveals an article's trajectory. Every article can be traced back to its origins immediately, on the spot. This becomes more important over time, where shifting theoretical and scientific paradigms, cultural trends, political views and so on, can be mapped in detail. If the edit function revealed 'knowledge is dynamic', the history function adds 'this is what knowledge used to look like'. It thus both reinforces the mosaic-in-flux metaphor and gives it a material temporal character—as if in 3D, if you like.

Rating

Just like any encyclopaedia, some articles in Wikipedia are better than others. On a practical level, this is easy to determine: the first article on Camus is clearly not as 'good' as the current one. In the past, determining the quality of an article has usually been left to the reader or the critic, both of whom are exterior to the actual work. In other words, there has been no self-reflexivity built in to the original work. (This is inadequate because an encyclopaedia's *raison d'être* is to provide specialist knowledge about things a reader is poorly informed about, so the question of quality has typically been difficult for such readers to answer.) In fact, for traditional encyclopaedias this type of self-reflexivity is dangerous because proprietary encyclopaedic knowledge must necessarily be presented as high in quality; fit for whatever the stated purpose of the knowledge. To provide a quality scale is an admission of failure to meet this contractual obligation, and one that casts the whole encyclopaedic project in doubt. Furthermore, this same economic framework—which requires a quality product—also encourages economies of scale and efficiency, and is constrained by the need to generate a profit (these are discussed in more detail in a now-dated article by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang (1998)). So the same conditions that result in a depiction of the encyclopaedia as a conclusive, high-quality bastion of knowledge, also apply powerful contradictory forces. As Wikipedia does not answer directly to commercial prerogatives it is able to sidestep this problem and provide, in this regard, what we might call a more honest work. This is evidenced in Wikipedia's rating system, where articles are judged according to specific criteria. Biographic articles, for example, are rated according to Figure 1 below.

The process of rating makes visible two things: (1) that not all articles are of a high quality (such as the article on Aaron T. Beck); (2) the actual characteristics of a quality article (e.g. outstanding, definitive, a great source, and so on), however vague they may be. It must be noted, however, that currently not all articles are rated and there is no policy that requires it, although it is very likely that article rating will increasingly become the norm. Thus, this self-reflexivity is a limited, voluntary endeavour. Nonetheless, and despite its limited application, the fact that Wikipedia's architecture provides this function is significant.

Figure 1 Wikipedia's Progressive Grading Scheme for Articles

Label	Criteria	Reader's experience	Editor's experience	Example
<u>FA</u> {{FA-Class}}	Reserved exclusively for articles that have received ' <u>Featured article</u> ' status after <u>peer review</u> , and meet the current criteria for featured articles.	Definitive. Outstanding, thorough article; a great source for encyclopedic information.	No further editing necessary, unless new published information has come to light.	<u>Wayne Gretzky</u>
A {{A-Class}}	Provides a well-written, reasonably clear and complete description of the topic, as described in <u>How to write a great article</u> as much as the existence of reputable sources allow it. It should be of a length suitable for the subject, with a well-written introduction and an appropriate series of headings to break up the content. It should have sufficient external literature references, preferably from the 'hard' (<u>peer-reviewed</u> where appropriate) literature rather than websites. Should be well illustrated, with no copyright problems. At the stage where it could at least be considered for <u>featured article</u> status, corresponds to the 'Wikipedia 1.0' standard. No editors involved in the writing of an article should self-assess their article at this level. Best venue for achieving this class is to request a <u>Peer review</u>	Very useful to readers. A fairly complete treatment of the subject as much as the existence of reputable sources allow it. A non-expert in the subject matter would typically find nothing wanting. May miss a few relevant points.	Minor edits and adjustments would improve the article, particularly if brought to bear by a subject-matter expert. In particular, issues of breadth, completeness, and balance may need work. <u>Peer-review</u> would be helpful at this stage.	<u>Linus Pauling</u>
<u>GA</u> {{GA-Class}}	The article has passed through the <u>Good article nomination process</u> and been granted GA status, meeting the <u>good article standards</u> . This should be used for articles that still need some work to reach featured article standards, but that are otherwise good. Good articles that may succeed in FAC should be considered A-Class articles, but being a <u>Good article</u> is not a requirement for A-Class.	Useful to nearly all readers. A good treatment of the subject. No obvious problems, gaps, excessive information. Adequate for most purposes, but other encyclopedias could do a better job	Some editing will clearly be helpful, but not necessary for a good reader experience. If the article is not already fully <u>wikified</u> , now is the time.	<u>Bob Marley</u>

Label	Criteria	Reader's experience	Editor's experience	Example
B {{B-Class}}	Has several of the elements described in 'start', usually a <i>majority</i> of the material needed for a completed article. Nonetheless, it has significant gaps or missing elements or references, needs substantial editing for English language usage and/or clarity, balance of content, or contains other policy problems such as copyright, NPOV or NOR. With NPOV a well written B-class may correspond to the 'Wikipedia 0.5' or 'usable' standard. Articles that are close to GA status but don't meet the Good article criteria should be B- or Start-class articles.	Useful to many, but not all, readers. A casual reader flipping through articles would feel that they generally understood the topic, but a serious student or researcher trying to use the material would have trouble doing so, or would risk error in derivative work.	Considerable editing is still needed, including filling in some important gaps or correcting significant policy errors. Articles for which cleanup is needed will typically have this designation to start with.	Alfred Hitchcock , Ales Hemsky , Ioshua Toulmin
Start {{Start-Class}}	The article has a meaningful amount of good content, but it is still weak in many areas, and may lack a table. For example an article on Queen Elizabeth might cover her personality well, but be weak on back story. Has at least one serious element of gathered materials, including any one of the following: NOTE: This is not a negative grade. There are no negative grades in Wikipedia. Having an article on Wikipedia is a passing grade, since it has to pass Notability. This grade is here to alert editors of articles that need some improvement to reach B-class	Not useless. Some readers will find what they are looking for, but most will not. Most articles in this category have the look of an article 'under construction' and a reader genuinely interested in the topic is likely to seek additional information elsewhere.	Substantial/major editing is needed, most material for a complete article needs to be added. This article usually isn't developed enough for a cleanup tag: it still needs to be built	A.I. Croce , Aaron T. Beck

Label	Criteria	Reader's experience	Editor's experience	Example
Stub {{Stub-Class}}	The article is either a very short article or a rough collection of information that will need much work to bring it to A-Class level. It is usually very short, but can be of any length if the material is irrelevant or incomprehensible. NOTE: This is not a negative grade. There are no negative grades in Wikipedia. Having an article on Wikipedia is a passing grade, since it has to pass Notability. This grade is here to alert editors of articles that need some improvement to reach Start or B-class	May be useless to a reader only passingly familiar with the term. Possibly useful to someone who has no idea what the term meant. At best a brief, informed dictionary definition.	Any editing or additional material can be helpful.	<u>Emppu Vuorinen</u>
Needed {{Needed-Class}}	The article does not exist and needs to be created.			

⁸ Words underlined indicate link in website

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Biography/Assessment#Priority_scale

The question of quality, however, must be looked at more closely, and in particular because it invokes a set of comparative criteria that represent an ideal. These ideals are difficult (I think impossible) to set in concrete, but following tradition, accuracy (truthfulness) and conclusiveness serve as good examples: everything important must be there and must be right.⁸ These criteria though—and any overarching ideal more generally—are not beyond contention or scrutiny (I discuss this further below). Unfortunately for the encyclopaedic project, we must admit they are relative, which means that rating an article is not exempt from assuming the problematic 'objective' or 'exterior' posture; rather, it conjures such a stance back into existence. Therefore, the rating feature in Wikipedia is paradoxical: on the one hand, it radically critiques the idea that encyclopaedic knowledge is infallible; but, on the other hand, the scale itself is structured by those very ideals (and constantly strives to realise them). This condition is similar to the one Birchall (2006) describes in *Knowledge Goes Pop*. Birchall is also interested in the 'legitimation' of knowledge and in particular the mechanisms that distinguish scholarly work as legitimate and conspiracy theory as illegitimate. Using the insights of Derrida, she concludes that there is always an 'aporia of legitimacy' (Birchall 2006, p. 84). Rules of legitimacy are never unshakeable, but nonetheless are necessary for any act of judgement. Birchall concludes that the academy has been too quick to dismiss conspiracy theory as illegitimate (she prefers instead to approach this conflict as a Lyotardian dif-

ferend) and has thus missed the fact that illegitimacy structures the very possibility of legitimacy (or of statements that can be considered accurate and conclusive). But as well as making any such process possible, it also eliminates the possibility of pure legitimacy. Further, this condition reveals a 'prior "politics" that comes "before"' (Birchall 2006, p. 84); a politics inherent to the structure. Whilst it would be rash to conclude that Wikipedia's rating system reveals such complexities in the structuring of knowledge, it certainly complicates encyclopaedic knowledge. It opens the door to a more critical understanding of the status of knowledge and its mechanisms of legitimacy.

Discussion

Consider the question: Who was Jesus of Nazareth? A Christian answer would most likely be: 'Jesus is the incarnate son of God'. A Muslim might respond that 'Jesus was a prophet'. An atheist might answer: 'Jesus was an influential man in history', 'Jesus was a conman' or even 'Jesus is nothing more than a myth'. These types of response are diametrically opposed, but throughout history have been vociferously defended and not without bloodshed. The origins of these contradictory answers lie in the different bodies of knowledge that each expresses, bodies of knowledge that have greatly influenced the everyday life of the multitudes for centuries. The vast changes in Australian society culminating in secularism, for example, can be understood here as a shift in such knowledge systems in which both parties come to 'acknowledge' the knowledge system of the other, even if ultimately each disagrees with the other.

In the past, the encyclopaedic style has always been to choose, to favour one position over another. For example, the famed 11th Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (published in 1911 and now available online at http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Main_Page) allows no space for atheist accounts in the article on Jesus. Whilst the article has a scientific and empirical posture—evidenced by reasoned discussion and close textual analysis of the Gospels and other early documents—it rests solely on Christian doctrine. The article is not entirely closed—there are regions of 'less certainty', where 'critical scholarship has still much to do' (http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Jesus_Christ)—but it reveals that it was not yet possible to question Jesus's divinity in such a context. The account is one-dimensional, which is not surprising given the dominance of Christian knowledge in early twentieth-century America (where the encyclopaedia was published). Recent accounts, however, are rarely as black and white as the 1911 *Britannica*. One is much more likely to come across a 'balanced' or problematically named 'neutral' point of view. The entry on Jesus in *Encarta* is one such example. Here, Jesus is described as 'the central figure of Christianity' and 'a historical figure whose existence is authenticated both by Christian writers and by several Roman and Jewish historians' (http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761565222/Jesus_Christ.html). Although the article covers similar

material to the *Britannica* of 1911, the question of Jesus's divinity remains at best, open. In other words, this account draws on a body of knowledge that leaves space for multiple voices—but importantly, these voices are absent from the actual account.

Wikipedia articles generally follow this trend. Indeed, the adoption of neutrality is official policy: commonly written as NPOV, the 'Neutral point of view' policy (in summary) requires that: 'All Wikipedia articles and other encyclopaedic content must be written from a neutral point of view, representing views fairly, proportionately and without bias' ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia: Neutral_point_of_view](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view)). Obviously, neutrality is a myth. Or more accurately, NPOV is just one of many competing knowledge systems. Moreover, NPOV is clearly incompatible with other accounts of Jesus. That is, there is vast difference between saying '*Christians believe* Jesus is the son of God' (a 'neutral' knowledge) and 'Jesus is the son of God' (a Christian knowledge). Once it is acknowledged that there are always competing knowledges to those represented—that one point of view is only *ever* one of many—the traditional encyclopaedic form seems both lacking and more obviously political. As Derrida reminds us, knowledges are never based on unshakeable foundations, *especially* ones based on apparent objectivity. It is in this context that the 'discussion' feature marks a new, positive visibility. I do not wish to claim that by attending to this lack (of multiple knowledges) Wikipedia attains anything like completeness—history has shown this to be a problematic and dangerous notion. Rather, in the production of every article there is also always an act of silencing. Every entry has an excess, a spillover that is lost or becomes invisible, when excluded. Traditional encyclopaedias have never adequately dealt with such competing knowledges (as we have seen, neutrality is not enough). In Wikipedia, alternate knowledges are not lost; instead they are relegated to the discussion page. Whilst this act of relegation is itself profoundly political—a process of privileging and legitimising some knowledges at the expense of others—the whole process, along with the knowledges that are usually discarded, becomes visible. The onlooker is privy to this struggle of knowledges and the rationale of why one was preferred over another. This is not to say that Wikipedia gives a total account of knowledge. Foucault once said 'a statement is always an event that neither the language (*langue*) nor the meaning can quite exhaust' (2002, p. 31), meaning that there is always a plethora of interpretations, or ways of knowing an empirical happening. Rather, by providing a discussion page Wikipedia reveals this impossibility of totality, the necessary excess, and also, the politics of exclusion. A new visibility. To summarise, the discussion feature provides a space for marginalised knowledges. Not 'accounted for' in the 'neutral' renderings of some expert, but voiced by the people who claim these knowledges as their own.

It would be too simplistic, however, to end my account of the discussion feature yet. What I have thus described is potential—the potential that lies within the architecture—which does not say anything about

actual practice. The discussion page for Jesus, for example, does not list these competing positions (knowledges and discourses) neatly. Instead, the current discussion page is broken up into 33 points of contention, most of which pale into insignificance in comparison with the question of Jesus's being itself (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Jesus>). (One such example is two competing accounts of 'Nietzsche's opinion of Jesus'. In the main article, Nietzsche's opinion of Jesus currently appears as negative: 'being worthy only of contempt'. This is disputed by Redfarmer, who claims Nietzsche depicts Jesus as essentially a good man.)

I think that this lack of fundamental disagreement (such as the very nature of Jesus) can be explained by two considerations: Firstly, it is quite likely that when *writing*, contributors all draw from roughly similar knowledge systems, ones where NPOV is held as the ideal.⁹ Here I am suggesting that NPOV—like its progenitors' positivism and empiricism—has infiltrated other knowledges to the extent that it is no longer possible to write an encyclopaedic article outside this particular guiding principle. In such a climate, even committed Christians will censor their own contributions. In short, the encyclopedia is not a neutral domain. The encyclopaedia is a genre with well-defined and naturalised conventions which, even if not formally outlined, nonetheless work to produce a limited set of author positions. Secondly, the examples of competing knowledges I have used—with regard to Jesus's nature—have been deliberately simplistic, only representing a tiny fraction of the plethora of contested knowledges to do with Jesus. In reality, competing knowledges are complex, multiple, overlapping and often self-contradictory. The discussion page is a reflection of such complexity. This does not detract at all from its function as visibility enhancer. It does, however, mean that some work is required to draw out these competing voices.

A Theory of Visibility

Wikipedia's architecture differs from previous encyclopaedic forms. As opposed to these previous manifestations, Wikipedia represents the knowledge of the encyclopaedia as contested, contingent, dynamic, and overtly the result of political processes. I have suggested that this difference, this architectural departure and its associated reorganisation of knowledge, is a notable political development. Thus far however, I have remained vague with regard to the specificities of this positive development, couching it rather loosely as 'visibility'. To draw this concept of visibility in more detail and thus bring its theoretical value to bear, I turn to its origins in the work of Foucault.

Foucault writes of visibility in a discussion of Bentham's Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* (1995, pp. 195–228), although it wasn't until Deleuze's monograph on Foucault that the term gained conceptual force. (Whilst I don't borrow directly from Deleuze, his reading of Foucault and his emphasis on visibility—rather than surveillance—

informs the following discussion.) Foucault was interested in what he saw as an important shift in the exercise of power, from the direct (such as torture) to the more subtle 'disciplinary power' (such as surveillance). (Deleuze describes Foucault's mapping of this transformation of power as the work of a 'cartographer', who maps the terrain of the social and draws from it generalised 'diagrams' of power (2006, pp. 21–8). As we will see, for Foucault the Panopticon is the general diagram of power for what he calls the 'disciplinary society'.) Part of this shift also includes the transfer of power, in the form of self-discipline, to the individual. That is, in this disciplinary condition society is organised in a way that results in people keeping *themselves* in line. Brute force is rarely needed and is instead replaced by a subtle form of generalised discipline. This self-disciplining doesn't occur randomly though. Rather, it is the result of calculated arrangements, of designing architectures and organising spaces in strategic ways.

He [sic] who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection (1995, pp. 202–3).

This relation, however, is initially made possible via and constantly dependant on the architecture: 'Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up' (Foucault 1995, p. 202). Moreover, for Foucault the Panopticon is not only one instance of disciplinary power, it rather represents the general model, or ideal, of disciplinary power. The relation of the Panopticon is thus detached from its specificity and becomes an abstract model of disciplinary power, or what Foucault calls a 'diagram' of power:

The Panopticon...must be understood as a *general model of functioning*...[it] must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure *architectural and optical system*: it is in fact a figure of political technology... (1995, p. 205) (emphases added).

Diagrams of power are manifest in arrangements of bodies, things and structures: in schools, train stations, shopping malls, hospitals, prisons, and so on. In the disciplinary society the Panopticon represents the ideal, the abstract model or diagram of power. But to a greater or lesser degree all architecture reflects some abstract diagram of power—the architecture of Wikipedia included. Furthermore, each produce different types of visibilities. Visibilities, then, are ways of looking, particular illuminations, made possible by real architectures. They are also mechanisms of power. In this theorisation, surveillance becomes

but one instance of a visibility: that which relates to the abstract diagram of the Panopticon. Visibility is however, as I have shown earlier, by no means reducible to surveillance. Indeed, the strength of visibility is that it enables us to take Foucault's theorisation of power beyond surveillance, and beyond the disciplinary society. The task that lies ahead is to map the relations of power in greater detail and thus provide a new diagram of power to match this new visibility.

I have argued that the architecture of Wikipedia provides a way of seeing, a visibility, of encyclopaedic knowledge. The light it casts shines in new directions, illuminates new features, and allows us to see more of the production of this genre of knowledge than ever before. And if our relationship to knowledge is always mediated by the structural condition in which it is represented—conditions that are themselves political—the more we know about these conditions and how they operate, the better. This is why Wikipedia is a positive visibility. To describe Wikipedia as a visibility, though, is also to place emphasis on its architecture and the relations of power inscribed within them. Visibilities are not just to do with opening things up, with laying bare the previously concealed. As a theory, visibility is concerned with how what we can see relates to a politics of arrangement, of architecture and design; with how what is made visible is bound up in relations of power, and with how understandings of knowledge are shaped by the architecture that enable them.

Notes

- ¹ For those seeking a general but succinct introduction to Wikipedia, Yochai Benkler's *The Wealth of Networks* (2006, pp. 70–4) is a good starting point.
- ² I say 'genuine', because in the Ming period (1368–1644) a draft work titled *Wen-hsien ta-ch'eng* might have competed in size (11,000 volumes) but was more of a compilation than a compendium, and thus shouldn't be considered (see Featherstone & Venn 2006, p. 16).
- ³ Stigmergy is a word used to explain how collaboration works when large groups of people are involved. See Mark Elliott's essay 'Stigmergic Collaboration: The Evolution of Group Work' (2006) for a full discussion on how this concept can be applied to new media environments.
- ⁴ I must clarify that such claims made by publishers were not usually shared by editors. In fact, the editors of the *Encyclopédie* were well aware of the shortcomings of their work, but did nonetheless have totalising ambitions: 'It took centuries to make a beginning; it will take centuries to bring it to an end. [Yet we will be satisfied to have contributed to laying the foundations of a useful work]' and 'at least one day, this work could take the place of a library of all types of knowledge for a gentleman and of all types of knowledge except his own particular domain for a professional scholar' (d'Alembert 1995, pp. 127, 128) (parentheses in original).
- ⁵ There are a few exceptions to this rule. For example, extremely contentious articles are 'frozen', which makes them much harder to edit.
- ⁶ The anonymity of users is an often-cited problem with Wikipedia. I cannot verify Sjc's details; whether or not he is an anthropologist or sociologist (Sjc

is male) and what exactly part-time means (does it mean a semi-retired, famous scholar, or a person who read *'Introducing Sociology'* a few days before making the entry?). This common criticism however, reveals how much the production of knowledge rests on institutional hierarchies, to the point where institutional membership is itself a mark of authority. This is an important question, but beyond the scope of this article.

- 7 Although searching/perusing via hyperlinks was revolutionary for the Web as a whole, it marks only a difference in degree for searching the encyclopaedic medium. Often articles would contain capitalised words, which meant that the word had its own entry. This new article could be found simply by referring to the index. Thus, although hypertext greatly simplifies this method it is not entirely new.
- 8 To some extent, the emergence of Wikipedia has affected this encyclopaedic ideal. Whilst conclusiveness and correctness remain powerful, the skill of writing *per se* is now increasingly important. Covering all the facts is not enough: they must be delivered in elegant but commanding prose. This discursive shift is a response to the innumerable clunky, structure-less, and generally poorly written articles in Wikipedia which seem a travesty of the traditional authoritative tone and style of such works. Obviously, there is great value in well-written work and certain linguistic standards must be met for any exchange of meaning to take place. However, we must be careful to distinguish these concerns from a reactionary, conservative approach to encyclopaedic knowledge, however hard this may be.
- 9 Ethnographic research would be needed to answer such questions definitively, but they are beyond the scope of this article.

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