From Multitude to Crowds—Collective Action and the Media

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No consensus on consensus:
A Paradox within Wikipedian Governance
and Collective Action

Introduction

Wikipedia unabashedly prides itself on being written through the use of consensus (Wikipedia, 2014a). Over the past fourteen years, consensus-building has contributed significantly to the encyclopedia's continuing relevance and success. In conjunction with qualifiers like "open" and "transparent," Wikipedian consensus is often presented as a fair, equal, and democratic practice that facilitates massively collaborative actions. In short, it is a unique model for organizing diverse actors whose values and beliefs are as differentiated as their cultures and geographies. While this accompaniment of rhetoric describes a promising development for global collective action, the word consensus requires greater scrutiny. In placing the focus squarely on the meaning of this concept, I carefully reconsider what consensus is, its complexities, and its effects on participants held together through action and attention. Additionally, this research problematizes the common associations of this self-governing mechanism by contrasting how it works when it is deployed by a community (as Wikipedia is often described as) with what it means for publics.

To do so, I compare studies associated with Etienne Wenger's "communities of practice" with those theorizations of "the public sphere" and "publics" as described by Jürgen Habermas and extended by Nancy Fraser, Gerald Hauser, Michael Warner, and Chantal Mouffe. This second set of authors establish a number of criteria to evaluate both the emancipatory and the hegemonic nature of consensus. The investigation thereafter relates the initial findings of a critical discourse analysis of the talk pages used to create the consensus policy on Wikipedia. Analytically, I find three main approaches that animate the Wikipedian meaning of the concept: an instrumental view, a goal-oriented view, and a rhetorical view. However, while these reductions are not representative of the vast mixture of discourse, they are significant in contrasting the meaning of consensus described in the actual policy and that of the complex, conflicted, and contradictory meanings found in the talk pages.

Summarily, the research finds that the policy itself has a narrower description of the concept, leaning heavily toward the instrumental and goal-oriented understandings of consensus. This situation can be expected, that the differences

and disagreements that happen on the talk page are filtered out of the actual policy. But such a process raises questions about the ability for Wikipedia, carried by this policy, to live up to its own potential as a platform to legitimate debate on topics that are incommensurable. Without a notion of dissensus to match consensus, the project faces some very serious questions: How do minority positions find legitimacy in this consensus system? How do diverse belief and value systems negotiate difference? On what grounds are they dismissed? If one takes Wikipedia's tagline as its mission to not only *be* the encyclopedia "that anyone can edit" but to also *enable* anyone to contribute in a substantial manner, these are significant questions that consensus is ill-equipped to answer. As such, I argue that if diversity, inclusivity, transparency, and understanding are the guiding values of Wikipedia, then the primacy placed on consensus may ultimately undermine the egalitarian nature of the project.

Relevant Literature

Wikipedia

A first step in understanding what is at stake with Wikipedia is by drawing an outline of the connections between democracy, action, and discussion. One of the encyclopedia's potentials has been discussed in terms of its existence as a non-hierarchical community that rejects expertise and authority. In other words, the "online encyclopedia that anyone can edit" is a novel approach to the question of how to create an engaging and sustainable system of self-governance. Such novelty has not gone unnoticed by scholars seeking political alternatives to the current systems of social organization. Yochai Benkler (2006), Don Tapscott (2006), and Clay Shirky (2011a) are notable among those in the past ten years who have proselytize the possibilities of cooperation based on Wikipedia's platform. Their respective focuses on the economic and political aspects of mass collaboration can be observed within David D. Clark's visionary manifesto of 1992. In this document he emphatically asserts that the Internet community rejects "kings, presidents and voting," and believes in its place in "rough consensus and running code" (Clark, p. 19). This line of argument has some intimate connections to the Janus-like qualities of Wikipedia. On one side of Wikipedia is a space where time is taken to discuss and deliberate disagreements, its talk pages. On the other is the quick pace of running code, of small discrete edits that need little to no discussion to maintain the production of its articles. Between these two activities, of editing and discussing lies the pivot of consensus that keeps Wikipedia in balance.

At the time of Clark's writing the first web browser, Mosaic, was a year from being released. The World Wide Web as we came to know it in our homes and lives was just beginning. As Patrice Flichy explains, the Internet pre-1993 was largely populated by computer scientists and small interest community groups (Flichy, 2007, p.91). Within this context, those who used the Internet were the same people who were maintaining and changing its structure. Together they constituted a community of technically inclined individuals who built its functions and purposes. The subsequent commodification of the Internet in the mid-1990s brought on a division of technical labour between consumers and programmers. As such, the idea that *the* Internet has a community, in Clark's description, is more than questionable today. What then do we make of his related remark of this community's ability to function on rough consensus? To follow this line of inquiry, the following section contrasts discussions of communities with publics and the social controls like consensus that are deployed by each.

Communities and collective action

To engage with the question of consensus today requires that we consider what sort of social structure is necessary for mass networks of individuals to remain cohesive enough to maintain activity. In the 1990s, Etienne Wenger developed the theory of "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1999) which placed activity as the focal point of social organization. The impetus for this model stems from a question of how group relationships are maintained without shared national, familial, or other cultural memberships. More explicitly, Wenger's model was directed toward understanding professional groups where businesses exchanged knowledge through face-to-face interactions. Elements of his theory have since been taken up to understand how online networks might function in a similar manner. Following Wenger's initial line of inquiry, Wasko, Faraj & Teigland (2004) took the activity of sharing knowledge as the prerequisite for what they deemed "networks of practice" (Wasko, Faraj & Teigland, p. 494). Against traditional institutional hierarchies, they explain that the network is established through the reciprocity of exchanges that follow social controls. These new forms of control, as the authors state "enhance cooperation and reduce misbehavior" and "encourage the contribution of knowledge to the network" (Wasko, Faraj & Teigland, p. 504). As such, they postulated that these non-hierarchical social limits "are not as likely to be dominating, thus allowing for more individual freedom in action" (Wasko, Faraj & Teigland, p. 503).

Given the outline of both communities and networks of practice, the idea of a shared practice has been viewed as an invaluable model for understanding how Wikipedians organize activity to produce their encyclopedia. While purporting

to have a flattened (but not flat) hierarchy, Wikipedia is heavily structured by explicit and formal policies that add legitimacy and authority to the behaviours to individuals in "communities of mass participation" (Kriplean, 2007). This is certainly true of the policies of social conduct that allows this "large and geographically dispersed group" to function in a way that contrasts "tightly knit" communities (Benkler, p. 73). Benkler explains "even in a group of this size, social norms coupled with a facility to allow any participant to edit out purposeful or mistaken deviations in contravention of the social norms, and a robust platform for largely unmediated conversation, keep the group on track" (Benkler, p. 74). When it comes to consensus in particular, Benkler states Wikipedia depends on "self-conscious use of open discourse, usually aimed at consensus". Though, consensus here has a particular meaning, as he elaborates that it does not mean voting, which Wikipedians sometimes engage with when necessary or convenient. He states that any call for a vote "can, and usually are, ignored by the community unless a sufficiently large number of users have decided that debate has been exhausted" (Benkler, p.74). In this sense, consensus is seen as an openly negotiated policy that facilitates the acts of individuals within a collective.

Likewise, the fact that Wikipedians internally organize their codes of conduct is essential to Firer-Blaess & Fuchs's (2012) argument that Wikipedia represents a novel and alternative method for the actualization of democracy in the form of info-communism. They argue "Wikipedia's decision-making process is an original method based on debate and consensus, a non-hierarchical and egalitarian system that bears emancipative outcomes" (Firer-Blaess & Fuchs, p. 2). Building off of a tradition of Marxism, the authors argue that Wikipedia represents a new mode of production because users not only have control over the production of content, but they also control the very process of decision-making that runs the entire site. Firer-Blaess & Fuchs explain that policy making "follows the same debate/consensus decision-making process (DMP) as in the editing process to adjudicate matters of style and content, of behavior in the editing process, of copyright and other legal matters, as well as of policy enforcement" (Firer-Blaess & Fuchs, p. 8). As such, deliberation becomes one of the fundamental methods that Wikipedia constitutes its project and that consensus-making enables deliberation. The authors continue by stating that this process of "active consensus" requires a general agreement between "parties in conflict" (Firer-Blaess & Fuchs, p. 6). By the time of Firer-Blaess & Fuchs's writing, Wikipedians no longer considered voting the same way as when *The Wealth of Networks* was published in 2005. The two authors make the point clear that consensus is not an example of voting, which is "explicitly excluded from Wikipedia" (Firer-Blaess & Fuchs, p. 10). "It is not enough to have points of view; one must also make them explicit

and rational" (Firer-Blaess & Fuchs, p. 10). In view of this description Firer-Blaess & Fuchs's argument circulates around the idea that internal deliberation and discussion is a better solution than voting, a view that follows the Habermasian idea of the public sphere.

The public sphere

The privilege given to rational discussion when discussing Wikipedia shares a lineage with Habermas's description of the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere. This eighteenth century development constituted a place where interested members of society came together to discuss cultural and political issues outside of the reach of the state apparatus. An important characteristic of this space is that it was conducted through "critical-rational public debate" which was a style of discourse borrowed from the courts, monarchs, and the state (Habermas, 1991, p. 29). Habermas argues that this provided the public sphere with a legitimate form of opposition while being objectively positioned outside of the political sphere of influence. The repercussions of this social entity came in the form of opposition to governments that no longer required violence to incite change. Instead, it allowed the transformation of society to be realized through peaceful debate and discussion (Habermas, p. 64).

Aligned with this conception of the public sphere, Clay Shirky (2011a) argues that the burgeoning of grassroots political movements coordinated by social media is a sea-change in the breadth and influence of the public sphere. Shirky argues that the most popular services like Facebook, Twitter, QQ, and Wikipedia have been mobilized in the pursuit of "political speech, conversation, and coordination" (Shirky, 2011a). In other words, these services move beyond slacktivist click voting and coordinate global "real-world action" en masse (Shirky, 2011a). In terms of Wikipedia specifically, Shirky explains that the importance of this project is not located within the legitimacy of the encyclopedic product but as a method of organizing activity. As a result of "Wikipedia's editor-in-chief [being] a rotating quorum of whoever is paying attention", "the social constraints of the committed editors" enables the site to allow anyone to edit its articles (Shirky, 2011b). In others words "the potential of social media lies mainly in their support of civil society and the public sphere" through its ability to promote self-organization and self-expression (Shirky, 2011a).

In review of each of the authors discussed, the point that is driven home is that social constraints and controls provide more opportunities for individual expression and organization than traditional hierarchical structures. In the specific case of the communities of practice, this enables the efficient and validated exchange of knowledge. In regard to the public sphere these social constraints

function to afford a space of transformation through discussion. With consensus in mind, it would seem as if it is a valuable mechanism for governing collective action. However, if the purpose is to pursue a just and egalitarian society, then we must question on what grounds this assumption about consensus is being made. By starting with critiques of communities and the public sphere, the argument will be put forth that consensus is not only ill-equipped for the task, but constructs the conditions for the subordination and domination of knowledge held by the marginalized.

Publics

The version of the public sphere that Shirky ascribes to aligns with Habermas's point of view. However, a number of problems have been identified with this portrayal for large-scale social entities. Whether it is the political public sphere, a communist mode of information production, or a network of practice, each reflects two key features. The first is the "action" of talk is the threshold for membership. Second, a common ground is pre-established for activity to unfold. These characteristics have crucial consequences to the meaning of consensus. One way to address this issue is to deny the solitary existence of *the* public sphere or the narrow vision focused of a community in favour of understanding discourse as existing between a constellation of interconnected publics.

The political philosopher Nancy Fraser (1997) has taken the position that Habermas's concept of "the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic political practice" and that it is necessary to understanding "the limits of actually existing late-capitalist democracy" (Fraser, p. 70). However, she finds the model that Habermas presents is terribly one-sided in presenting the bourgeois public sphere as *the* public sphere. In doing so, she is critical of the fact that he failed "to examine other, nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing public spheres. Or rather, it is precisely because he fails to examine these other public spheres" that he idealizes as singular and monolithic (Fraser, p. 74). In other words, to make sense of democracy as it currently exists we must take into consideration the importance and constitutive relationships between other publics.

Similarly, Fraser's critique has been taken up by Michael Warner (2002) in his theoretical treatise on the formal elements of publics. For Warner, a public consists of seven characteristics: "it is self-organized" (Warner, p. 50); "a relation among strangers" (p. 55); the "address of public speech is both personal and impersonal" (p. 57); "constituted through mere attention" (p. 60); "the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (p. 62); publics "act historically according to the temporality of their circulation" (p. 68); and it is "poetic world-making"

(p. 82). One of the important aspects in terms of the current discussion is the difference between Warner's public membership through attention and Habermas's membership through rational-critical debate. In Habermas's public sphere, only the interlocutors are given the privilege of membership. Habermas's "reading public" was actually a public talking about what they read. Merely reading was not considered to be enough of a contribution. In contrast, Warner successfully argues that a public not only consists of talking but of attention. A public emerges between the attentive relationship that is formed between the addresser and the addressee. In this sense, the audience is equally important as the speaker. For Warner then, the "cognitive quality of that attention is less important than the mere fact of active uptake. Attention is the principal sorting category by which members and nonmembers are discriminated" (Warner, p. 61). Therefore, the temporality of a public is dependent on attention alone. Once a member stops paying attention, that portion of the public ceases. Warner explains that this conception of a group is significantly different from other social entities, like nationalities, in that most "social classes and groups are understood to encompass their members all the time, no matter what" (Warner, p. 60). This focus on attention affords an understanding of how a group of strangers can create a social entity that is sustained beyond physical proximity and temporal difference, conditions that are immanent for Wikipedians and the people that read their words.

Consensus

Warner's assertion that the "subject" of the public is an attentive stranger has immediate consequences on the forms of collective action. Gerald Hauser (1999) explains that the rise of civil society correlates to "when national borders were opened to trade" and is at its core, "concerned with relationships among diverse groups and interests" (Hauser, p. 21). He continues this thread by contrasting it with the root characteristic of communities which value "common beliefs and shared social practices" (Hauser, p. 21). It is therefore the differences of beliefs and practices between these communities that require a space to build a "shared awareness of common issues, shared interests, tendencies of extent and strength of difference and agreement, and self-constitution as a public whose opinions bear on the organization of society" (Hauser, p. 64). By these conditions a "public is not necessarily a group in consensus" (Hauser, p. 101) but a group that holds a "common reference world" (Hauser, p. 55). To this point, Hauser argues consensus can only be held as the ideal in discussion where groups are "weak in diversity" and differences are resolved through shared traditions (Hauser, p. 55). In our contemporary context, the "continual encounter with difference strips the

productiveness of consensus as the test of communication for the pluralistic conditions of actually existing democracy" (Hauser, p. 55). In other words, consensus is an unrealistic measure of public discourse where difference abounds and what makes consensus possible is often absent.

Taking a step further, Fraser argues that not only is consensus unrealistic, this social control constitutes a form of hegemonic domination. In Fraser's words, Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony "includes the power to establish authoritative definitions of social situations and social needs, the power to define the universe of legitimate disagreement, and the power to shape the political agenda" (Fraser, 1999, p. 153). She is wary of any discourse that claims it is working towards a "common good" like consensus as it "will have been reached through deliberative processes tainted by the effects of dominance and subordination" (Fraser, 1990, p. 72-73). One way that this has been achieved, especially in terms of Habermas's public sphere, has been to act "as if" differences between groups are eliminated and that every participant is equal to each other. Fraser argues that the reality is that such differences are only bracketed off, allowing for the dominant group to maintain social inequalities and the conditions for determining what is a legitimate and rational disagreement (Fraser, 1990, p. 63). Fraser draws from the bourgeois public sphere to make the point that it "was governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality. These functioned informally to marginalize women and members of the plebeian classes and to prevent them from participating as peers" (Fraser, 1990, p. 63). Even if there is formal participatory parity like the informal social controls can often subordinate minority groups (Fraser, 1990, p. 63).

Fraser provides a number of examples of how this occurs. She explains "men tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men; men also tend to speak more than women, taking more turns and longer turns; and women's interventions are more often ignored or not responded to than men's" (Fraser, 1990, p. 64). Additionally, she explains that the words that subordinate groups use may not be "the right voice or words to express their thoughts" or when they do adhere to the dominant style "they discover they are not heard. [They] are silenced, encouraged to keep their wants inchoate, and heard to say 'yes' when what they have said is 'no'" (Fraser, 1990, p. 64). This point has been made by O'Sullivan when discussing the Neutral Point of View policy on Wikipedia, which he describes as the policing of content which runs the "danger of merely mirroring the typical knowledge economies of the West" that limits the potential for dissent and the proliferation of voices (2011, p. 48).

In Habermas's "ideal speech situation" consensus is produced through agreement or "warranted assent" (Hauser, p. 54). He describes that the "basis for such

assent will be the weight of the better argument stemming from its superior rationality" (Hauser, p. 54). What is important to note is that this rationality is not found a priori but is situated within its social context. As such, the criteria for a better argument is always based "on prior standards of propriety, relevance, evidence, and good reasons. These standards may differ among individuals and groups. Claims that fail to satisfy such criteria can be dismissed as irrational because they cannot be redeemed at the level of shared rational criteria" (Hauser, p. 52). His point echoes Fraser's argument that outsiders of the dominant group can and will be dismissed by attributing their disagreements as warranted assent, either by what appears as minimal input, incoherence, or silence.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that Habermas does not leave any room for a valid form of dissensus. Hauser explains that Habermas's "model assumes that failure to reach consensus is the result of distortion" and that it "does not take into account that dissensus also can arise from conditions of difference" (Hauser, p. 54). Such an omission does not help to understand the conditions of "actually existing democracy" where difference is to be expected (Hauser, 54). Upholding consensus as the ideal quality requires that disagreements are brought into warranted assent, and if not voluntarily, then the process of deliberation will encode the ability to dominate these minority positions into the rhetoric, decorum, and style of the "common sense" and "rational" nature of discourse. The fallout of this critique of consensus is that far from the emancipatory rhetorics that have been associated with Habermas's public sphere (and even the networks of practice) which touts "accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies" consensus deploys strategies of distinction to maintain domination (Fraser, 1999, p. 74).

Up to this point the question of domination has had various articulations. For Habermas, the public sphere represents the "rationalization of domination" to discourse (1991, p. 210). For Hauser and Fraser their contentions have been that the legitimacy of socio-political knowledge in the liberal model was dependent on maintaining a hegemonic control over its contributions. In contrast to the attention held by publics and Warner's subordinate counterpublics, Chantal Mouffe (2000) seeks an agonistic solution where power may still be asymmetrical but its orientation coordinates public and counterpublic not as enemies, but as adversaries, opposing players with varying strategies for the same game of democracy.

Mouffe explains that in an agonistic pluralistic system, hegemony and consensus are not something to be extinguished. Instead they are crucial elements to maintaining a healthy and vibrant democracy/ She supports this argument by describing how consensus is "and will always be — the expression of a hegemony

and the crystallization of power relations" (p. 49). However, any denial of this "moment of closure" is a denial of the ability of a people to form an identity as a "people," albeit one that is temporary, contingent, and always contestable (p.49). The objectivity being mobilized in this case is not a neutral consensus that is created through the exclusion of those who are not liberal-minded and rational. In other words, publics and counterpublics engage in controversies that oscillate between freedom and equality, keeping the questions of "the political" from ossifying on either side of the balance.

In review of the arguments put forth, consensus on its own might be seen as functional when members hold shared beliefs and practices, that is, when they belong to a community of shared identities. However, as Hauser describes "when multiple perspectives are the norm, the realistic test of a position's strength is less that it achieves agreement than it can be understood across perspectives" (Hauser, p. 55). As such, if an emancipatory project has as its goal to provide a parity of participation among strangers, agreement cannot be held as the ultimate standard of achievement. In other words, a project that works at the scale of society and civilization cannot function on the values associated with a community-based social structure. The implication in the case of Wikipedia is that despite its project to be inclusive and diverse in matters concerning knowledge, it conversely requires that all difference be brought into line through warranted assent. One way to investigate this paradox is to analyze how Wikipedians have conceptualized consensus and whether these political philosophy debates or others have found their way into the policy.

Method

Contrary to the often democratic rhetoric deployed on behalf of consensus, the previous discussion has characterized consensus as a hegemonic process of domination. While Fraser and Hauser have described how consensus works in general, the purpose of this study is to examine the specifics of the meaning attributed this governance technique by Wikipedians. In keeping with the focus of deliberation, discourse, and hegemony, the current study examines the Wikipedian consensus policy through a critical discourse analysis. This method is particularly apt for this situation because it can trace the lines of ideology that flow between the three dimensions of discourse: "social practice, discoursal practice (text production, distribution and consumption), and text" (Fairclough, p. 74). The purpose of this method then is to foreground "links between social practice and language, and the systematic investigation of connections between the nature of social processes and properties of language texts" (Fairclough, p. 96). In discussing

consensus, the analysis concentrates on revealing the relationship of ideology to the structure and processes of deliberative discourse.

With this in mind, ideology obviously does not exist in isolation. As described by Hall via Fairclough "Gramsci conceived of 'the field of ideologies in terms of conflicting, overlapping, or intersecting currents or formations'" (Fairclough, p. 76). The importance of this fact suggests that the "immediate origins and motivations of change lie in contradictions which may problematize conventions" (Fairclough, p. 79). A critical discourse analysis therefore seeks to identify the traces of ideological conflict and contradiction through the three dimensions of discourse. Ultimately, the identification of points of contradiction reveal areas of discourse that are open to interpretation and sympathetic to transformation. Contradictions can therefore be used to pursue new trajectories and to change the status quo. As such, if the consensus policy contains contradictory statements, then there is an opportunity to redirect the meaning of what it means to govern the collective actions of Wikipedians.

Data collection

The subsequent section describes the first portion of a critical discourse of analysis of the Wikipedia consensus policy, concentrating on the textual level of two sets of discourse. The first text is composed of all of the discussions that have occurred on the consensus policy talk page (including its archives) from the earliest edit on 26 February 2006 to 1 December 2014. This text was collected as HTML and converted into 4.8 MB worth of plaintext/markdown formatted text. In total, 425 distinct authors and 7257 edits are included in this corpus (Wikipedia, 2014b). Limitations to the current study include the fact that only the English version of the consensus policy has been analyzed. Not only do other language versions differ in terms of content, some languages like German, do not adhere to the primacy of consensus as a policy. Additionally, the data for this research was collected and coded by a single researcher. As such, it lacks inter-coder reliability required to validate findings. With this in mind, the results of this study should be considered as suggestive of future avenues of research rather than a comprehensive analysis.

Following Fairclough's own analysis of the meaning of the word 'enterprise' (Fairclough, p. 112), the current study sets out to identify "a field of potential meaning" and "sets of transformations upon that field" for consensus. The goal of which is to observe the multiple meanings and their conflicts. This was achieved through a series of subsequent content analyses employing word concordance and collocation using the AntConc program (Anthony, 2012).

The second text utilized for this study was the current consensus policy itself as it was on December 11, 2014. The description of consensus on this page is analyzed for the presence and absence of frequently used descriptions of consensus in the talk page. This form of analysis provides insight into which concerns about consensus appear resolved or no longer important to the maintenance of consensus on Wikipedia.

Text 1: Consensus policy talk page and archives

In Fairclough's terms, the metaphor of a field is useful because there is no singular meaning of a word. In the case of the consensus policy, plotting out this 'field' is the first step to understanding what it means to Wikipedians. While Fairclough utilized a close reading of the text, the current study analyzes the contexts of instances where consensus has been explicitly defined. One way to do so is to search for consensus in conjunction with "is," which is a verb of being. One can then observe the explicit attempts at defining consensus by matching the frequency of various pairs of the concordance of "consensus is". The frequency of the following sets of words in the corpus are important, but so to are their positions within it. In the case of the consensus talk page it has been divided by Wikipedians into 18 archives and the current discussion page. As such, each of the keywords have been considered relevant based on their overall frequency throughout the entire corpus, the range in time of their usage, and being above average in both regards. What this provides is a general plot or pattern of important ideas attached to defining Wikipedian consensus.

Consensus is reached was mentioned 30 times across 10 archives and in the current talk page, making it the most relevant phrase of being. It was used to describe the results of editing efforts but also the results of discussion and decisions made by a majority. It was also considered to be a practice, in conjunction with achievement, and something attainable and projected into the future. In these instances there is evidence of differing positions about what consensus is. In an ontological sense, it is something akin to a goal where conscious effort is required to bring this future moment about. The effort or action that is used to do so differs between editing, voting, and discussion.

Consensus is determined was mentioned 31 times across 7 archives. The typical usage of this phrase is associated with either "quality," "arguments," or "by the quality of the arguments," with a total of 18 instances. In this sense, consensus is considered to be rhetorical in nature. The ability to provide a convincing argument therefore becomes a critical attribute of understanding how consensus happens.

Consensus is achieved was mentioned 22 times across 8 archives. It has been associated with a number of meanings, such as how to assess when consensus occurs, but also in terms of a process, the quality of arguments, or in the absence of further edits. This configuration of meaning is closely related to the meaning of "reached" in that it similarly is used for understanding a future moment of success through efforts attributed to both discussion and editing activities.

Consensus is always was mentioned 14 times across 8 archives. It is used multiple times to denote that consensus is "always possible" or that it is "provisional". As well, this phrase is also used in conjunction with either "determined" or "reached". What is interesting about "always" is that it introduces the idea that consensus is temporary, which contrasts with the "achievement" notion of consensus as a stable moment. In a different sense, consensus as "always possible" echoes Habermas's notion that difference and disagreement can only result through a distortion. In other words, that agreement is not only possible, it is assumed to exist and it is only a matter of finding the right path to it.

Consensus is formed was mentioned 15 times across 7 archives. It is found to be associated with the idea of consensus being "binding," that "prior" consensus needs to be respected in the absence of "new" consensus, as well as "local" and "community" forms that suggest different scales of consensus.

I have left the usage of *consensus is no*t to the end as it requires further clarification. On its own, it is the most common phrase of being as it is mentioned 193 times across all 18 archives and the current talk page. The typical use of the phrase is in the service of engaging in disagreement over the nature of consensus. It is sometimes used to state that consensus is not immutable, a vote, a majority, a super majority, or numerical in nature. These instances happen occasionally, but the most prevalent phrase is "consensus is not unanimity" which occurs 22 times over 6 archives. To put this phrase into context, the Oxford English Dictionary contains two definitions of consensus, the second describing consensus as "the collective unanimous opinion of a number of persons" (OED, 2014). Given that nearly half of the instances of this phrase occur in the first archive, it suggests that Wikipedians began discussing the limits of this dictionary definition of consensus.

A second step is required to understand the modifications made to create nuanced understandings of the term consensus. This is done by searching for "* consensus" in the corpus where the asterisk is treated as a wildcard character. Like the previous analysis, above average range and frequency are used to observe the relevancy of particular phrases. The results illustrate a diversity of semantic relationships and concerns related to consensus.

Kinds of consensus: Some of the most frequent conjoined terms about consensus are attempts to add difference within the idea of consensus. As such, "community

consensus" and "rough consensus" are two terms that are heavily used throughout the talk pages history. The idea of a "local consensus" appears often with its match "global consensus" occurring half as much. These ideas carry some semblance to "wide," "wider," "broad," and "broader" forms of consensus. Another description of consensus creates temporal relationships between consensuses as represented by "new", "previous", "prior", and "current". The veracity and quality of a consensus is also described in terms one what is "true" or "false," a "sham," "flawed," "actual," "real," "strong," or "silent".

Verbs of consensus: In alignment with the previous analysis, a group might "reach" or "achieve" consensus or additionally they might "find," "get," "use," "build," "form," or "gain" it. Wikipedian's also talk in terms of "reaching," "determining," "achieving," "finding," and "seeking" consensus. Finally, a number of verbs are illustrative of the discourse surrounding actions which "determine," "establish," define," reflect," "represent," or even "violates" consensus.

In light of all these descriptions the one combination that is far and above most frequent throughout the history of policy discussion is the phrase "no consensus". It is used 724 times across all archives and the current talk page. Given the frequency of this phrase, the question of what to do or how to identify when there is no consensus is one of the most substantial and long-standing concerns of the policy.

This list illustrates that Wikipedians have built a vocabulary to deal with a concept that has no singular definition. The meaning of consensus can more justifiably be considered as a variety of kinds, activities, and understandings. In accordance with Fairclough's work on discourse, these words form Wikipedia's "field of potential meaning" when dealing with consensus. The following paragraphs places these terms within the context of the previous analysis to suggest some useful clusters to aid in understanding how these phrases fit together.

There are a number of patterns that have emerged from the two queries ("consensus is *" and "* consensus"). When looking at the similarities of "reached" and "achieved," consensus appears to be considered to be a future event that comes from effort. There is however a distinction over the nature of this effort. For some, this means to be actively engaged with discussions, for others it might mean to edit the article page until there is disagreement, and still others consider that a vote is acceptable to achieve the goal of consensus. This configuration of attributes might be usefully described as a goal-oriented perspective of consensus.

Associated with this position is that the substance of consensus can be conceptualized as a binding contract to negotiate between previous, current, and new forms consensus that favour the status quo in light of disagreement. When

disagreement surfaces, a majority vote may be requested to move progress of an article forward. Here consensus is not positioned as the goal. In this version of consensus, what is valued then are the editing actions that are permitted to happen after consensus has been found. This is in keeping with the idea of a rough consensus as expressed by David Clark's manifesto. From this view, discussion is viewed as a hindrance to action. A repercussion of this view is that decisions are often made by groups that are small and local. I consider this group of meanings to outline an instrumental view of consensus.

The next most common meaning associated with consensus can be found in its relationship to the quality of an argument. The importance of this distinction is that the idea of quality infers that as much as there are good and bad arguments, there are also good and bad kinds of consensus. Consensus then does not exist as a singular and monolithic goal but as a space of possibility where discussants attempt to build stronger levels of consensus over time. This also means that previous consensus can be overturned by the higher quality of subsequent arguments. This is seen in the fact that there are "flawed," "wrongful" and "false" kinds of consensus. But it also leans toward the ideals of the "real," the "actual," and the "true". In this case, the definition of consensus follows Hauser's understanding that quality arguments are used to neuter disagreements through warranted assent. In other words, it is a rhetorically driven view of consensus.

What becomes evident in view of this list is that there are a number of poles of debate about the nature of consensus. Prominently, a major concern whether discussion or editing should be prioritized. There is also the question of scale as it pertains to how "local" or "global" levels of consensus afford particular forms of validity. There is also a thread of discussion surrounding agency where the concern is over the validity of passive or "silent" consensus and contribution to more active forms of consensus. Finally, there is the ontological component of consensus. Wikipedians appear to circulate between questioning whether it is made of parts like a "process" that describes how discussion happens or whether is it singular like an event that is "established" after discussion ends.

In summary, I would like to suggest that these perspectives and poles may be seen to constitute different configurations or tendencies in understanding the meaning of consensus. In different configurations, one attribute or another may be positioned as the main value to guide the direction of discussion concerning consensus. These results illustrate that there are a variety of understandings that may not be reconcilable. How these relate to ideology is a question best answered by analyzing the current state of the consensus policy.

Text 2: The consensus policy

Fairclough describes that discourses flow not only within a text but between other sites of discourse. Studying how one text is positioned within another can provide insight into how ideology cuts across all levels of discourse. I examined the Wikipedia consensus policy that was the most recent version at the time of writing (December 11, 2014). This research was used to contextualize how the plethora of discussion has been funnelled into a coherent document presumably achieved through consensus. The following is a comparison of the keywords found in the previous analyses to the actual words that are present on the policy page. They are clustered together in relation to the goal-oriented, instrumental, and rhetorical tendencies in understanding consensus.

The policy as of December 11, 2014 contains language that suggests that consensus is primarily goal-oriented with an instrumentalist lean. The most common recurrent phrase is "consensus building" and is associated with "reach," "reaching," "achieving," "making," "build," and "formed". The more overtly instrumental tendencies of consensus are communicated by the way that it is "established," that Wikipedians "find" it, that the "new" or the "current" consensus can be used to "override" "previous" ones, as well as existing at a "local" scale.

This view creates a very particular ontological understanding of consensus. It is considered to be naturally static. Once consensus has formed and can be recognized as such, this instance is not expected to change. Any change signals that a new consensus entity has been formed or has been found. This would explain how there are "new" and "previous" consensuses. Additionally, language concerning the finding of consensus aligns with Habermas's view that consensus is assumed to occur, as it is only a matter of locating it. This view contrasts a conception of consensus that is a "process" and "provisional" where the idea of a "new" consensus lacks value because such change would be assumed to be internal to the meaning of consensus. Tellingly, these last two terms are absent from the current policy. While it appears that this mixture of goal-oriented and instrumental views of consensus seems to dominate the policy, there is a small but important representation of the rhetorical view. Consensus is related to the activity of determining ("determine") the "quality of arguments". Given this difference between the full rhetorical usage of consensus in the talk page and the way the concept has been legitimized on the policy page, I will conclude how these findings relate to the critiques of consensus provided by Hauser and Fraser.

Rough and rhetorical consensus. Found throughout the analysis is a constant struggle between giving priority to discussion or to editing. As the analysis of the policy page illustrates, the balance has been slanted in favour of enabling action.

This approach is reminiscent of Clark's use of the term "rough consensus". However, despite the wealth of discussion about rough consensus on the talk page and the presence of the term in the subtext of the policy, the policy curiously lacks reference to this concept. This may be due to the fact that early discussions of rough consensus were concerned with how to specify what percentage of participants is required to validate rough consensus-based action. The results of this debate comes through the negative definition on the policy. It states that consensus "does not mean unanimity […]; nor is it the result of a vote" (Wikipedia, 2014c). With this in mind, rough consensus may have been equated with a view of consensus that is determined through majority voting and therefore has been removed from the description.

However, polls are still considered to be useful as "structured discussion" and unanimity is still the ideal. The evidence suggests that the presence of the unstated ideology associated with rough consensus, that difference and minority positions are not valued and need to be bracketed off. This has immediate implications for what constitutes the measures used to "determine the quality of arguments". In this sense, a high quality argument will be one that permits efficient and quick action. If a Wikipedian disagrees on an issue to the extent that further action is arrested, their argument may be interpreted as irrational or irrelevant. As such, even though the community has moved away from the more explicit form of domination attached to voting for the purpose of rough consensus, the values that are at its core have continued to dominate. This reiterates Fraser and Hauser's comments that upholding consensus as the ideal quality requires that disagreements are brought into warranted assent. If this is not done voluntarily then the process of deliberation will encode the ability to dominate these minority positions into the rhetoric, decorum, and style of the "common sense" and "rational" nature of discourse. Specifically in the case of rough consensus, this means subordinating understanding and difference in preference for the ability to act and edit. When it comes to the concerns over no consensus, which proliferate throughout the talk page, the policy does contain five bullets on the matter. Interestingly, no consensus is described as when "[d]iscussions sometimes result in no consensus to take or not take an action" (Wikipedia, 2014c). It is here that the instrumental view of the policy is made clear. It accepts that consensus does not always happen and that the point of discussion is to provide legitimacy to action.

Conclusion

If consensus is to be understood as a fair, open, and transparent mechanism for the governance of diverse groups of people, then the meaning of this idea

differs greatly from the one described by Wikipedians. In fact, such a definition overlooks the aspects of consensus that enable the control and dismissal of difference. I have argued that as the project currently deploys consensus it creates the conditions that undermine its fairness and transparency. If Wikipedia is in fact a community, as the usage of consensus would assume, then according to Hauser it is necessarily "weak in diversity" and not nearly as inclusive as it tagline purports. But the fact that the phrase "no consensus" was the most frequent word found in the study of the talk pages suggests that there is diversity and that it needs to be attended to. If Wikipedia's project is to continue with the values of egalitarianism that are tied to its genre, then the role and strategies associated with consensus need to be reconsidered. That is not to say that consensus and community must be given up completely. As Mouffe has argued, hegemony is a necessary aspect of the engine of democracy. However, it must always be drawn into competition with difference. If Wikipedia is to succeed in its goals then an equally weighted policy on dissensus and attention paid to publics needs to emerge. In reality, such a prospect may be incredibly difficult to implement given the immediate conflict that would emerge. Not only is the introduction of a new policy a serious and rare occurrence, in all likelihood, there would not be a consensus on this new policy to validate its existence. It would be an unresolvable issue that characterizes the very problems that need to be addressed but cannot be solved under the current policy. However, such attempts in pursuing a mechanism that is equipped to legitimize incommensurable discussions would further the goa to acknowledge the contributions made by anyone.

In conclusion, this paper has compared a critical understanding of consensus with how Wikipedians tend to conceptualize consensus. It has also suggested that the issues presented here are in part a result of Wikipedia valuing the shared beliefs of a community over the differences that exist in diverse and varied publics. In the service of a more complete critical discourse analysis on this topic, study of the consensus policy and its discourse should be further analyzed in conjunction with other discursive practices such as turn-taking, the amount of text that each user contributes, and the technical mechanisms used to encode consensus. Such analyses may reveal the degree and manner that consensus has been achieved through domination and subordination. In bringing these opaque, unequal, and hegemonic practices to attention we can begin to unravel the aura of democracy surrounding Wikipedia, realize the importance of the concern over "no consensus" and to grapple with the difficulty of balancing collective action with public understanding.

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