The Wikipedian Discourse: A Foucauldian Archaeology of Power Relations

Abstract: Wikipedia – "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit" – has become an exemplar of the so-called Web 2.0, an emerging Internet-based media space that emphasizes collaboration and free production of knowledge. Nearly any individual who visits the website can edit nearly any article in any way desired; one can fix an incorrect fact or grammatical error as well as vandalize and slander. The project is often depicted in one of two different ways: first, as a harmonious, unstructured anarchy in which order mysteriously arises; and second, as a dystopic state-of-nature in which truth is relative and only subject to the masses. In response, this paper rejects both of those depictions and instead focuses on a Foucauldian account of power relations in the on-line encyclopedia. Using Foucault's methodology as developed in <u>The Archaeology of Knowledge</u>, a conflict over the existence of an article on one of Wikipedia's competitors - Encyclopedia Dramatica, a satirical and frequently obscene parody of Wikipedia - is analyzed. This paper works through Foucault's method of bringing a discourse's "discursive regularities" to light by beginning with the most basic question of discourse: What is recognized as a statement in this discursive space? This analysis is followed by the identification of how statements construct discursive objects, which in turn create enunciative modalities or subject positions, which are themselves organized around concepts. By examining both official and unofficial sources, it is shown that conflicts over content in Wikipedia are coordinated in network of organizing questions that structure these concepts. The Wikipedian discourse is therefore distinguished not due to its ideals that determine rules for content, but rather in the way in which these concepts are organized.

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that is collaboratively written by volunteers; unlike most traditional encyclopedias, anyone can become a member of Wikipedia's editing staff simply by visiting the project's website and clicking on the "edit this page" link. When this occurs, the user will be presented with the article's text and can make any changes desired – from correcting a factual error or inserting a new section to replacing the entire article with hate speech or pornography. What is most nontraditional about Wikipedia is that these changes take effect immediately, and the only mechanism of enforcement built into the system from a technical standpoint is that any other user can reverse one user's changes.

Since it launched in 2001, Wikipedia has grown tremendously, and community norms and official rules have emerged in order to maintain order in the now-gigantic encyclopedia. According to official statistics kept by Wikipedia[1], in September 2006, the English language version of Wikipedia alone consisted of over 609 million words in over 1.4 million articles. At this time, over 150,000 users had contributed to the English version of the project, making over 3.8 million collective edits to the project.

Wikipedia has consistently ranked in the top twenty-five websites visited around the world by web traffic analyzer Alexa (a subsidiary of Amazon.com) since early 2006. As of December 2007, Wikipedia is the eighth most visited website on the Internet, and it has been consistently been ranked in the top ten since August 2007. According to Alexa's statistics, from September to November 2007, an average of 8.6% of Internet users around the world visited Wikipedia each day.[2] Wikipedia's articles are also consistently the top results on Yahoo and Google, two search engines which vie for the #1 and #2 spots on Alexa's worldwide website rankings.

Furthermore, the content of Wikipedia articles can be politically significant. An editorial by Jose Vargas in the Washington Post illustrated this in relation to the 2008 Presidential election in the United States: "Type a candidate's name into Google, and among the first results is a Wikipedia page, making those entries arguably as important as

any ad in defining a candidate."[3] In an article featured in techPresident by Fred Stutzman, for 25% of Democrats and 60% of Republicans, the candidate's article on Wikipedia was ranked higher than their official campaign website. This led Stutzman to claim that "no other entity on the web that plays such a systematically influential role in candidate information positioning as Wikipedia."[4]

Because of this, how Wikipedia articles are created and regulated is of significant importance; specifically, an attempt to discover what Michel Foucault described as the "discursive regularities"[5] of Wikipedia's "discourse" would enable us to better understand how hundreds of thousands of volunteers coordinate with each other over the Internet to create such a massive project. We may initially assume that some of these discursive rules may be fairly obvious: the English language must be used (at least in the English-language version), statements must be logically consistent, and arguments must have a claim and a valid warrant. However, even at this basic level, we can identify several problems with such rules: what exactly do we mean by "the English language" – does it include technical jargon or slang? What does it mean for an argument to be logically consistent – can one use irony or purposely contradict oneself in order to prove a point? What exactly constitutes a claim, and how can one tell if a warrant is valid for a specific claim?

While these are questions that some theorists in various fields have no doubt attempted to answer in general terms and contexts, discursive formations are, for Foucault, characterized by how they answer questions like these. However, it is not merely that two discourses are disparate because one answers a question with different answer than the other. In fact, whether two discourses have the same answer is irrelevant, as a discourse may change the answer it gives to one of these questions over time. Rather, these two discourses are discrete if the way in which one comes to formulate an answer to a question is different than the way another does. We should ask these questions, but only

because they assist us in showing how statements reveal what Foucault calls discursive formations.

Therefore: the first goal of discourse analysis is to therefore examine these relations in order to find specific rules; the second goal is to examine these how these rules form discursive formations. We must strongly resist the temptation to focus on *why* each statement was articulated by each subject at each place and time, as this question assumes that we have a certain privileged viewpoint from which we can discern the motivations of a speaking subject. While it is especially alluring to explain away statements as mere reflections of a certain ideology, social position, economic system, etc., Foucault characterizes this as an attempt "to use the categories of cultural totalities … in order to impose on history, despite itself, the forms of structural analysis."[6] This form of commentary forces our rules, categories, and structures on the speaking subjects in a discourse; instead, Foucault develops a method by which statements in a discourse can be elaborated into a set of rules, categories, and structures specific to a particular discourse. This method, which Foucault describes as archaeological, "is nothing more than a rewriting … a regulated transformation of what has already been written. It is not a return to the innermost secret of the origin; it is the systematic description of a discourse-object."[7]

The overall goal of discursive analysis is to form a historicized positivism; "to show that to add a statement to a pre-existing series of statements is to perform a complicated and costly gesture, which involves conditions … and rules."[8] Furthermore, we should "treat discourses in terms not of the gentle, silent, intimate consciousness that is expressed in them, but of an obscure set of anonymous rules." Foucault urges the need to "reveal the limitations and necessities of a practice where one is used to seeing, in all its pure transparency, the expression of genius and freedom."[9] Given the fact that Wikipedia presents itself as "the free encyclopedia" and declares to have a "Neutral Point of View," this injunction is particularly insightful.

However, there are first a few precautions issued by Foucault: He warns us to "not look for the headquarters … nor the groups which control the state apparatus … [as] the rationality of power is characterized by tactics which … end by forming comprehensive systems."[10] This does not mean that one should deflect one's critical gaze from the state (apparatus) whenever it may be of relevance to a certain discursive analysis. In fact, Foucault frequently analyzes the State, various dominant groups, and state apparatuses; however, he only does so in the context of the discursive formation, examining how statements entered into discourse. Foucault's warning is that we must avoid the temptation of searching for who 'has' the power in a certain discursive formation. In revealing power relations, we are to implicate systems, tactics, and techniques, not individuals, governments, and organizations. Foucault does not ask what a certain statement 'means' behind the rhetorical and ideological masking, but instead examines how it fits into a certain discursive formation and "what reciprocal effects of power and knowledge they ensure."[11] Likewise, this work will not attempt to discover or reveal the underlying ideologies or struggles present in this particular conflict, nor will it attempt to identify the specific individuals who, through their indirect manipulations, decided the outcome of the debate before it even began.

> Instead, this work will examine the statements in the debate in order to identify:
>
> [A] control that applies not the content of statements themselves, to their conformity or nonconformity to a certain truth, but to regularity of enunciations. The problem is now: Who is speaking, are they qualified to speak, at what level is the statement situated, what set can it be fitted into, and how and to what extent does it conform to other forms and other typologies of knowledge? … We move, if you like, from the censorship of statements to the disciplinarization of enunciations.[12]

In interpreting this quote, we should not mistake his declaration of "The problem" as one that should be literally our problem, or the questions we should directly ask in analysis. Instead, what Foucault identifies here is a form of power relations that has taken these questions – ones of identity, qualification, situation, organization, and conformity - to be its problem, or the questions it asks when determining which statements emerge. It

is through these heuristics that we must then situate our questioning of a certain discourse. Likewise, we must move from analyzing statements through the lens of 'censorship' (e.g. seeing who is silenced and asking why) and instead examine *how* statements are regulated, restricted, marginalized, and disciplined. Such an analysis differs from what Foucault calls commentary or language analysis, as:

> The question posed by language analysis of some discursive fact or other is always: according to what rules has a particular statement been made, and consequently according to what rules could other similar statements be made? The description of the events of discourse poses a quite different question: how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?[13]

Now that we have our task, the method by which we will analyze discourse must be described. Specifically, this work will follow Foucault's methodology of discourse analysis, as described in The Archaeology of Knowledge. However, it should be noted that Foucault never actually details a systematic method which can be universally applied to all discourse; instead, he seems to create a method in the course of examining various elements in the history of knowledge and ideas. This work will therefore attempt to repeat part of his analysis in a different realm, which means that there may be some theoretical or methodological changes that must be made.

Foucault refuses to initially define the elements of his analysis formulaically; in fact, after his introduction, Foucault admits that he has made "indiscriminate use … of the terms statement, event, and discourse"[14] – the key elements of his analysis – but claims that he will solve that problem sometime later in his analysis. However, this does not stop him from starting by "take as my starting-point whatever unities are already given … but I shall not place myself inside these dubious unities in order to study their internal configuration." In his analysis of knowledge, Foucault begins with various competing unities: for example, he compares "political economy … biology … [and] psychopathology."[15] Similarly, we must begin with certain competing unities categories around Wikipedia: specifically, Wikipedia's competitors, which have grown with

Wikipedia's size and popularity. This is facilitated by the fact that Wikipedia's technical architecture is an open source software program called MediaWiki; any technically skilled user with a computer can download this program create their own version of Wikipedia, with their own rules, themes, and political structure.

Wikipedia, as a general content encyclopedia, contains articles on many of its competitors or 'forks.' Some of these, such as Conservapedia, Uncyclopedia, and Citizendium are presented as general compendiums of knowledge on the same scope as Wikipedia, but are fundamentally based on different editorial principles. For example, Wikipedia presents Conservapedia as an "wiki-based encyclopedia project written from a socially- and economically-conservative viewpoint supportive of American Conservative Christianity;"[16] Uncyclopedia as a "wiki that provides satirically-themed articles as a parody of Wikipedia;"[17] and Citizendium as a "wiki-based free encyclopedia project … providing what it calls 'gentle expert oversight' of everyday contributors."[18] Other competitors are those which do not have the same scope of content as Wikipedia. While they may or may not have the same general editorial principles as Wikipedia, these projects are chiefly distinguished from Wikipedia by their focus on a particular subject. These include Wookieepedia, described by Wikipedia as an "online encyclopedia for information on the *Star Wars* fictional universe"[19] and Jurispedia, a "WikiWiki academic law encyclopedia."[20] Finally, there exists Encyclopedia Dramatica, a website that likewise uses the MediaWiki software to provide collaborative creation of articles, but is painfully absent in Wikipedia. Not only is there on article named Encyclopedia Dramatica in Wikipedia, but (as of December 2007) a visitor to Wikipedia is technically not able to create such an article[21].

When faced with these characterizations, several consistent elements merge: primarily, each project is defined as a unity, with its own articles, pages, purposes, characteristics, and so on. In an attempt to enter an analysis of the Wikipedian discourse, this work will attempt to reveal the ways in which these unities are constructed in

Wikipedia. Of particular importance – and therefore emphasis – is Encyclopedia Dramatica, which does not have its own article on Wikipedia. However, the primary aim of our analysis should not be to determine exactly what Wikipedia(ns) consider(s) Encyclopedia Dramatica to be, but rather to determine how ED is constructed through discourse in Wikipedia. It is important to emphasize the *how* of this question and strongly resist the *why* or *what*: the *why* reduces statements to the level of intentions and discourse the level of ideologies, and the *what* is never as unified as it initially may seem.

Foucault demonstrates this second point by initially identifying various unites of statements "left in their provisional, visible grouping" like "medicine, grammar or political economy"—[22], he attempts to find a "well-defined field of objects" that actually unified them. However, in a detailed analysis of these given unities, he demonstrates an inability to reveal a fundamental, systematic definition of each of these groupings that clearly defines them and situates them equally in a discursive formation like knowledge. He could attempt to create such a unity by defining these unities, but Foucault does not want to impose his own definition on the world (of discourse). Because he insists on letting discourse reveal itself, the only way he can continue with his analysis is to show how statements in a discourse reveal the "interplays of differences, distances, substitutions, [and] transformations" that form "systems of dispersion."—[23]

Like Foucault, we must begin with an "initial probe" of "certain fairly loose, but familiar, groups of statement" by first examining a statement's "conditions of existence … in a certain discursive formation."—[24] As Foucault's analysis is dependent on revealing these formations through statements, we must likewise begin at this level. Initially, it may be assumed that statements, at a fundamental level, are emerge in articles in the form of claims, facts, sources, and so on. However, these specific elements of an article are actually determined by another class of statements, which collectively appear in the form of a dispute or discussion over these elements. Therefore, our analysis will begin analyzing statements at the level of conflict resolution.

In Wikipedia, conflict resolution typically takes place though various "talk pages," which are created for each article and are used to facilitate specific discussion regarding a particular article. It is accessed by clicking the "discussion" link present at the top of each article, and is designated by placing the prefix "Talk:" in front of the title of an article – if an article is titled "Wikipedia," the talk page is titled "Talk:Wikipedia." In this designated space, Wikipedia editors frequently argue over what should or should not be included in the corresponding article.

However, as Encyclopedia Dramatica has no article, it has no corresponding talk page to analyze. Instead, we must examine a different form of discussion that focuses on Encyclopedia Dramatica, the debate over whether or not the site should even have an article on Wikipedia. When a user proposes that an article should be removed from Wikipedia for a certain reason, a specific type of page is created for discussion of the proposal, called an Article for Deletion (or AfD). When an administrator (a user who has been designated this status by a vote of Wikipedia users) decides that a certain consensus regarding the issue has been reached (such as delete or keep the article, continuing with the example), they may state what they deem consensus to be, officially designate the issue 'closed,' and implement the measures (if any) deemed necessary.

By analyzing statements in this space, we can show how statements Wikipedia are dispersed, and how such statements reveal certain discursive formations. Not only can we look at which arguments 'win' and which 'lose', but we can also examine which arguments are deemed to be valid (but wrong) arguments and which are not even seen as valid arguments. Finally, at a most fundamental level, we can examine which statements are even considered to be arguments at all. Though all of these methods, we can determine the field of regularity for statements in relation to not only the specific article being discussed, but statements themselves in Wikipedia.

One way to do this in a discursive formation is to compare statements removed from the discourse without objection to statements that were removed, but objected to

and subsequently reinserted into the discourse. Finding a removed statement may seem to be an impossible task; however, the software upon which Wikipedia runs enables a visitor to see the history of each page, presented in the form a chronological list of revisions made by specific users. The software enables a viewer to determine when a page was changed, which user account made the change, and what specifically was changed. Due to the fact that any speaker can technically edit any other statement present, this enables a speaker to remove any collection of symbols that does not make sense, which is itself a statement. For example, GTBaccus posted a comment initially functioned as a regular statement: it was a signed argument and other users replied with statements of their own. However, the first user to reply, Septentrionalis, placed their statement in the middle of GTBaccus's signature, cutting off the timestamp that typically follows a user's name. The following was therefore displayed on the AfD page[25]:

> I know it's on the talk page - I'm the one who put it there. It just isn't worth the grief at this point. The Navframe idea isn't a bad one… let's see…
> -GTBacchus(talk)
>
> As I've said above, I think the verifiability issue is covered by the provision of WP:V that allow otherwise unused sources to be acceptable sources on themselves; and these mentions do go some way to establishing notability. Septentrionalis 15:03, 21 July 2006 (UTC)
>
> 03:42, 21 July 2006 (UTC)

GTBaccus and others replied to Septentrioalis's statement, placing their comments between the two timestamps; eventually, over twenty-eight lines of text separated GTBaccus's argument and signature from the timestamp. While it was a coherent section of symbols, it was not recognized as a statement in this discourse. This can be seen in the actions of Netscott, an administrator who declared that the timestamp was "extraneous text" and removed it from the page without any objection.

In addition to the non-statement, Netscott also removed another block of text of the discussion that was not deemed to be a proper statement in this forum: a comment by an editor named Hardvice that quoted in detail an existing comment made by another editor in another discussion. This comment, which referenced various newspapers and website that had discussed Encyclopedia Dramatica, was deemed "illogically duplicated talk page commentary"[26] by Netscott and removed from the page. However, Hardvice called Netscott's deletion an "attempt to corrupt AFD to throw it in their favor"[27] and re-added the text. Other users agreed, including GTBaccus, who told Netscott, "it's ok. It's ok if we talk about this here, because Hardvice wants more people to see it. No harm is being done, no animals were injured in the course of this discussion, etc."[28] What was accepted as a compromise was to move the discussion initiated by Hardvice's comment to a distinct, boxed section at the bottom of the discussion page. This indicates a failed attempt to limit a specific text out of the realm of statements; therefore, it follows that the commentary quoted by Hardvice was affirmed as a valid statement in this field of discourse.

Now that we have a certain basic understanding of how a statement is formed in this space, we can reveal the various discursive formations these statements construct. One heuristic Foucault uses to identify discursive formations is that of discursive objects. These are not objects in 'reality,' some actual thing that exists independently of discourse and is merely represented in a statement (what semiotics may call a referent). Rather, for Foucault, discursive objects are those objects which are constructed solely through discourse; it is constituted when a discourse "finds a way … of defining what it is talking about, of giving the status of an object – and therefore making it manifest, nameable, and describable."[29] What should be noted is that there is no systematic form of an object in all discourses; instead, each particular discourse constitutes its own type of objects.

This particular discourse constitutes several discursive objects. The most visible are objects that represent statements; this does not mean that statements themselves *are*

objects, but that they are constructed as objects in statements. In the ED AfD discussion, statements revealed two objects in particular: the keep and the delete, which referred to a statement functioning as an official declaration of opinion in favor of keeping or deleting the article (e.g. a vote). Several statements characterize other statements as objects in this way, like "many of the keeps seem to be coming from mass spamming campaign" or "The amount of delete votes here suggest."[30]

When the objects keep and delete are formed, the corresponding words keep and delete words are often qualified as using adjectives like speedy, strong, or weak; one editor even declared their decision to be a "**Ridiculously strong extreme speedy keep.**"[31] However, in the discussion, some of these phrasings were constructed as unique types of objects that designated a wholly different vote than their unqualified form. KillerChihuahua, for example, stated that the vote object constituted by the phrase "speedy keep" was one that that could only be properly invoked under certain conditions: "Since there has already been at least one delete vote, Speedy keep is not possible." However, the fact that KillerChihuahua had to make this distinction indicates that it is not universal; following Foucault, we should not attempt to systematically explain when a statement will be constituted as a "keep" a "delete" or a "speedy keep," but rather show this dispersion of objects in discourse as one that is necessarily contingent.

However, various other statements in the debate indicate that despite the wide variety of terms used to state an editor's decision on the issue, most of the vote objects (even those designated with "speedy keep") were referred to simply as either "keep" or "delete" votes. One instance of this can be found in the frequent conflation of these terms. For example, editor Rootology made a lengthy statement in which he declared his decision to be a "**speedy keep**."[32] Several editors primarily or only cited Rootology's decision in their statements, but used different terms to declare their decision. Nosmik's decision and rationale was "**Keep** as per Rootology." Anchoress's was similar, declaring, "**Weak Keep** per rootology. I agree that this is a bad faith nom."[33] Additionally, there

were some statements that declared their decision to be in a form other than keep or delete, but were attached to a rationale that clearly refers to one of these decision objects. The statement of Nathan, for example, used the term "**Kill it with fire**" [34] to indicate a decision for deletion. This is not an inference, but is based on two other elements in the debate: first, the rationale that followed this phrase explicitly aligned itself with arguments made by the nominator and Tony Sidway (which were in support of deletion); second, it was interpreted as such by at least one user, IICATSII, who replied to the statement by arguing that it "isn't a strong argument for delete."

However, we should not declare that vote objects in an AfD are, at a fundamental level, either keeps or deletes and defined based on the context of the statement instead of the bold vote. Rather, we should recognize the conflict present in the concept of the vote itself: are votes either keeps or deletes, or is there a speedy keep vote that is different from a mere keep? Is a vote that is declared to be a weak keep a less passionate form of a keep vote, or does is it also designated with its own unique type of vote? How much weaker is a weak keep when compared to a keep, a speedy keep, a strong keep, or a strong speedy keep? All of these questions are not ones that are not resolved before the discussion begins, despite the fact that there is a "Guide to Deletion" which designates specific roles for votes. In fact, nothing could be farther from the case can be seen in the case of the speedy keep.

In the Guide to Deletion, speedy keep is defined as a vote that "is rarely used. It implies that the user thinks the nomination was based on an obvious misunderstanding and that the deletion discussion can be closed early." However, this statement was frequently used in the discussion, and not in the way the guide says it is to be used. Over thirteen statements were prefaced with "**speedy keep**" (out of slightly over one-hundred total bolded prefaces), and one indicated a serious conflict in the deletion, not an obvious misunderstanding: "**Speedy keep** Although article is being vandalised by Wikipedia admins." Following Foucault, we should recognize this contradiction as one that indicates

a phenomenon inherent in every discourse: the conflict present in the formation of objects.

Enunciative modalities are the second heuristic in discursive formations Foucault tells us to identify; these revealed by different aspects of how a speaking subject exists in relation to statements in a discourse. One of these is the status of the subject, which is indicated by "a system of differentiation and relations … with other individuals or other groups that also possess their own status."[35] For example, medical discourse formed the status of the doctor and deemed it a necessary precondition for a certain medical statement (the diagnosis) situated in relation to an individual with a certain status (a patient).

In the ED AfD, speaking subjects were frequently constructed to have a status in relation to their vote objects. In fact, the words "keep" and "delete" were used to refer to a speaking subject who had made a statement that functioned as a corresponding vote object. This is revealed in statement a statement like "the deletes have put together a spamming campaign."[36] However, it is more often the case that the word "keepers" refer to subjects who have made "keep votes" and the word "deletionists" refer to subjects who have made "delete votes." Statements like "I ask everyone, especially the extreme keepers and deletionists"[37] reveal this formation.

In fact, this formation itself is even referenced in the discussion, in a comment by Crazyswordsman: "MONGO, before you classify me as a 'keeper,' note that I have never said keep."[38] The statement was a reply to two related statements by MONGO, who claimed that "editors from there [Encyclopedia Dramatica] are now going to come here to filibuster this vote," and "it's doubtful that the keepers are simply going to step forward and admit they edit that website."[39] Crazyswordsman, who made a statement disagreeing with MONGO, additionally added this pre-emptive statement. In addition, Crazyswordsman declared that he had no affiliation with Encyclopedia Dramatica: "nor do I edit ED, nor do I enjoy ED."[40]

What this set of statements also reveals another enunciative modality, in which the speaking subject has the status of a Wikipedian or an EDian (or EDiot, as ED editors call themselves). These sites are constructed as two different wikis from which two different sets of subjects emerge. Those from Encyclopedia Dramatica are constructed as subjects whose statements are improper and should not function as legitimate arguments, as they contain "conflicts of interest." However, we must again follow Foucault and identify not a set of rules which determine who is a Wikipedian or and EDian and how such a status affects the reception of their statements. Instead, we must show that this question is necessarily and continuously resolved through discourse.

Some users suggested that all who had ED accounts should not be allowed to participate, while others[41] restricted this prohibition to administrators of ED. One self-confessed ED user said that all EDians should be allowed to participate, because "Its not just your wikipedia, its OUR wikipedia, and we all have a right to chime in our opinion." GTBaccus suggested a compromise, to "list all the Wikipedians who have ED accounts, and all the Wikipedians who are written about at ED … and carry on with the discussion knowing just who has a conflict of interests where." While one user referenced Wikipedia's policy on Conflict of Interest, the 'official' definition of Conflict of Interest was actually invoked; instead, the users in the discussion argued over what the proper role of EDians was. The issue was never 'officially' resolved in the form of exclusion of EDians from the debate or a declaration that their statements were to be seen as legitimate arguments. In closing the debate, the administrator Nandesuka did not even refer to the issue, although it is possible that Nandesuka was not aware of this discussion. However, this is irrelevant (and impossible to discover); instead, we should only focus on the fact that – for whatever reason – it did not enter the realm of 'official' concern, which is an 'official' decision itself.

The third level of discursive formation is that of concepts; however, we are not to look directly for concepts in the traditional sense (that is, ideas), but rather for "a set of

rules for arranging statements in series, an obligatory set of schemata of dependence, of order, of successions, in which the recurring elements that may have value as concepts [are] distributed."[42] Giving an example from the discourse of grammar, Foucault identifies a network of concepts in "the various conceptions of the phonentic elements, of the alphabet, of the name, of substantives and adjectives … of proper noun and common noun,"[43] which are all used to collectively organize words into a language that consistently relates various discursive objects (words) and enunciative modalities of the speaking subject coherently into a grammatical rules.

In the AfD, one concept that emerged was that of the Wikipedian policy of Conflict of Interest, which differs from conflict of interest as a discursive object. The concept of the policy is not to be characterized with a system for determining which statements were legitimate and which were not through some sort of flowchart or formula. Regardless of what the actual text of the policy is, the concept of the policy of Conflict of Interest as revealed in the AfD is an organizing function that frames a certain topic in a debate in a certain way. It is revealed in the question, Is the user not "advancing the aims of Wikipedia in order to advance outside interests?"[44]

The key issue of the debate was whether or not the Encyclopedia Dramatica article violated Wikipedia's Verifiability, Reliable Sources, Notability, and No Original Research policies. These policies are all relatively defined: a website is notable if "The content itself has been the subject of multiple non-trivial published works whose source is independent of the site itself. […] This criterion includes reliable published works in all forms."[45] Likewise, verifiable "means that readers should be able to check that material added to Wikipedia has already been published by a reliable source." If one goes to the Reliable Source policy, users are warned that:

> **This page is considered a content guideline on Wikipedia**. It is a generally accepted standard that all editors should follow. However, it is not set in stone and should be treated with common sense and the occasional exception.

> **This page in a nutshell:** Articles should be based on **reliable, third-party, published** sources with a reputation for fact-checking and accuracy.[46]

There are some examples of reliable sources, but there is no criterion or method of determining reliability. Instead, users are told to go to a specific discussion page "for queries about the reliability of particular sources."[47]

In the ED AfD, these policies function as organizers through which statements (in the form of arguments) were to be made. As shown, all the other policies were largely defined in relation to reliable sources. Sources regarding Encyclopedia Dramatica were certainly available, but their reliability was questioned: One user stated that most of the sources "are blog sites, and do not qualify as reputible resources;"[48] another, in reference to a source from Newsvine, stated "Newsvine is a bloglike publishing service - anyone can start and write anything in their own column."[49] However, some users stated that blogs – in particular a blog from the Washington Post – was a reliable source; however, users had to make different arguments not based on policy to decide this issue. Users cited Alexa web rankings, references by other reliable sources, and their inclusion in other Wikipedia articles in order to justify the reliability of a source. In this way, the concept of reliability regulated the formation of statements in Wikipedia.

In contrast, there were frequent arguments characterized as "irrelevant" in the AfD; these were those statements that did not fall under the concepts in Wikipedian policy. For example, it was argued, "It is irrelevant whether the subject is notable,"[50] as Notability was defined in relation to the reliability of sources which wrote about the subject. Furthermore, the fact that Conflict of Interest was largely ignored in the debate can be attributed to the fact that while the policy was a concept that organized statements, this policy was not applicable in the context of concepts of notability/verifiability.

In conclusion, the discourse of Wikipedia is largely characterized by two organizing formations: one that determines which questions are to be asked, when,

where, and under what circumstances, and another that determines what conditions statements made in response must have. The first takes the form of Wikipedian policies which function as concepts in order to facilitate a focused and organized discussion that revolves around a small set of key questions to be answered. However, the set of questions to be answered is not stable: even in the five days during which the discussion was active, it was disputed which questions were to be asked. The second formation is that of statements as objects, which are similarly regulated in relation to Wikipedian policy. However, as shown in the speedy keep vote, this organization can be significantly detached from Wikipedian policy and instead defined largely in an individual discussion.

What is of supreme importance, however, is to remember that this discursive formation is constantly in flux. It is possible for the questions, conditions, qualifications, discussions, sites, and even statements themselves to change. For example, it is possible that Wikipedia could adopt policies which directly codify conditions (such as give an exclusive list of reliable sources), as opposed organizing discussion around certain questions. If this occurs, the discursive formation may not be the same as the one describe in this work. However, if there is merely a shift on the level of concepts – such as notability being redefined as one that references the 'popularity' of a subject as opposed to the reliability of sources that describe it – it is simply an instance of the regular operation of this discursive formation.

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