

Who Leads Collaborative Writing? An Ethnonarrative Approach of Governance on the French Wikipedia

Abstract

For some years now, many scholars from computer science and engineering or communication fields have commented the Internet as a potential democratic public sphere. In this sense, the collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia appears to be a paragon of a self-governed organization able to produce knowledge. Paradoxically, it seems that the specific Wikipedian governance as a whole has remained a never opened black box. Going into the details of the processes at stake allows us to show that so-called decentralization of powers is more complex: Wikipedia is ruled by strong power plays where actors might be single or collective and might belong to one or another group depending on individual ideologies and contextual strategies about the decisions to be taken. We also illustrate how an ethnonarrative approach, based on recent studies about theory of mind in narratology, can explain heterogeneous mechanisms of authority.

1. Introduction

Justice, equality and sovereignty of people must constitute a minimal base for democracy to happen, according to Aristotle's definition (Aristote and Pellegrin). As soon as organized processes are needed, democracy might be a way to manage them. This is our starting point to address Wikipedia - even if it is claimed on the website that *nobody* leads the project¹.

Powers on Wikipedia are supposed to be decentralized (Andrea Forte and Bruckman 2008; Bryant, Forte, and Bruckman 2005; A. Forte, Larco, and Bruckman 2009). Nevertheless, frequent editors dominate what people see on Wikipedia articles (Priedhorsky et al. 2007; Laniado and Tasso 2011), hence frequent editors would also dominate rule building and organizational work. Then, to what extent the democratic value would be reversed by a small community of opinion leaders?

When the first scholarly works on Wikipedia have emerged², there has already been a wide consensus about auto-organization features of the online encyclopedia (Viegas et al. 2007). More recently, some researchers bridging online and offline communities kept on concluding to an increased decentralization of powers (A. Forte, Larco, and Bruckman 2009). They especially highlighted the role played by collectively built rules, partly linked to formal status (e.g. administrators) whose importance grow as the encyclopedia becomes larger (Derthick, Tsao, and Kriplean 2011). It is true that talk pages and argumentation together allow consensus-based straw polls, although decision-making processes have remained unclear insofar as the overall prospect of one group is not easily understood from a multitude of voices (Schneider 2012).

Wikis technical platforms are very well designed to support rules and policies (Butler and Pike 2008). In the meanwhile, ambiguities in those policies give rise to power plays (Kriplean et al. 2007) which are potent but assessed with difficulty. More, focusing on institutionalized rules is limitative as they only represent a part of Wikipedia organizing. The collaborative creation of new rules was a bureaucratic answer (Butler and Pike 2008) to the problem of any

¹ See: http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aide:FAQ/lecteurs#Qui_dirige_Wikip.C3.A9dia_.3F

² For a full literature review on Wikipedia, see (Martin 2011)

democratic system: How manage situations that necessary imply conflicts between contributors who have to collaborate, especially if one takes into account the emotional aspects (Laniado 2012)? Grassineau (2012) showed that, ideologically, Wikipedia might illustrate what Feyerabend called democratic relativism: in one hand, rules should not be binding ; on the other hand everybody is expected to take part in the discussion (Lejeune 2011).

But, who's *everybody*? Benkler (2006) had already pointed out that the Babel objection suited very well to the so-called democratic potential of the Internet: "If everyone can speak, no one can be heard". In fact, everybody *does not* speak on Wikipedia, but *some* do. Thus, authority claims and alignment moves have been studied (Bender, Morgan, and Oxley 2011). Those researchers underlined discursive strategies in identity building through social acts. Reagle (2007) offered interesting insights about leadership on Wikipedia, unfolding eight specific features of the latter, but he focused on individual actions only. Hence, some gaps are still remaining. First, the current literature concentrates on the English Wikipedia. There is a risk to expand conclusions to other languages, ignoring the possible cultural effects. Second, a detailed description and understanding of organizational processes lacks compared to researches about articles editing which are widely investigated.

2. Wikipedia, an organizing process

Wikipedia is a never finished work (Kaltenbrunner and Laniado 2012). *What* is written and *how* it is written is renegotiated at any time, hence we consider the organization as a process made possible through communication between actors (J. R Taylor and Van Every 2000). Without communication, the organization does not exist. Talk pages and meta pages, that is, written communication between actors, essentially guarantee collaboration. The text and conversation theory (James R. Taylor et al. 1996; François Cooren 2010a; F. Cooren 2004; F. Cooren, Taylor, and Van Every 2006) emphasizes the agency of texts within an organization. Conversation is the context, the *site* where an interaction takes place. Text means the *content* – also called *surface*, what is actually said (J. R Taylor and Van Every 2000). Actors intentions are nothing in some way compared to what is effectively written. However, the duality assumes that site and surface compose text, that is, researchers of this theory expect that intentions would be present within the texts which would then be

endogen. Given the significant presence of texts, argumentation, talks and discourses on Wikipedia, we believe that this framework is relevant to study the online encyclopedia. Supporting the theoretical background, we consider Weick's interactionism powerful to approach Wikipedia. In his view, organization is made of constant returns between individuals, groups and their shared interactions (B. Vidaillet *et al.*, 2003).

Power relationships on Wikipedia must be unfolded by proper means to the extent that there is no formal structure and no formal hierarchy. Firstly, we used an argumentative analysis whose results will be overviewed. Second, we present a narrative approach adapted from recent researches in postclassical narratology.

3. Studying the creation of a new policy on the French Wikipedia

To unravel decision-taking processes on the French Wikipedia, we firstly focused on the genesis of the creation of what was a key issue for the community: the opportunity to appeal against an administrator who committed abuses.

An administrator is elected by the community³ to ensure maintenance via technical tools. The most crucial actions allowed by this special status are the following:

- Protecting pages: an administrator is authorized to prevent the article from editing in case of recurrent vandalism. This action might also be taken if conflicts between contributors are redundant, influencing an article badly. Protecting pages must be exceptional since the openness of the encyclopedia is their trademark.
- Administrators are the only contributors able to edit protected pages. They play a central role on articles about current events where vandals add wrong material while many other contributors try to share relevant information. In that case, any edit must be posted on the talk page and an administrator add the information to the article. For instance, the 2011 Tohoku earthquake article on the English Wikipedia was protected the first few days. Only administrators could modify the main page.

³ All information about administrator status is available on <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Administrateur>

- Administrators can also delete new articles (SI⁴) that do not respect admissibility criteria (CAA⁵). Usually, this tool is used in case of vandalism but, depending on the interpretation of the CAA – considered as a formal rule or as a recommendation –, some administrators may delete articles without any consensus⁶.
- Another tool allow administrators to block one contributor convicted of vandalism.

Most of the administrative tools are used against vandals. The few others should be used after a consensus has been found. Hence, an administrator is not supposed to use his tools for editorial reasons. However, some contributors still consider that administrative status confers power. As there is no time limit on administrative term of office, abuses might not be sanctioned - especially since the institution that manages conflicts (*Comité d'Arbitrage*) lost the confidence of some influent contributors. The context shows why the opportunity for any contributor to contest administrators' actions was capital for the community.

This last issue were recurrent since a previous straw poll in 2006 was concluded by the refusal of such a contesting process. As nothing is never finished on Wikipedia, the 2006 decision remained relevant until a contributor decides to challenge it and launch into a new debate. It did happen on August 19, 2010 when the user Dereckson created the page *"Wikipédia:Prise de décision/Administrateur/ Contestation du statut"*. Then, contributors have been debating for nearly one year. The votes ended with a new paradoxical situation: administrators were forced to create a "contestation page" while the modalities of this contestation were rejected by the community. It meant that the "democratic" decision could not be applied since the community had not agreed with the details of the procedure. A new straw poll followed to discuss the details. Votes ended on January 1, 2012. Finally, the contestation pages were implemented. For now, several administrators have already been confirmed or excluded through this procedure.

⁴ <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:SI>

⁵ <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:CAA>

⁶ An article is discussed on <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Pas> when admissibility is put in question.

We used an argumentative analysis to focus on textualized negotiations retrieved from talk pages connected to the creation of the rule⁷. We highlighted the emphasis on the value “democracy”, often used as an argument to justify one stance (Wathelet 2011). Although contextual features were effectively present in the negotiations, confirming the endogen characteristic of texts (François Cooren 2010b), it remained difficult to assess how much they constrained authority relationships in the ruling process. More, using democratic values in an argumentation does not mean that the process is democratic in itself. Finally, those results contradicted in some way the WP:NOT policy that explicitly specifies that Wikipedia is not a democracy⁸. We thus felt necessary to expand our dataset and decided to lead in-depth narrative interviews of the biggest contributors to the rule we had studied.

4. An ethnonarrative approach

Wikipedia has this particular, that it offers deep insights into texts being written. Witnessing the textualization process is a great opportunity for the researcher often constrained to rebuild stories from final artifacts and would help identifying the varied power plays (Delcambre 1990). But, as already said, although context is embedded into organizational texts, it is tricky only with an argumentative analysis to evaluate what specific elements influence decisions. Thus, we had to supply our previous analysis with direct testimonies from the main involved actors.

Hans Hansen (2006) appealed for a methodology that combines ethnography and narrative approaches. According to him, studying texts within a context of construction is relevant to uncover many understandings that usually remain at the tacit level (Polanyi & Sen, 1983 cited by Hansen, 2006b;). Voices usually marginalized in institutionalized texts can be heard if paying attention to the context.

⁷ See:

http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discussion_Wikip%C3%A9dia:Prise_de_d%C3%A9cision/Administrateur/Contestation_du_statut and

http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discussion_Wikip%C3%A9dia:Prise_de_d%C3%A9cision/Administrateur/Modalit%C3%A9s_de_la_contestation

⁸ This policy is similar on the English Wikipedia. The French version can be found here: <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:NOT>

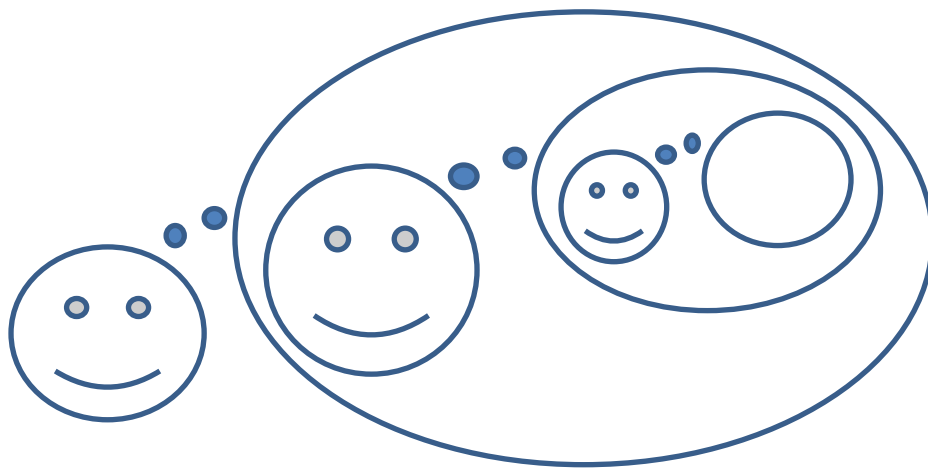
Our approach – online ethnography - combined participant observation and narrative in-depth interviews. We have been following organizational procedures but also day-to-day conversations on the French Wikipedia for two years. The openness of the media allows anybody to access every talk, what represents scarce opportunity for the researcher. We created some articles to enter the community and to live the process inside. Participant observation was important to know key actors and to shape first hypothesis: Who are the biggest contributors? Who seems to have most influence? What are the places where power issues are discussed? However, we did not want to influence debates related to the “contestation policy”, hence we did not participate to talks or votes. We also wanted to meet the biggest actors of the creation of this rule. There exists contributors rankings for every articles (including pages about organizational processes) made available on a dedicated website⁹. We led eleven in-depth interviews from twenty biggest contributors to the creation of the “contestation” rule.

A semi-directed interview is constituted of narratives to the extent that it is a message which through representation (a story is not a story till it is told) tells of events involving participants – somebody to narrate, somebody to receive (P. Hansen 2012). In narratology, narratives might be considered as formal structures, that is, narratives are *in* the text. Narratives might also be seen as epistemological tools, a sensemaking tool (Iversen 2012). Following Ricoeur (Ricoeur 1991a; Ricoeur 1991b), our stance is close to the latter. We are interested in the function of narratives: a way to make sense from experience. Postclassical narratology underlines the ethical dimension of narratology: through his narratives, an author tries to convince that some values are better than others (Phelan 2005). It means that the interviewee is the author of his own story and that we give credence to him to tell his experience rightly.

Similarly to previous structuralism ambitions, cognitive narratology (a specific stream in postclassical narratology) asserts there are rules underlying narratives. Those rules would not be external structures but would dwell in the brain of the author, of the reader and of the depicted characters. According to this idea, we use our embodied experience to make sense of narratives and we would use narratives to make sense of the world (Iversen 2012). Cognitive

⁹ See <http://toolserver.org/>

narratology is guided by the theory of mind – that is the cognitive processes that allow to attribute a certain mental state to somebody. In short, we use theory of mind each time we communicate to others, trying to guess their intentions and to understand what they mean (Baron-Cohen 1991). Zunshine (2012) asserts that similar processes are at stake when reading literature. Reader's empathy is made possible because the reader attributes intentions to the characters who, in a similar process, attribute intentions to other characters, etc. Zunshine calls socio-cognitive complexity those embedded mental states – a mind in a mind in a mind, etc.



Following her work, we think that:

(1) any interview might include a narrative but cannot be reduced to it. However, in a narrative interview, the researcher requires the interviewee to tell his experience about one event, inducing linked sequences, justified decisions or compared moments (Lambotte, F. Meunier 2011). Starting from personal experience, story differs radically from discourse. More, emplotment (Czarniawska-Joerges 1999; Czarniawska 2004) enables self-reflexivity, a retrospective sensemaking exercise. Paraphrasing Karl Weick (1995), we can say that actors do know what they are doing only after having done so! Narratives do not equal reality and depend on contextual features: relationship with the researcher, daily emotional states, etc. Once again, narrative is not about truth and there is no point to differentiate it from any other fictional work ;

(2) extracting embedded mental states about authoritative actions (any action impacting the organization) reveals authority figures in organizing processes. Interviewees are delegated actors who speak for the organization and, doing so, they are *authoring* the organization. Let's put it in the words of Taylor and Van Every (2010):

“Yes, it is by the authoring of the perceptions and intentions of the organization (B) by someone (A), its agent, that organizational authority is established: a second-to-first relationship of the organization with all its agents, justified by a recognition of the legitimacy and authenticity of its mission and accomplished by its communicating with them.”

(3) specific actions will be linked to specific actors, allowing us to reveal the complexity of power relationships. Focusing on each interaction one by one grants not to fix actions to actors indefinitely and ascertains to take into account the evolving characteristic – the time dimension - of organizing. The multiplicity of actors taking part in the interaction must be underlined: an actor might be one contributor but also several contributors together – we then speak about intermental units (Zunshine 2012). We also consider the agency of non-humans like bots¹⁰, rules and policies or any other texts (Akrich, Callon, and Latour 2006).

5. Examples

Each interview was an answer to the question: “Tell me the story of your participation to the creation of the policy about contested administrators”. Obviously, like any other narratives, the told story exceeded the narrow scope of the main message (the rule) to embody wider issues. Here are two short extracts of some interviews and an illustration of how we proceeded to analyze them. Then, we will picture a new map of authority on Wikipedia and discuss the benefits and drawbacks of this method.

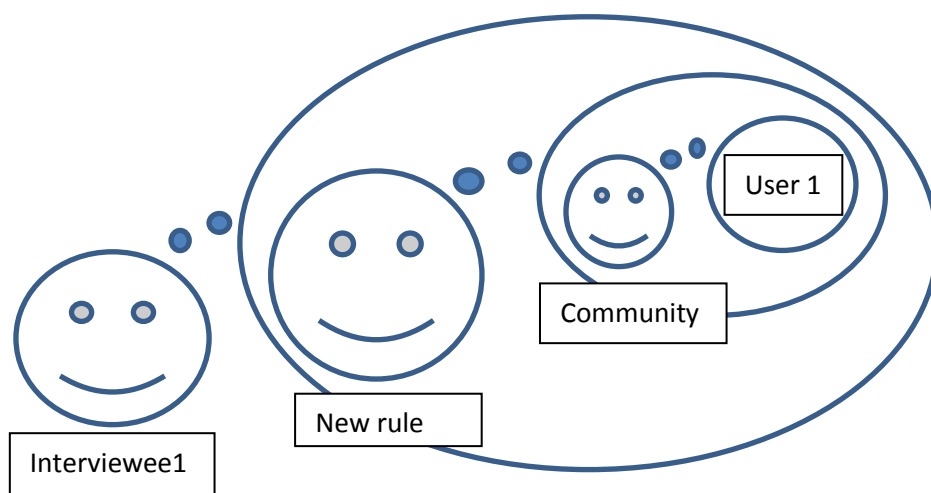
Extract 1

¹⁰ More information about bots here: <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Bot>

*“It is not normal that User1¹¹ cannot be questioned. In fact, **with the new rule**, he would be challenged right now, **with the new procedure**, I do not give him three months to be challenged and I'm sure about the result.”¹²*

What about organizational actions in this extract? Basically, the question is: who is legitimate to remove his status to an administrator. According to the interviewee, the new *rule* creates the opportunity. It means that in some way the rule *is acting*. It also means that text should be considered as a non-human actor, an organizational *agent* (F. Cooren 2004; François Cooren 2010a). On the other hand, the rule alone is not enough to contest an administrator. It has to be *used* by the community, which is an intermental actor. The socio-cognitive chain can be represented as following:

“I **think** that the new procedure **allow** the community to **question** User1.”



This example shows that for one action made possible (here: contesting an administrator), several actors are needed. More, those actors do not have the same weight. Without the rule, the community could not challenge an administrator. The rule is prior in the interaction.

Extract 2

¹¹ Wikipedia pseudonym has been anonymized.

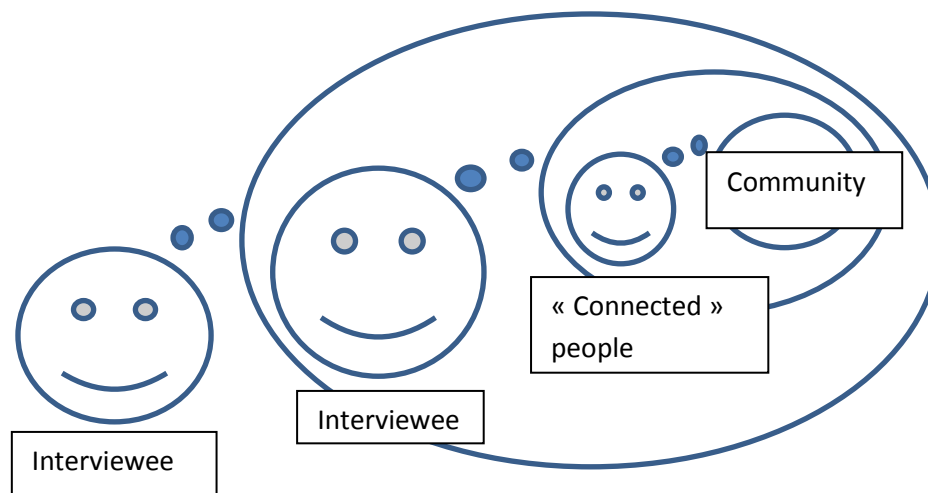
¹² Our translation into English.

It is very difficult for the researcher to assess to what extent a certain actor has influence on the others. However, one actor's subjectivity makes it very clear - given that the multiplicity of different points of view must be discussed, compared and contrast afterwards. Unfolding those strong relationships is one of the greatest benefit of our approach, as shown by the following extract:

*"There is a factor which comes into play a lot in the discussion. I do mean that there are people who have more influence than others. And personally I do not have so much influence. And I think one of the reasons is that I met just a few people, I'm not on IRC, I've never really gone there, nor on Twitter, and there are also real meetings. **I think people who have influence are those who use those media.**"*

Here is our socio-cognitive translation:

"I **think** that I **do not have** the influence that **have** people who **use** different media [to influence the community]."



Starting from a situated point of view highlights one actor's auto-reflexivity. Including himself within the interaction, the interviewee points out the drawbacks of his behavior – even if he does not seem to regret his lack of influence.

This extract also shows that (1) we do not need to talk so much about the reality of the so-called influence. The fact that some contributors are perceived to be more powerful than others is enough because if many contributors think that some have influence, they *do* have influence, even if a priori there is no

reason for. Once again, narrative analysis is not about truth but about sensemaking ; (2) we do not need to discuss the real intentions of the “connected users”. Maybe they are aware of their power. Maybe not. It does not matter because the consequences are the same.

Our interviewee tackles an issue that was not so explicit in our previous argumentative analysis: the organizational significance of certain places outside Wikipedia. This suggests the relevance of taking into account of the context.

6. Discussion

We introduced an ethnonarrative approach that considers the socio-cognitive complexity of actors involved in organizational processes. We also presented two different examples to show into the details how we proceeded to analyze the narrative interviews. Here are the results of our analysis applied to eleven in-depth interviews we conducted between April and August 2012.

Before an extensive description of the different emerging categories, we want to emphasize the great absents of the typology: the usual reader of the encyclopedia but also the contributor who does not care about organizational issues. This differs from democracies where every citizen is invited to participate to the democratic process, at least through the vote. On Wikipedia, governance owns to people deeply involved in organizational issues. Since this represents between two and three hundred people out of five thousand active contributors (and more than 1.3 million registered users)¹³, any assertion about decentralization of powers on Wikipedia must be relative. On the other hand, among involved users, decentralization is a reality that must be detailed.

We unfolded seven categories of authorities:

- **Private individual:** he is acting alone, according to his own interests (which may embed those of the community). A private individual can be involved in recurrent procedures such as recent changes patrolling¹⁴.
- **Individual with official status:** Administrators, bureaucrats or arbitrator. They have been elected by the community. Administrators have special administrative tools (see *supra*).

¹³ For the French Wikipedia.

¹⁴ More information here : http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Patrouille_RC

- **Small group of individuals:** There are unofficial groups of interests and act to defend them. They may be *inclusionists* (meaning that they think Wikipedia should admit more entries than traditional encyclopedias) or *suppressionists* (they want a restricted encyclopedia). Other “clans” exist, built on previous conflicts, friendships, real life meetings, geographical proximity, etc.
- **Non-humans:** Non-human actors include rules, policies, recommendations and bots¹⁵.
- **Large group of voters:** Consensus-based decisions are sometimes too difficult to reach when a large amount of people must express their opinion. Then, Wikipedians take decisions through a voting process. It happens for administrator applications, straw polls, surveys, etc.
- **The outside of Wikipedia:** The most influent Wikipedians hold their own blogs where they discuss Wikipedias’ issues. Some Wikipedians also chat on IRC channels, meet in real life, etc.
- **Large group of participants:** In short, the “community”. This intermental unit overlaps different realities depending on the situation.

Those categories are not mutually exclusive. It means that an individual with an official status (e.g. an administrator) will probably act sometimes for interests that have nothing to do with this status. A group of voters is obviously composed of private individuals, individuals with “clans” interests, some individuals who are administrators, etc. However, the process of voting results in *one* decision which is the expression of the majority. In that sense, we consider a large group of voters as an intermental unit. In fact, the multiplicity of opinions expressed through the vote are not so different from the multiplicity of arguments struggling in one mind. Consequently, each action highlights the prevailing category.

We also pointed out two different types of organizational actions:

- **Influence and/or make a judgment:** Although influence is subjective and depends on interviewee feelings (or “embedded mental states”), narrative approaches show that a shared feeling is similar to truth insofar the consequences are similar.

¹⁵ “Bots are automatic or semi-automatic agents that interact with Wikipedia like any user but for repetitive and tedious tasks for humans.” See <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Bot>

- **Concrete actions:** Many actions impact the organization directly. Concrete actions include starting a debate or a straw poll, voting in favor of an administrator, protecting a page, blocking a vandal, deleting an article, etc.

Reviewing the authority of the categories mentioned above, it appears that private individual initiatives are paramount for both types of actions. A first answer to the question “Who’s leading Wikipedia?” would be something like: “Highly motivated private individuals!” Is Wikipedia an oligarchy? Not at all. Those individuals are different persons, with sometimes opposed interests. They are each other forces of opposition and represent currents of thoughts shared by many contributors. In fact, they look like “representatives” except they have not been elected for the job. More, their power is widely offset by the large groups of voters. If initiative is individual, the application of a decision must often go through a vote, and the transition between the two take very much time and fails sometimes. To become an organizational action, individual initiative must be seized by the collective. Thus, private individuals power in straw polls is strong only because they are the ones who determine what people are voting about. Voters approve one or another proposition, thereby confirming one’s private initiative, more or less shaded by the needed compromises done during the process.

Status actions are essentially concrete and consist in the use of maintenance tools, as described *supra*. Some interviewees assert that immaterial influence of people who have been elected is tangible but global results show that it is relative. However, contributors with official status struggle with private individuals about a series of issues to which their interests differ. For example, many conflicts appear on deletion pages (PàS) where administrators interpret the results of negotiations in order to conserve or delete an article. This interpretation is very close to an editorialist choice¹⁶. Depending on the administrator personality, the decision will be taken carefully or roughly. It is also salient to point out that the administrator choice is made possible by his status but is not necessary motivated by it (e.g. an administrator might be more inclusionnist or suppressionist).

¹⁶ Contributors are currently arguing about that issue in day-to-day talks. This extract from the “bistro” illustrates the controversy:

http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Bistro#Une_P.C3.A0S_.C3.A0_cl.C3.B4turer_svp

Narrative approaches help qualifying influences between small groups of individuals. Those influences play an undoubted role, at least in the mind of frequent contributors. Consequently, frequent contributors act as if those influences were materialized, thereby creating the conditions for their reality. In some way, they seem to be self-fulfilling prophecies. Concrete effects on the encyclopedia appear when background conflicts between “clans” lead to conflicts resolution procedures with potential sanctions like blocking. The same is true regarding the outside of Wikipedia whose “effective influence” is relative but whose “potential influence” is seen as a threat.

Non-human actions are mainly concrete, even if rules and policies also play a role to encourage or discourage contributors to act in some way. As said before, voters exert concrete actions. Doing so, they are a needed force of opposition and flatten strong initiatives taken by individuals. They also prevent the processes from organized abuses of small groups of interests.

To conclude, we assert that governance on Wikipedia is well-balanced but struggles always appear when different groups participate in joint construction (Hardy and Phillips 2004; Hardy, Palmer, and Phillips 2000).

The most appealed categories overlap well-known conflicts that always imply “private individuals”. It makes sense precisely because individuals take the initiative, hence they are prior in the power relationship. First, struggle nodes appear between “private individuals” and “small groups of interests”. We think it is more of reckoning between “clans” than real power issues, but our methodology is not designed to clearly establish it. Second, concrete organizational actions are sometimes polemical. Administrators decisions might be considered as illegitimate and will be contested by “private individuals”. This explains why the creation of a new policy allowing anybody to challenge an administrator was so strategic for the community.

We have not spoken yet about the “large group of participants” category. The interviewees often credit all the participants with authority, even in a roundabout way:

*“Even if the rules do not exactly correspond to what I proposed, it did not bother me **that to happen.**”*

It is hard to know who is hidden behind the passive voice or general terms such as “people”, “contributors”, “we”, “Wikipedians” or “the community”. We should have asked our interviewees to specify the terms while telling their story but the difficulty lied in the fact that we would have asked them to answer our own research questions! Actually, we think that at some point the use of general terms is needed for three main reasons.

(1) First, general terms are used as figures backing one or another stance (François Cooren 2010a). In that sense, referring to the term “community” might be a way to legitimize a democratic-based approach of consensus;

(2) second, as we said before, it is not always easy for one actor to aim the origin of an action. It is also a matter of convenience ;

(3) third, general terms are needed to create a “self” from the polyphony of voices (Robichaud, Giroux, and Taylor 2004). Since there is no “large group of participants” whose power would not come from an individual initiative, the “I” is included into the intermental unit “contributors”, allowing everyone to identify to the decision, and thereby reducing struggles between “I” and “them”. According to Taylor and Van Every (2010), the transition from “I” to “we” is the first step in the construction of organization-as-entity. Then, this “authority” should not be understood in the same way than other categories. All the “I” initiatives have been black-boxed (Akrich, Callon, and Latour 2006; J. Taylor and Every 2010) and any hierarchy is now hidden, even for the actors themselves. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake not to consider this “thirdness” (J. Taylor and Every 2010) as a real authority. It is a specific authority that allows the contributors to feel as a whole and to act congruous according to this feeling.

7. Conclusions

Although democratic values are often used in contributors argumentations, it would be excessive to depict Wikipedia as a democracy. There are some democratic features - such voting processes – but decision-taking differs from democracy in many ways. Given the number of authority categories we unfolded, organizing on Wikipedia looks decentralized. However, only the term “decentralization” does not render the complexity of authoritative actions on the online encyclopedia.

The overlapping characteristic of the categories is critical and show why it is so tough to define authority on Wikipedia. Nevertheless, we highlighted the significant role that private individuals play in the organization. This result is coherent with the openness of the system that allows anybody to modify or add information. However, it does not mean that *anybody* could participate to organizational issues: users involved in those processes are also deeply involved in the construction of the encyclopedia. They know very well the everyday functioning of the platform. Paradoxically, they often consider the organizational side of Wikipedia as a waste of time but feel *compelled* to take part in it. They seem not to get any direct benefit from this participation, except, at some point, the opportunity to turn the situation to their own advantage.

There exists forces of opposition facing the category of private individuals. Most significant decisions for the community must go through a vote before being accepted. Private individuals initiatives are thus counter-balanced by voting processes similar to those in democracies, albeit those processes on Wikipedia are in general more refined¹⁷. More, proposals submitted to the vote are already the result of hard negotiations between several “private individuals” backing different stances. This explains how consensus is ensured and why radical opinions are systematically flattened through the process.

Several influences must not be neglected. Small groups of contributors act together to enforce an opinion, what creates recurrent conflicts between different groups of interests. Power issues become apparent in some particular places such deletion pages. Such pages are nodes where the power of private individuals initiatives meet administrative tools whose power remains equivocal and “clans” interests that organize themselves to influence decision-taking process. As such, the construction of the rule to contest administrator abuses appears to be a collective reaction to the measured risk of a new hierarchy while conflicts between small groups of interests remain a meaningful noise factor.

Finally, we pointed out the function of describing authority as a “we”, instead of seeing it as the result of private initiatives. Following the work of Taylor and

¹⁷ See: http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%A9thode_Condorcet

Van Every (2010), we think this is where the extreme polyphony of voices is translated into one institutionalized text which overlaps the idea of a unique organization called "*Wikipedia*".

This paper also meant to present our ethnonarrative approach. We highlighted some benefits and drawbacks of our methodology.

Our approach grants to contextualize interactions in a very detailed way that complements usual content analysis. We were able to build an original typology of authoritative actors on Wikipedia, while maintaining the evolving nature of the organization. Socio-cognitive complexity is also coherent with Weick's idea that sensemaking is retrospective. Our method links cognitive processes of actors to the idea of communication as constitutive of the organization (James R. Taylor et al. 1996; F. Cooren, Taylor, and Van Every 2006; J. R Taylor and Van Every 2000; F. Cooren 2004; François Cooren 2010a). However, socio-cognitive complexity must be combined with participant observation in order to make sense of interviewees' stories. A very good knowledge of the context is needed before meeting actors. We also think that the methodology might be slightly redesigned in order to highlight conflicts between authority figures. For now, the approach lacks of explanatory power.

Some suggestions on future researches include the probation of our methodology in other online and offline organizational contexts where no formal structures grant authority. On Wikipedia, other linguistic spaces must be investigated so that cultural effects would be assessed.

8. References

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