USER DRORK: A CALL FOR A FREE CONTENT ALTERNATIVE FOR SOURCES
AN INTERVIEW WITH DROR KAMIR

DROR KAMIR AND **JOHANNA NIESYTO**

Dror Kamir, whose user name in Wikipedia is DrorK, works mainly in the fields of natural language processing and translation. He became active in the Hebrew Wikipedia in April 2005, and then in the Arabic and English Wikipedias but is currently on a long 'Wiki vacation' from all three. He is instead focusing on promoting free-content policy in Israel as a board member of Wikimedia Israel, of which he was one of the founders, and as a volunteer of the Wikimedia Foundation. In Wikimania 2008 in Alexandria, Egypt, he delivered the presentation 'Cross-Cultural Dialog through Wikipedia'.

Johanna Niesyto (JN): When and how have you become involved in Wikipedia?

Drork (Dror Kamir / DK): Being a linguist, I used to work in a high-tech company that dealt with natural language processing. Generally speaking, this is the field that caters for improving search engines, creating machine translation software, etc. I found myself landing on Wikipedia pages more and more often. That was in 2002 when Wikipedia was about one year old. At that time, Wikipedia was beyond its infancy but still not so developed. The information it held grew rapidly, and so it became increasingly useful for me. It combined the traditional well-organized methods of presenting data with contents that reflected the actual interest of people and their actual use of language. It took my colleagues and me a while before we understood the concept of Wikipedia and how it works, and yet, at that time, innovations related to computers and the internet were our bread and butter, so it was not too long before I realized that there was a different concept behind this encyclopedia. At that point I realized I could edit the content, but nevertheless, it took some more time until I made my first edit.

JN: What have your edits been about since then?

DK: I tried to edit articles on subjects I thought I had some knowledge about. These were mainly articles about linguistics and some articles about history or politics. Most of my early edits were in Hebrew. My initial interest was mainly in the Hebrew Wikipedia. I reckoned there were masses of people trying to edit the English Wikipedia, whereas the Hebrew Wikipedia was where I could make more impact, as I gathered it probably needed more editors, due to its natural disadvantage of having relatively few fluent speakers. So, I started by making some edits on the Hebrew Wikipedia, but they were reverted on the pretext that they were too sweeping and had overridden too much of the information previously introduced by other editors. Then I learned to make my edits more subtle, to measure the amount of change that I wanted to make more accurately. A few months after I started editing on the Hebrew Wikipedia, I took a look at the Arabic-language Wikipedia. It was a bit like sneaking into the neighbor's backyard. To be honest, I expected a lot of political propaganda. I suppose I was prejudiced about the manner of writing in the Arab world. What I saw at first was better than I expected. I read the article about Israel, and I did not see political propaganda, not at first. Later on, I became engaged in conflicts about the content of articles on both the Hebrew and the Arabic Wikipedias.

JN: What kind of issues have you been 'fighting' about?

DK: Well, Israeli history is a delicate subject in particular, especially as there have recently been waves of revisions in this field followed by backlashes. I think we are currently amid one of these backlashes. One way or another, dealing with Israeli history and related topics is stepping on shaky ground. I made my first edits on Wikipedia at a time when not only intellectual debates, but also actual events in Israel and its vicinity were reaching a boiling point. There were harsh outbursts of violence outdoors and retrospective reviews of Israeli history in books, magazines, and university classes. I thought certain articles on the Hebrew Wikipedia were too conservative in their approach. I thought neutrality would be better served if more room was given to the revisionist views, but I felt strong objection from more 'veteran' editors. Looking back, I am not sure whether they objected to the content I wanted to introduce, or perhaps I carelessly stepped on other editors' toes, being too pushy. Later on, I managed to better map the population of editors. I found people who adhered to revisionist approaches more than I did, and others who were very conservative when it came to historical issues. When I started to edit in Arabic, I felt I was thrown to the 'conservative position', as I had to convince people that they could not refrain from mentioning Israel by its name. Maybe it is not a conservative position after all, because it is a fundamental issue, which is naturally important to me as an Israeli. But it also has to do with basic rules of conveying information. Arab editors argued that in certain circumstances they would not mention Israel by its name, but rather write 'Palestine' or the 'Zionist Entity' or various other terms used in the Arab world when trying to avoid recognition in the state of Israel. I argued that this was not acceptable per the Neutral Point of View (NPOV) principle. This debate was harder than trying to introduce some revisionist views to the Hebrew Wikipedia. First of all, I was considered a guest on the Arabic Wikipedia, as I am not Arab; moreover, I'm an Israeli. Secondly, this is indeed a fundamental issue that has to do with 'quasi-axioms' that underlie certain people's view of the world.

JN: The German-language Wikipedia user Fossa criticized the German-language Wikipedia heavily. One of the solutions he brought up was that users should publish their social networks on their user sites, so that users know to whom – and to which group – they are talking. What do you think of this idea with regard to the political conflicts you just described?

DK: He makes a very good point in this suggestion, and I think it relates to the whole issue of anonymity on Wikipedia. Wikipedia has love-and-hate relations with the concept of anonymity or virtual identities, which is so common on the internet. On the one hand, there is a lot of suspiciousness toward unregistered contributors and a strict ban on 'sock puppets' (one person who opens several accounts in order to use alternative identities on Wikipedia). On the other hand, when someone opens an account on Wikipedia, he can construct a whole

new character for himself. No one would know his origins, affiliations, expertise, and interests unless he decided to reveal them and only to the extent he chooses. A Wikipedian can also choose whether to use one account for all Wikipedias or different identities for each language in which he or she wants to contribute. Paradoxically, an unregistered contributor is often less anonymous than a registered one, because the IP is used instead of a nickname for such contributors; a lot of information can be inferred from the IP address.

The anonymity dilemma has become crucial when administrators started to act like policemen and judges. I was involved in a few quasi-judicial discussions on the English Wikipedia and felt as if I entered a scene of the British TV series *The Prisone*r. It was exactly like that village in which everything seems real but actually isn't, and there is an administrator that acts as 'Number 2'.

The main difference is the transparency to which Wikipedia adheres. In principle, everyone can see any discussion on Wikipedia. However, as Ayelet Oz showed in her talk at Wikimania 2009 about 'Wikipedia as a System for Acoustic Separation', this transparency is heavily impaired by the flood of information that Wikipedia provides and by the division of this information into various pages and subpages. When I recently tried to understand the rules that govern the debates on Wikipedia, I was overwhelmed by the huge amount of long pages. Some of them are 'official policy', some of them are 'essays', and some merely analyses or proposals. There is a lot of internal jargon used on these pages and particularly in debates. It is nearly impossible to get the hang of all this written material.

That brings me back to Fossa's idea. It is basically good, particularly in the case of administrators, but wouldn't it become just another load of information listed somewhere, hard to locate, and hardly understood as it includes strange nicknames of unidentified people? A better solution might be to automatically map relations among editors and administrators according to personal talk pages or editing patterns. There is already a tool called Wikistalk that offers something similar to that, and yet I didn't find much use of it. As for interpersonal relations, Wikipedia started with a few rules and two major principles, namely Assume Good Faith and Ignore All Rules. The idea was to avoid too much formality, bureaucracy, and regulation, while encouraging openness and cooperation as much as possible. Maybe the right way is not to ask people to list their relations and interests, but to put the 'blocking' guns down, relax the over-nervous administrators, let people have edit wars until they get tired, and agree to think of a consensual version. Let people be rude to each other without sending an administrator as Mother Superior to punish the sinners. Maybe we need to apply Ignore All Rules more often.

JN: You reflected already on your experiences on the Hebrew and Arabic Wikipedia. How have you been using the English Wikipedia?

DK: My edits on the English Wikipedia were quite minor, at least at the early stages of my activity. I did not feel I could contribute much to the English Wikipedia because, as I said, there were already many people, among them native English-speaking Israelis and Jews who contributed regularly to the English version. I contributed quite a lot to the Hebrew and Arabic Wikipedias and became quite involved in the community of editors of both of them.

JN: I found out that your user page on the English Wikipedia has been deleted. One of the arguments you've been giving is 'I believe Wikipedia has turned into a political forum'.

DK: I still stand behind this statement. I think it is a problem that should be addressed. I used to think the English Wikipedia worked much better than the Hebrew or Arabic Wikipedias, but at some point I had, once again, this feeling of working like a diplomat or a lawyer rather than as an encyclopedia editor. I am not a diplomat nor a lawyer, and I lost my patience eventually.

JN: Why are you on a 'Wikivacation'? Is it a definite decision to quit Wikipedia?

DK: I am drawn to Wikipedia like a moth to candlelight. Whenever I feel I have had enough, I am somehow drawn back to it. I suppose I truly believe in the underlying concept of this project, and I also acknowledge its importance in creating the new universal basis of knowledge. The latter is, in fact, a double-edged sword. The fact that Wikipedia is unprecedentedly accessible and comprehensive, combined with the fact that there are only a few limitations on its distribution, hold the potential of it becoming an oracle that tells people what to think. Not explicitly, of course, but rather by speedy dissemination of certain versions of information to a huge number of people with very limited options to withdraw problematic versions and too few alternative sources that can provide another angle with similar efficiency. Maybe helping to create such a free content alternative is something I should consider, but currently it is beyond my abilities. Anyway, as long as I can do something to keep Wikipedia on the right track and prevent possible negative ramifications, I want to be there.

That said, I do take long leaves, usually after 'slamming the door' in frustration. Most of my leaves, including the recent one, came when I was worn out by the debates, especially when I felt they were becoming more and more political or ego-motivated, rather than real give-and-takes about how to make the content more insightful. I suppose I cannot absolve myself of responsibility. In many cases I probably also drifted on this wave of having debates for the sake of debating.

As for the Arabic Wikipedia, I stopped editing there during the crisis in Gaza in December 2008, when I saw that some Arab editors initiated an article in Arabic about it called 'The Massacre of Gaza'. The name of the article was changed later on, but I still felt it was a bit too much, especially as I saw more and more attempts to initiate articles about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the word 'massacre' in their title. There was also an incident in which a Palestinian editor insisted on making edits to the article about the geographical region called Palestine, according to which the Hebrew language 'infiltrated' Palestine during the 19th century. I brought him an abundance of evidence that the Hebrew language was spoken in this region long before the Common Era, but he insisted on editing the article in a way that would portray Jews as foreigners or 'newcomers' to the region.

On the Hebrew Wikipedia there were several incidents that made me quit writing there. There are two that I remember well. One of them involved the use of the word 'terror'. I argued that this term should be avoided or properly attributed, namely 'it is terror according to so-and-so'. There is simply no accepted definition of when violence turns into terror. You cannot even

apply here the criterion of 'I know it when I see it', which the American judge Potter Steward set for pornography in 1964, because in each case of alleged terror, everybody sees something different, usually based on prejudices. When this debate about using the term 'terror' heated up, I saw one of the most influential veteran editors on the Hebrew Wikipedia stating on his user page, referring to a certain anti-Israeli organization, 'Certain truths must be told, this is a terrorist organization'. Then I realized that something had gone wrong. Are we trying to convey information or to preach?

JN: What about the English Wikipedia edit wars? Have they been similar or different to your experiences in the Hebrew and Arabic Wikipedia?

DK: As I said, at first I felt things were going on much better on the English Wikipedia, but I changed my mind later on. I remember several experiences on the English Wikipedia that were quite similar to the ones I have just described. I remember a debate about Gilad Schalit, the Israeli soldier who was kidnapped in Gaza. Some users suggested he should be defined as a hostage, and I supported that. I said the facts on the ground suggested that he was a hostage. Other people said that for the sake of neutrality we should refer to him as 'captive'. In this specific case, I might not have been totally honest. I do believe 'hostage' is the proper term to describe his condition, but I cannot say I am unprejudiced about this issue. I do not have any personal relation to Gilad Schalit or his family, but I have strong feelings about this case. One way or another, the debate did not seem so harsh or essential to me at the time. After all, writing 'captive' instead of 'hostage' did not make that much of a difference as far as the Wikipedia article was concerned. Then again, looking back at this case, I could have seen here the first seeds of the phenomenon that would later become unbearable for me. For example, people brought as references journalistic articles about Gilad Schalit that used the term 'hostage' in order to prove it was legitimate. This is a bit odd, because using sources does not solve the problem at hand. It would be wise to consult relevant sources in order to establish facts, like the Earth orbits around the Sun and not the other way around. But here, the facts are not questionable; it is more about moral judgment of these unquestionable facts. I am not sure whether Wikipedia should or can avoid moral judgments in all cases, but moral judgments are always hard to handle and relying on sources is hardly a useful tool to address this problem. It is reasonable to consult an astronomer about whether the Earth orbits the Sun or vice versa, but what kind of source should I consult when it comes to terminology that implies moral judgment? A reverend? A rabbi? A qadi? A philosopher? Should I rely on legal definitions? If so, which legal system should I use? Saying 'captive' instead of 'hostage' could be problematic when moral judgment is an essential part of the case we want to describe. After all, we treat murder cases differently than we treat accidents. If we take for example the tragic fate of Alan Turing, there is a strong moral aspect to this story, and you cannot avoid it, even when you try to be neutral. A cold factual account of the events that led Turing to kill himself would be insufficient and maybe even misleading. Then again, I do not see how using references solves the problem of whether to use 'hostage' or 'captive' or, generally speaking, whether to introduce a moral aspect to the article and how to do it. Maybe this is the point where an editor-in-chief is needed to set a policy.

Another interesting political incident I was engaged in happened not on the English Wikipedia but, on Wikimedia Commons. At the beginning, Wikimedia Commons was not supposed

to be an encyclopedia, but rather a repository of files, particularly images. In practice, it turned into a visual encyclopedia in its own right. A lot of policy issues that had been discussed on the various Wikipedias were not addressed on the Commons, because people treated it as a kind of service to the other projects. In fact, such issues pop up in the least expected places. File names, for examples, are actually texts. A contributor describes his image in the file's name and sometimes, deliberately or unaware, introduces his point of view through this 'back door'. There was a contributor who named a picture of Tel Aviv 'Tel Aviv occupied Palestine'.

JN: Do you think that Wikimedia Commons should also follow the NPOV principle?

DK: Yes, definitely. The method of keeping impartiality must be different because the nature of content is different, but I believe Commons should adhere to the NPOV principle like any other Wikimedia project. First of all, any text written by the editors should be consistent with NPOV. This includes file names, names of categories, description of images, etc. As for the core content, I saw many political caricatures on Commons; some of them express highly contentious views, and some of them in very bad taste. The publication of these caricatures is certainly legitimate and in line with the freedom of speech, but for that end there are already plenty of blogs and forums. I am not sure a Wikimedia project should be the billboard for such materials just because they are distributed under free license. Even when such material should indeed be available on Commons, for example, when it is an indication of a certain zeitgeist or important for understanding a certain event, it should be presented in an NPOV way. I saw a derogatory caricature against a known figure that was categorized under his name along with genuine portraits of him. Since every category on Commons turns automatically into a gallery, this person's images were displayed side-by-side with the derogatory caricature. On Wikipedia, such a display would be considered highly problematic. I don't see why Commons should be different.

JN: You once said 'NPOV and No Original Research have become idle principles'. So what do you propose?

DK: I would like to see a better balance among these principles. Wikipedia's core principles, namely Neutral Point Of View, Verifiability, and No Original Research, seem to me very reasonable as a global editing policy, but these principles are conflicting in many cases. For example, in Hebrew there are several optional names to the territories known in English as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Each name implies a political view about the future of these territories. Of course, the article about these territories on the Hebrew Wikipedia includes all of these names, as well as the names used in Arabic and European languages, but one name must have precedence for the article's title, and repeating all the names whenever there is reference to these territories is impossible. A reasonable solution would be to invent a descriptive name for the sake of neutrality, but this would be considered violation of the No Original Research principle. A lot of discretion is needed in such cases in order to decide which principle should be satisfied at the expense of another, but I feel that currently these decisions are more a matter of trend than the result of careful consideration.

If we go back to the issue of references, the demand on the English Wikipedia to back every piece of information with 'reliable sources' has become overrated and even counterproductive in recent times. The change in policy becomes even more evident when comparing the early formulation of the Verifiability principle to the current one. The phrasing went from saying, 'Verifiability is an important tool to achieve accuracy, so we strongly encourage you to check your facts' to the current version that reads, 'The threshold for inclusion in Wikipedia is verifiability, not truth'. So now the sources are positioned at the center, and subsequently editors talk much less about facts and truth, and mostly argue about what kind of documents should be considered reliable sources and which sources should have precedence. For me, a good way to check the reliability of a source would be to send someone to check if the information it offers corresponds to reality. This is not hard to do in a global project like Wikipedia. In my opinion, trying to circumvent the problems of original research and verifiability with a decision to give precedence to one source over another, and an absolute demand to prefer written sources over oral testimonies or photographs, is actually introducing another original research, which is equally problematic if not more. Also, the demand for written 'reliable sources' might have something to do with the fact that the various Wikipedias have relatively few articles about places in Africa and African culture, as Mark Graham showed in his talk at the CPOV Bangalore conference about 'Palimpsests and the Politics of Exclusion' in Wiki spaces.

JN: Another statement of yours on the CPOV-list was, 'Actually Wikipedia has abandoned most of its primary values – it is no longer open to all'. [1] Do you think it was open to all at any point of its history?

DK: This is a good question, which I can answer only according to my personal feeling and intuition. I do feel Wikipedia used to be much more open. Then again, this was at a time when a relatively small group of enthusiasts gathered around this project. It is easy to be friendly when you are not so popular, and paradoxically, when people respond to your friendliness and join you, you become much more closed. This paradox is very human. There are people who are at the center of activity and afraid to lose their position. There is a natural fear of newcomers trying to abuse the system. At some point, a better, more stable mechanism should develop to ensure openness with cautiousness. This kind of mechanism has seemingly developed on the English Wikipedia, but it is as if something went wrong in the process. The English Wikipedia has today an abundance of rules and regulations, it has a quasi-judiciary that tries contributors and punishes them. It has committees that decide about policy in processes that resemble either court sessions or conventions of the UN General Assembly. This system is rather chaotic and lacks many of the checks and balances that can be found in the equivalent 'real-life' systems. For example, I once complained about a certain editor's behavior and found the accusations redirected at me. At the end, it was I who was 'punished' and blocked for several days. Whether or not I deserved this 'punishment', this 'reversal procedure' is usually unacceptable in well-balanced judicial systems. When I started to be active in Wikipedia, I didn't wish for a system that would resemble a judiciary,

1. Dror Kamir, 'Wikipedia and I', posting to CPOV mailing list, 13 April 2010, http://listcultures.org/pipermail/cpov_listcultures.org/2010-April/000090.html.

let alone a poorly managed judiciary. In the past, a newcomer to Wikipedia encountered the normal suspiciousness of people who tried to be open but were afraid of losing the intimacy of their newly formed society and the control over their precious projects. Currently, a newcomer won't survive the entanglement of rules, warnings, bureaucracy, debates, committee decisions and quasi-trials unless he is very manipulative. Paradoxically, these manipulative people are the ones that were supposed to be left out.

JN: I have looked at your slides of your talk at Wikimania 2008 in Alexandria, Egypt, where you presented Wikipedia as a cross-cultural platform. [2] Looking back, do you still regard Wikipedia as 'a platform of cross-cultural dialogue', as you put it?

DK: Yes and no. What I said in Alexandria is still valid, but there are problems I preferred to ignore back then and which I cannot ignore now. I talked optimistically, maybe even euphorically, about embarking on a cross-cultural journey and how anyone can benefit from it. Today, my experience on the Arabic Wikipedia seems to me more like a bonfire party. It was fun and interesting, but I didn't keep a safe distance from the fire. Wikipedia and wiki systems in general certainly have the potential of becoming a platform for cross-cultural dialogue. There are even Wiki-based educational projects in Israel that were initiated specifically for this purpose, usually for encouraging dialogue between Jewish and Arab pupils. I heard about these kinds of projects on the Wikipedia Academy conferences that Wikimedia Israel organized at the Tel Aviv University. Then again, while I think the Wikipedia policy should encourage cross-cultural dialogue for the sake of better articles among other benefits, I am not sure the current policy does that. I am concerned about the concept of 'community autonomy' that became almost a dogma on Wikimedia projects. The idea that each language community sets its own editing rules and etiquette, decides independently which sources to use, which subjects are notable, etc., is meant to ensure diversity and account for cultural variations, but since it became supreme to most other principles, you can never know for sure what to expect when moving from one Wikipedia to another, and you find it much harder to communicate with Wikipedians in different projects. This makes cross-cultural dialogue through Wikipedia very difficult.

JN: Thank you very much for this interview.

2. Dror Kamir, 'Cross-cultural Dialog through Wikipedia', http://www.slideshare.net/DrorK/AlexandriaWithRemarks.