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# **Content Policies in Social Media Critical Discourse Studies: the Invisible Hand of Social Media Providers?**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper complements theoretical and methodological considerations regarding social media in critical discourse studies as it addresses social media content policies as a key contextual element. Specifically, this paper argues that – and why – the exploration of content policies and their enforcement is indispensable when approaching social media platforms, and social media data in particular, from a critical perspective.*

*A number of researchers have already begun to identify contextual elements that require particular attention when viewing social media and social media data through a CDS lens. However, social media sites' content policies, as a pervasive contextual element, have not received adequate research attention yet.*

*Drawing on Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) and recent developments in Social Media CDS (SM-CDS), this paper first demonstrates the existing gap in research. Then, it contends that social media sites' content policies deserve more detailed attention in SM-CDS, argues why this is the case and elaborates on the different aspects of content policies and policy enforcement that require examination. After detailed theoretical discussion of this, empirical evidence to support this argument is presented in the form of a case study of Wikipedia and Wikipedia data.*

**Key words:** social media, CDS, SM-CDS, content policies, Wikipedia,

## **1. Introduction**

The advent of social media has changed the communicative landscape – merging interpersonal and mass communication, the convergence of different modes of communication, the integration and recontextualisation of sources and content are just a few elements that mark this change. While individual platforms come and go out of fashion, target and attract different audiences and serve different purposes, overall social media usage has exponentially expanded and permeated all aspects of life over the past ten years (van Dijck 2013: 4).

Thus, it is not surprising that social media and the associated transformation of the communicative landscape have sparked research across many fields in

the Humanities and Social Sciences, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) being among them. While a number of researchers have studied social media empirically and theoretically (Barton 2015; Neumayer 2012; Zappavigna 2015; Page Barton, Unger, and Zappavigna 2014; Jarrett 2016; Seargeant and Tagg 2014), several scholars have presented considerations on how to systematically approach social media and social media data from an explicitly CDS perspective (e.g. Unger, Wodak, and KhosraviNik 2016; KhosraviNik 2017).

Building on these scholars' work, this paper, first, demonstrates that a particular element of contextualisation has not received sufficient attention in Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) – social media sites' content policies. Second, this paper offers a detailed *theoretical* exploration why the investigation of social media sites' content policies is indeed indispensable in SM-CDS as they have a) tangible consequences on social media data and b) such policies – as social practice – have noteworthy broader implications. Finally, I underscore these theoretical considerations with empirical evidence – data taken from Wikipedia, the collaboratively created encyclopaedia and social media platform<sup>1</sup>, are used to illustrate the impact content policies have on site content.

The article is structured as follows: a brief overview of key tenets of CDS is followed by a discussion of how social media and social media data have been approached in CDS, including contextual elements already identified as crucial. Against this backdrop, I add a component of contextualisation – I discuss the relevance of content policies and their enforcement and argue why and how this aspect is significant. Finally, Wikipedia serves as a case study to demonstrate how impactful content policies are – how these policies shape Wikipedia's outwardly-directed content and thus deserve particular attention<sup>2</sup>. The paper ends with concluding remarks and an outlook on future studies of social media within a CDS framework.

## **2. Critical Discourse Studies**

CDS is a 'form of critical social research' (Fairclough 2010: 203) with many manifestations united by the view of language use as carrying out ideological work. Language use – discourse – is understood as a means of giving expression to and representing, but also as a tool to construct or contest power relations and, generally, as a form of social practice (Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 258). Thus, at the core of CDS lies the view that discourse plays a vital role in the construction, reflection, maintenance but also subversion of the societal status quo and its power structures (Wodak and Meyer 2001: 10). Additionally, discourse and other, non-linguistic social practices/structures are understood as mutually constitutive. Hence, apart from discourse shaping (social) reality/practices, discourse, in turn, is shaped and influenced by the given social practices and the societal status quo (Wodak 2001b: 5).

Another unifying characteristic – 'critique' – relates, in essence, to researchers' perspective on what linguistic analysis can or should aim to accomplish. Starting from the view that language use is ideological, linguistic analysis is understood as a means of challenging taken-for-granted

assumptions manifest in discourse and denaturalising the seemingly ‘natural’ status quo (Machin and Mayr 2012: 4–5). Generally then, CDS researchers share the view that investigating language use can provide an insight into the workings, structure and order of societies. Beyond this explanatory critique, CDS researchers then aim to determine what the social optimum is and how to effect social change to achieve this ideal (Fairclough 1992: 79).

Finally, and central for this paper, CDS emphasises the importance of contextualisation, i.e. embedding discourse material in layers of background information. As discourse and other social practice are inextricably linked, discourse cannot be examined in isolation and still yield a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. What is more, contextualisation serves a triangulatory purpose and thus potentially mitigates researcher bias (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 33–40). Concerning form and extent of contextualisation, researchers’ ‘analytical emphasis’ affects the focus on some point along the continuum between macro and micro level of investigation<sup>3</sup>, which contextual information researchers provide and how they relate this information to the aspect they focus on (Hart and Cap 2014: 1).

Wodak identifies four context layers, which serve to support researchers in ensuring that they approach contextualisation systematically (cf. Wodak 2001a). First, she proposes an examination of the data and their immediate co-text. The second level consists of ‘the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses’, that is, how the discourse sample relates to and recontextualises other discourses and discourse material. Wodak’s third layer consists of questions regarding situatedness – ‘the extralinguistic social/sociological variables and institutional frames of a specific “context of situation”’ and the ‘formality of situation, the place, the time, the occasion of the communicative event, the group(s) of recipients, the interactive/political roles of the participants’ (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 41). The fourth and broadest level of context is the historical, social, cultural and political context ‘which the discursive practices are embedded in and related to’ (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 41).

The following section addresses the evolution and characteristic traits of social media. It details how CDS scholars have conceptualised social media and addresses how to approach them from a CDS perspective.

### **3. Social Media and CDS**

The development of social media is part of the broader Web 2.0 evolution, which describes a technological leap that gave rise to the convergence of different modes of communication (Herring 2013: 2–4). This evolution also precipitated the shift to the ‘participatory internet’ with its numerous social media platforms, where users take an active role in generating content (KhosraviNik and Unger 2016: 207). Social media, having developed out of this change in the communicative landscape, may be defined in terms of their extraordinary communicative qualities – users

- (a.) work together in producing and compiling content; (b.) perform interpersonal communication and mass communication simultaneously or separately – sometimes mass performance of interpersonal communication

and; (c.) have access to see and respond to institutionally (e.g. newspaper articles) or user-generated content (KhosraviNik 2017: 582).

Based on this definition of social media communication, sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter can be classified social media platforms. Even Wikipedia, a website best known as a collaboratively created encyclopaedia, shares the communicative affordances characteristic of a social media site (cf. Page et al. 2014: 41, 92; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010: 59): Wikipedia – comparable to Facebook and Twitter – depends on users who participate and collaborate to create content. Moreover, Wikipedia invites users to interact and react to user or institutionally created content and, simultaneously, communicate information to a broad audience via Wikipedia articles (see more on this in section 4).

As the above definition indicates, social media are notably different from traditional (news) media and thus pose a host of challenges to critical researchers. These reach from questions, such as how to account for the combination of modes and multimodal meaning making when analysing social media data, to issues pertaining to elements of content production/consumption in settings where the conventional distinction between producers and consumers does not apply. Various scholars have begun to address these challenges. Fuchs, for example, deals with the merged roles of producers/consumers (2014) and also problematizes mere quantification and big data analysis divorced from context and theoretical considerations in social media research (2017). By comparison, Androutsopoulos (2008), already in 2008, proposes a combination of ethnographic and discourse analytical methods, and Jurgenson (2012), viewing the internet as an integrated element of society, generally cautions against the flawed understanding of online contexts as divorced from offline contexts.

All of these researchers already highlight the importance of a context-sensitive approach to social media and social media data. Building on this, KhosraviNik (2017: 4) proposes a ‘contextualisation level which embeds both the text and the medium’ in the broader social, cultural and political context in his discussion of Social Media CDS (SM-CDS). That is, CDS researchers are urged to address how the social media site examined relates to society at large and what its function in society is or can be (cf. KhosraviNik 2017: 4–5; KhosraviNik and Unger 2016: 214). Thus, one focal point when examining social media (data) is Wodak’s fourth contextualisation level in particular or, more specifically, the importance of bridging the gap between the third and fourth context level as discussed above (Reisigl and Wodak 2001).

Naturally, the development of new communication technologies and associated media also requires detailed examination of the immediate institutional frame, i.e. the third contextual layer. As illustrated by the abovementioned definition of social media, KhosraviNik highlights the difference between traditional top-down media (e.g. broadcast media) and social media with regard to the new forms of collaborative and collective content creation, mass and interpersonal communication (also cf. Jones 2008). Therefore, and in addition to embedding the medium in its broader societal context, ‘paying some attention to the media practices and the affordances of the technologies that allow social media data to be produced

and shared' is key when engaging with social media and social media data in a CDS context (Unger, Wodak, and KhosraviNik 2016: 281).

With respect to this, Page et al. (2014: 11) and later Unger et al. (2016) draw on Herring (2007) to aid researchers in approaching and assessing social media systematically, in particular with respect to the third layer of context<sup>4</sup>. Herring proposes a number of medium factors (e.g. size of message, synchronicity) and situational factors (e.g. purpose, norms). The following subsection addresses a subcategory of the latter in more detail.

### 3.1 Social Media and their Policies

As part of her situational factors, Herring refers to three types of norms. The '[n]orms of language' refer to the linguistic idiosyncrasies and conventions a social media community might share. By comparison, 'norms of social appropriateness' refer to conduct policies and netiquette, i.e. standards of how participants ought to behave. These are notable as they impact how users might interact – how they share content, argue and persuade. Finally,

“[n]orms of organization” refer to formal or informal administrative protocols having to do with how a group is formed (if applicable), how new members are admitted, whether it has a leader, moderator, or other persons whose role it is to perform official functions, how messages are distributed and stored [...], how participants who misbehave are punished, etc. (Herring 2007)

Herring's norms already touch upon site policies in general as many social media platforms cite particular conduct policies ('norms of social appropriateness'). What is more, Herring's 'norms of organization' suggest aspects of policy enforcement. However, her categorisation does not address the issue of social media's *content* policies, an aspect that has become increasingly important in light of recent controversies about content manipulation and censorship (e.g. Rosenberg 2018; Solon 2017).

Still, the fact that content policies<sup>5</sup> have not been recognised as a central component of investigation in Social Media CDS is not surprising for two reasons (but see Gillespie 2018). First, the line between conduct and content regulations is not definitive as, of course, how something is said and what is being said are inextricably linked. Second, many of the most well-known social media sites proclaim their open and laissez-faire approach to users' content production and dissemination. By comparison, the practice of content manipulation via policies and policy enforcement is not advertised. For instance, Twitter alleges 'to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers' (Twitter 2018c). Similarly, YouTube claims 'to give everyone a voice and show them the world' and supposedly, 'Wikipedia is free content that anyone can use, edit, and distribute' (Wikipedia 2016b). Only recently, social media sites have begun to limit this self-representation of unfettered openness – while Tumblr claims that '[y]ou can post whatever you want on your Tumblr', it immediately hedges this *carte blanche* with: 'as long as it is lawful and follows our Community Guidelines and Terms of Service' (Tumblr 2018). Facebook changed its mission statement: originally the site intended 'to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected' but then it changed this to read: 'To give people the power to build community and bring

the world closer together' in 2017, arguably in reaction to the proliferation of hate speech, fake news and other harmful content on the site (Kelly 2017).

The following section sheds light on several aspects that deserve attention when dealing with social media sites' content policies.

### 3.2 Content Policies and their Enforcement

Irrespective of the apparent openness of social media sites or, at times, in line with the increasing hedging of this openness, most, if not all, social media sites have developed 'terms of use' policies including content regulations that are applied to their users on a daily basis. Such rules that 'condition users' abilities to act in these spaces' (Stein 2013: 353) are therefore central when examining social media and social media data in a CDS context. For example, Facebook's 'terms of service' refer to its 'Community Standards', which describe Facebook's 'standards regarding the content you [the Facebook user] post to Facebook and your activity on Facebook and other Facebook Products' (Facebook 2018b)<sup>6</sup>. Comparably, Wikipedia explicitly refers to 'content policies' which direct users' activities and ensure that Wikipedia's goal – to be an encyclopaedia – is still at the heart of its users' activities. (Wikipedia 2018b). What is more, even though the site's policies have been complemented via community efforts, the most central content policies were put in place top down, that is, by the website creators themselves: representing the Neutral Point of View, providing verifiable information and not citing unpublished sources (Schiff 2006; Wales 2005).

In order to enforce such rules, social media platforms can take various actions. *Enforcement actions* can reach from warning users, to deleting content, blocking users and to suppressing entire topics referred to online. Beyond manipulating site content, certain social media platforms may even get actively involved in instigating legal proceedings. For example, if posted content is considered inappropriate, Facebook may warn users, limit or completely disable their ability to post and, in addition to this, they reserve the right to 'notify law enforcement' (Facebook 2018a). By comparison, Twitter limits the visibility and searchability of 'accounts under investigation or which have been detected as sharing content in violation of [Twitter's] Rules' (Twitter 2018a). Twitter may even 'prevent certain content from trending' (Twitter 2018a) if it is not deemed conducive to 'healthy discussions' (Twitter 2018b). To give another example, Wikipedia contributors may have their content deleted and may even be banned from editing Wikipedia by other contributors (Wikipedia 2016a).

This already leads to the next important aspect to consider in a CDS context, namely the (group of) *actors*<sup>7</sup> enforcing these policies. Here, I identify three strategies: one, there is top-down enforcement, e.g. the corporations behind Facebook or Twitter (by means of employees or detection algorithms) detect a content policy violation and take punitive action. The other end of the spectrum is community-based enforcement, i.e. users and contributors are organised in a way that allows them to enforce (content) policies themselves, e.g. Wikipedia predominantly pursues this strategy. Finally, in-between these two poles are instances of users/contributors notifying the social media site, which then checks if the flagged content is problematic enough to warrant punitive action<sup>8</sup>. The three different enforcement strategies I identified – 'top-

down institutional enforcement’, ‘community-based enforcement’ and ‘community-informed enforcement’ – leave very different traces in discourse material. That is, researchers might not even be aware that their data sample is incomplete or skewed as it might have been subject to a top-down corporate decision to exclude content. In contrast, decisions about content modifications concerning particular Wikipedia articles can, very often, be traced in the associated community discussions.

In addition to considering content regulations, enforcement actions and who enforces the policies, it is important to examine a social media providers’ *record of (content) policy enforcement*. At times, the phrasing used for social media policies might be rather vague, possibly to allow applicability around the globe and across legal and societal contexts. Therefore, and to attain an understanding of where a particular site actually draws the line and, e.g. flags/removes content, it is imperative to research concrete instances where punitive action was taken. What is more, such punitive action should always be viewed in context – political, regional, legal and social. The national legal context may play a notable role in connection with hate speech, for example, Austria prohibits statements/actions of national socialist resurgence, i.e. posting a swastika on Facebook can, beyond punitive action by Facebook itself, lead to legal prosecution<sup>9</sup>. One instance where Facebook enforced content restrictions based on contextual consideration was the conflict between Russia and Ukraine – Facebook refers to two ‘slang words the two groups have long used to describe each other’ (Allan 2017). Facebook claims that

[a]fter conflict started in the region in 2014, people in both countries started to report the words used by the other side as hate speech. We [comm.: Facebook] did an internal review and concluded that they were right. We began taking both terms down, a decision that was initially unpopular on both sides because it seemed restrictive, but in the context of the conflict felt important to us (Allan 2017)

This is a particularly notable example as the phrasing here does not hide the extremely subjective nature of assessment – Facebook does not offer a rationale or any concrete parameters used for their decision but that it ‘felt important’.

The next section elucidates why exploring content policies and their enforcement are crucial, particularly in the context of CDS.

### **3.3 Why Content Policies and their Enforcement Matter**

In the main, content rules and their enforcement deserve attention in SM-CDS for two reasons: (a) they have tangible consequences on social media data and (b) such policies are a form of social practice and thus represent and enact certain social norms and structures.

The former point refers to the fact that content policies distort social media data. Whether there is certain content that could not be sampled because it was removed before the researcher began data sampling, or what content is actually visible and disseminated on a social media sites and, connected to this, whose voice is represented and whose is suppressed – these are but a few

issues created in part by social media sites' content policies and their enforcement. As social media data are shaped by content policies, they must always be critically assessed with respect to whether particular regulations might have led to the exclusion of particular voices.

It could be argued that the data CDS scholars are likely to select for examination might be especially affected by sites' content regulations seeing as CDS aims to examine (and redress) social problems. To do so, CDS researchers might select and sample social media data that deal with a particular social problem, a conflict, a power struggle, a vulnerable group, etc. where content might be, in part, classified as hate speech, (threat of) violence or, at least, biased in some way. Such offences are subject of various social media sites' regulations, for example, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube each have certain regulations concerning hate speech and discrimination against particular vulnerable groups (Facebook 2018a; Youtube 2018; Twitter 2018a). Therefore, CDS researchers should be particularly mindful to treat their data samples as potentially incomplete, manipulated and distorted.

Another connected point relates to the CDS view of wider social practice and discourse as mutually constitutive. In line with this, analysts aim to understand broader societal issues through the discursive lens, i.e. by examining language material. What is more, the *absence* of language material on certain issues can also shed light on such broader societal issues. However, if there are indeed such discursive absences, it is important to understand whether they occur because there is an actual gap or whether this gap was forcibly introduced by an institution, imposed by a social media community or even imposed by a government. Therefore, examining content policies and understanding whether they affected the social media data in the given context of study is crucial to arrive at a reliable analysis of data and interpretation of a social issue.

The latter point mentioned in the introductory paragraph of this section touches upon the notion of content policies as social practice. Indeed, content regulations and associated enforcement strategies deserve attention with respect to their broader implications concerning democracy, free speech, censorship and the protection of vulnerable groups. Freedom of speech is widely recognised as the bedrock of functioning democracies or, as Stein (2013: 354) puts it, 'the representation and circulation of diverse opinions, interests, and experiences are necessary in order for citizens to collectively evaluate and determine the common good' and media provide a critical platform for this circulation and exchange. It is tempting to, then, prematurely celebrate the Web 2.0 with its participatory nature and multiple social media sites as a heaven-sent tool for such democratic processes as social media allegedly consist of 'creative content produced by and for consumers and users, without the need for institutional filtering or control bureaucracies' (Hartley 2013: 130). However, while content produced by users might be more prevalent than in traditional news media, social media content and its production is by no means independent from institutional control – enforcing conduct as well as content policies is one means of how this control is exerted. Consequently, identifying these regulations, how they are enforced and who<sup>10</sup> enforces them is key to understand, for instance, users' agency and ability but also limitations<sup>11</sup> to con- and distribute content (cf. van Dijck 2009).



Another notable benefit of examining content policies and enforcement strategies is the insight they provide into broader societal trends. Social media content policies may shed light on what, at any given time, is deemed acceptable or unacceptable content in society/societies and how these elements might change and evolve over time. Such policies provide an insight into how sometimes quite controversial and complex issues and seemingly contradictory values are negotiated and reconciled. To give an example, certain sites may emphasise their commitment to freedom of speech but also censor hate speech – investigating a social media provider’s stance on this sheds light on their value system, or the value system they assume their users subscribe to.

Connected to this, the abovementioned enforcement record of social media sites’ content policies is notable. The enforcement record might shed light on ideological tendencies supported by the social media platform in question or, if enforcement hinges on community effort, what postings members of the community report as unacceptable at certain points in time. While on the surface, many social media sites present content policies that seem similar to one another, their practice of when and where these are enforced can differ notably and might, thus, allow a glimpse into the workings of different platforms. A potential problem in this context is that, as outsiders to the institutions, researchers might not have access to the processes that lead to or do not lead to policy enforcement. Still, they can observe the consequences, such as Facebook treating particular postings as hate speech but possibly not doing so in other instances, and use further contextual information to theorise and explore why this might be the case.

Generally, examining content policies and their enforcement is not equally challenging across the social media landscape. This is because some websites’ enforcement is traceable and others’ is not. For instance, YouTube content moderators might have access to more specific and detailed content policies and they might remove particular content before any regular users sees said content. Hence, regular site users remain in the dark as to the extent to which the platform provider might censor uploaded content. On the other hand, some sites – typically ones that rely on ‘community-based enforcement’ – have a relatively accessible process of policy enforcement. For instance, Wikipedia, as belonging to the ‘community-based enforcement’ category, allows a glimpse into how policy adherence is explicitly negotiated and thus traceable for the researcher. Finally, a potential ‘black box’ remains irrespective of the social media site examined, namely the question of who precisely are the individuals behind social media content policies and their enforcement. Researchers must acknowledge that reliable information on this aspect might be limited and adjust their research objectives accordingly.

The following section presents a case study of Wikipedia and a particular Wikipedia page to illustrate how the platform’s content policies, enforcement strategies, actions and enforcement record indeed affect Wikipedia’s outwardly-directed encyclopaedic content. It is important to point out that, due to spatial limitations, this case study does *not* assess the broader implications of particular content policies and their effect, but is indeed *limited to* demonstrating that such policies shape site content.

#### **4. Case Study – Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia**

Wikipedia is among the top most visited websites globally (Alexa 2018) and is famous for its encyclopaedic articles. A lesser-known aspect is that each Wikipedia article, i.e. encyclopaedic entry, is accompanied by a so-called Talk Page (TP). That is, a discussion site that allows so-called Wikipedians (Wikipedia visitors who also want to contribute to and edit Wikipedia) to discuss controversial (editing) issues with regard to the article in question. Thus, the front stage – the outwardly-directed encyclopaedic entry visited by a considerable number of internet users – is supplemented by sites not intended for public consumption, the back stage (cf. Goffman 1959; Herring 2013: 15).

The existence of such sites qualifies Wikipedia as a social media platform. To rephrase KhosraviNik's above definition, on social media, users (a) collaborate to create content, (b) engage in both mass and interpersonal communication, and (c) access and recontextualise each other's and institutionally-produced content. Wikipedia meets these criteria as Wikipedians engage in debate on Wikipedia discussion sites and, simultaneously, collaborate to create content directed at readers of the encyclopaedia on the article pages. Additionally, the Wikipedia editors have access to external source material (such as newspapers) as well as user-created content.

What is more, Wikipedia's structure makes it the ideal platform for a short and self-contained but still illustrative case study about social media content policies and their impact, as it allows researchers to trace the impact of content policies on site content. On the one hand, there is the encyclopaedic article, where numerous Wikipedians – potentially anyone who visits the site and has a minimal degree of (digital) literacy – contribute content. Since Wikipedia provides access to the article history, i.e. every version of an article that has ever existed is recorded by date and accessible to the public, the addition or removal of content over time can be traced. On the other hand, Wikipedia TPs allow the opportunity to glimpse behind the scenes of this content production process. As these Wikipedia sites serve as spaces for debate about Wikipedia's encyclopaedic content, researchers can observe Wikipedians' referring to content policies and aspects of enforcement. Additionally, the TP discussion threads are timestamped, which enables researchers to correlate the discussed element with article development.

It is notable that Wikipedia's general modus operandi also makes it the ideal platform for this case study. The site largely relies on community effort in policy creation and enforcement (Konieczny 2010), which, arguably, necessitated the creation of Wikipedia discussion sites in the first place<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, community-based action requires transparency concerning policies and enforcement – to enable the Wikipedia community to act and build on existing policies, Wikipedia contains numerous sites providing a detailed understanding of current content policies and enforcement procedures. These guide Wikipedians' actions but also help researchers to understand Wikipedia's policies and related aspects.

## 4.1 Data and Method

I sampled all TP entries that accompany the English Wikipedia article on the European Union as this was a particularly controversial topic that yielded ample discussion (Wikipedia 2019a). Thus, I collected 15 years of debate from 2001, when the article and TP were created, to December 2015, when discussions and editing activity were low, i.e. my sampling did not interfere with any ongoing heated debates. All in all, the sampled corpus consists of 611,431 tokens.

After reviewing Wikipedia's core content policies, enforcement actions and record in connection with the article on the EU, I examined the TP corpus using AntConc (Anthony 2015). That is, I searched for occurrences of references to Wikipedia's core content policies limited to the search terms: 'WP:.\*' and 'Wikipedia:.\*'<sup>13</sup>. I extracted each instance found through this search, examined the associated concordance lines and expanded these lines to take into account entire discussion threads as this permits an understanding to what end Wikipedians refer to content policies, e.g. to include or exclude content from the article on the European Union.

Since TP entries are marked for time of posting, I was able to determine when these references to Wikipedia policies were made. What is more, each version that has ever existed of the Wikipedia article 'European Union' is freely accessible and is also dated, which allowed me to correlate TP postings and associated Wikipedia article version. Thus, after examining the identified references to content policies on the TP, I compared these to the corresponding article versions in order to assess if the debate had an impact on the article and, if so, what this impact was.

Section 4.2 gives a brief overview of Wikipedia's core content policies and aspects connected to policy enforcement. Section 4.3 homes in on Wikipedians' references to content policies in the TP data and corresponding changes made to the Wikipedia article.

## 4.2 Wikipedia Operations – Content Policies and their Enforcement

### *Content policies*

Wikipedia lists three core content policies: 'Neutral point of view', 'No original research' and 'Verifiability' (Wikipedia 2018b). These three were not, as many other Wikipedia policies, developed by the community itself, but were introduced by the site developers in the early 2000s (Wales 2005). The first – the neutral point of view ('NPOV') encapsulates the encyclopaedic idea of representing 'fairly, proportionately, and, as far as possible, without bias, all of the significant views that have been published by reliable sources on a topic' (Wikipedia 2015). The second policy – the exclusion of original research 'OR' – states that Wikipedia articles 'may not contain any new analysis or synthesis of published material that serves to advance a position not clearly advanced by the sources' and excludes 'original thought' (Wikipedia 2018b). Verifiability of information refers to Wikipedia's standard of always citing and listing sources so that 'people reading and editing the encyclopaedia can check that information comes from a reliable source' (Wikipedia 2018b). In turn, 'reliable sources' means that only the 'best and most reputable authoritative sources

available' ought to be used without specifying how to reliably identify such (Wikipedia 2015)<sup>14</sup>. While the Wikipedia community has since introduced additional content policies, these are not detailed here (for more, see for example Wikipedia 2019b).

### *Enforcement strategy*

Wikipedia predominantly pursues a community-based enforcement strategy, that is, Wikipedians enforce Wikipedia's content policies themselves as can be seen, for instance, from the community's references to alleged content policy violations in my corpus (see section 4.3). In this context, it should be noted that for all its apparent inclusiveness, Wikipedia has a contributor hierarchy. That is, certain Wikipedians have more rights and access to modify content and to police the community depending on seniority, number of contributions and community elections (see Kopf 2018 for more on this).

### *Enforcement actions*

When a Wikipedian deems another's edit in violation of Wikipedia's content policies, they can delete or replace this content. They can simply undo other Wikipedians' revisions of an article or – depending on a Wikipedian's position along the contributor hierarchy – even exclude another Wikipedian from editing content altogether. What is more, as a last resort, encyclopaedic entries can be 'protected'. That is, to prevent repeated and undesired content modifications (e.g. 'vandalism' (Wikipedia 2016a)), articles can be locked against modification in their entirety, so that only high-ranking contributor groups may modify content. It is worth mentioning that the majority of enforcement actions are usually not applied to TPs and, in addition, Wikipedians are discouraged from modifications of given content on TPs in general (Wikipedia 2016a). Therefore, in contrast to Wikipedia articles, talk page content is less likely to have been tampered with post hoc.

### *Record of enforcement*

Tracing the TP discussions and the evolution of the article 'European Union' in section 4.3. shows that the article was subject to numerous acts of content policy enforcement between 2001 and 2015. In addition to this, the article on the EU was 'protected' 14 times (see Kopf 2018 for more), i.e. this article apparently elicited enough undesired content modifications to warrant this form of editing restriction.

Section 4.3 presents a short overview of how and to what end Wikipedians referred to content policies in their discussion of the article on the EU, and what consequences this had on article content. Rather than an exhaustive examination, the aim is merely to demonstrate – by use of one particular social media site – that content policies indeed affect site content, here Wikipedia's outwardly-directed article content.

### 4.3 Cited Content Policies and their Impact

For the purpose of this short case study, I limit my data discussion to instances that meet two requirements: (a) they refer to at least one core content policy introduced above: NPOV, OR or verifiability and (b) they do so explicitly and incontestably, i.e. by use of Wikipedia's standard reference and link to its body of policies: 'WP:\*' and 'Wikipedia:\*'. This results in 24 concordance lines – 19 of which<sup>15</sup> present unambiguous arguments for either inclusion or exclusion of content<sup>16</sup>.

More importantly, the overwhelming majority of these references to Wikipedia content policy on the TP have a direct and traceable impact on the content of the corresponding article. The following presents a brief discussion of how Wikipedians employed content policy to affect article content.

Two postings comprising two concordance lines invoke Wikipedia content policies to argue for the *inclusion* of specific content and are actually successful in doing so. That is, their preferred content was included in the article on the EU on the basis of citing content policy. To give one example, in September 2007, a poster modified the article by changing the EU's GDP. However, the article history shows that this change was reverted back to the original. On the TP, the Wikipedian who undid the change argued for inclusion of the original GDP on the basis of verifiability: 'This figure may not be right, but it is it [sic] verifiable (See: WP:VERIFY)'. In this case, it is especially notable that Wikipedia content policy is judged as superseding factuality, i.e. policy compliance is apparently deemed more important than factual accuracy of particular content.

The remaining 17 concordance lines invoke Wikipedia content policy to argue for the *exclusion* of particular content from the article and 14 of these argue their case successfully (see table 1). For example, in February 2007, a Wikipedian modified the article to include an interpretation of the symbolisms underlying the EU flag 'the ring of stars may be compared with the Crown of Immortality. The ultimate salvation of Christianity, membership of the Kingdom of Heaven [...]'. Lines 1 and 2 in table 1 are part of one statement that was posted in response to this change – the poster argues that this interpretation of the EU as distinctly affiliated with Christianity ought to be excluded. They do so on the basis of content policy: 'Please read WP:REF<sup>17</sup> – about citing sources and WP:OR – no original research. Interpretation of a painting is not a source but original research'. Tracking article history shows that, as a consequence of this argument based on content policy, the article indeed excludes this content.

Another remarkable instance of content policies affecting content is given in line 3 – an editor suggested calling the EU a 'loose confederation' – this is rejected, not because the respondents necessarily disagree but: 'according to WP:OR it does not matter much whether we believe the EU meets the criteria listed in the article confederation. Only reliable secondary sources do matter'. That is, again, content policy takes absolute precedence.

Lines 13 and 14 are responses to a controversial proposal – a Wikipedian proposed that the Wikipedia articles about each EU member state ought to be streamlined in the sense of sharing an introductory paragraph that clearly identifies and defines these countries, above all else, as EU members. This edit

is comprehensively rejected on the basis of content policy: ‘what you write is WP:OR since you have not yet given any direct reliable sources that state what you have concluded yourself here’ and ‘[i]t seems to be a mistake that could be interpreted as being a failure of WP:NPOV’.

1	about citing sources and	<b>WP:OR</b> - no original research. Interpretation of
2	Please read	<b>WP:REF</b> - about citing sources and
3	Well, according to	<b>WP:OR</b> it does not matter much whether we beli
4	and probably original research	<b>WP:OR</b> ; it is about a good source (which this se
5	ikipedia articles as references:	<b>WP:V#Wikipedia</b> and sources that mirror Wiki
6	these entities are superpowers. (	<b>WP:OR</b> ). Therefore I removed the ma
7	therefore would contravene the	<b>Wikipedia</b> rules on POV. I will continue to str
8	Are you conversant with	<b>WP:OR?</b>
9	ke a subjective conclusion, i.e.,	<b>WP:POV</b> . I call it POV, because I might very w
10	of individual countries or states.	<b>WP:NOR</b> does not allow us to combine data fro
11	term, so much that it is left as	<b>WP:OR</b> .
12	(UTC) This is too much	<b>WP:OR</b> for something with so many sources
13	nation, above, what you write is	<b>WP:OR</b> since you have not yet given any direct
14	interpreted as being a failure of	<b>WP:NPOV</b> because you have (unwittingly) failed

**Table 1: 14 references to content policy lead to the exclusion of content**

Finally, in three instances Wikipedians draw on content policy to argue for exclusion of content, but lose the argument with their fellow Wikipedians. One notable example affected the introductory paragraph of the Wikipedia article on the EU, so, arguably, the part that site visitors would definitely read. A Wikipedian wished to exclude:

although the formation of a single state is not an explicit goal of the EU, eurosceptic [sic] fears that it will ultimately deprive member states of their sovereignty have made the EU (and its future) a major political issue in itself.

They argue for exclusion on the basis of a NPOV violation: ‘Please, with sugar on the top, accept Wikipedia:Neutral point of view and WP:NOT#PUBLISHER’. Ultimately, their view is rejected and the information is included. However, it is notable that this was not the case *in spite of* content policy, but because the Wikipedia community did not agree that a violation was actually given: ‘The article is supposed to be accurate. [The EU’s] controversial relationship with the nation-state and national identity, belongs in the intro as a central’.

Altogether, this brief study of Wikipedia data illustrates that content policies and their application have a major impact on article content. Indeed, only three out of 19 instances where content policies were invoked did not lead to the desired modification of the Wikipedia article.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that, while social media sites' content policies have hitherto not received sufficient consideration, they actually merit detailed investigation in Social Media CDS. In fact, such policies deserve attention in two respects. First – and as the case study of Wikipedia substantiates – they function as content corrective and thus affect and distort social media data. Secondly, content policies (and aspects of enforcement) represent/enact certain power relations and allow insights into attitudes and world views. The investigation of content policies and their enforcement may shed light on what types of content are socially acceptable at a particular point in time and whether the policies – reflecting shifting attitudes – change over time. What is more, such policies understood as social practice have remarkable implications concerning the participatory web with its apparent democratisation of content production. The ramifications and significance of content policies concerning this supposed democratisation, censorship and the protection of vulnerable groups need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

As a consequence, future studies on social media data should consider whether and how content policies and their enforcement might have affected the sample. In addition to this, even research in SM-CDS that does not engage with data should assess content policies and their enforcement since doing so permits an understanding of how content production can be restricted in times of the participatory internet, and what the wider societal implications of these restrictions might be.

## Notes

- 1 See more on Wikipedia as social media site in section 4.
- 2 Wikipedia – because of its notable structure and modus operandi – is particularly suited for the demonstration and argumentation of how content policies indeed affect site content (see more in section 4).
- 3 The school of CDS a researcher subscribes to also impacts the explanatory power ascribed to contextualisation.
- 4 Naturally, Herring's factors impact on researchers' choice of analytical parameters as well – they affect how to approach the exploration of Wodak's first, as well as second context level in connection with a CDS study focused on social media.
- 5 It is worth noting that failure to comply with conduct policies may also lead to removal of content, i.e. conduct policies also affect content.
- 6 For more information on these policies, consult, e.g. Stein 2013.
- 7 It is important to note that it is not always possible to identify the individuals involved – see more on this in 3.3.
- 8 See Farkas and Neumayer 2017 for a study of activists utilizing this method on Facebook.
- 9 This example also points towards the notable role of social media's privacy and data protection policies (and the jurisdiction social media platforms and users are subject to) as a poster's identity might or might not be protected.
- 10 Or, at least, which user group(s)/representatives of social media platforms. There might be limited access to information on the individuals/actors involved.

- 11 Such limitations need not be condemned out of hand – the CDS notion of normative critique might even lead researchers to conclude that certain restrictions on freedom of speech are acceptable.
- 12 Since community-based decision making demands explicit communication about such processes.
- 13 ‘WP:\*’ and ‘Wikipedia:\*’ are used to refer and link to Wikipedia policies, i.e. occurrences of these items are incontestable references to Wikipedia policy.
- 14 It bears repeating that an examination of these policies could lead to notable insights concerning what Wikipedia(ns) and the societies it is shaped by/shapes understand by, e.g. ‘reliable sources’ and how they believe neutrality is attainable. However, as noted at the end of section 3.3 this case study focuses on demonstrating the impact of Wikipedia policies on Wikipedia data rather than taking a wide-angle view on certain policies’ implications.
- 15 Five lines only emphasise the importance of content policies, e.g. the request to ‘internalize WP:TRUTH and WP:OR before continuing this discussion’.
- 16 Rather than indicative of an overall low number of references to Wikipedia (content) policies in the given corpus, the low number of concordance lines subject to detailed examination is owed to my drastic downsampling applying the parameters discussed.
- 17 ‘WP:REF’ is a reference to Wikipedia policy on providing verifiable and reliable sources.

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