Wikipedia's Potential to Shape Public Opinion

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Abstract

This paper discusses influences of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia on public opinion. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that is developed by volunteers. The community's work influences the actual encyclopedic content. Wikipedia contains information that is relevant to public opinion. People have plenty of opportunities to find information in Wikipedia about a variety of issues. Wikipedia is used by nearly three quarters of German internet users. Wikipedia is widely used by journalists. This boosts the dissemination of its content and its potential to influence public opinion. Parts of Wikipedia's content are biased and this bias flows from the community into the articles. Thus, Wikipedia and its online community have become a factor in public opinion formation.

Keywords

Wikipedia, Public Opinion, Political Communication

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Introduction

This paper discusses several influences of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia on public opinion. The scope of the paper is mainly theoretical, but empirical data from Germany is presented to support the theoretical assumptions.

Wikipedia is a project for the development of a free online encyclopedia. Its content is provided by a community of volunteers. The two largest language versions of Wikipedia are English (more than 3.6 million articles and an active [within the last 30 days] community of 145,412 users) and German (more than 1.25 million articles and 23,487 active users).[1] Wikipedia is one of the most attractive platforms on the Internet regarding the number of visitors. It is ranked by the alexa.com traffic ranking system 7th worldwide and 6th in the US as well as in Germany.[2]

It has been suggested (Roessing, 2008, 2009) that social-psychological processes within the community influence the content of the articles which in turn can influence public opinion. Wikipedia is more than its encyclopedic content. Every article has a discussion page which can be used by authors to discuss content, writing, sources, and other aspects of the corresponding article. There are other pages within Wikipedia that are not directly attached to the actual articles but serve organizational purposes. In order to maintain the large amount of text and to keep the rather versatile community running, a considerable amount of communication takes place in the background of the project. Some of the more busy areas of organizational operations include:

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[1] http://[en|de].wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Statistics [2011-07-03]
[2] http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/wikipedia.org [2011-07-03]

- Fight against vandalism and improper behavior. Some Internet users think it is facetious to falsify information, add obscenity, or insult people in Wikipedia. The pages discussing appropriate measures[3] are also frequently used as a theater for ideological conflicts within the community (reporting an opponent as a vandal and hoping that his account will be blocked).

- Deletion of irrelevant or ill-written articles. The conflict between so-called *inclusionists* and *exclusionists* (also: deletionists) has a long tradition. The first want as many issues covered by Wikipedia as possible (without overburdening the community). The second prefer a more qualified range of issues that are notable for an encyclopedia. This area of conflict also includes a page for appeals against prior decisions[4] and quite lengthy and intensive discussions about the criteria for notability.[5]

- Coordination administrative action. Administrators (also: sysops) are members of the community who were elected to use additional privileges for the organization of Wikipedia (Roessing, 2008). They decide which accounts are blocked and which articles are deleted or protected against vandalism or conflict. Naturally, administrators are exposed to hostile behavior almost every day. To avoid inconsistent decisions they arrange their line of action on the administrator's noticeboard.[6]

- Several other pages in the background of Wikipedia deal with conflicts, misbehavior of administrators, quality of articles, legal issues, organization of real-life meetings,

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[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Administrator_intervention_against_vandalism and
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Vandalensperrung
[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Deletion_review and
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:L%C3%B6schpr%C3%BCfung
[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability and
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Relevanzkriterien
[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Administrators%27_noticeboard and
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Administratoren/Notizen

and many more issues relevant to an army of volunteers who are working on one of the largest knowledge bases in human history.

The article-level, the discussion-level, and the meta-level of Wikipedia are closely interrelated: Articles are changed after ideas are discussed and agreements are made on the discussion level. People who behave aggressively try to push their points of view against community consensus are blocked after discussions on the meta-level, which stabilizes the content of Wikipedia's articles. The interrelations between the three levels of Wikipedia's community work are illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1: The three levels of community work
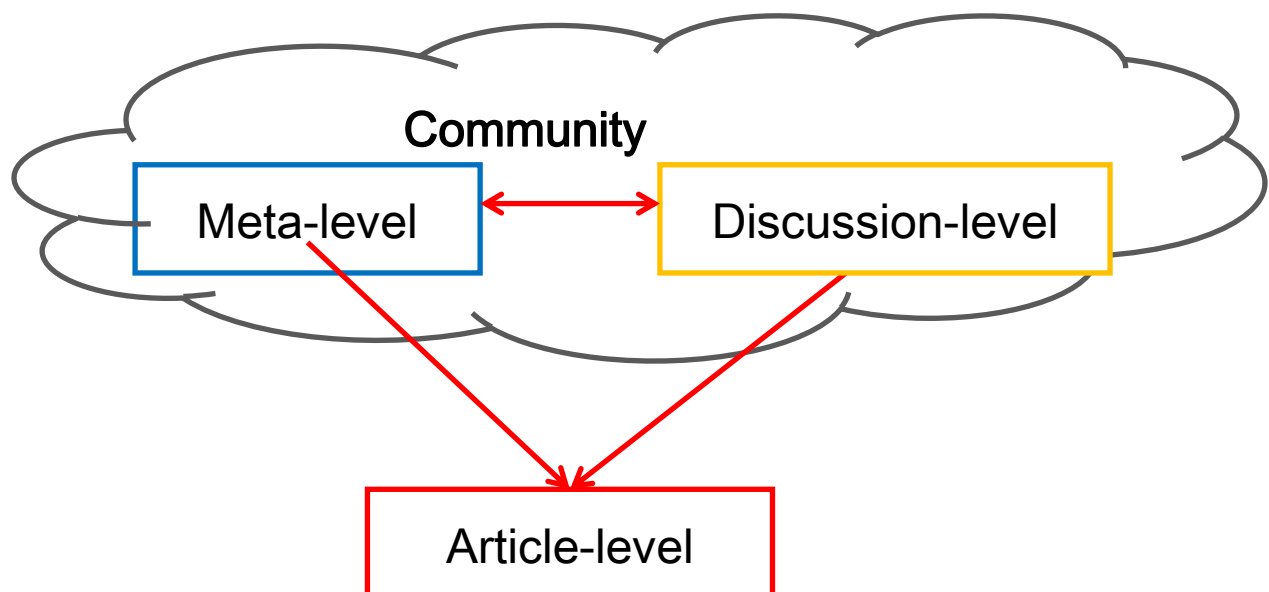
Source: Own drawing (cf. Roessing, 2008, p. 174).

The user-generated encyclopedic content covers a wide range of topics, including many that are relevant to political communication and public opinion. The following data is taken from the German language version of Wikipedia. One the one hand, it is known that there are differences between the different language versions of Wikipedia as well as between public

opinion in different cultures. On the other hand, aim, tasks, and proceedings of Wikipedia's different communities are quite similar and processes of public opinion can be compared across borders (Pfeil, Zaphiris, & Ang, 2006, Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004).

Wikipedia's content is organized in categories. Categories can contain subcategories and articles. Figure 2 presents data from the Allensbach-Institute on what people in Germany worry about and the number of articles and subcategories for the corresponding categories in Wikipedia. Leaving the content of the subcategories aside, the numbers indicate how much information is available to the reader with two mouse-clicks from an article of interest.

Figure 2: German worries and Wikipedia's content (2011-07-04)

Question: *"Please have a look at this list of items and tell me those where you would say: Yes, that worries me?"*[7]

People's worries

(Worry[8] / "Yes"[9])

Number of articles (subcategories)[10]
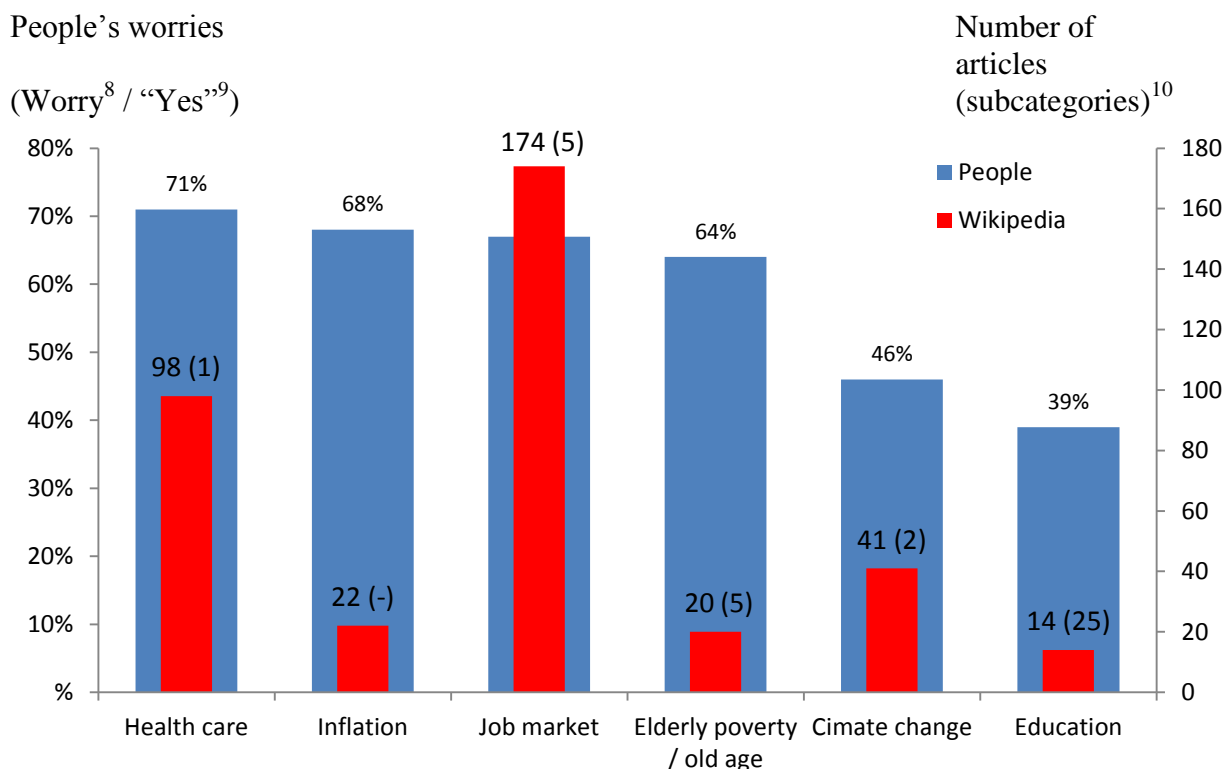
Source: IfD-Survey 10055, May 2010, own analysis.

Additionally, there are 81 articles and one subcategory (including 138 additional articles) in the category 'German parties'[11] and the category for political scandals[12] contains 54 articles

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[7] „Es soll einmal untersucht werden, was den Menschen heute Sorgen bereitet, was sie bedrückt. Könnten Sie diese Liste bitte einmal durchsehen und mir alle Punkte nennen, von denen Sie sagen würden: Ja, das macht mir Sorgen?"

[8] Die Arbeitslosigkeit; Dass die Krankenkassen viele Leistungen nicht mehr übernehmen, dass man im Krankheitsfall nicht mehr gut versorgt ist; Dass man im Alter zu wenig Geld bekommt; Dass alles immer teurer wird und unser Geld an Wert verliert; Dass unser Bildungssystem nicht den Anforderungen des modernen Berufslebens entspricht; Dass der Klimawandel nicht mehr aufzuhalten ist.

[9] IfD-Survey 10055, May 2010, Germans over 16 years of age.

[10] http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kategorie:Arbeitsmarkt; http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kategorie:gesetzliche_Krankenversicherung; http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kategorie:Alter; http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kategorie:Inflation; http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kategorie:Bildung; http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kategorie:Klimawandel

as well as 4 subcategories including additional 110 articles and two more subcategories. German-speaking citizens have plenty to read in Wikipedia if they are interested in (or worry about) politics. However, this finding is put into perspective by the numbers on popular culture: The category 'popsong'[13] lists 942 articles; the category for the corresponding musicians contains 289 articles and two subcategories which in turn contain 2,079 entries.

**Journalists disseminate Wikipedia's content**

The potential to affect its readers is multiplied by journalists making use of Wikipedia as a research tool. Several studies have shown that journalists like and use Wikipedia. Machill, Beiler & Zenker (2008) found that German journalists rely mostly on the search engines Google and Yahoo and on Wikipedia for their online-research. In another study, Neuberger, Nuernbergk, and Rischke (2008, p. 112) found that in two thirds of participating editorial offices more than 50 percent of the journalists used Wikipedia for their work. Ninety-six percent of the respondents acknowledged that Wikipedia offers correct information at least in most cases. A content analysis of German national newspapers and a news-magazine revealed that Wikipedia was mentioned 207 times between January and June 2009. In 16 percent of these 207 cases, Wikipedia was named as a source of information for the newspaper. It is quite plausible that journalists use Wikipedia as a source without naming it explicitly in many more cases. Figure 3 illustrates the two channels over which Wikipedia influences public opinion.

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[11]   http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kategorie:Partei_in_Deutschland
[12]   http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kategorie:Politische_Aff%C3%A4re
[13]   http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kategorie:Popsong

Figure 3: Wikipedia's influence on public opinion
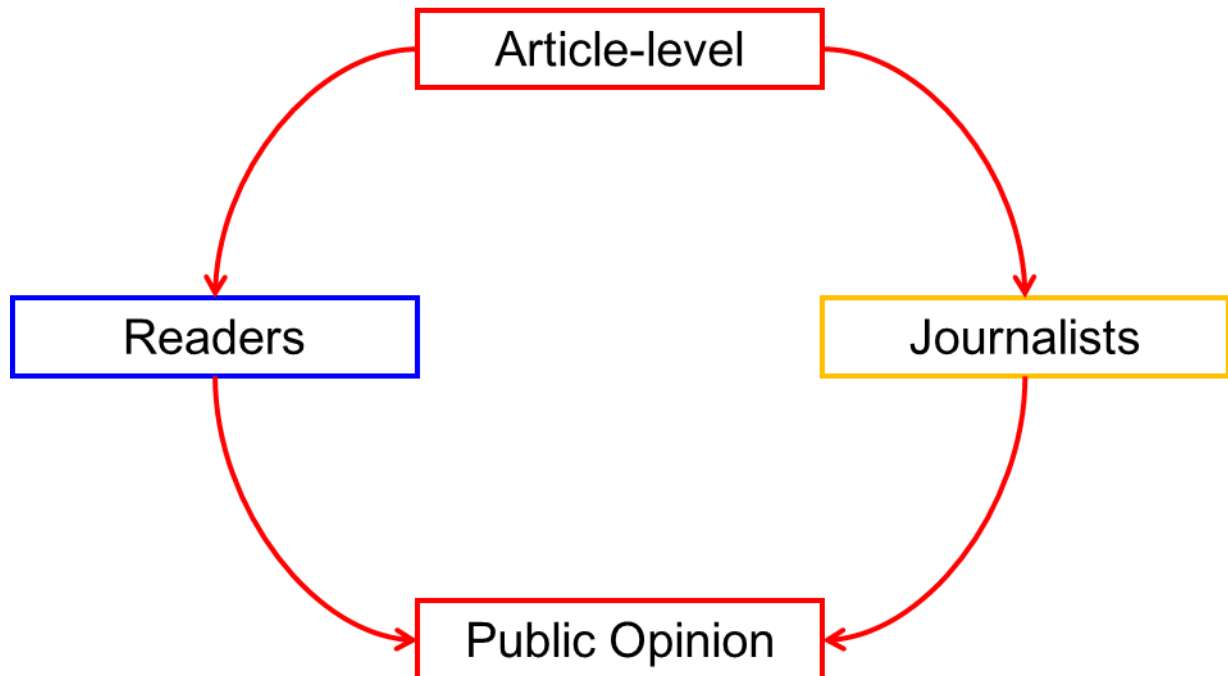
Source: Own drawing.

Wikipedia as a source of (political) information

The reach of Wikipedia is extremely high: As one of Germany's most visited websites it reaches more citizens than popular online mass media such as spiegel.de or bild.de.[14] In 2010, nearly three quarters (73 percent) of German Internet users accessed Wikipedia at least occasionally, nearly one quarter at least once a week. Among young people Wikipedia achieved a range of 95 percent (Busemann & Gscheidle, 2010).

For the purpose of political information, in Germany as well as in other modern democracies, traditional mass media still play the most important role. The most popular source for gaining

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[14]   Cf. http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/de.wikipedia.org: de.wikipedia.org ranks sixth in Germany [2009-11-03].

political information is television. This applies to Germany as well as to France or to the United States. During election campaigns more than three quarters of the respective national electorate got their news about the election from television. In contrast, only about one third used the Internet for this purpose (cf. Müller, 2011, pp. 126-130). Among different Internet sources, the online presence of TV stations (U.S.) and newspapers (Germany) play the most important role. In contrast, only few voters visit political parties' or candidates' online presence to get information on political affairs or campaigns (cf. Kepplinger & Podschuweit, 2010).

A telephone survey conducted in the run-up of the German federal state election in Rhineland-Palatinate confirmed these findings. Beyond that, the survey showed that Wikipedia was ranked directly behind the web pages of the national and regional press: One month before the election in March 2010, almost one fourth of the Rhineland-Palatinate Internet users visited Wikipedia to get informed about political affairs and the political parties (figure 4). Thus, Wikipedia was one of the most widespread Internet sources and much more important than social networks or political parties' websites.

The potential effectiveness of Wikipedia in election campaigns is increased by its high credibility. Even journalists, trained to cross-check sources, ascribe high rates of credibility to the online encyclopedia (cf. previous chapter). The first reason for its high credibility might be that Wikipedia is perceived to distribute information based on facts only and not on the opinion of the author. A second reason may be that the users do not recognize economic or other kinds of influences which are more obvious in traditional advertising. Consequently, it can be assumed that due to its wide distribution and its high credibility among the electorate Wikipedia plays an important role in election campaigns.
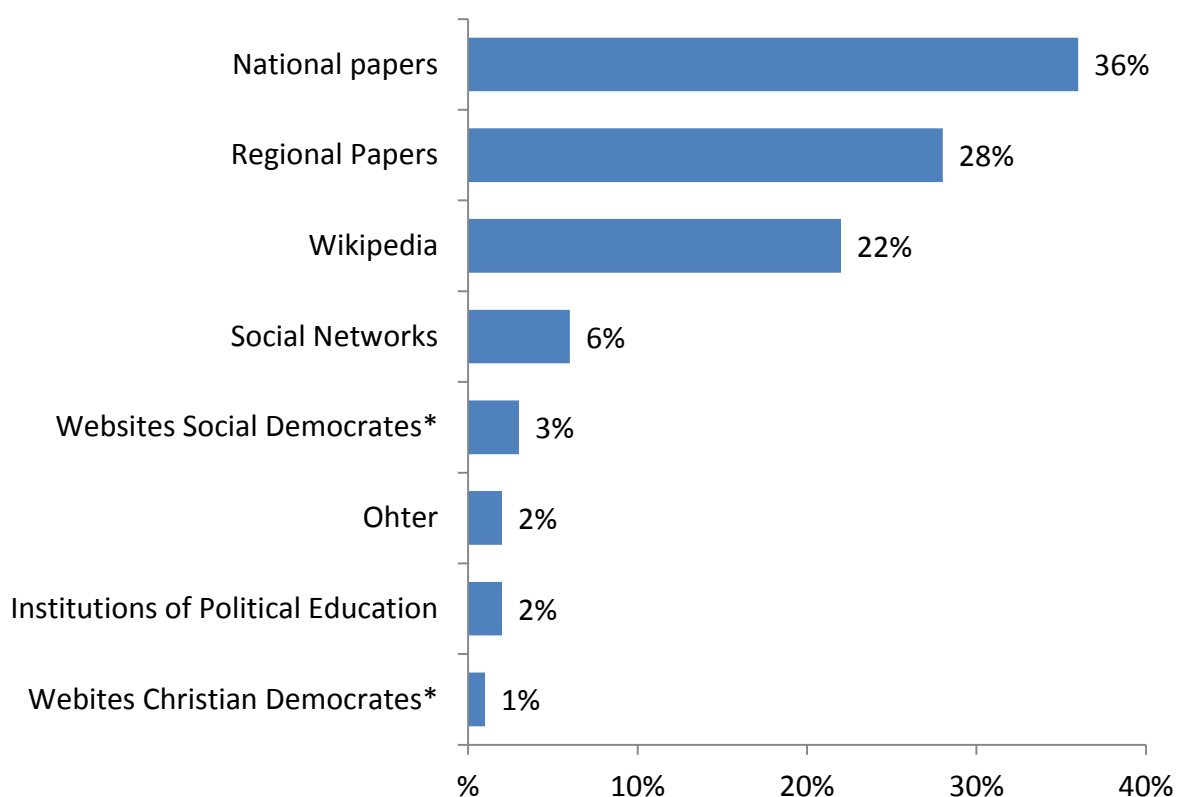
Figure 4: Reach of web pages in the 2010 state election campaign in Rhineland-Palatinate

Question:

"There are plenty of possibilities to gain information about political affairs and the goals of political parties'. I'm going to name some of them. Which of them do you use in the run-up to the state election in Rhineland-Palatinate?"
Request (If the Internet is used at least "sometimes")
"Which of the following online content do you use to get informed in the run-up to the election?"[15]

Category	Percentage
National papers	36%
Regional Papers	28%
Wikipedia	22%
Social Networks	6%
Websites Social Democrates*	3%
Ohter	2%
Institutions of Political Education	2%
Webites Christian Democrates*	1%

* Websites of party and candidate

Basis: Voters who use the Internet to gain information about the election campaign (n = 107)

Source: Telephone survey among voters in Rhineland-Palatinate in March 2010

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[15] „Es gibt ja viele Möglichkeiten, wie man sich vor einer Wahl über das aktuelle Geschehen und das, was die Parteien wollen, informieren kann. Ich nenne Ihnen jetzt einige davon. Welche nutzen sie vor der kommenden Landtagswahl gar nicht, gelegentlich oder öfter?"
– „Welche der folgenden Angebote im Internet nutzen Sie, um sich vor dem Wahlkampf zu informieren?"

Biasing Content

Wikipedia's community, Wikipedia's content, and the use journalists make of it would not be of interest for public opinion researchers if the online encyclopedia contained just pure knowledge (i. e. mere facts, this is usually the purpose of an encyclopedia). However, there is strong evidence that this is not the case. Activists and interest groups from the offline world have found their way into the Wikipedia community and there are many areas of ideological conflict.

As it is not allowed to directly write opinions or political statements (POV, point of view in Wikipedia's community jargon) into the articles, activists found other ways to (or at least try to) influence Wikipedia's content in line with their interests.

1. Meta level. The general structures of the project are organized on the meta level. Among the usually most fiercely disputed meta events are elections of new administrators. Internal (inclusionists vs. exclusionists) and external (left-wing vs. right-wing, religious vs. gay) conflicts are reflected in the way as well as the results of those elections.

2. Discussion level. It is very popular among ideological warriors to use multiple accounts to invoke the illusion of a majority in controversial discussions. This strategy is called sock-puppetry.

3. Article level. The introduction (or more prominent placement) and the removal (or less prominent placement) of information in Wikipedia articles is called *instrumental editing*. The concept is based on *instrumental actualization* (Kepplinger, 1992). This is a strategy to emphasize one's opinion by exaggerating facts supporting one's own position or by downplaying contradicting information. The strategy is sometimes used by journalists to bypass demands for objective reporting.

It becomes clear that biasing Wikipedia's content with at least the hope to have some of the bias transmitted to the general public is more than a hypothetical possibility.

Discussion

The findings of this paper can be summarized in five statements.

1. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that is shaped and written by a community of volunteers. The community's work on the meta level and the article discussion level influences the actual encyclopedic content.

2. Wikipedia contains a huge amount of information that is relevant to public opinion. People have plenty of opportunities to find information in Wikipedia about issues they are concerned of.

3. Wikipedia is used and trusted by journalists. Their use of Wikipedia for research boosts dissemination of its content and its potential to influence public opinion.

4. Wikipedia is used by nearly three quarters of the German online population. With regard to a state election campaign in Rhineland-Palatinate Wikipedia was the third-most important source of information behind national and regional newspapers.

5. Parts of Wikipedia's content are biased. Political and other interests flow from the community into the articles. Adding this to the potential effects on (direct or indirect) recipients (No. 2 to 4) the online community of the Wikipedia project becomes a factor in public opinion formation.

It is suggested that public opinion researchers and academic theorists consider Wikipedia as a distinct factor in shaping public opinion.

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