



## Negotiating boundaries of knowledge: Discourse analysis of Wikipedia's Articles for Deletion (AfD) discussion

Shing-Chung Jonathan Yam

To cite this article: Shing-Chung Jonathan Yam (2016) Negotiating boundaries of knowledge: Discourse analysis of Wikipedia's Articles for Deletion (AfD) discussion, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 13:3, 305-323, DOI: [10.1080/14791420.2015.1137334](https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2015.1137334)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2015.1137334>



Published online: 03 Mar 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 252



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



## Negotiating boundaries of knowledge: Discourse analysis of Wikipedia's Articles for Deletion (AfD) discussion

Shing-Chung Jonathan Yam

Department of Sociology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, PR China

### ABSTRACT

Although previous research has revealed factors that affect Wikipedia editors' decisions regarding content retention and deletion,<sup>1</sup> there has been little research on the editors' discussion that is involved therein as a linguistic process. In this article, I study Wikipedia's Articles for Deletion (AfD) talk pages and conceptualize each discussion as a conflictual language game.<sup>2</sup> I study, by using discourse analysis interpretively and critically, how participants (especially first movers) frame the discussion direction—either as an invitation to collaborate or with cascading arguments (leaving little room for casual chit-chat). Finally, I study entire AfD discussions and find two coexisting language games: the discussion game and the consultation/enforcement game. I find that the closing admins of AfD discussions function as policy experts rather than consensus facilitators. Hence, AfD discussions contain both sets of game rules, but ultimately the power of the decision is nonetheless vested in the admins. This brings background power dynamics into the grammar of language games in the struggle for the generation and sustenance of the dominant knowledge or narratives of our information society.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 July 2015

Accepted 23 December 2015

### KEYWORDS

language game; conflictual game; notability; online forum; Wittgenstein; cooperative knowledge generation; information sociology

Editors of newspapers and magazines constantly engage in the selection and silencing of information in terms of choosing what to publish. This, in effect, sets a boundary between knowledge and “nonknowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Following the information explosion, the need to find this boundary continues to grow to ever greater magnitudes due to emerging complex social problems<sup>4</sup> and, on the contrary, the global management and constant updating of our knowledge set, as seen in mass online cooperative knowledge generation projects.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I will use Wikipedia as an example to illustrate how “we,” as volunteers of our globalized world's knowledge generation, have set this boundary for our own information society.

The sociological study of nonknowledge has often characterized nonknowledge as *ignorance*, which can then be strategically exploited (for example, for political advantage).<sup>6</sup> However, nonknowledge as a nonconcept can take connotations that are antithetic.<sup>7</sup> I shall only focus on one contested boundary that separates knowledge from nonknowledge: the boundary that decides what we *want to or should know*. Traditionally, aristocrats and later academia set this boundary by approving and concealing library resources and

innovations.<sup>8</sup> Later, scientific knowledge became dominant.<sup>9</sup> However, unlike in the television era, a mass reception period (as articulated by Baudrillard and Lyotard), our retribalization has once again created a single village,<sup>10</sup> this time global and cosmopolitan. On the one hand, there are millions joining the village of Wikipedia. Optimistically, this “globalizing communicative space,” propelled by the Internet, would then call for a “fully inclusive, democratic global sociology.”<sup>11</sup> However, we are just as equally torn between global resistance and cooperation;<sup>12</sup> for on the other hand, there are limitations to this village metaphor: the digital divide, the (in)ability to volunteer, and global clashes of value become prominent.

Villagers come from diverse fractions<sup>13</sup> with their own expectations of *knowledge* and, in the case of Wikipedia, what an encyclopedia should be. But the way in which Wikipedia (as a website) brings diverse villagers into a concerted effort has been surprisingly simple in the beginning. It applies some fundamental editorial rules set by its founder Jimmy Wales and a software interface (“*wiki*”) for users to create and modify website content. This combination of institutionalized practice with software is why Wikipedia can be seen as hinging on a series of sociotechnical mechanisms.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the increasing number of participants arriving at and disappearing from its talk pages leads to the emergence of a peculiar and diverse language game that progresses and faces collisions from many directions: the discourses that are upheld and expressed by whoever enters the discussion incidentally. Participants must then explore the discursive context during these discussions, which are partly shaped by themselves but (overwhelmingly) more by the unknown others.

The problem of knowledge dominance in the information society is thus personal;<sup>15</sup> but, at the same time, it is imitative of previous modes of knowledge generation that require intense information filtering/selection, such as newspaper reporting.<sup>16</sup> How then, we may ask, does knowledge get preserved or suppressed now? We have moved away from mass reception to a supposed age of microinteractions and reinstitutionalization of civil space. The problem is stringent because of the power that resides in knowledge, including its accessibility. For example, the deletion of Wikipedia’s article on “WIF” (an organization that voices claims that Wikipedia editors found unsubstantiated and could be “fraudulent”<sup>17</sup>) would affect the organization’s fate. This ultimately stirred strong protests from WIF’s founder.<sup>18</sup> In this article, I will provide an in-depth, data-driven case study. I will investigate the most controversial discursive environment of Wikipedia’s editor community—the retainment or deletion of articles, as discussed on its Articles for Deletion (AfD)<sup>19</sup> talk pages. As we shall see, much of the debate centres on the interpretation of the “notability guideline” (WP:Notability),<sup>20</sup> which decides whether topics should be included in this gigantic encyclopedia.

## Framework

I will conceptualize Wikipedia editors’ online exchanges as a *move* in a “language game,” a central concept of Wittgenstein’s view on language as social actions.<sup>21</sup> Several separate trends in sociological theory are explicitly indebted to Wittgenstein: Bloor’s strong programme,<sup>22</sup> Giddens’ structuration theory,<sup>23</sup> and the major representative of phenomenology in sociology, Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology.<sup>24</sup>

Wittgenstein was a philosopher who, in his early years, presented a philosophy of language that attempts to find elementary propositions by positioning the roles of

thoughts (and, consequently, language) as “logical pictures of facts.”<sup>25</sup> The later Wittgenstein abandoned this view<sup>26</sup> and instead contended that sociolinguistic contexts condition how we act and experience our world.<sup>27</sup> It is thus clear why the later Wittgenstein would be relevant to the sociology of communication and language, for each of these contexts constitutes a game that has not only its own rules, but also a specific *language* that governs its rules. By forgoing the classical-philosophical interest in terms of exact definitions, Wittgenstein was able to show that a “blurred concept” can still function sociolinguistically—leading to a pragmatic view of language.

There have been two readings of the language game regarding the relationship between social action and language rules. Bloor’s strong programme incorporated elements of the sociology of knowledge with various levels of sociologism. Garfinkel and Sacks’ (sometimes labelled as the “antiskepticians”)<sup>28</sup> ethnomethodology would contend that rules and action are inseparable. In their view, grammar lies at the heart of language games and links rules and actions.<sup>29</sup> While these pictures of language games entail static rules to which participants should adhere, the discursive environment of AfD discussions appears to be more interesting for three reasons. First, there is no clear boundary as to who is an insider and who is an outsider and, if there is a boundary, there is high mobility between the inside and the outside (and vice versa). Second, *none of its participants can be certain as to what the rules of each language game are*. This contrasts with other highly established social contexts that Wittgenstein cited as examples (e.g., explaining mathematical ideas or the communication between builders).<sup>30</sup> Finally, AfD discussions are conflictual. If language consists of “family resemblances” of a concept (a “complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing”<sup>31</sup>), the untangling of these criss-crossings (for the sake of an analysis) in AfD discussions would rely on *contested* concepts. Therefore, discussions build upon conflicts, and hence AfD discussions can also be seen as language games that undermine themselves.

## Background

Wittgenstein’s concept of language games has inspired a great deal of research on the Internet and organizations. Fayard and DeSanctis studied these language games in a professional forum by focusing on role, social identity, and linguistic style.<sup>32</sup> Hardy, Palmer, and Philips studied how strategic changes occur in an NGO and developed a strategic discourse model that consists of the three circuits of “activity,” “performativity,” and “connectivity.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, I will investigate online discussions; however, my focus is on global *conflictual* communication. Therefore, this exercise will illuminate our understanding of this specific strand of language games in general. Moreover, by using an interpretive approach, I will also focus on the editors’ use of *discursive resources*. This will allow me to deepen the understanding of legitimate (passed on as shaped by Wikipedia’s discursive history) linguistic techniques to “lead/advance” the game.

In AfD discussions, an editor nominates a deletion and editors discuss the potential deletion for about seven days.<sup>34</sup> After this period is over, a “closing admin” will review the discussion and give their final decision to either delete or retain the article. Previous studies of Wikipedia’s article deletion processes have shown that the lack of indication of importance alone is the most important commonly used criterion for speedy

deletions,<sup>35</sup> and notability is the most factor in AfD discussions.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Taraborelli and Ciampaglia showed that there were two groups of editors who each had a consistent voting behaviour—one tended to vote for deletion while the other voted for retainment.<sup>37</sup> Hence, the practice of deletion has crystallized in the two fractions of “deletionists” and “inclusionists,” each with their own advocating association.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, the following analysis will also consider AfD stances in the broader context of these ideals as “practice diffusion”<sup>39</sup> of knowledge generation. For the purpose of differentiation, I shall call the persons of the act *deleters* and *retainers*.

## Methodology and data

My method of choice is discourse analysis, which is inseparable from the understanding of meaning-making and social positions.<sup>40</sup> The recent critical turn in discourse analysis,<sup>41</sup> as propelled by Fairclough,<sup>42</sup> has further directed discourse analysts’ attention to ideology and power negotiation. My analysis will adopt part of this critical orientation by focusing on the *power relations* between editors in their choice of utterance during AfD discussions. The utterer must choose a sequence of words from its alternatives to form their discourse. The meaning of a discourse thus derives from such choices.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, both open and axial coding<sup>44</sup> will be used to establish categorical schemes and relationships between concepts to facilitate a two-phased analysis.

### First phase

Data from the AfD discussion pages was collected from June 1, 2013 to June 21, 2013 (the first phase). A total of 1079 AfD nominations/discussions were collected. This time period has been chosen due to convenience. The aim of this phase is to classify the discursive resources that are available to and employed by editors. Out of the 1079, 20 discussions were selected for analysis at random and consist of 167 comments. By starting with open coding, I recognized the features of editor comments. I followed this by using axial coding, which established the relationships between these comments. Finally, the organization of these features led to a categorization scheme. I will use these categories in the discussion of the second phase.

The first phase revealed four broad categories of discursive resources that editors often use: institutionalized rules (Wikipedia policies/guidelines), external validators, free style operationalization, and signals. The use of these resources is abundant; for example, the AfD discussion page on July 16 alone provides the following examples for each category [all user names are anonymized throughout this article (italic square brackets added, brackets, italics, and hyperlinks in original)]:

#### *Institutionalized rules:*

- 1a] Per [WP:NEO](#); this is a term of recent coinage of little [significance](#)
- 1b] and almost no coverage in [reliable sources](#).
- 2a] **Speedy Keep** – Specifically meets criteria #4 of WP:NHOCKEY
- 2b] as a *major collegiate hockey league First-Team all-star*.

*External validators:*

3a] Completely unsourced biography of a living person,  
 3b] and am unable to find any coverage.

4a] Alex001, there is coverage in the trade papers about this film:

*[six hyperlinks with title]*

4h] In essence, this is the same kind of film as the previous

4i] Lawrence-Grant collaboration, *Did You Hear About the Morgans?*

*Free style operationalization:*

5a] Wikipedia is not a place for a person who only became notable for her death.

5b] Just because her death was announced on a lot of news sites

5c] does not make her a notable-enough girl to appear on Wikipedia.

*[arguing that a term is not a neologism]*

6] It's used in context, is written recently, and expands on the concept usefully.

*Signals:*

7a] **Comment:** The above editor has a rather large COI on this subject,

7b] which he has not disclosed here.

8a] Appears to be a bad faith nomination in retaliation for my comments in

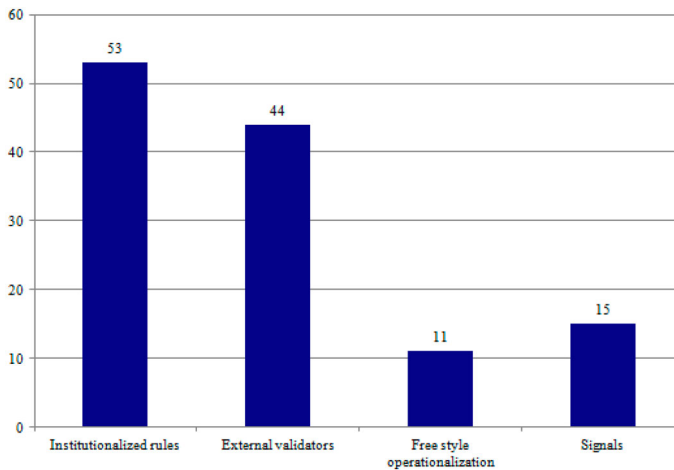
8b] disagreement with the nominator [here](#).

*Others:*

9a] this girl has undoubtedly helped many (young) people around the globe

9b] cope with their own (terminal) illnesses in a positive way.

Here, “institutionalized rules” refers to the citation of Wikipedia rules to establish legitimacy. External validators are essential to fulfil the reliance of the notability guideline on “evidence from reliable independent sources”<sup>45</sup> or to establish nonnotability, i.e., the lack thereof. Freestyle operationalization, which has less legitimacy than the previous two resources, elaborates concepts/requirements that are central to the argument by introducing new dimensions to those concepts. Signals are speculative attempts at suggesting implicit intentions or malpractices of other editors, the writers of and contributors to the article, or writers of external sources based on observable evidence. Discussions can become personal when they are directed at other participants. Finally, a number of comments (“Others”) do not fall under these categories. They consist of mere expressions of standpoint, the dittoing of others’ comments, general reviews of the problem at hand (especially for long discussions and these can conveniently come with an appeal to the opinion of the majority), questions, coordination efforts, off-topics such as suggestions on how to change the article or personal debates, etc. While these comments are



**Figure 1.** Frequency count of comments that employ the four discursive resources found in 20 randomly selected AfD discussions;  $n = 167$ . A comment can belong to multiple categories (up to all four). Comments that do not belong to any category are classified as “Others” (=78). Mean (number of comments per discussion) = 8.35. Median = 4. Max = 60. Min = 1.

beyond the scope of this paper, they do amount to 47 percent of the comments that I have investigated; consequently, they represent the wider social functions of AfD discussions. The overall distribution of the four discursive resources is shown in Figure 1.

### Second phase

The second phase starts from July 1, 2013 for three months and involves the analysis of editors’ first comments followed by entire discussions—a research design that is similar to that of Horne and Wiggins.<sup>46</sup> As in the first phase, I also used a three-pass coding process. My presentation is concerned with depth rather than generality. Illustrative cases are intended to demonstrate the variety of strategic discourses, while theoretical discussions will mostly be deferred to the final discussion section, in the spirit of Strauss and Corbin.<sup>47</sup>

The results suggest that two language games are happening in AfD discussions: the *consultation/enforcement game* and the *discussion game*. Furthermore, I uncovered two rather different argumentative styles, together with their hybrid: *cascading arguments* and an *invitation to collaborate*. I will illustrate these features in the following two sections: first, with an analysis of first moves, in which argumentative styles are most prominent, and second, studies of entire discussions, which illustrates the two sets of language game rules by reflecting on participant behavior.

### Case study: first moves

When an article appears in Wikipedia, it immediately serves its purpose to our global village by being publicly accessible. The darker side to this is less known—article death. While there are more than four million articles at the time of writing, these articles’ fate can change significantly if an editor places an AfD to it: more than half of the articles in Schneider *et al.*’s AfD data set eventually got deleted.<sup>48</sup>

A deleter can start with a short comment:

10a] This is a textbook example of [WP:BLP1E](#),

10b] only known for his illness. **Delete** [Brett2](#) <sup>account</sup> 18:11, 4 July 2013 (UTC)

Short comments like this can attract criticisms from multiple directions, from the relevance of the guideline/policy to its proper use. But first moves can be much more elaborated and illustrated with rules and examples, which has the added benefit of directing the discussion that is to follow. For example, Cassidy03's first move comprises three paragraphs and ten bulletin points. His first paragraph outlines a background for the proposal:

11a] Six months after an AfD that was heavily [WP:CANVASSED](#), nothing substantial in

11b] this article has changed and there is still almost nothing to establish this breed's

11c] notability. Don't get me wrong, they're cool dogs, I just don't think they have a place

11d] here. [This](#), [this](#), and [this](#) are the only sources I could find that aren't run by breeders

11e] themselves.

Canvassing is discouraged in Wikipedia "because it compromises the normal consensus decision-making process, and therefore is generally considered disruptive behavior."<sup>49</sup>

This signal helps Cassidy03 justify another deletion attempt. But then he runs into the same problem as Brett2—the inability to establish nonnotability with reliable sources, and he has to resort to free-styling. Nonetheless, through this opening, he invites further discussion by showing a willingness to back off ("cool dogs") and conversing in an informal tone ("Don't get me wrong," "just don't"), which is what I refer to as an "invitation to collaborate."

Subsequent paragraphs further elaborate the first but contribute little to the deletion cause. Instead, they call for help:

*[Criticizing source articles]:*

12a] has very low resolution (so low as to be unreadable—I understand why, but still)[. . .]

12c] The dutch article looks ok, but I don't speak dutch [. . .]

12e] appear to be an editorial/opinion piece [. . .]

12g] appears to be written by breeders involved with Tamaskans.

This describes problems faced by Cassidy03 rather than objective truths and is vague with the use of hedges. Some further points suggest a lack of independent coverage or reliability:

13] • Sources 4, 5 and 7 are all for one dog

14] • Source 8 is a Facebook video

All these are bits of evidence that Cassidy03 finds but with their meaning in the context of AfD left to be elaborated—work from the community is expected. By this, he refrains from using aggressive deletionist language, and instead further elaborates on his invitation in the last paragraph:

15a] I'm raising this article at AfD a second time so we can perhaps



15b] establish a consensus without an influx of breeders from Tamaskan forums.

Based mostly on signals, this first move thus sounds personal rather than analytical. This is in line with Wikipedia’s spirit—consensus—but is also problematic on behalf of Cassidy03’s deletion cause.

But many first movers are more aggressive. Disgleirio444 starts his five-sentence move with:

- 16a] lacks reliable sourcing and a significant claim to notability. [. . .]
- 16c] Unreliable sources include reviews on Amazon written by subject, [. . .]
- 16e] dead links to insignificant contributions/mentions in community newspaper, [. . .]
- 16g] offensive to some due to its racist humor. [. . .]
- 16i] Does not pass notability criteria for
- 16j] [WP:CREATIVE](#), [WP:ENTERTAINER](#) or [WP:PERP](#) [. . .]
- 16l] repeatedly abused by fans and the tape’s owner. [. . .]
- 16n] The creator of the article deleted a prod shortly after it was added

This firm, exhausting, and dogmatic style serves a sole purpose—that of deletion. I call this argumentative style as “cascading arguments,” which are accompanied with a formal and distanced tone with passive voice and long words (“insignificant”).

Finally, there are also editors who are more balanced and can incorporate arguments from both sides:

- 17a] Not that I think this is a problem with [WP:CRYSTALBALL](#),
- 17b] but it is way [WP:TOOSOON](#) to have an article [. . .]
- 17d] I know the sources cited in this article as of this timeare [*sic*] reliable,
- 17e] but this looks too short right now [. . .]
- 17g] Unless more info from reliable sources can be found to make it long enough
- 17h] for the article to be here,
- 17i] a written work about it on this encyclopedia
- 17j] would be just none other than unnecessary. EkoFive 19:49, 9 August 2013 (UTC)

The abundant use of contrast connectors helps move through opposing views, but EkoFive still manages to arrive at his conclusion by ending sentences with deletionist ones. Both Cassidy03 and EkoFive employ a colloquial, informal style of writing (11c “Don’t get me wrong,” 12c “looks ok”; 17b “way”), which exhibits characteristics of online forums as a place for chit-chat<sup>50</sup> as opposed to the kind of work talk<sup>51</sup> as adopted by Disgleirio444.

After having a taste of the diverse characteristics of first moves, we shall now move on, embracing more complexity: the study of entire AfD discussions.

### Case study: entire discussions

First moves can frame discussions, but subsequent interactions will decide how successful the framing is. Many AfD discussions, however, have rather limited or even no interaction at all. If there are no follow-up comments, the process fails to help closing admins, who

would then have to do the job themselves. Given that many articles that are subject to AfD are rather obscure, it is understandable that few editors care to take part. Also, some “discussions” are not interactive—in the case when participants are all talking to the closing admin rather than to each other. Given this understanding, we shall now examine two discussions in detail where interactions do happen. We shall see how AfD discussions in fact consist of two language games—consultation/enforcement and discussion.

### ***AfD/2013 Soldotna Airport Turbine Otter crash***

This AfD discussion consists of the first move followed by 21 threads (Table 1).

Fu600 starts with cascading arguments:

- 18a] A non-notable light aircraft accident that fails to make WP:AIRCRAH  
 18b] and more critically the Wikipedia policy of WP:NOTNEWSPAPER.  
 19a] was ignored as all news events quickly are. [. . .]  
 19c] There is no indication that this accident will result in changes to  
 19d] Air Traffic Control procedures, Federal Aviation Regulations, [. . .]  
 19f] The NTSB is investigating, but this is not significant in itself in that they investigate  
 19g] all commercial accidents with fatalities as a matter of course. [. . .]  
 19i] Globally dozens of light aircraft accidents like this one happen everyday [*sic*][. . .]  
 19k] Please note that “keep” arguments should not be made on an emotional basis but  
 19l] should show how this accident has lasting consequences and thus does not violate  
 19m] the Wikipedia policy of WP:NOTNEWSPAPER.  
 19n] Fu600 (talk) 01:13, 17 July 2013 (UTC)

The problem is that WP:AIRCRAH is an “advice on article content,”<sup>52</sup> not a guideline. This sows a seed of controversy. While sprinkling a number of boosts, he/she provides little evidence for nonnotability. Another editor, GavynSevenSeven, starts the first thread and votes for keep (represented by a “Keep” in bold). His/her comment only relates loosely with the first move:

- 20a] NTSB was concerned because ferry services are held to higher standards [. . .]  
 20c] few more weeks to see if anything comes out of this [. . .]  
 20e] thank you for nominating it for deletion four minutes after I declined the PROD.

Neither side has come up with decisive sources or rules. Rather, GavynSevenSeven can only hope to delay the decision. But debates can be a healthy way to clarify concepts and motivate both sides to look for evidence. This happens in the fifth thread, the longest thread with nine comments. Here, Had8ley starts with a delete vote and cites the notability

**Table 1.** Frequency count of thread distribution over number of comments in the AfD discussion for the article “2013 Soldotna Airport Turbine Otter crash.”

Frequency count (threads)	9	3	1	3	1	0	3	0	1	Total =21
Number of comments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	

Note: I use the word thread loosely here, based on whether a second comment is really replying to the first in the thread; if it is not, it is considered a new thread.

(events) guideline in addition to Fu600's WP:NOTNEWS and WP:AIRCRAH. The reasons for citing these are:

21a] does not seem to be any ongoing coverage. [. . .]

21c] All there is are initial news reports, [. . .]

21e] (regardless of its death toll) is of no importance to the aviation industry,

These are generalized statements presented with a dogmatic voice. But no evidence is presented to back up 21a. It is hard to support deletes with external validators because deletes require their absence. The fairness principle would thus place the burden of proof on retainers. The disputed orthodoxy of WP:AIRCRAH, on the other hand, is taken up by Ivorytheninth:

22] Well WP:AIRCRAH is just one project's *view* of what is notable]

23a] AIRCRAH isn't Wikipedia's notability guideline for articles, it's a ready reckoner

23b] against which articles which may be assessed for consideration for deletion.

This forces Had8ley to abandon WP:AIRCRAH and focus on WP:EVENT only. To fill the void, he/she reinforces his/her use of WP:EVENT:

24a] Indeed, we don't need the WP:AIRCRAH guideline.

24b] But that's why I based my reasoning on the WP:EVENT policy.

24c] So far, there is just no evidence of any "lasting impact to Alaska"

24d] (otherwise, the situation might look different).

24e] For the time being, one could thus also apply WP:TOOSOON.

24f] -Had8ley (talk) 13:10, 17 July 2013 (UTC)

"Lasting impact" is only one of the criteria of notability (events), and moreover, "This does not, however, mean recent events with unproven lasting effect are automatically non-notable."<sup>53</sup> This disputed interpretation thus fails to convince Ivorytheninth. It is also at this point that the thread digresses into satirical comments:

25a] Oh, I missed the publication of the report, the findings and conclusions,

25b] could you link me to that please?

25c] Otherwise, what's the rush in deleting this article?

This brings the discussion back to the issue of postponement. The thread ends with cynicism with the syntax of a nonexistent policy:

26a] WP:SHUTUPWITHWPSALREADY

26b] -OneZeroJaswinder (talk) 20:03, 17 July 2013 (UTC)

The thread thus runs into nothingness and noncommunication, which Castro referred to as "meaning incoherence" in her study of synchronous chats.<sup>54</sup> While she observed attempts of self- or other-repair in her data, this does not happen in our thread. A key difference here with casual synchronous chats is that AfD is confrontational: fierce

exchanges occur *because* participants hold opposite views. Meaning incoherence in this thread simply kills it. Neither party can provide further evidence and editors stop participating with its futility.

Repairs to digression have occurred in some other places. Thread nine, with seven comments, is initiated by a new participant, Kai11th. He/she votes for Redirect (to another article) followed by:

- 27a] The “significant and widespread ongoing coverage” does not exist, [. . .]
- 27c] If there does prove to be further and significant coverage of the crash in the
- 27d] future, we can reassess the situation, [. . .]
- 27f] As for “no consensus” now, we have two (one rather weak) ‘keep,’
- 27g] one ‘keep or merge’ and a bunch of ‘merge or redirect’ !votes,
- 27h] and I suspect that the nominator
- 27i] would not be against merging or redirecting either.

He/she thus leans towards deletion with 27a but at the same time allows room for further assessment by suggesting a merge/redirect as a middle ground. By summoning the nominator, Fu600 replies with:

- 28a] does not meet the Wikipedia policy WP:NOTNEWSPAPER
- 28b] and all the “delete” and “redirect” comments have supported
- 28c] that it does not, which is clearly the case.
- 28d] The “keep” arguments to date have failed to show
- 28e] how this article does comply with Wikipedia policy
- 28f] and have instead relied on emotional or vague arguments.
- 28g] I am confident that the closing admin
- 28h] will weigh those arguments appropriately.

28g shows that these participants are not only talking to each other (discussion) but also talking to/reminding the authority (consultation). Fu600’s comment is provoking for Ivor-ytheninth. The repair to this happens with Fu600’s:

29] Alright let’s address that argument:

This immediately resets his/her tone to cascading arguments. What follows is a lengthy paragraph explaining that much of what NTSB investigates is not noteworthy:

- 30a] What you seem to be suggesting is that
- 30b] we should have articles on all aircraft accidents, in case, [. . .]
- 30d] go back and delete the 99% of accident articles
- 30e] that turn out to be routine
- [Discussing Wikipedia policy:]*
- 30g] an event article must be shown to be about
- 30h] something more than just a news story that has no enduring value.

This elaborates his/her first move on the (im)practicality of waiting for the NTSB report. To this, Ivorytheninth reinterprets Fu600's argument with:

31a] You've made some interesting points, mostly **prophecy** and **your own opinion**,  
31b] but it's now down to the community to decide.

But the two policies mentioned apply to article content only, not editors' opinions. 31 is followed by criticisms of Fu600's deletionist tendencies and behaviour. With neither side providing further evidence, hope is placed on the notion of consensus—that of the unknown others.

The result of the discussion is **keep**. While many closing admins do not state the rationale behind their decisions, Lalawethika12 does spare a few sentences for this purpose:

32a] The result was **keep**. Many arguments on both sides did not address sourcing,  
32b] and as such were marginally helpful at best, but those which did indicated that  
32c] coverage was significantly wider than local and demonstrated that there is  
32d] sufficient source material. Whether this is more appropriate as a standalone  
32e] article or a subsection of another should be discussed further as there is no  
32f] clear consensus on that here.  
32g] Lalawethika12 <sup>Talk to me</sup> 06:02, 30 July 2013 (UTC)

The unsatisfactory performance of participating editors is met with the authority of the closing admin. If we go back to see what those source materials (32d) could be, we can see that Ivorytheninth has provided one external validator in his one-comment thread, and in thread ten, MadaTenThree and Ivorytheninth have given five. These sources have been criticized, however, by Kai11th, who claimed:

33a] It says *one* of the worst, not *the* worst, and it's a blog not an article; [. . .]  
33c] it was written the day after the crash  
[Discussing MadaTenThree's article:]  
33e] does not "[refer] to the potential implications of this crash for  
33f] Alaska's essential air taxi services."

Closing admins have to go through lengthy discussions to find relevant arguments. Many elements of this discussion are irrelevant in the eyes of Lalawethika12. He/she has a very specific focus, that of sourcing (32a). While we can see the effect of first-move framing, with participants arguing over the two criteria proposed by Fu600, this has little to do with the outcome. This is because the closing admin is looking for validators and their evaluation as validators (reliable sources showing notability of subject). With retainers providing validators, the decision between keep and delete is thus set. This also shows a practical side to AfD discussions—the aim is not so much about convincing others. It is about convincing the authority. But such tension between the rules of discussion and consultation/enforcement might be more latent than what 28 g suggests. Let's have a look at this tension with another example.

**Table 2.** Frequency count of thread distribution over number of comments in the AfD discussion for the article "Maurizio Curroni."

Frequency count (threads)	3	2	0	0	0	1	Total =6
Number of comments	1	2	3	4	5	6	

### *AfD/Maurizio Curroni*<sup>55</sup>

The disputed article is about a supposed Italian academic. This is a shorter discussion, with only fifteen comments in total (two first moves followed by six threads; Table 2).

Again, single-comment threads prevail. The first move is surprisingly weak, with only one sentence:

34] He is not known in Italy. Noell14 (talk) 17:00, 29 August 2013 (UTC)

This deviates from the common style of cascading arguments, which many deleters would adopt, suggesting a lack of experience or interest in getting the article deleted. Perhaps knowing that this move lacks convincing power, Noell14 adds one more comment under 34 (hence having two first moves) after getting two keep replies. This second "first move" further explains nonnotability:

35a] The Italian article [*link*] has been deleted several times

35b] because he kept writing his own resume.

35c] All of his books are published through print-on-demand services.

35d] He does not teach at Link Campus University

35e] (source: Italian Ministry of Education

35 contains a number of signals. With the vagueness and multiplicity of interpretations that signals have, the discussion quickly expands into surrounding uncertainties and unknowns. Thread two demonstrates how fast this surge of complexity can happen with another editor, ozfiFtEEn (actual names replaced with italic square brackets):

36a] **Keep** He seems to meet notability criteria.

36b] Being Deputy Rector of [*institute name*] and Director of

36c] [*department name*], plus his written work, all suggests notability.

36d] The article, however needs serious work.

36e] **It has no references**, which is a huge issue. Plus it's broken English

37a] A simple google search return countless relevant sources

37b] and many of the books he has published are available on google books.

37c] And his notability is not grounded singularly on his academic title.

37d] Which can be referenced to [*journal and program name*].

37e] Yes this article has issues, but they can be rectified through a clear up

37f] and the addition of citations.

37g] Your argument for deletion, "He is not known in Italy," is petty,

37h] not backed up by anything.

This operationalizes notability to the publication of books and journal articles. However, ozfiFtEEn does not cite the relevant rule—notability (academics) guideline,<sup>56</sup> which contains criteria that are open to interpretations, e.g., “made a significant discovery” or “*highly cited academic work*”<sup>57</sup> (italics in original). But the guideline does say that “Simply having authored a large number of published academic works *is not considered sufficient to satisfy Criterion 1.*”<sup>58</sup> With this ignorance, free style operationalization jumps in with so much detail but so little to argue, ending in weak sentences such as 37g–h.

The thread digresses into personal discussions. Noell14 repairs this by denying the accusations and then offers a point-by-point rebuttal to ozfiFtEEn’s sources:

- 38a] I didn’t “attack,” but I asked a question politely. Also, I don’t see the “vendetta”
- 38b] and I have nothing to do with “the Italian political system” (!!).
- 38c] • The PDF dates back to six years ago and does not confirm that he is the
- 39a] It’s backed up by the only authoritative Italian source:
- 39b] the Ministry of Education.

With the first mover insisting on bringing up this authoritative source, ozfiFtEEn has no choice but to tackle it head-on:

- 40a] nothing to prove the website you quote is official or complete. [. . .]
- 40b] and so may not be on an Italian list. [. . .]
- 40c] may not be registered as a teacher;
- 40d] most higher level university positions are effectively administrative.
- 40e] Thirdly, its not beyond imagination that he may have retired or moved to a
- 40f] different university; his career is international and he worked in Moldova

All these add uncertainty to the source’s reliability, but the advancement of the cause remains scant. Participants can get entangled with a need to discuss; 37g–h thus borders on irrelevance. This suggests how AfD discussions work despite opportunistic participation. In the discussion mode, participants can collaborate, argue, or digress into nothing. In the consultation/enforcement mode, facts are presented. In both cases, the closing admin is expected to do the rest. It is perhaps this and an overall inability to find reliable sources that lead to the final fate of this article:

- 41] The result was **delete**. parker001600 (talk) 01:26, 16 September 2013 (UTC)

## Discussion

A need for “moving on” through language rules is an essential feature of Wittgenstein’s language game. This is what makes his later philosophy of language sociologically relevant. Our research findings, however, revealed two sets of language rules that coexist in AfD discussions: discussion and consultation/enforcement. In the discussion game, editors participate in AfD discussions in a way that is similar to other online asynchronous chats (although lonely “discussions” with only one comment are also common). In the consultation/enforcement game, participants are also aware that their debate probably “doesn’t

matter,” because the outcome is singlehandedly decided by the closing admin (e.g., 28g–h). The decision process of these admins lacks the visibility of AfD discussions, especially because many closing admins decide without providing rationales for their decision (e.g., 41). Because closing admins are not bound to appeal to the majority, they have the power to decide regardless of how many deleters or retainers incidentally (or through canvassing, which is against Wikipedia’s guidelines) enter the discussion or their respective argumentative skills. This is a key advantage of administrative decision over a simple count of majority, but this also means that the genealogy behind adminship is crucial in determining Wikipedia’s fate.

The reliance on administrative power suggests a working model in which participants help closing admins to find and evaluate evidence. Moreover, these evaluations require the interpretation of Wikipedia rules around which the AfD language game revolves. Discourses that frame arguments (such as those regarding notability) have already crystallized into these rules, and there is little that one can do to them in AfD discussions. Because of this inability to change the rules, debates thus centre on two other areas: the interpretation of these rules and the discovery of evidence to satisfy (e.g., notability) criteria.

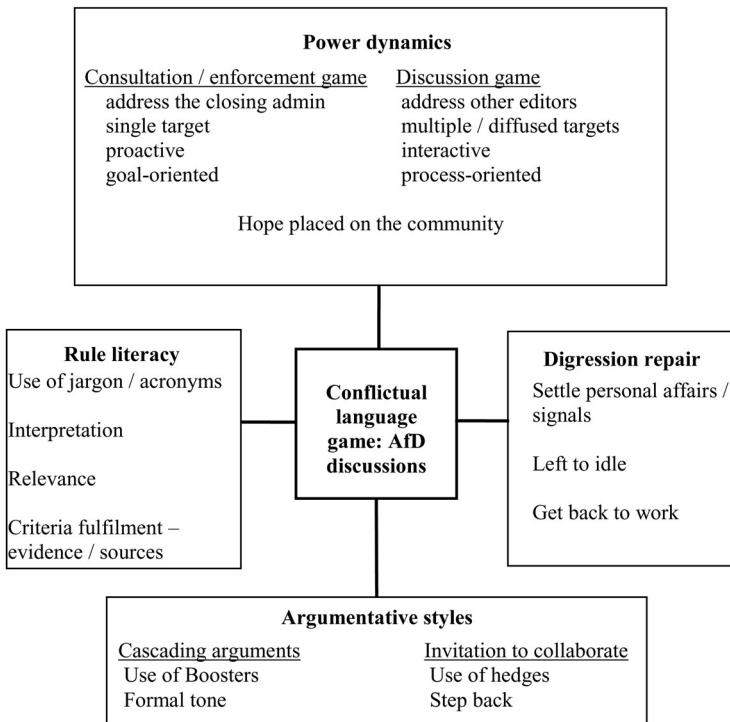
The consultation/enforcement mode suggests the pragmatic side of a game in which the actual manifestation as a site of independent yet transparent lobbying efforts, deviates from its original setup as a site of discussion. In these situations, the whole game shrinks into a two-step process in which participants speculate on the reaction of those in power and speak accordingly. Here, then, the power to interpret rules skews significantly towards the admins, and the community has little to contribute. This brings power dynamics into the moving-on dynamics of conflictual language games.

AfD nonetheless requires an interpretation of external sources and rule literacy to reach the final decision. Digressed discussions can be left to idle as a dead thread but can also be repaired.<sup>59</sup> This suggests that conflictual games’ moving-on does not rely on sustained conversations (because participants disagree anyway) but relies on convincing the authority. This extended picture of the conflictual language game is summarized in [Figure 2](#).

Rule literacy is a prerequisite for effective participation, not only because it establishes legitimacy but also because further discussion can then address how its criteria should be fulfilled. Its central importance and diversity in scope are the most prominent features of AfD’s language games in contrast with other online forums; for example, Fayard and DeSanctis’ professional forums rely on implicit rules that predominately address issues of etiquette only.<sup>60</sup> Future studies in critical sociology and communication can help reveal how these rules (such as WP:Notability) come into being as a public discursive process so as to identify the forces behind knowledge dominance. On the downside, this reliance on rules has created a learning curve problem for newcomers as referring to relevant rules is ever more crucial in terms of advancing one’s cause (e.g., contrast 2 and 40).

Also, because the closing admin decides on the outcome, participants can talk to them (e.g., 28) in addition to other current or future participants, or even to nonparticipants (e.g., 31b). This power setting gives a pragmatic side to conflictual language games and accordingly determines the adopted set of language rules. Power negotiation here does not rely on roles, as the closing admin refrains from participating in the discussion, but rather depends on what participants perceive are the most crucial issues. This, however, further depends on participant motivation and manifests into two kinds of argumentative style: an invitation to collaborate, which shows an openness to discuss the issue to “find





**Figure 2.** Features of conflictual language games as seen in Wikipedia’s AfD discussions

out the truth” together (e.g., 11–15), or cascading arguments, which leave little room to discuss the issue (e.g., 16). Both argumentative styles are absorbed into an overarching system of administrative decision-making, which iteratively performs knowledge preservation/suppression, thereby capitalizing on what the masses are interested in such as pop knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Knowledge generation thus occurs simultaneously with the dominating process of particular types of knowledge under rules that have discursively been formed since Wikipedia’s establishment in 2001. Finally, digressions, as in the case of miscommunication or resorting to personal discussions, are subject to repair (e.g., to “get back to work,” as in 29). However, given that discussions are not for discussion’s sake but for closing admins to find relevant arguments, they can just as well be left to idle.

With editors initially joining the project to write about their hobbies,<sup>62</sup> these discursive features can become at odds with their original intentions. In order to stay, editors have to instead brush up their rule literacy to form arguments and provide external validators that can be verified by others as convincingly reliable. This is, essentially, an unlearning followed by a relearning of another institutionalized language, from which no participant can escape the moment at which they step into this village that both includes and excludes no one.

## Notes

1. J. Schneider, A. Passant, and S. Decker, “Deletion Discussions in Wikipedia: Decision Factors and Outcomes,” *WikiSym '12* (2012); and D. Taraborelli, and G. L. Ciampaglia, “Beyond

- Notability. Collective Deliberation on Content Inclusion in Wikipedia,” *2010 Fourth IEEE International Conference on Self-Adaptive and Self-Organizing Systems Workshop* (2010): 122–25.
2. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, [1953] 1967).
  3. L. McGoey, “Strategic Unknowns: Towards a Sociology of Ignorance,” *Economy and Society* 41 (2012): 1–16.
  4. U. Beck, *Risk Society* (New York: Sage Publications, 1992); U. Beck, and D. Levy, “Cosmopolitanized Nations: Re-Imagining Collectivity in World Risk Society,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 2 (2013): 3–31; A. Irwin, *Sociology and the Environment* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2001); B. Perry, and P. Olsson, “Cyberhate: The Globalization of Hate,” *Information & Communications Technology Law* 18, no. 2 (2009): 185–99; and G. Spaargaren, “Sustainable Consumption: A Theoretical and Environmental Policy Perspective,” *Society & Natural Resources: An International Journal* 16, no. 8 (2003). doi:10.1080/08941920309192
  5. A. Ardichvili, V. Page, and T. Wentling, “Motivation and Barriers to Participation in Virtual Knowledge-Sharing Communities of Practice,” *Journal of Knowledge Management* 7, no. 1 (2003): 64–77.
  6. McGoey, “Strategic Unknowns: Towards a Sociology of Ignorance.”
  7. M. Gross, “The Unknown in Process: Dynamic Connections of Ignorance, Non-Knowledge and Related Concepts,” *Current Sociology* 55, no. 5 (2007): 742–59.
  8. P. Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot* (New York: Wiley, 2000).
  9. J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984 [1979]).
  10. M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); M. McLuhan, and Q. Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2001 [1967]).
  11. R. N. Jacobs, and E. Townsley, “On the Communicative Geography of Global Sociology,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 33, no. 3 (2008): 503.
  12. L. A. Stengrim, “Negotiating Postmodern Democracy, Political Activism, and Knowledge Production: Indymedia’s Grassroots and E-Savvy Answer to Media Oligopoly,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2, no. 4 (2005): 281–304.
  13. A. A. Cohen, *Foreign News on Television: Where in the World is the Global Village?* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).
  14. S. Niederer, and J. van Dijck, “Wisdom of the Crowd or Technicity of Content? Wikipedia As a Sociotechnical System,” *New Media and Society* 12, no. 8 (2010): 1368–87; and S.-C. J. Yam, “Sociotechnical Interaction at Work: an Ethnographic Study of the Wikipedia Community,” *Text & Talk* 35, no. 5 (2015): 669–94, <http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/text.2015.35.issue-5/text-2015-0016/text-2015-0016.xml> (accessed December 23, 2015).
  15. M. Deuze, “Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture,” *The Information Society* 22, no. 2 (2006): 63–75.
  16. T. Haas, *The Pursuit of Public Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* (Routledge, 2007), 156.
  17. K. Tabb, “Authority and Authorship in a 21st-Century Encyclopaedia and a ‘Very Mysterious Foundation,’” *eSharp* 12 (2008): 12.
  18. *Ibid.*, 11.
  19. Wikipedia offers three kinds of article-deletion processes according to the level of controversy of the deletion. I only study the process for the most controversial deletions because it can attract much debate—i.e., the AfD process.
  20. <http://en.wikipedia/wiki/WP:N>
  21. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.
  22. D. Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976 [1991]); D. Bloor, *Wittgenstein, Rules and Institutions* (London: Routledge, 1997).
  23. A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1984).

24. H. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967).
25. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Humanities Press, 1921 [1961]).
26. See note 2 above.
27. D. Seidl, "General Strategy Concepts and the Ecology of Strategy Discourses: a Systemic-Dis-cursive Perspective," *Organization Studies* 28 (2007): 197.
28. A. Pickering, *Science as Practice and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
29. S. G. Shanker, *Wittgenstein and the Turning-point in the Philosophy of Mathematics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987).
30. See note 2 above.
31. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 32.
32. A.-L. Fayard, and G. DeSanctis, "Evolution of an Online Forum for Knowledge Management Professionals: A Language Game Analysis," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10, no. 4 (2005). doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2005.tb00265.x
33. C. Hardy, I. Palmer, and N. Philips, "Discourse As a Strategic Resource," *Human Relations* 53 (2000): 1227.
34. [http://en.wikipedia/wiki/Wikipedia:Articles\\_for\\_deletion#How\\_an\\_AfD\\_discussion\\_is\\_closed](http://en.wikipedia/wiki/Wikipedia:Articles_for_deletion#How_an_AfD_discussion_is_closed)
35. Speedy deletion, suitable for least controversial deletes, is one of the two alternatives to AfD. See: R. S. Geiger, and H. Ford, "Participation in Wikipedia's Article Deletion Processes," *WikiSym '11* (2011): 201–2; Taraborelli and Ciampaglia, "Beyond Notability. Collective Deliberation on Content Inclusion in Wikipedia."
36. Schneider, Passant and Decker, "Deletion Discussions in Wikipedia: Decision Factors and Outcomes."
37. Taraborelli and Ciampaglia, "Beyond Notability. Collective Deliberation on Content Inclusion in Wikipedia."
38. [http://meta.wikimwiki/wiki/Association\\_of\\_Deletionist\\_Wikipedians](http://meta.wikimwiki/wiki/Association_of_Deletionist_Wikipedians); [http://meta.wikimwiki/wiki/Association\\_of\\_Inclusionist\\_Wikipedians](http://meta.wikimwiki/wiki/Association_of_Inclusionist_Wikipedians); B. Stvilia, M. B. Twidale, L. C. Smith, and L. Gasser, "Information Quality Work Organization in Wikipedia," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 59, no. 6 (2008): 983–1001.
39. J. A. Colyvas and S. Jonsson, "Ubiquity and Legitimacy: Disentangling Diffusion and Institutionalization," *Sociological Theory* 29 (2011): 27–53.
40. See note 33 above.
41. J. P. Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*, 3rd ed. (UK, Routledge, 2011); S. C. Herring, "Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Approach to Researching Online Behavior," in *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*, ed. S. A. Barab, R. Kling, and J. H. Gray (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
42. N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 2nd ed (London: Longman, 2001).
43. M. A. K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978).
44. A. L. Strauss and J. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, 2nd ed. (Sage, 1998).
45. <http://en.wikipedia/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability>: "This page in a nutshell" accessed 22 Mar 2015
46. J. Horne, and S. Wiggins, "Doing Being 'On the Edge': Managing the Dilemma of Being Authentically Suicidal in an Online Forum," *Sociology of Health & Illness* 31 (2009): 170–84.
47. See note 44 above.
48. See note 36 above.
49. <https://en.wikipedia/wiki/Wikipedia:Canvassing>
50. G. Salmon, *E-moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online* (London: Kogan Page, 2000).
51. J. Finlay and L. Willoughby, "Exploring Online Learning Relationships: a Case Study in Higher Education," in *Remote Relationships in a Small World*, ed. S. Holland (Peter Lang Publishing, 2008).
52. <http://en.wikipedia/wiki/Wikipedia:Aircrash> (accessed August 16, 2013)
53. [http://en.wikipedia/wiki/Wikipedia:EVENT#Lasting\\_effects](http://en.wikipedia/wiki/Wikipedia:EVENT#Lasting_effects) (accessed August 19, 2013)

54. M. C. A. Castro, "Let's Chat: An Analysis of Some Discourse Features of Synchronous Chat," *Journal of English Studies and Comparative Literature* 9, no. 1 (2007).
55. This name is anonymized.
56. [http://en.wikipedia/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Notability\\_\(academics\)&oldid=555682370](http://en.wikipedia/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Notability_(academics)&oldid=555682370) (accessed March 23, 2015)
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. See note 55 above.
60. A.-L. Fayard, and G. DeSanctis, "Kiosks, Clubs and Neighborhoods: the Language Games of Online Forums," *Journal of the Association for Information Systems* 9, no. 10/11 (2008): 693.
61. F. B. Viegas, M. Wattenberg, J. Kriss, and F. van Ham, "Talk Before You Type: Coordination in Wikipedia," *Proceedings of the 40th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (2007), <http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&arnumber=4076527> (accessed April 10, 2014).
62. S.-C. J. Yam, "A Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Cooperative Knowledge Generation: Ideology and Structural Tension of Nupedia," *West East Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2012): 48–54, <http://www.westeastinstitute.com/journals/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/5-Shing-Chung-Jonathan-Yam-A-Sociology-Of-Knowledge-Approach-To-Cooperative-Knowledge-Generation-Ideology-And-Structural-Tension-Of-Nupedia.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2015); and S.-C. J. Yam, "Decommercialization and Anti-Elitism: Early Years of Wikipedia 2001–2002," *International Journal of Arts & Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2013): 533–38, <http://universitypublications.net/ijas/0601/pdf/SPQ603.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2015)