

## Extended Abstract

### **Amateur encyclopedia editors as nonprofessional journalists: Wikipedia as a gateway for breaking news**

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#### **1. Introduction**

In Wikipedia, an open community develops and maintains a free online encyclopedia. The German language version contains more than 1.7 million articles, most of which are considerably longer than articles from traditional printed encyclopedias such as the German Brockhaus or the Encyclopedia Britannica. Wikipedia is a very popular source of information for internet users and journalists (cf. Pentzold, 2011; Messner & DiStaso, 2013; van Eimeren & Frees, 2013).

The word ‘Wiki’ originates in the Hawaiian language, meaning *quick, fast*. The possibility to quickly add or edit information extends Wikipedia’s scope beyond that of traditional encyclopedias. Wikipedia, like other online services, e.g. YouTube or Twitter, has become a gateway for breaking news. However, due to the original concept of Wikipedia as a free online equivalent to traditional encyclopedias, its role as a news medium is causing concern among Wikipedia’s community of volunteer editors. As a matter of fact, the Wikimedia Foundation (the organization that runs Wikipedia) provides a dedicated channel for free-licensed news: wikinews.org. However, this project is rather small, has comparatively few active users – and contains little actual news content (for more information on Wikinews cf. Thorsen, 2008; Vis, 2009).

Subject of the present article is the dispute over the acceptance of breaking news in the German Wikipedia community. There are two research questions:

*RQ1: How does the community deal with new articles about breaking news? Which arguments do supporters and opponents of such articles use during the dispute?*

*RQ2: What happens when the Wikipedia community faces the challenge of dealing with a developing situation?*

Theoretical background for the analysis is the gatekeeper theory (White, 1950; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). It is assumed that Wikipedia’s editors who oppose articles about breaking news want to keep the gates for such articles closed; supporters of articles about breaking news, want them open.

## 2. Method

The present analysis is based on a qualitative analysis of polls and poll related discussions as well as of discussions about requests for deletion in the German language version of Wikipedia. The qualitative analysis has the objective to determine *typical* structures of discussions about breaking news. *Typical* arguments of Wikipedia's gatekeepers are to be identified. In addition to that, qualitative analysis is applied to *understand* the community's reaction to a case of breaking news that unfolded parallel to the writing of the correspondent article (Loveparade disaster 2010). Overall, the analysis is based on (1) poll and discussion about news-related articles from 2005,<sup>1</sup> (2) poll and discussion about news-related articles from 2009,<sup>2</sup> (3) discussion about the request for deletion concerning the article about the Ansbach school shooting,<sup>3</sup> (4) discussions about the article on the Duisburg Loveparade disaster.<sup>4</sup>

## 3. Findings

The qualitative analysis reveals four groups of typical arguments:

1. *Arguments addressing Wikipedia's nature as an encyclopedia.* Some users argue that it lies not within the purview of an encyclopedia to cover breaking news. Others say that newsworthy events oftentimes are deemed notable for a general interest encyclopedia in retrospect.
2. *Pragmatical arguments.* Supporters argue, for example, that some high-quality articles emerged over time from short articles about breaking news. Opponents say that lack of reliable information makes it virtually impossible to write an acceptable article about an unfolding event.
3. *Arguments concerning Wikipedia as a community project.* There is the danger of a citation cycle when Wikipedia editors make use of mass media as sources while journalists use Wikipedia for research. Others argue that high-quality articles about breaking news are one of the strong suits of Wikipedia.
4. *Arguments referring to wikinews.org.* Users either recommend the project as an outlet for articles about breaking news or indicate that Wikinews lacks success and public attention.

Once the article about the Loveparade disaster was accepted in Wikipedia, the discussion turned to what can be called *second-level gatekeeping*. Wikipedia's gatekeepers had to decide whether certain pieces of information should be included in the encyclopedic article. Among the disputed contents were discussions

1 [http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Meinungsbilder/Aktuelle\\_Ereignisse&oldid=106892343](http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Meinungsbilder/Aktuelle_Ereignisse&oldid=106892343) (accessed 29.09.2014).

2 [http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Meinungsbilder/Newsbezogene\\_Artikel&oldid=75732997](http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Meinungsbilder/Newsbezogene_Artikel&oldid=75732997) (accessed 29.09.2014).

3 [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:L%C3%B6schkandidaten/21.\\_September\\_2009#Amoklauf\\_von\\_Ansbach\\_28bleibt.29](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:L%C3%B6schkandidaten/21._September_2009#Amoklauf_von_Ansbach_28bleibt.29) (accessed 29.09.2014).

4 [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diskussion:Ungl%C3%BCck\\_bei\\_der\\_Loveparade\\_2010/Archiv/1](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diskussion:Ungl%C3%BCck_bei_der_Loveparade_2010/Archiv/1) (accessed 29.09.2014).

about the commercial nature of the Loveparade or media speculations about the victims' causes of death. Eventually, the gates remained closed for all disputed information.

The case of the English Wikipedia article about the London bombings in 2005 illustrates that Wikipedia has become a trusted source of information on unfolding events. The article was created hours after the terrorist attacks and grew constantly. A journalist from New Zealand later commented: “*One of the more notable responses [to the London bombings] was that of the free online encyclopedia Wikipedia, which had a work-in-progress page up as soon as the news broke, and, through the contributions of many volunteers, quickly established a resource that was better than most news sources. Think of that: an encyclopedia as breaking news.*”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Brown, Russell, New Zealand Listener, July 23-29 2005, pp 52-53, We Are All Reporters. Quoted after [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Press\\_coverage\\_2005#July](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Press_coverage_2005#July) (accessed 19.03.2013).