WIKIPEDIA AND ARCHIVAL PROBLEMS:

A Derridean impression

"Do these new archival machines change anything?"

Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (1996: 4)

By Dominic Pretorius

As much as *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* is Jacques Derrida's meditation on the notion of archives as it relates to Sigmund Freud, the person and the psychoanalytic tradition, many of his insights can be applied to theories of the archive in general. Moreover, he is particularly concerned with the meaning of archives at a moment of rapid technological development. Derrida (1996: 17) writes, "[At] an unprecedented rhythm, in quasi-instantaneous fashion, this instrumental possibility of production, of printing, of conservation, and of destruction of the archive must inevitably be accompanied by juridical and thus political transformations." These 'transformations', in 1996, were the hopes that as computers and the internet became more sophisticated and accessible, they would issue in a new era of knowledge production, storage, and reproduction, that is, a democratic archive. Derrida did not know, but may have vaguely sensed, that he was writing shortly before the advent of Wikipedia in 2001 which, as its cofounder Jimmy Wales says, "Imagine[d] a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge" (cited in Gallert, Mushiba, and Winschiers-Theophilus, 2016: 1). Although Wikipedia has arguably seen success, it has also failed to transcend many of the constraints, relating to privilege and power, that Derrida expressed regarding the archive. In this article, I will apply Derridean impressions onto contemporary debates regarding Wikipedia's exclusion, through policy and practice, of various people, languages, and knowledge systems.

The word 'archive' stores its political function in its etymological roots. It means the place of the archons, the rulers in Ancient Athens who had the authority to make and represent the law. Derrida (1996: 4) writes, "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory." In the contemporary moment, there is not a singular place where knowledge and power coalesce as simply as in Ancient Greece. There are, of course, many archives – parliaments where legislation is formulated, the various courts where justice is distributed, universities where knowledge hierarchies are established. However, these archival places share two features: firstly, they have material substrates, for example, infrastructure, documents, and capital; secondly, they have officials who

are invested with exclusive power over them (Derrida, p. 2). Over time, nation states have seen a general shift from monarchies' absolute political power towards various forms of democracy with increased suffrage. Concomitantly, these archival places are expected to be increasingly accessible and transparent, and ultimately to be *by and for the people*, the founding ideal of democracy. Derrida (p. 4) writes, "Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation."

It is within this political trajectory that the internet, in its infancy, was celebrated as the next step towards a democratic archive. In a utopic imaginary, Wikipedia would be the ultimate archive *by and for the people*: an easily, freely, and universally accessible repository of the vast and deep knowledge that has been accumulated throughout human history, where everyone could inscribe their own contribution in its ever-growing store. Notably, these technological possibilities were announcing themselves at the same time that post-colonial societies were committing themselves in new ways to the process of decolonisation. For example, *The Empire Writes Back*, a seminal account of post-colonial critiques of Western notions of language and literature, was published in 1989.[1] Those who had for so long been oppressed by, and excluded from, the centres of power and knowledge were finally able to respond to those ideological systems and to speak on their own terms. For Achal Prabhala, an activist who served on the advisory board of Wikimedia Foundation from 2006 to 2018, Wikipedia came at a time, with dropping telecom prices and cheap smart phones, when equality seemed to be near. Prabhala (2018) writes:

Let's face it: we will never catch up with the accumulated mass of formal knowledge produced

> ❝Although Wikipedia has arguably seen success, it has also failed to transcend many of the constraints, relating to privilege and power, that Derrida expressed regarding the archive. In this article, I will apply Derridean impressions onto contemporary debates regarding Wikipedia's exclusion, through policy and practice, of various people, languages, and knowledge systems. ❞

by Europe and the US. Not going to happen. But in the digital world? I did think it was the one place where we could have a kind of equality; new rules for a new world.

And yet, in reality, the internet and Wikipedia did not become the laudable knowledge commons that many prophesised. In fact, the internet very quickly became subject to the 'tragedy of the commons', a communal resource compromised by a few people acting in their own self-interest (Hardin, 1968: 1244). As the internet became increasingly commodified, a minefield full of click-bait and advertising, Wikipedia remained staunch in its belief that it would be an oasis for freedom. In 2005, cofounder Jimmy Wales assured the public, "We help the Internet not suck" (cited in Prabhala, 2018). But in a different sense, Wikipedia was under threat from a 'tragedy of the commons' in which its openness apparently allowed for people to exploit and abuse it. Many were sceptical about the reliability of its user-generated content. Malicious people could lead misinformation campaigns, thereby ruining the resource for everybody else. As Garrett Hardin (p. 1243) the economic theorist behind 'The Tragedy of the Commons' writes, "Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all." Many of us who attended school in the 21st century will remember a teacher forbidding the use of Wikipedia because it was not considered a reliable source. Consequently, there was increasing pressure for Wikipedia to assert more control over the production of its content. The issue caused major controversy when a hoax article was published on Wikipedia, accusing a prominent American journalist of being a suspect in the assassination of former US President John F. Kennedy (Wikipedia contributors, 2019, 'Wikipedia Seigenthaler biography incident'). The fallout from this article caused the site to apply, amongst other

things, more stringent policies on referencing information and on who gets to publish and edit articles (Giles, 2013).

The only apparent way to guard against the 'tragedy of the commons' was for the site to become more regulated even if that meant foregoing its founding democratic values. Hardin (1968: 1247) writes as a justification for this conservative turn – that is, the privatisation of the commons – "[i]njustice is preferable to total ruin." Consequently, Wikipedia became increasingly constrained by two related things, text-based sources and a relatively small community of volunteer editors who are predominantly white, educated men living in the Europe or North America (Giles, 2013). In fact, 90% of all Wikipedia editors are male, which would not surprise Derrida (1996: 3), who noted that archiving has always been a patriarchal act. The site has been criticised for "reflecting a Western, male-dominated mindset similar to the perspective behind the encyclopaedias it has replaced" (Cohen, 2011). It is necessary to pause here and reflect that these two things – citation and verification – represent the Derridean physical substrate and authority that determine political power. And so, as Derrida (p. 37) writes, "The question of the archive remains the same: What comes first? Even better: Who comes first? And second?"

It is easy to lose sight of the underpinnings of Wikipedia content, because it is on the internet, which is still a strange virtual world, and cannot be thought simply as a place in which an archive is stored and protected. But, remember, there are very real materials needed for Wikipedia to function: the servers, the physical and digital texts it requires for sources, the telecommunication infrastructure, the personal computers and phones, and the volunteer labourers, who need homes, spare time, money, and education. These factors all contribute to what Derrida (1996: 3) called the "privileged topology" of the archive which, although the internet may seem to exist everywhere and nowhere at once, has decidedly geographical implications. Firstly, the archive excludes information about places and people that are on its periphery, because of the conscious and unconscious biases of its keepers. According to Jim Giles (2013), quoting research done at the University of Oxford, "...many African nations have fewer articles than the fictional realm of Middle Earth. These regions... are 'virtual terra

> 66 In fact, 90% of all Wikipedia editors are male, which would not surprise Derrida (1996: 3), who noted that archiving has always been a patriarchal act. The site has been criticised for "reflecting a Western, male-dominated mindset similar to the perspective behind the encyclopaedias it has replaced". 99

incognita'." Secondly, the knowledge produced on those peripheries is considered suspect, even if it conforms to the text-based (that is, not oral) sources required by Wikipedia. Prabhala (2018) notes an example in which articles about Makmende, a Kenyan superhero character, were blocked from Wikipedia, despite their references to well-known Kenyan newspapers. The article on Makmende was only permitted to enter the archive when the subject received a mention in the *The New York Times*. Prabhala (2018) concludes with not a little exasperation, "...nothing really happens unless it happens in a journal published out of Cambridge or a newspaper in Manhattan. And Wikipedia is passionately committed to this warped, outmoded, colonial view of the world." Furthermore, Paul Gallert et al (2016: 2), who have promoted the integration of indigenous knowledges into Wikipedia, note that even the design of technology excludes certain groups of people because it replicates "cultural logics and literacies."

Derrida (1996: 40) explains that "there could be no archiving without... archontic principles of legitimization... without criteria of classification and hierarchization." Importantly, here, Derrida expresses the archive's two-pronged concern regarding knowledge, that is, what constitutes knowledge and, moreover, what knowledge is notable or a matter of consequence. Consequently, the many undocumented knowledges, many of which are archived in oral and embodied traditions, cannot enter Wikipedia, which remains humankind's most extensive archive. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida (p. 34) draws attention to the "archival problems" of, for example, oral traditions and transgenerational heritage, ways of knowing that cannot be reduced to scientific inscription. On the other hand, those in the so-called developing world lack access to text, whether it be in printed or electronic form. And even if the knowledge has found a place in text, one of Wikipedia's 1,300 administrators, a position earned through the self-affirming and myopic community of Wikipedians, has the power to delete any article *he* determines to be inconsequential or frivolous. There is the story of Anasuya Sengupta, an activist from Bangalore, who demonstrated this point at a 2010 conference for African Wikipedians. She wrote a Wikipedia article on Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, a prominent

> **❝**Prabhala (2018) notes an example in which articles about Makmende, a Kenyan superhero character, were blocked from Wikipedia, despite their references to well-known Kenyan newspapers. The article on Makmende was only permitted to enter the archive when the subject received a mention in the *The New York Times*.**❞**

women's rights activist in Nigeria, during the conference proceedings. Her entry was "marked for speedy deletion... [it was] judged to be trifling" (Chafkin and Kessenides, 2016). This editorial decision is telling when a meme regarding Chuck Norris has had its own Wikipedia page since 2006 (Giles, 2013).

Wikipedia's archive, by limiting what constitutes valuable knowledge, in turn asserts what constitutes being human. The archive is stored in an 'ark', which we must think of in its two connotations: a chest and Noah's Ark. A chest is for files, but is also your body's chest, where your heart is, where your life and love are stored. In the story of Noah's Ark, after making a covenant with the lord, Noah constructs an archive of life on earth in case the world is wiped clean and human society must start again. Analogously, Wikipedia can be seen as the archive for everything 'we/they' know. And, contrary to common sense, the archive is not just about the past that it stores. Future writing is based on the repository of knowledge and also on its footnotes - that small archive at the bottom of each of these pages, those works that have become accepted in the archive, and thus the archive produces the future as much as it stores the past. As the story of Noah shows, the Ark is about reconstituting the future. It is based on a constant anxiety about the fragility of the present moving into the future, a future that will be defined by its archive and those who control it. Derrida (1996: 36) notes accordingly: "It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself." There may never be a biblical flood, but there is a constant dying, a piecemeal annihilation of human beings and their languages and culture. Or as Public Enemy would say: "Apocalypse bin in effect" (cited in Eshun, 2003: 299). We live at a moment of knowledge

death, as globalisation assimilates and obliterates certain people, languages and cultures, - all of which are carriers of knowledge, but knowledges that will transform or disappear in this process. It is the archived knowledge, stored in legible, exterior mediums, that will survive, thereby ensuring the survival of its officials', and their descendants', political power. Instead of producing an infinite and diverse store of knowledge, archives "aim to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration" (Derrida, p. 3). And, for Wikipedia, that 'ideal configuration' is decidedly Western and male. With its proliferation becoming ubiquitous, it imposes a 'We' on an 'Other' in what Derrida (p. 42) calls "the violence of [a] *communal* dissymmetry." In this violent relation, the 'We' – the custodians of knowledge – becomes the overseers of the 'Other' who cannot resist becoming subservient to the dictates of the archive, because of the uneven power dynamics present in that address.

Wikipedia's concern as an archive with the future can also be read in terms of what Mark Fisher calls 'SF capital' – science fiction capital – which creates a "positive feedback between future-orientated media and capital" (Eshun, 2003: 290). Most simply, global capital flows towards the likes of Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, and technologies like cryptocurrency, because they are believed to be producing the future. Similarly, Wikipedia can attract USD 104.5 million during the 2017/2018 financial year because it is believed to be the future's archive (Wikipedia contributors, 2019, 'Wikipedia: Fundraiser statistics'). The foundation's leverage is its promise to produce "reliable, neutral information" and to ensure "access to knowledge for everyone, everywhere" (Wikipedia contributors, 2018, '2016-2017 Fundraising report'). But, as I have argued, that funding is going towards producing a particular kind of knowledge for a particular kind of person, all of which will produce a particular kind of power structure in the future. Importantly, Kodwo Eshun, as an Afrofuturist, has theorised that black culture in Africa and its diaspora was denied a history during the colonial period in order to subjugate black people. Thereafter, Eshun argues that there is a risk that black intellectual culture is, and will be, overdetermined by its concern with revising that historical archive, thereby leaving

> 66 This archive and the internet in general are, therefore, like many archives before it, a nexus point for acquiring significant political power in determining what constitutes valuable knowledge and, moreover, what constitutes being human. 99

the future open to colonisation by former colonial powers. Eshun (p. 288) writes, "the vigilance that is necessary to indict imperial modernity must be extended into the field of the future." Therefore it becomes of utmost importance that people work towards, and fight for, a future archive that is inherently democratic, because there is always the risk of history repeating itself.

To try to rectify the archive, activists like Prabhala have valiantly tried to change Wikipedia, its culture and its citizens. In 2010, Prabhala produced a film entitled *People are Knowledge*, which documented his attempt to integrate knowledge from rural communities in India and South Africa into Wikipedia (Prabhala, 2010). The documentary seeks to expose what Derrida (1996: 4) calls the "limits *declared* to be insurmountable" by the keepers of the archive. In Limpopo, a northern province of South Africa, he interviewed Sepedi people regarding Mokgope, a drink made from fermenting Marula fruit, and then facilitated the writing of a Sepedi-language Wikipedia article about it, while using the recorded audio files as the sources. Although the article is active, it remains untranslated by other Wikipedians because it is in a minor language and because of the audio references (Prabhala, 2018). This stands in contrast to an entry on a French drink called Pastis, which has been translated into 22 different languages. This is another example of how Wikipedia's archival limits restricts the spread of some knowledges compared to others. Although Prabhala had minor victories, ultimately, he quit trying to fundamentally change the structure and make-up of the site, because partially due to harassment from seasoned Wikipedians. Under perceived threat, they have become increasingly protective over their property. Prabhala (2018)

concludes: "[Don't] be fooled: it's merely the old system of power, wrapped in a dazzling gauze of technological emancipation and repackaged with a benevolent liberal bow."

In summary, I have tried to show how Wikipedia, which for a time may have seemed to offer a significant opportunity to shift the power dynamics in the global production of knowledge, has fallen foul to the oft-hidden constraints of the archive. Reading Wikipedia seems a common, natural, and politically neutral research method. However, applying Derrida's insights onto contemporary debates regarding Wikipedia's policies and practices shows that, in fact, there are physical substrates and archons to this archive. This archive and the internet in general are, therefore, like many archives before it, a nexus point for acquiring significant political power in determining what constitutes valuable knowledge and, moreover, what constitutes being human. In the collective human body, the heart, in its archival chest, refuses to love large proportions of humankind, and this will inevitably have an impact on the future of this body, and how it constitutes and remembers itself. I think of Koleka Putuma's 'Storytelling[1]', the opening poem in *Collective Amnesia* (2017), a body of work that writes back to the archive of Western patriarchy, highlighting the voices that the archive keeps silencing. The poem's title sits at the top of the page, but the page remains blank, not empty but full of whiteness; the title is footnoted though,

directing your eyes to the bottom of the page in order to read below the footnote separator line because that's where the power lies: "1) How my people remember. How my people archive. How we inherit the world" (Putuma, 2017: 11).

Finally, one might want to consider or support initiatives that promote internet accessibility and literacy, which may lead to a more democratic Wikipedia or an entirely different future archive. For example, the University of the Western Cape in South Africa has worked with residents in Mankosi, Eastern Cape, since 2012 to set up Zenzeleni (translated as 'Do it yourself'), the country's first cooperative-owned Internet Service Provider network (Tucker, 2017). This is a South African instantiation of a movement to close the internet connectivity gaps that exists globally, particularly on the African continent, through community networks that democratise the digital. ∎

References

Cohen, N. (2011). When Knowledge Isn't Written, Does It Still Count? *The New York Times*, 7 August 2011. Available: https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/08/business/media/a-push-to-redefine-knowledge-at-wikipedia.html

Derrida, J. (1996). *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Eshun, K. (2003). Considerations on Afrofuturism. *The New Centennial Review*, *3*(2): 287-302. Available: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41949397

Gallert, P., Mushiba, M., and Winschiers-Theophilus, H. (2016). On Persuading an OvaHerero Community to join the Wikipedia Community. 10th International Conference on Culture, Technology, and Communication, London, United Kingdom. pp. 1-18. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-50109- 3_1

Giles, J. (2013). 'Free for all? Lifting the lid on a Wikipedia crisis. *New Scientist*, 10 April 2013. Available: https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21829122.200-free-for-all-lifting-the-lid-on-a-wikipedia-crisis/

Hardin, G. (1968). The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science*. *162*(3859): 1243-1248. DOI: 10.1126/science.162.3859.1243

Kessenides, D., and Chafkin, M. (2016). Is Wikipedia Woke? *Bloomberg*, 22 December 2016. Available: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2016-12-22/how-woke-is-wikipedia-s-editorial-pool

Putuma, K. (2017). *Collective Amnesia*, Cape Town: uHlanga.

Prabhala, A. (2010). *People are Knowledge*. Vimeo, Video. Available: https://vimeo.com/26469276

Prabhala, A. (2018). Writer and activist Achal Prabhala on expanding the parameters for what is considered knowledge. *Bubblegum Club*. Interview with Christa Dee. Available: https://bubblegumclub.co.za/art-and-culture/writer-and-activist-achal-prabhala-on-expanding-the-parameters-for-what-is-considered-knowledge/

Tucker, B. (2017). How a rural community built South Africa's first ISP owned and run by a cooperative. *The Conversation*, 28 November 2017. Available: https://theconversation.com/how-a-rural-community-built-south-africas-first-isp-owned-and-run-by-a-cooperative-87448

Wikipedia contributors. (2019). Wikipedia Seigenthaler biography incident. *Wikipedia*, last revised 13 May 2019. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_Seigenthaler_biography_incident

Wikipedia contributors. (2019). Wikipedia: Fundraising statistics. *Wikipedia*, last revised: 6 April 2019. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Fundraising_statistics&action=info

Wikipedia contributors. (2018). 2016-2017 Fundraising Report. *Wikipedia*, last revised 25 September 2018. Available: https://foundation.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=2016-2017_Fundraising_Report&action=info

1   *The Empire Writes Back* was first published by Routledge in London. It is, of course, ironic that the seminal work regarding the literary opposition to the empire was originally published by Western academics within the empire.