TRANSCRIPT Ep 2 Wikipedia's three big fights – what knowledge counts?

[00:00:05] **Heather Ford:** There's a game that's being played in southern Queensland for a very long time. Two teams with 6 to 8 players each. The game begins when the Buroinjin. A kangaroo skin ball is thrown into the air. Someone catches it and runs. You can pass in any direction. The aim is simple get to the other end of the field without being touched. The game doesn't stop at half time. It doesn't stop if someone drops the ball. It stops at sunset. This is the game that the Kabi Kabi people invented and have played for thousands of years, and buroinjin is still played today. The game you're hearing is happening on a basketball court in Shepparton, Victoria.

The game of buroinjin is not on Wikipedia, not because no one knows about it. Because it was never written down in a newspaper, in a book, never published in an academic journal. And without that, it cannot exist in the encyclopaedia that promised to be the sum of all human knowledge.

[00:01:22] **Achal Prabhala:** As long as you insist the knowledge is only something that has been written down in multiple reliable sources. There are also effectively saying that societies that don't publish large quantities of texts and haven't over the last several hundred years are in fact dumb, devoid of knowledge.

[00:01:45] **Heather Ford:** Welcome back to All That We Touch, Wikipedia, a series about how Wikipedia shapes what you know. I'm your host, Heather Ford. I'm a professor of knowledge technologies at the University of Technology Sydney, And this is my co-host for this episode, Richard Cook. Hi, Richard.

[00:02:03] **Richard Cooke:** Hi, Heather. I'm a journalist and author who's just written a book about Wikipedia.

[00:02:08] **Heather Ford:** And we're going to take you through three of its biggest fights. Not fights over facts, not fights over whether it leans to the right or left of politics, and not the edit wars that happen every day, every minute on Wikipedia, like arguing over the spelling of yoghurt and the gender of cartoon cat Garfield. No, these are fights over

something much bigger. Fights about what Wikipedia even is and whose knowledge belongs inside it. Okay, this first story, this first fight is English. Wikipedia, the real Wikipedia. This started really early on in Wikipedia's history, where there was a question.

[00:02:57] **Richard Cooke:** Should you just complete Wikipedia in English? If such a thing is even possible and then translate it into other languages. Or should there be encyclopaedias running in parallel throughout the whole of Wikipedia's history?

[00:03:13] **Florence Devouard:** I've stumbled on Wikipedia back at the end of 2001.

[00:03:18] **Heather Ford:** In 2001, almost no one knows what Wikipedia is or how it works.

[00:03:24] **Florence Devouard:** Nobody knew the website was very new. Hardly any visitors, very few contributors.

[00:03:31] **Richard Cooke:** One of the most important things about Wikipedia when it starts is that it's terrible. It's so bad that it's almost an invitation for people to say, I think I could do better than this.

[00:03:45] **Florence Devouard:** And I remember at that time, yeah, it was very geeky. It was just even now, the interface is very still for geeks. At that time, it was even more.

[00:03:56] **Heather Ford:** This is Florence Devouard. Florence is not your typical Wikipedia editor. She's a scientist, not a techie. She's French, not American. And she's a woman in a community that was and still is overwhelmingly male. Florence doesn't even think she can take part.

[00:04:17] **Florence Devouard:** I freaked out this was in English only I'm French. My English is. Yeah, you know what it is. The content I was writing about was related to biosafety biosecurity.

[00:04:29] **Heather Ford:** That's Florence's area of expertise and her day job. And she's writing about it on English Wikipedia. But then she makes a discovery.

[00:04:41] **Florence Devouard:** I found a link to a French Wikipedia. It was small, so the French was just three people. At some point when I joined, there were there were some rules in English, but there were basically no rules at all in French. So the first tendency is to copy the English rules to kick start the French one. Except back in 2001 2002, it doesn't feel so good to blindly adopt the English Wikipedia rules.

[00:05:11] **Richard Cooke:** The system at this stage is still very young, and people are working out what this thing is, and they're working it out mostly through trial and error. Try something. See if it works. So one of the early arguments between French Wikipedians and Wikipedians elsewhere is should an encyclopaedia have recipes in it? French people, believe it or not, think that it should.

[00:05:38] **Heather Ford:** That does not surprise me. It's all about the food. And as Wikipedia starts to spread, something else becomes clear. It's not just one encyclopaedia. It's many different languages, different communities.

[00:05:55] **Richard Cooke:** This is a really old question in encyclopaedias. If knowledge is one thing that everybody can agree on, is it the same across cultures? Even Bill gates, when he did the Encarta Encyclopaedia, gave an example. If you say Shakespeare is one of the most important authors, that's true in English, and it's kind of true in Spanish, but in Spanish, Cervantes is much more important than Shakespeare is. So would it be right for a Spanish encyclopaedia to have a longer entry on Shakespeare than Cervantes? Probably not. Very early in Wikipedia, the moment that there are people in other languages involved, you start having these kinds of debates and arguments. Should there just be one encyclopaedia which is translated into all the other languages? Probably not, but Larry Sanger thinks so.

[00:06:52] **Heather Ford:** Larry Sanger is a co-founder of Wikipedia.

[00:06:55] **Florence Devouard:** And one of the latest conversations I had with Larry Sanger before he left the program is he told me bluntly, your presence is not necessary. What you're doing is actually quite useless. The work done on the French. Because what we need to do is to actually first build the encyclopaedia, the English one, and then we can translate in the other languages. And I said, no way this is going to work this

way. No it's not. And I do not agree that the other ones should be just translation. We are going to do our own things.

[00:07:34] **Heather Ford:** But Jemmy Wales has a very different idea about how these encyclopaedias should develop.

[00:07:42] **Richard Cooke:** That's right. And one of his inclinations was that there should be very little oversight into these other language editions.

[00:07:51] **Heather Ford:** And Larry Sanger leaves Wikipedia early after just a year. So it's Jemmy Wales at the helm. And under his really hands off approach, the language editions are just left to figure themselves out. Each one on its own. In France, that meant that people like Florence de Waard could keep writing a Wikipedia of their own.

[00:08:15] **Richard Cooke:** The important thing to recognise here is that a wiki is also a community. In the very early days, French Wikipedia has its own logo. Why does it have its own logo? Because it doesn't want an English language sentence on the Wikipedia logo.

[00:08:32] **Heather Ford:** Hmm. So other languages start their own encyclopaedias?

[00:08:37] **Richard Cooke:** Yeah. There is a surprising lack of overlap between. If you look at really big Wikipedias, like Japanese, German and English, for example. It's only 40 to 50% of. Even the article titles are the same across all three. That's much lower than I expected.

[00:08:54] **Heather Ford:** Yeah. But over time, people start to realise that even though there are hundreds of other languages Wikipedia available, that English really holds the world's attention. English is the invisible centre of them all.

[00:09:11] **Richard Cooke:** And English is the biggest second language in the world. If you speak two languages, there's a high likelihood the second one is going to be English. And what tends to happen is that people who might edit in Hindi or Swahili or many, many other languages around the world, if they want to write about a technical topic or a historical topic, they will start writing in English. And that can create some

huge disparities. So Hindi, one of the most spoken languages in the world, has hundreds of millions of speakers. At one stage, there's something like 50 active Hindi Wikipedia editors, because all the people who speak Hindi are just editing about Indian topics in English.

[00:09:56] **Heather Ford:** Mhm. So you can write articles in your language, but if you want to attend Wikimania Wikipedia's annual conference or if you want to join the mailing list, debates, or even if you want to edit the parts of your own Wikipedia that are controlled centrally, you'll need English. English is the working language of the whole Wikimedia movement. It's kind of like the encyclopaedia is multilingual, but the machinery behind it isn't the Wikimedia Foundation. That organisation that keeps the whole thing running is based in the United States, and it's funded overwhelmingly by North American and European donors. So when we talk about English being the invisible centre of it all, is it really so invisible?

[00:10:51] **Richard Cooke:** So Wikimedia Foundation is a genuinely polyglot organisation. It prides itself on employing staff who speak many different languages. You'd be hard pressed outside the UN to find a place where, as many people can speak as many different languages as they do. In the Wikimedia Foundation. But ultimately, the language that they conduct business in is English. In an office in San Francisco. You can't get away from that. They have previously thought about moving the foundation headquarters to India to try and account for the fact that that's kind of where the growth is happening in the in the internet today. But they haven't gone there. And I don't think they're going to either.

[00:11:38] **Heather Ford:** So the first fight that shaped Wikipedia. It started with this question should English Wikipedia be translated into other languages with French Wikipedia editor Florence D Wade.

[00:11:52] **Richard Cooke:** And Larry.

[00:11:52] **Heather Ford:** And Larry.

[00:11:53] **Richard Cooke:** Yeah. Would she won? Would she comprehensively. Yeah.

[00:11:57] **Heather Ford:** So this argument about translation was settled a long time ago. English Wikipedia would not be translated. Multiple Wikipedias went out. But this bigger fight over English, Wikipedia being the real Wikipedia, the invisible centre that pulls everything towards it, including editors. That fight is still going on today.

[00:12:27] **Richard Cooke:** So this idea of the primacy of English is also a fight about the primacy of text. That's the start of another fight.

[00:12:38] **Heather Ford:** So, Richard, I'm going to tell you the story that you actually know very well. So in 2010, Achal Prabhala, who was an activist and a writer based in Bangalore in India, Atul had an idea.

[00:12:53] **Achal Prabhala:** I was obsessed with Wikipedia, as I think every sane person should be, and I directed my energy towards what Wikipedia wasn't doing well in my opinion, which was redefining knowledge. As long as you insist the knowledge is only something that has been written down in multiple reliable sources. There are also effectively saying that societies that don't publish large quantities of texts and haven't over the last several hundred years are in fact dumb, devoid of knowledge coming from one such society, India, and then living and working in another South Africa. I knew that this last statement just isn't true. We're not dumb.

[00:13:40] **Heather Ford:** That's Achal Prabhala from his keynote speech at the Creative Commons Global Summit in 2021. So one example that he used was a game of sir played by kids in northern India. And, uh, it's kind of like tag where kids used to draw a kind of square in the dirt, and the defending team has to move around without being tagged or touched by the other team.

[00:14:12] **Richard Cooke:** Yeah. In India, there can be games played by tens of millions of people, which have essentially no written record attached to them at all. So should this game be in Wikipedia? It seems absurd that the answer should be no. But if it's not written down in a newspaper or an academic paper, then you can't put it in Wikipedia.

[00:14:35] **Heather Ford:** So Atul's idea was that okay, why don't we go and record people in these villages where this game is being played, where they can describe the game, describe the rules describe the tradition.

[00:14:50] **Achal Prabhala:** To illustrate another way of citing sources by recording them. Because these sources were people, we call them oral citations, and we arrange them in the manner of a traditional textual citation.

[00:15:02] **Richard Cooke:** And that can act as what he called an oral citation. For this game, and that would be sufficient for it to go into Wikipedia. And straight away he started a fight.

[00:15:13] **Achal Prabhala:** So if you saw the Wikipedia article, it didn't look very different. We had multiple sources. It created a bit of a stir, almost entirely outside the Wikimedia movement, and was met within by an uncomfortable silence at first. But when finally people started to notice it, it was met with derision.

[00:15:33] **Heather Ford:** And derision is the polite word for it. Editors went after the oral citations listed as sources delete. Then a lot of the articles themselves delete. And on the discussion pages, they debated whether oral knowledge could even really be knowledge in tones that range from sceptical to openly condescending.

[00:15:59] **Richard Cooke:** He thought that these problems could be worked out over time, the same way that other Wikipedia policy problems have been worked out over time. Instead, he found a real resistance and reluctance to engage with it, even from people. He expected to be allies in this idea, and it fell flat pretty quickly.

[00:16:22] **Heather Ford:** What was really interesting to me is that it showed how Wikipedians talk a lot about being kind of passive curators of knowledge that's produced elsewhere. But here Wikipedia editors were really making active decisions about who was a legitimate knowledge holder and who was illegitimate. And they had their reasons. You couldn't prove these people, these knowledge holders, existed. Editors reached for their favourite cautionary tales the hoaxes, the invented articles that had slipped through before. And they said, this is how it happens.

[00:17:11] **Richard Cooke:** Another sticking point, which may be less obvious, is that Wikipedia is terrible with sound. There is a tiny amount of sound on Wikipedia, and one of the things that people talk about when they first encountered it was how backwards that seemed. So part of the resistance, I'm sure, came from people not wanting to have a stack of sound files on Wikipedia when they were trying to make it load as quickly as possible and break as little as possible as well.

[00:17:41] **Heather Ford:** I think the reason why it was so wholly rejected was that it actually posed a question that would be relevant for every Wikipedia, because it spoke to one of the foundational rules around reliable sources, and that would have changed everything.

[00:17:59] **Richard Cooke:** This was never resolved, and there are people who see it as a real missed opportunity.

[00:18:05] **Achal Prabhala:** It fell by the wayside of good intentions. It's revived every once in a way, in the spirit of the times we now live in. And by that I mean words like diversity and inclusion and all these other pretty words that I can only repeat ironically, but clearly as sort of a window dressing. There's no real desire on the part of anyone, I think, to try to transform Wikipedia into what I think it could be.

[00:18:30] **Richard Cooke:** If you look at the growth in the internet over the last decade, a lot of it's been concentrated in places like Nigeria and India. And there's a sense that maybe Wikipedia didn't meet that audience where it was. It didn't make enough accommodations to it. So Wikipedia's growth has plateaued, and the number of editors, and especially administrators on Wikipedia has either plateaued or gone down as well. And while oral citations may not have been the answer, it didn't really make many changes to speak to the Global South that was coming online at that time. So it does seem like a bit of a sliding doors moment, maybe. It's one example of how Wikipedia wound up being much less radical than a lot of people expected it to be.

[00:19:24] **Heather Ford:** Now for our third and final fight. Richard, this fight has two clear opposing sides. They even have names. Very nerdy names. The Inclusionist versus the Deletionists. Some people think that this fight has gone away. I disagree. It's a fight that continues. People don't really talk about it in those terms anymore.

[00:19:46] **Richard Cooke:** Do you think it's the biggest fight on Wikipedia? The fight to rule all the others? Inclusionism versus Deletionism.

[00:19:53] **Heather Ford:** It's big. It's probably the biggest because it actually plays out every day still, right?

[00:19:59] **Richard Cooke:** I agree, and so many of these other fights are really downwind of this one. The moment that you start an encyclopaedia, you start a conversation about what should be in it and what shouldn't be in it. And in the past, the answers to this have been quite different from what we imagine. So the very first Encyclopaedia Britannica has dozens of pages about how to treat diseases in horses. And the line for drama is only eight lines long. The moment that you do a digital encyclopaedia that is free to produce. Some people think Wikipedia should be as big as the world.

[00:20:39] **Heather Ford:** Mhm. Some definitions first. Inclusion. Illusionists. That's the nickname of Wikipedia editors who want to see Wikipedia grow. Like their name they like, including more and more knowledge. Their argument is simple Wikipedia is not paper. Wikipedia has no finite number of pages. So why exclude anything? And the deletionists rich.

[00:21:07] **Richard Cooke:** There are Wikipedians who seem to take a sick thrill from deleting as much of the material on Wikipedia as they can. And in their mind, they're improving its quality. They're also making it less interesting, I feel. And there's a lot more of those people now.

[00:21:24] **Heather Ford:** The deletionists concern is quality over quantity. Too many obscure or poorly sourced articles, they argue, undermines the credibility of the whole encyclopaedia.

[00:21:36] **Richard Cooke:** And it's the fight between Inclusionist and Deletionists which determines how big Wikipedia is and what's inside it.

[00:21:45] **US TV News archive:** Justin, you are looking at obviously a very disturbing live shot there. Apparently, a plane has crashed into the World Trade Centre in New York.

[00:21:53] **Heather Ford:** The very first fight where this happened happened - 9/11. These were the early days of Wikipedia, weren't they?

[00:22:02] **Richard Cooke:** Yes. So 9/11 is a crucial event in the history of Wikipedia.

[00:22:09] **US TV News archive:** Oh my God.Oh my God.That looks like a second plane.

[00:22:14] **US TV News archive:** That that just exploded.

[00:22:16] **US TV News archive:** So this looks like it is some sort of a concerted effort to attack the World Trade Centre that is underway.

[00:22:27] **Richard Cooke:** September 11th, 2001. A number of commercial airliners were hijacked by terrorists, and two of them most famously, were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in Manhattan, New York City. It was a mass casualty event, killing thousands of people and injuring many more. This is where people, not just in the United States but worldwide, are logging in constantly, looking for any information about these attacks that they can find. And there's very little on the internet. And what there is there is collected and filtered and promoted through Wikipedia. This was only a few months after Wikipedia had been founded. It became not only a place people went looking for information, but it placed that people contributed to to kind of share this sense of vigilance and, and trauma, really. So naturally, people start editing Wikipedia much more as a response. And one of the things that they do is write articles about the victims of the attacks. And these are not standard encyclopaedia articles. They are often memorials. They are people who knew the victims and those are kept up for a time. But then other people, especially European Wikipedians, say, well, are we going to have a page for every single person who's killed in a terrorist attack anywhere? Is this really something we should have in an encyclopaedia? And over time, the answer becomes no. And this material is kept in a separate memorial to the rest of Wikipedia.

And so that's one of the early examples of saying, okay, this is not someone who should be in an encyclopaedia, even an encyclopaedia not written on paper.

[00:24:20] **Heather Ford:** So this is one of the first instances of the inclusionist versus deletionists.

[00:24:26] **Richard Cooke:** That's right. As in so many other rounds, they won.

[00:24:29] **Heather Ford:** Yes. And it's interesting because Inclusionist versus Deletionists becomes a part of like a kind of lingo that that Wikipedians actually use to describe themselves at this moment.

[00:24:42] **Richard Cooke:** That's right. Yeah. People identify as Inclusionist and Deletionists. And one quirk of Wikipedia is that most of the important early Wikipedians, including its founders, are Inclusionist. But Wikipedia is deletionists.

[00:24:57] **Heather Ford:** Yes. And 25 years later, the Deletionists are still around. How are they shaping Wikipedia today?

[00:25:06] **Richard Cooke:** So one of the kind of arenas where this battle plays out is an area called articles Nominated for deletion. That's all of the new articles, often that have been created in the last 24 hours. And there's a voting system about whether or not they should be retained or they should be discarded. Almost always, they are discarded.

[00:25:28] **Heather Ford:** I studied this in the early 2000s, and most of the time they were actually deleted because they were not notable. They were not deemed important enough for inclusion in the encyclopaedia for no other reason.

[00:25:43] **Richard Cooke:** So list of films with monkeys in it, for example, was deleted for a while. I think, though there is a list of films with monkeys in it back in Wikipedia. Now, as there should be. And so many times if you see something that strikes you as odd on Wikipedia and think, why is that the way it is? The answer is because Exclusionists won the fight over what should be in Wikipedia.

[00:26:07] **Heather Ford:** When we were studying this, we did encounter a lot of editors who would go just to these pages and be shooting these pages down. That was the main activity. It was kind of like a video game.

[00:26:23] **Richard Cooke:** That's right.

[00:26:24] **Richard Cooke:** There are Deletionist editors who specialise in voting on articles nominated for deletion, who have a less than 1% vote rate in terms of keeping an article. There hanging judges who convict 99% of the time, and they are sometimes voting on tens of thousands of articles nominated for deletion. They've got a lot of time on their hands.

[00:26:49] **Heather Ford:** Yeah. And they get an edit to their credit every time they delete something, not only when you add but also when you delete.

[00:26:56] **Richard Cooke:** It is seen as a cheap way to run up a high score. If what you want to do is bolster what's called your edit count, which is the number of times you've contributed to Wikipedia.

[00:27:07] **Heather Ford:** Three fights.

[00:27:09] **Heather Ford:** None of them really over. All of them shaping what you learn from the world's biggest encyclopaedia. Wikipedia survived the battle over translation. It survived the deletionists and the exclusionists, and the fight over whose knowledge even counts. But what is coming next is different. 6 million automatically generated articles. A bot writing in a language it doesn't speak the last best place on the internet. A is coming for Wikipedia. How long can it hold out?

[00:27:48] **Richard Cooke:** I suddenly realised that this was going to be the last human authored encyclopaedia.

[00:27:54] **Heather Ford:** That's Richard Cooke, and he'll be joining me again in the next episode, along with Francesca Sidoti. If you found this series useful or interesting, please leave us a rating and review on Apple Podcasts. I'm Heather Ford and I'm the executive producer of All That We Touch. Wikipedia. Francesca Sidoti is the associate

producer and Jane Curtis is the senior producer. Sound design by John Jacobs. It's made on Gadigal Country in Sydney, Australia by UTS Impact Studios. Executive producer of Impact Studios is Sarah Gilbert.