

## DIGITAL DEMOCRACY: CONSTRUCTING A CITIZENS' HISTORY ON CYBERSPACE

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**Abstract**— *It has been argued that "... the digital text, with its democratic architecture, allows for the possibility of constructing a citizen's history that is inclusive and diverse, where a multiplicity of viewpoints becomes relevant" (Anon., cited in Perera, 2015, P.1). This suggests that cyberspace with its potential to enable multiple stories from various subjectivities has become a site of cultural agency and citizenship (Goode, 2010), radical collaboration, convergence and a tool of democratizing the construction of knowledge. Thus, the digital becomes a new political space which in turn politically charges the 'real' practices and spaces that become the subject of digital narratives. In the light of these observations, this paper critically analyses the construction and content of a Wikipedia entry on 2014 anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka. A critical reading of the content indicates that user-generated content of a platform such as Wikipedia which is known for community participation and radical collaboration indicates the possibility of web-based texts being rather hegemonic 'citizen's' histories/ stories rather than democratic and that of 'citizens'. Therefore, with a view to elucidating the intersections between various ideologies, power, strategies of storytelling and the digital in its fluidity as well as rigidity, this paper also discusses possible tools and strategies to produce alternative digital texts that interrupt existing hegemonic narratives in an attempt to harness the strengths of cyberspace for the purpose of activism and consciousness-raising.*

**Keywords:** *Cyberspace, Cultural Agency, Democracy*

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. The Reality of Digital Democracy

The digital is often seen as a space that enables narratives from the masses. Catherine Bernard in *Bodies and Digital Utopia* (2000, p. 26) suggests that "Digital communications also promote an ideology of transcendence in regard to the plurality and diversity of cultures, politics, and histories that overcome space and time, offering the promise of an open space of equal exchange based upon a non-hierarchical structure". Indeed, claims of multilingual, web-based, free-content encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia to non-

hierarchical community participation seem to endorse such positive perceptions of the digital. For example, Wikipedia's entry on itself notes that;

"Anyone with Internet access can write and make changes to Wikipedia articles, except in limited cases where editing is restricted to prevent disruption or vandalism. It is reported that there are more than 70,000 active contributors working on more than 35,000,000 articles in 290 languages. People of all ages, cultures and backgrounds can add or edit article prose, references, images and other media here. What is contributed is more important than the expertise or qualifications of the contributor." (Wikipedia, n.d.)

The emphasis on diversity and the irrelevance of expertise or qualifications is clearly an allusion to 'democracy', and the centrality of the citizen archivist and what is termed as cultural activism on cyberspace (Edwards, Howard and Joyce, 2013).

However, when one focuses on such production of knowledge and thereby culture in the digital age, it is imperative to consider whether the space for production is truly democratic, plural and non-hierarchical. Such a consideration is especially significant, given the unequal access to basic tools as well as advanced technologies in different communities in different parts of the world as suggested by the term 'the digital divide' which aims to describe the circumstances of inequality that characterize access (or lack of access) to resources, technological and otherwise, across much of the globe (Ginsburg, 2006, pp. 129, 128). Nevertheless, as Bernard argues, the digital, in the form of a global network powered by the internet, at least overwhelms the physical boundaries of cultural production and dissemination and thereby "subverts unilateral systems of information by de facto opening transnational and transcultural connections... [and]...allows the restructuring of geo-political boundaries into an ever-expanding market of limitless access" (2000, p. 26). In the light of the dichotomous relation between digital age and digital divide which problematizes the conceptualization of the digital as democratic and enabling, one could also suggest that erasures, exclusions and hegemonic narrative

strategies are an inevitable element in supposedly democratic digital narratives. Then, even web-based encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia with strong claims to community participation and therefore democracy<sup>i</sup> could, in reality, reproduce dominant cultural practices to a certain extent.

## I. ANALYSIS

### A. Narrating Riots: The Making of the Singular Voice

Considering the Wikipedia entry on anti-Muslim Riots in Sri Lanka in June, 2014, one could argue that it is largely mainstream for a number of reasons. The article draws from more than hundred sources and on one hand this can be interpreted as an indication of the plurality of voices that characterizes the act of storytelling on the web. On the other hand, however, this plurality itself can be hegemonic in that it has drawn from mainstream accounts of the event, especially in the western media and in established local news outlets (which in the first place chose not to report on the event), and thereby navigated towards a singularity of view point and ideology that fails to capture the socio-cultural and political complexity that underpinned the 2014 anti-Muslim riots. In addition, even though the Wikipedia entry drew from multiple sources<sup>ii</sup>, it also has a master narrative frame that attempted to articulate a particular 'truth'. Consider for example the opening section of the entry;

"The 2014 anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka were religious and ethnic riots in June 2014 in south-western Sri Lanka. Muslims and their property were attacked by Sinhalese Buddhists in the towns of Aluthgama, Beruwala and Dharga Town in Kalutara District. At least four people were killed and 80 injured.<sup>[4]</sup> Hundreds were made homeless following attacks on homes, shops, factories, mosques and a nursery.<sup>[5]</sup> 10,000 people (8,000 Muslims and 2,000 Sinhalese) were displaced by the riots.<sup>[6]</sup> The riots followed rallies by Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a hard line Buddhist group.<sup>[7]</sup> The BBS was widely blamed for inciting the riots but it has denied responsibility.<sup>[8][9][10]</sup> The mainstream media in Sri Lanka censored news about the riots following orders from the Sri Lankan government.<sup>[11]</sup>" (Anon., 2014, anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka)

The hyperlinked references that appear in the form of square bracketed numbers within the text function as 'truth' indicators or verifications of the master narrative that interprets and rewrites other content, rather than as signs of multiplicity. In other words, the Wikipedia entry encourages the users/readers to understand the incident

through a specific interpretive narrative structure primarily laid out in the opening section cited above. Furthermore, the immediate anonymity such referencing practices superimpose on the original story tellers on the web- be it journalists, concerned citizens or Facebook, Twitter, YouTube users- glosses over the multiplicity of voices and thereby creates the illusion of a singular narrative which in turn is authoritative because of its apparent singularity. Hence, Ginsburg's observation that the digital age shapes contemporary frameworks of understanding the world in a way that "disregard the cultural significance of the production of knowledge in minoritized communities, increasing an already existing sense of marginalization" (2006, p. 132) seems to be at least partly applicable to the Wikipedia entry in question.

Furthermore, in spite of the potential of the digital to interrupt dominant discourse by enabling marginal personal stories, it needs to be noted that the practice of contributing to Wikipedia as a writer mostly aligns with the dominant cultural practice of representing the voiceless. The personal narratives or the voices of those who have first-hand experience of communal are muted as they are transmitted through two layers of representation; first through the 'sources' that the Wikipedia entry draws on, and secondly through the author of the entry him/herself. The personal voice is then distant and to a great extent unrecognizable as they appear in the form of numbers and generalized opinions. Hence it could be argued that in spite of the space for personal stories the accessibility and affordability of the digital and its tools has facilitated over time, dominant cultural practices of narration have reinscribed onto the world "the illusion that these remote "others" exist in a time not contemporary with our own, effectively re-stratifying the world along lines of late modernity despite the utopian promises made by "digerati" of the possibilities of a twenty-first-century McLuhanesque global village" (Ginsburg, 2006, p. 130).

### B. Implications of Anonymity

The genesis of web-based resistance has seen the contributions of individual students, techies, hackers, policy activists in the 1990s open-source movement whose mantra was that "information is free" (Kidd, 2003). Technology was therefore, a means to liberate information. As Goldspink (2010) points out, as a free information source, Wikipedia is regarded as part of the open-source movement. Unlike some open-source environments which facilitate the development of a marketable reputation for contributors, Wikipedia does not indicate the list of contributors that one can point to as evidence of

contribution. While Wikipedia policy states that “Users can contribute anonymously, under a pseudonym, or, if they choose to, with their real identity” (Wikipedia, n.d.), anonymity seems to be the general practice of contributors. Therefore, in Wikipedia, “contributions are, in essence, non-attributable” and as a result, the compliance to community standards and norms that can be elicited through ‘a reputation effect’ is absent (Goldspink, 2010, p.655). Hence, the production or manipulation of content is a possibility that can compromise the basic principles of clear purpose and neutrality that is expected to provide a reference point against which all contributions could be judged (ibid., p.654).

Hence, a point of interest is the intersections between the possibility of anonymity and associated implications on the politics of digital narratives on platforms such as Wikipedia. Although Wikipedia gives readers the opportunity to explore the edit history, earlier versions of entries and details of contributors when available, it is rarely that such content is scrutinized. As a result, vested interests that may lie beneath the surface of a text can go unnoticed. Hence the democracy and dissemination that the digital spaces promise can conversely be detrimental to positive activism on cyberspace. For example, the entry on Aluthgama communal violence has been created by a user bearing the name “Obi2canibe” whose user page states: “This user is proud to be an Elam Tamil” (User:Obi2canibe, n.d.). Furthermore, numerous edits (removed from the current version) have been made by anonymous users with clear political agendas to insist on the ‘innocence’ of Buddhists:

“On 11 June 2014 a Muslims attacked *innocent* Buddhist monk and his driver while they were travelling [sic] across Dharga Town.....After the *Cruel* Muslim act against innocent Buddhist Monk BBS Rally peacefully marched into Muslim areas ...” [my emphasis]

While the large number of contributions (according to the ‘page information’ Wikipedia provides, there has been 109 edits to the 2014 anti-Muslim riots entry to date) that have been made by different people since the creation of the entry could be indicative of community participation and democracy, on the other hand, this conveys the possibility of biased narratives gaining currency, challenging us to reconsider the notions of web-based cyber-activism as being subversive and autonomous from the hegemony and practices of state and corporate media, whose overall approach favours established centers of power.

In the light of the above discussion, one needs to consider the possibility of a politically-conscious re-writing as intervention or interruption in order to re-claim plurality,

democracy and non-hierarchy that underpins the digital and its potential for activism and consciousness-raising.

### C. Re-writing: A Citizens’ History

The critique of the Wikipedia entry on Aluthgama violence signals the need to produce alternative texts that fully realize the democratizing potential of the cyberspace with a heightened sensibility of what community participation and cyber-activism on the web is meant to accomplish. Time Magazine proposed in 2006 that communication and collaboration on web is about “the many wrestling power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes” (cited in Dijck, 2009). Indeed, the digital facilitates radical collaboration and opens up opportunities to ordinary citizens to become the media, specially when profit oriented corporate and state run media fall short. This was the state of affairs after Aluthgama riots, with established mainstream media choosing to maintain silence at the height of the violence; reasons ranging from orders from higher-powers to self-censorship over fear of pushback (Groundviews, 2014). In this context, citizen journalists became the media, using blogs and web-based alternative news portals such as Groundviews, Colombo Telegraph and Republic Square and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. Such user-generated content in a sense constitutes what Kidd terms as “a new commons regime” (2003, p. 51) in which, autonomous from the directions from the corporate and state media, unpaid workers share cyber territories/ spaces, labour time and technology and techniques to construct alternative memories and narratives mostly from within non-democratic socio-political conditions. Wikipedia too, with its enabling of citizen participation and editable content, can be tool of activism on cyberspace. Hence, a construction of an alternative digital text should aim at offering a rich discursive context for reader engagement by addressing the gaps, silences and erasures that are present in the original text through the incorporation of multiple voices and narrative strategies that facilitate the participation and investigation by the reader. Such a re-writing is possible due to the discursive and democratic space that the digital allows.

An alternative beginning for the Wikipedia entry can be produced with snapshots of Google maps to illustrate the areas and locations affected by violence. The inclusion of Google maps indicates convergence of platforms, and therefore multiplicity enabled on the cyberspace.

Conversely however, the gaps, silences and erasures that are a part of hegemonic story telling can also be reflected in digital texts, in spite of the democratizing and discursive potential of the platform. For example, the Google map descriptions of locations affected by violence a year later in 2015 is a clear indication of erasure or political amnesia that is encouraged through dominant narratives of internal conflicts. This gap is tellingly evident in the Google map location indication of the burnt No Limit outlet in Pandura, which states "now open" (depending on the time of access), business hours and contact telephone numbers. A critical reading which recognizes such erasures of history and memory can be solicited by including a side note that could read: "Map descriptions as they appear on web may not reflect the current situation /important past events". The altered text, then, not only politicizes the digital space but also alters the meanings associated with the physical spaces that it refers to. Sharing Google map locations of affected areas is to a certain extent an appropriation of Turkel's notion of "history in the digital" as an "experience for users; a process, an active, spatial, virtual reality encounter with the past." (Cohen, et al., 2008, p. 454). On a more intangible level, if a narrative is constructed by bringing together multiple voices from various communities, organizations, marginal news outlets, social media platforms and also mainstream news portals, it constructs a space that reflects, at least partly, a communal space underpinned by memory, history and the lived experience of the nation, potential nationalisms and associated politics.

In contrast to the original Wikipedia entry which, as discussed earlier, adopted an authoritative interpretive framework and drew from comparatively mainstream sources, an alternative text needs to be more of a palimpsestuous construction that brings together multiple narratives (both central and marginal), community stories, videos and articles that appeared on various digital platforms. Instead of writing a master narrative drawing from various sources, an alternative text can attempt to create a patchwork of narratives that together tells the story of anti-Muslim riots in its diverse complexity; hence resulting in not "a citizen's history", but a truly citizens' history "that is inclusive and diverse, where a multiplicity of viewpoints becomes relevant" (Anon, cited in Perera, 2015, p.1). Videos are important in this regard, since they have the potential of disseminating the voice of those who lack access to basic infrastructure to share their experience on their own. Original stories of victims from affected locations and eyewitness as they were articulated in first person can be enabled through the sharing of audio visual

narratives. Although aware of the inevitable limitations in terms of the handful of victims interviewed and the editing choices that the video producers make, the incorporation of video links along with a brief indication of its content can attempt to address the gaps and silences of the original text. Furthermore, using images can be especially significant in the light of the argument that "the expression and construction of identities through digital media production usually relies heavily on the visual, and it is this visual component that can jolt us into a more critical reflexivity" (Weber and Mitchell, 2008, p. 41).

Furthermore, the incorporation of multiple narratives in the form of extracts is another strategic possibility that would open opportunities for active critical participation and investigation by the reader, which is perceived as a salient feature of archiving history in digital spaces. Discussing historical archiving in the digital age, scholars have argued that,

"dissemination in digital form makes the work of the scholar available for verification and examination; it also offers the reader the opportunity to experiment. He or she can test the interpretations of others, formulate new views, and mine the materials of the past for overlooked items and clues. The reader can immerse him/herself in the past, surrounded with the evidence, and make new associations. The goal of digital history might be to build environments that pull readers in less by the force of a linear argument than by the experience of total immersion and the curiosity to build connections." (Cohen, et al., 2008, p. 454).

While the structural limitations of platforms such as Wikipedia might not allow the incorporation of innumerable original content in their full form or an immersive experience, a patch work of original content free from a frame of interpretation can facilitate an active engagement on the viewer's part in the place of passive narrative anticipation. On the other hand, the attempt to incorporate material such as maps and videos that pushes the boundaries of text-based encyclopedia format enforced on Wikipedia is a subversion of form in itself. Larry Sanger, the co-founder of Wikipedia, has argued that "it was essential that we [Wikipedia] began the project with a core group of intelligent good writers who understood what an Encyclopaedia should look like, and who were basically decent human beings" (2005, cited in Goldspink, 2010, p. 654). This statement not only highlights an attempt to mould the multiplicity that the digital facilitates into a desired shape through 'role-models' but also, the importance of establishing a style consistent with the

Encyclopaedia genre, a stylistic model that might shape the contribution of others. In this light, acknowledging the individual writers or organizations who have contributed to the narrative by using extracts in the form of quotes, not only subverts a stylistic model that invites a master narrative frame and singularity of voice, but also emphasizes on the nature of cyber-activism and storytelling on the web: a collective narrative act of the web-literate masses.

### I. CONCLUSION

The digital text is widely perceived as a tool of empowerment which enables inclusion and diversity; in other words, citizens' histories, memories and archives through its potential for democratic storytelling. However, a closer look at user-generated content of a platform such as Wikipedia which is known for community participation and radical collaboration indicates the possibility of web-based texts being rather hegemonic 'citizen's' histories/stories rather than democratic and that of 'citizens'. A critical analysis of the Wikipedia entry titled 2014 anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka indicates a singularity of voice and an authoritative frame of interpretation that undermine the democratic empowerment that cyberspace promises. Hence, re-writing hegemonic narratives is an assertion of the multiplicity of ideologies, genres, structures and storytelling strategies that the digital is meant to endorse. Such alternative narratives which capture the multiplicity of voices, perspectives and ideologies surrounding an issue or an event construct a digital history that encourages readers to investigate and form interpretive associations of their own.

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<sup>i</sup> Wikipedia is described as is a multilingual, web-based, free-content encyclopedia based on a model of openly editable

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content. It is written collaboratively by largely anonymous volunteers who write without pay.

<sup>ii</sup> In certain instances the ephemeral nature of the content on cyberspace has hindered such incorporation with links leading to blank pages with error messages. This needs to be understood as a structural limitation of digital preservation.