

Wikipedia as an arena and source for the public. A Scandinavian Comparison of “Islam”

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Abstract

This article compares Wikipedia as an arena and source for the public through analysis of articles on “Islam” across the three Scandinavian languages. Findings show that the Swedish article is continuously revised and adjusted by a fairly high number of contributors, with comparatively low concentration to a small group of top users. The Norwegian article is static, more basic, but still serves as a matter-of-factly presentation of Islam as religion to a stable amount of views. In contrast, the Danish article is at once more dynamic through more changes up until recently, it portrays Islam differently with a distinct focus on identity issues, and it is read less often. The analysis illustrates how studying Wikipedia can bring light to the receiving end of what goes on in the public sphere. The analysis also illustrates how our understanding of the online realm profits from “groundedness”, and how comparison of similar sites in different languages can yield insights into cultural as well as political differences, and their implications.

Keywords

Wikipedia, public sphere, freedom of information, comparative, digital methods

Introduction

The online encyclopedia Wikipedia is heralded as a non-commercial, user generated source of information. It is also a space for debate over controversial issues. Wikipedia, therefore, stands out from other online media more commonly analyzed in studies of public debate: on the one hand, mainstream media such as online newspapers are typically deemed interesting since they (are thought to) reach a wide audience with curated or edited content. On the other hand, discussion forums and more recently social media attract scholarly attention as open

arenas for debate, potentially between general users. Wikipedia, in contrast, has two faces: It is a channel for communication of carefully crafted informational texts, from in principle everyone, but in practice a small number of vigilant contributors, to anyone. But Wikipedia is also an online forum for these contributors. As such, it is simultaneously a source and an arena for public debate. In addition, given that Wikipedia since 2001 has expanded into more than 250 languages, the site provides a unique case for comparison between different polities.

This article offers a comparison of Wikipedia as a source and arena for public debate over a controversial issue in three different countries. The countries are the Scandinavian nation states Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The selected issue is Islam. In these countries, as in many other European and Western ones, Islam has taken center stage of public debate for a prolonged period in the 2000s, not least following international events such as the 9/11 terrorist attack in the US, the so-called war on terror in Afghanistan, and the escalation of terrorism in the Middle East as well as in Europe in recent years. “Islam”, then, is fitting for a case study of Wikipedia in relation to public debate. Denmark, Norway and Sweden cluster together in comparative studies in the social sciences. The rationale for choosing such similar cases lies in the potential for bringing out nuanced differences that yield better insights not only into the specificities of Wikipedia in each language, but also the wider context for public debate around controversial issues in the countries.

Wikipedia’s different language versions with individually written and edited content, invites comparison, but also offer a good opportunity for a historical analysis of the web. Use data is readily available from Wikipedia. Edits to the articles, and metadata connected to those edits, are similarly retrievable. The data can be used to create comparative timelines, descriptive statistics on contributions, content and use, and also textual analysis of different kinds.

In what follows, I ground the study in democratic theory, arguing for the need to refocus our research to include the receiving end of public communication in online media. Next, I introduce Wikipedia and research into Wikipedia, present the three case countries and the rationale for comparison, and then describe the data and my approach. On that basis, I present the analysis. With primarily such a descriptive and comparative aim, the analysis will follow three steps: first, focusing on the contributors and their edits, I ask how the articles have developed in each case. Secondly, concentrating on the content, the texts in the articles on Islam is compared. Here, I am interested in the foci of each article. Third, I study the use of

the articles. In the conclusion, I draw together the findings and point to the contribution of the articles.

Democratic Theory and Online Media: From Deliberation to Information

Democratic theory took a “deliberative turn” in the 1990 (Bohman 1998). The body of work that emerged from this turn, documenting the search for deliberation in different settings, is impressive (Carpini et al. [2004] for overview). Work on public online deliberation alone makes up a considerable part of this tradition. In studies from the early 2000s, the analytical gaze was often directed towards online discussion forums. Studies focused on how deliberative the discussions were (e.g. Graham and Witschge 2003), or on how other forms of communication could matter (Black 2008). Scholars have also studied forum designs, considering features that may heighten deliberative performance (e.g. Jensen 2003). More recently, interest turned to social media – or, to be precise, overwhelmingly to Facebook (Stoycheff et al 2017) and somewhat to Twitter (e.g. Larsson and Moe 2014). Although there is a tendency to broaden the perspective to study other forms of engagement and dialogue than deliberation (e.g. Highfield 2016; Vatnøy 2017), weight is still given to the “active” participation, that is to traceable communication online. The attention given to deliberation has had some interesting effects, two of which concern theory and one of which concerns the empirical focus.

Theoretically, media studies in recent decades paid little attention to public sphere concepts in competing normative theories. As for instance Ferree et al (2002) have described, we can discern distinct traditions of normative democratic theories with different public sphere concepts. Ferree et al. describes four, ranging from Schumpeterian “representative liberal theory”, via Rousseauian “participatory liberal theory”, through to deliberative and Foucaultian “constructivist theory”. To be fair, some media scholars have engaged with work outside the deliberative camp, especially with the fourth tradition (e.g. Dahlgren 2006). Still, the explanatory potential of for instance the representative liberal theory to our media environments has not been utilized (Larsson and Moe [2014] for an attempt).

The second theoretical “effect” of media studies’ focus on deliberation is that our field might appear stuck in a moment in time, while political theory has moved on. In the past years,

political scientists have contributed detailed critiques of deliberative theory, particularly the problems with operationalizing and empirically testing it (Mutz 2008). Moreover, so-called realist approaches have gained ground within political theory, for instance represented by economists' analyses of voting behavior (e.g. Caplan 2007) or political realism (Hall 2017; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2018). The "response" from the deliberative camp has been to launch a systemic approach (Mansbridge et al 2012). It is ill advised to blindly follow the latest theoretical trend, but critically engaging with it is a good idea, and a challenge for our field.

The "empirical effect" of the focus on deliberation is that media researchers have been compelled to look for mediated arenas with public two-way communication, and two-way communication of a certain kind. The emergence of discussion forums, blogs with commentary fields, Twitter discussions, Facebook pages or Instagram comments all invite analysis of interpersonal communication between citizens. For the scholar with deliberation in mind, these arenas are ripe with data for research questions concerning the extent to which the communication follows some version of a deliberative ideal. The effect was sound empirical studies of the deliberative qualities of political talk in different off- and online media (e.g. Wessler and Schultz 2007), but comparatively little attention given to media that did not promise publicly available dialogue about explicitly political issues. Predominately one-to-many forms of communication attracted less analytical interest, at least in the online realm.

But the receiving end of public communication is important. All the strands of normative democratic theories share a basic assumption that the public, in order to govern, needs some form of information about society (Ferree et al. 2002). This idea is also found in UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 defines freedom of expression to include the freedom of information, "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers".

We do know that only a small minority tend to act on the potential for participating in public debate on political issues through online media (e.g. Enjolras et al 2013). Likewise, we know that with the growth of online media, the sources as well as arenas for the public expanded massively, but that some providers continue to attract tremendously more attention in each market (Webster [2014] on the US, Newman et al [2017] on digital news in Europe). Many of the key providers of news and information, and of public debate, are still traditional media outlets, or digital-born media with a lot in common with traditional media. Some of the key

providers of news and information – the sites used by the public as sources for information and arenas for debate – are less similar to traditional media. We know little about who the speakers in these arenas are, how we can describe the content, and what the implications are for democracy.

Such questions should trigger analysis of informational sites popular among the public, and the task of assessing their role as agenda setters for citizens' freedom of information invites comparisons since that can help us question what we take for granted in familiar societal settings, and bring out peculiarities with individual cases. This is the rationale for studying Wikipedia in three different language-defined publics. Such a study requires an introduction to Wikipedia as well as an explanation of the case selection.

Wikipedia and Media Research

According to its self-presentation, Wikipedia is “a free online encyclopedia with the aim to allow anyone to edit articles”, the “largest and most popular general reference work on the Internet”, and “ranked among the ten most popular websites”. Owned by the nonprofit Wikimedia Foundation, the site has since 2001 expanded into more than 250 languages. Wikipedia's articles are governed by the “three principal core content policies” (Wikipedia 2017): Neutral point of view (an aim for fair representation, and no bias); Verifiability (attribution of reliable sources for material likely to be challenged and for quotations); and No original research (original thoughts and analysis should not be included). The idea is that the contributors over time, and through discussions, reach consensus also over controversial issues, guided by these core policies. In addition, Wikipedia offers tools to help out where such consensus is not easily reached. These tools include closing an article for edits, blocking users from making edits etc. Not surprisingly, the content policies are also debated. For instance, and with relevance to the present analysis, it can be argued that reaching consensus on a point of view within one Wikipedia article is only a first step, with a consensus across different language versions being the next. Or, conversely, one could ask if such a “global” consensus would risk smoothing over cultural distinctive perspectives, creating an Anglo-American bias, as discussed by Massa and Scrinzi (2013, np), who label the presence of diverse points of view on different language editions as “Linguistic Point of View (LPOV)” (also Rogers [2013, 170-1]).

Wikipedia attracted the interest of media researchers from its inception. As the encyclopedia grew, gained readers as well as contributors, and got a reputation for accuracy and reliability, many researchers sought to explain the success. The perplexity of the phenomena was sometimes spelled out: “how the Wikipedia came to be and continues to grow was a mystery to us”, offered Bryant et al (2005, 9) as motivation for an interview study of collaborative practices among Wikipedians. Another study bore the telling subtitle “Wikipedians and Why They Do It” (Schroer and Hertel 2009). From these kinds of interests grew a body of work analyzing collaboration, social roles and hierarchies (e.g. Solvoll 2009). This work and interest should be understood in the context of our field’s attention to the so-called web 2.0 in the first decade of the 2000s: When media researchers sought to describe transformations to the sector, to media content and not least the changing role of the users, they often reached for Wikipedia as a key example (e.g. Bruns 2008). In such research, Wikipedia is largely an illustration of a new, exciting phenomenon, or a vehicle to study social behavior in new online settings.

Later contributions have focused on the status of Wikipedia as the growth in content as well as contributors has slowed down (Lih 2013). Other scholars have argued that a sole focus on human agency fails to grasp the success of Wikipedia, since the automated content agents, so-called bots, are by far the most active users (Niederer and van Dijck 2010), taking care of a range of mundane tasks that contribute to the vigilance needed to ensure quality. This research typically also stresses the fact that quite few users actually contribute in a sustained way to content production, e.g. by addressing the “myth of user-generated content”, arguing that “the small cadre of Wikipedia editors could be considered a new elite” (Rogers 2013, 36).

With such an approach, Wikipedia is not primarily studied to understand its inner workings or as a case of online collaboration, but to understand culture and society. In Rogers’ call, we should strive for “online groundedness”, meaning we should pursue research that “follows the medium, captures its dynamics, and makes grounded claims about cultural and societal change” (Rogers 2013, 23ff). To illustrate his point, Rogers offers a comparative analysis of the Wikipedia articles on the Srebrenica massacre of July 1995, in six languages. His aim, then, is not to assess Wikipedia’s accuracy, but to propose doing “cultural research with Wikipedia”, that is to use Wikipedia as a cultural reference in itself (Rogers 2013, 197). Rogers finds differences ranging from specific references to facts, through the use of images,

to discrepancies in the very name of the articles. He problematizes the neutral point of view principle, but also an opposition to a national point of view. Similar studies exist e.g. comparing definitions of “globalization” across languages (Rubira and Gil-Egui 2017). Others have aimed to look for overlaps and discrepancies in different languages, but studying entire Wikipedias based on link use (Hecht and Gergle 2010), finding that there is a small overlap in concepts in different language versions.

Such comparisons of differences across cultures and languages provide an inroad to understand cultural dissimilarities, not just on Wikipedia, but also at societal level. This is in line with the aim of the present study’s focus on “Islam” in Scandinavian Wikipedias.

The Scandinavian Countries, Islam and Immigration Debate

The three case countries Denmark, Norway and Sweden are all small nation states (5-9 mill inhabitants), with distinct languages. In studies of political systems, they tend to cluster together, described through their features as a certain type of welfare state that goes beyond providing a safety net for citizens to also level out differences (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990). Comparisons of media systems also tend to group the three countries together, e.g. as examples of the North/Central European democratic corporatist model in Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) work from the early 2000s. Features include the importance of a mass circulation press, a historical shift from party newspapers toward a neutral commercial press, a strong institutionalized journalistic professionalism, strong, well-funded public service broadcasting institutions with high levels of legitimacy, and overall wide-ranging, but legally limited, state intervention. The case countries also share high penetration of information and communication technologies.

The cases, then, are similar when it comes to basic social and political characteristics. When it comes to immigration and Islam, there are likewise a set of shared features: historically, all three countries experienced an influx of migrants from poor countries in the late 1960s to early 1970s, leading to a formal “immigration stop” in the early 1970s. In the following decades the countries immigration policies have all been guided by the UN’s Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

If we look closer, there are differences, though. For instance, the first immigrant groups to arrive in the countries were dominated by different nationalities, so that Norway got a distinct Pakistani minority of guest workers, while Turkish and Yugoslavian guest workers were more present in Denmark. It is also worth noting that Sweden, unlike Denmark and Norway, is not a member of NATO, and did neither take any part in the warfare in former Yugoslavia in 1999, nor in the wars in Iraq (1990 and 2003), the bombings in Libya (2011), nor the war in Afghanistan (2001-). The countries have all experienced terror in recent years, but differently: The so-called Muhammed cartoon crisis stemmed from the publication of newspaper caricatures in Danish daily Jyllands-Posten in 2005. Although the debate and controversy that followed had ramifications across borders, the effect was arguably most grave in Denmark, e.g. with the terrorist attack on a public free speech debate meeting in Copenhagen in February 2015. Stockholm was hit by a terrorist attack by an Uzbek immigrant in April 2017. Norway, in comparison, experienced a terrorist attack by a sole right-wing extremist in Oslo and at Utøya in July 2011. Sociologists have argued that immigration policies in the three countries diverged in the last decades of the 1900s, with Denmark entering a more restrictive path (e.g. Brochmann and Hagelund (eds) 2010), also in terms of citizenship regulations (Midtbøen 2015).

In all countries, issues connected to Islam has been high on the agenda politically, and also been key for debates about freedom of speech (Colbjørnsen [2017] on Norway), as well as concerns within the mainstream media connected to curation of public debate (e.g. Ihlebæk and Thorseth 2017). Also here, there are however differences. A study of newspaper coverage of the 2015 refugee crisis found Danish print media to focus more often on negative economic consequences, and Swedish on the positive moral consequences, with Norwegian coverage taking a middle position (Hovden et al 2018). A related analysis, covering 1970-2016 found “Islam” to be the only religious identity to be mentioned in the newspaper coverage of immigration. “After 2010, a quarter of all Norwegian and Danish items and one in five Swedish articles explicitly mention Islam” (Hovden and Mjelde forthcoming, p. 7). This, the authors argue, seems to support Yilmaz’ (2016) claim that immigration in Scandinavian media has changed from a debate about workers to a debate about Islam. Overall, the study finds persistent differences in the coverage of immigration in the three countries, with, on the one hand. the Danish newspapers being “more strongly (and increasingly) threat-focused, and with an increasing focus on Islam in the later period” and, on the other hand, “Sweden as constantly emphasizing the humanitarian side of immigrants as victims, and with racism as a

continually important issue” (Hovden and Mjelde, forthcoming, p. 16). These findings inform the selection of data and approach in the present analysis.

Data and Approach

The analysis will start from one comparable Wikipedia article. The article should be found in all three cases, it should have a relatively long history to limit the chances of radical outlying editions and it should not be too short (in Wikipedia terms; a “stub”) in order to have sections to compare. Furthermore, the topic of the article should not only be related directly to immigration debate, but also hold some sort of controversy. This would, assumingly, bring out differences and make for a sort of “critical case”. Based on these considerations, the article for “Islam” was chosen.

A comparison of different language Wikipedia articles can have a range of foci: On a textual level, we can concentrate on words, arguments, meaning and content. We can compare uses of images, and links. On the meta-level, a comparison of user-generated web content also invites analysis of the histories of the articles, including the characteristics of the contributors.

In order to undertake comparison at the level that facilitates discussion that can inform our understanding of public debates on immigration, the present analysis commences in three steps corresponding with a simple sender-content-receiver model of communication. In the first step, basic characteristics with the production of the articles on Islam are compared. These include historical data of edits made, the type of edits, developments in the volume of the articles, and basic data on top editors. Such data is available from Wikipedia, and can be compiled and analyzed through a range of descriptive statistics. The second step compares article content. The aim is to get a general overview of the ways in which Islam is portrayed in the articles, based on a qualitative close reading of each article. In the third step, statistics on use are compared, aiming to get an understanding of how the articles are accessed differently or to different extents in each case over time.

Data for the historical comparisons are taken from the live web. The articles were downloaded in December 2017. For the analysis, since all edits are logged, and since these edits do not occur at a very high frequency, methodological challenges with “freezing” web

content (Brügger 2008) was not deemed crucial. The timeframe of the analysis, then, differs from each step to the next: data allows for a historical approach in step one when analyzing the development of the articles – from their original inception till December 2017. The content in step two is compared as it appears on the web in late 2017. In the final step, user statistics are compared as far back as Wikipedia data permits, to mid 2015.

In sum, the analysis of three Wikipedias' coverage of Islam aims to shed light on speakers, content and uses of an online arena we tend to overlook. Based on historical developments as well as previous work on political divergence and mainstream media coverage of immigration, I make assumptions for each step of the analysis. First, focusing on the production – the contributors and their edits – I expect to find similar developments in each country, with controversy and dynamic changes to the content corresponding temporally with major societal events such as terrorist attacks or political shifts. Secondly, concentrating on the texts in the articles on Islam, I expect the Danish Wikipedia article to be the most politicized and negative, the Swedish to be more positive, and the Norwegian one to be the least comprehensive. Third, in the comparison of uses, I expect co-variance between the countries over time, with distinct bursts of interest linked to major events. I also expect increased readership over time, especially following the so-called 2015 refugee crisis.

Comparative Analysis

To get a general impression of the Danish, Swedish and Norwegian language versions of Wikipedia, table 1 compares their sizes with each other and the English-language one across rank, number of articles, number of administrators, contributors and active contributors who have made one or more edit in the last 30 days. Sweden's ranking as number 3 is apparently explained by a single contributor's use of a bot (called Lsjbot) to produce a staggering number of short articles (Wikipedia counts 3 032 633), which underlines the need to pay attention to the role of algorithms when comparing online data. Despite this instance, Swedish Wikipedia does have more contributors than its neighbors, but there is also a noticeable difference in the size of the Norwegian and Danish ones, even though they draw on similar language areas (5-6 mill. inhabitants).

[Insert table 1 about here]

Beyond that, the ratio between the size of each Wikipedia and the ones who contribute to it more or less actively is also different, as illustrated in Figure 1 (excluding Lsjbot in the Swedish case). While the English Wikipedia is the largest, responsibility is distributed to more people. All the three case countries' Wikipedias give more territory to cover for each admin and contributor (e.g. 11283 articles per admin and 184 articles per active contributor in Sweden). The Danish case, which is the smallest in size, also have the most distributed structure among the three cases, which means especially more active contributors per article. Still, the case countries' Wikipedias are from this perspective less democratic than the English one, in that fewer administrators and active contributors are responsible for more articles.

From this general comparative overview, we can move on to the articles on "Islam" in each of these Wikipedias, first by comparing the production of the articles historically, second by studying the content of the articles, and third by looking at users.

[Figure 1 about here]

The Contributors

Production of the "Islam" articles in the three languages can be studied historically through log data. The first edit to an article on the topic was made in 2002 in the Swedish Wikipedia, with the Danish and the Norwegian following suit the year after. By September 2017, 2 988 edits had been made to the Swedish article, 1 216 to the Norwegian and 1 505 to the Danish. The number of contributors is also about the double in the Swedish case compared to the others (1 193 (SE), 480 (NO) and 494 (DK)). This makes sense given the overall sizes of the three Wikipedias. However, the number of edits in the Swedish case also means the content of the article changes much more frequently: Average time between edits from inception till December 2016 in Swedish is 1,9 days, while it is 3,5 in the Danish and 4,3 in the Norwegian.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 compares edits (excluding minor ones) per year over time. If we focus on similarities, each case shows a pattern where a slow start with few edits are followed by a steep increase in 2006-2008 (Swedish) and 2007 (Norwegian and Danish). Thereafter, the number of edits fall. This means that the major work on the presentation of “Islam” was made early – now more than ten years ago. If we compare to societal events of relevance, the period is before any of the noted terrorist attacks in each of the countries, but timewise closely related to the cartoon crisis (publication in 2005). It is worth mentioning that 2005-2008 represented significant years of growth and activity for Wikipedia in general. None of the more recent events, such as the 2011 terror in Norway or the 2015 terror in Denmark, has left a mark on the production or revision of the articles.

This leads us to the differences between the cases. The Norwegian article stands out in the sense that following 2008 (when 126 major revisions were made), the article is stable and not subject to opposing contributors’ changes. Only 1-3 edits have been made yearly since 2014. In the Danish and Swedish cases edits are distributed more evenly over time. As late as 2013 the Danish article was subject to the second most edits (102 major ones). If the Norwegian article can be described as stable, the Danish and Swedish seems more volatile, and subject to potentially big changes until recently (32 and 81 being made in 2016 to the Danish and Swedish articles, respectively), perhaps mirroring societal events.

This begs the question of who the contributors in question are. As we should expect, a small group of most active contributors make up a large portion of the edits. Some users are anonymous, some deleted, and others share unverifiable and incomplete personal information. Therefore, exact descriptions of who these contributors are, is difficult. A general impression based on available information points to mainly male adults, with few traces of immigrant backgrounds.

However, these numbers also reveal differences: Top 10 users in the Swedish case have made 16,8 per cent of edits. In the Norwegian language, the corresponding number is 21.7 per cent, and in the Danish 28,5 per cent. This strengthens the image of the Danish article as the most unstable, in the sense that almost a third of all the edits until 2017 are made by a group of 10 users. The numbers are also interesting when we keep in mind the overall sizes of the three Wikipedias: On average, every active Swedish contributor has added to close to 184 articles (see figure 1), while a Danish one only contributes to 122. This speaks, perhaps, to the level

of controversy of the issues, and they ways in which these controversies engage users differently in the different countries.

In sum, the data on the production of the articles on “Islam” in the three Wikipedias show similar early histories, followed by markedly different developments. The Swedish engage the most contributors concentrated in a few peak years, while the Danish shows a more continuous dynamic change over time, and the Norwegian one comes across as the most static. The assumption that changes temporally would correspond to recent societal events is not supported in these data.

The Articles

While the comparison of the contributions concerns Wikipedia as an arena for participation for the public, the articles help us understand the features of Wikipedia as a source for the public.

Figure 3 displays the content boxes of each of the articles, and provide an overview of the ways in which Islam is portrayed. What are the significant aspects given attention? To start with, each case shares some parts: the articles feature etymologies as well as main sections on faith and creed. In accordance with Wikipedia norms, each article also has a list of references and literature as well as external links. Beyond these similarities, there are clear difference to the articles, which, based on a close reading of the texts and their structures, can be described as three distinct presentations of Islam.

[Figure 3 about here]

The Norwegian Wikipedia has the “base line” presentation: Islam is a religion. The article presents in detail the components of Islam faith (the “concept of God”, the Prophet, holy texts and the Coran etc.), religious rituals, as well as denominations (Sunni, Shia, Sufism). A brief chronological history of Islam is provided. In the last sections, the role of Islam in Europe is given space. These sections are predominantly historical, and the brief section on Islam in Norway stops in 2005. Finally, a short section on Islamism (defined as a political ideology aimed at having society run according to Islamic rules) provides historical backdrops and

ends with a note on the controversy of whether Islamism is an integrated part of Islam. The article lists nine external references, predominately to Norwegian sources. The list of literature is likewise quite short, with only Norwegian authors, bar one listed radio broadcast. Throughout the text, then, focus is on historically informed, brief and orderly factual information on the aspects that make up Islam as a religion.

A second presentation is found in the Swedish text: Islam as religion and culture. The article includes main parts found in the Norwegian counterpart describing the elements of the religion – though the Swedish versions are more elaborate and wordy. It is also more pedagogical, e.g. in the explanations of “Jihad”. In the Norwegian article, a one sentence definition is provided, where “small Jihad” is described as “the fight against enemies of Islam”. No further discussion of the controversial concept is provided. The Swedish article, however, provides the Arabic term “jihad asghar”, notes that “a last resort could be a phase of defensive warfare”, and then additionally underlines that:

In the Western world, “jihad” is often associated with modern Jihadist (militant) movements and Islamic terrorism. “Jihad” is often translates as “war”, which Muslims and Muslim Scholars [lärd] often point out are not synonyms.

This example illustrates how the Swedish presentation is more thorough, but also different in its scope since it seeks to explain to a larger extent than the Norwegian. The list of references is also longer (35), and the literature provided mix Swedish and English language books.

However, the main difference in terms of content lies in the presentation of Islam as something more than a religion: In the Swedish article, a whole main section is given to Islam as “culture and science”. This section includes presentations on art, architecture, the relation between scholarly work and Islam as religion, as well as a history of Muslim philosophy. In addition, while the Norwegian article presented social aspects of Islam such as demography in a general historical overview, the Swedish article separates these aspects in a subsection. Together, these organizing principles and editorial choices give a detailed presentation of religious aspects of Islam, but also portrays Islam as a social entity or force, with distinct cultural components and histories.

Finally, the Danish presentation is again different in that it presents Islam as a religion and identity. Like in the previous cases, the basic aspects of the religion are described, but in a less systematic manner. Also, a section on Islam in Denmark is missing. The Danish text is more clearly problematizing Islam as a term. While all three articles start with a similar sentence describing Islam as a monotheist religion, the Danish moves on to a long section called “Definition” where three meanings of Islam is presented: the direct meaning of subordination to God, the “empirical reality of ‘the Islamic world’ from a sociological perspective”, and the “ideal Muslim community”. None of the two other articles provides a comparable discussion. In the Danish text, the discussion prepares the ground for other subtle differences. For instance, rather than naming a section “Faith” or “Creed” (as found in the two previous cases), the Danish comparable section is titled “Faith and infidelity”, where the section on infidelity discusses historical changes to the idea of infidelity, linked to Islamic fundamentalism.

Beyond those sections, the Danish article stands out through a distinct focus on identity, given a whole section. Here, rules of conduct are described, including food and drink, dressing, language and human rights. But more elaborately, issues of gender and sexuality make up several subsections, including issues such separation of genders, abortion and virginity, and even presentation of different forms of marriages (arranged, forced and mixed). None of these issues are treated in the two other languages, and the sections on Islam as culture is missing in the Danish version. Concerning references and literature, the Danish article has the most extensive list of references (112, detailed and meticulous), and a list of literature that leans on English language works. In sum, the article is different in its explicit focus on Islam as identity, and appears as the least well-ordered, but illustrating the controversies connected to the issue.

As sources for the public, someone seeking information about Islam and turning to Wikipedia in Sweden, Denmark and Norway will get presentations that share some basics, but also have quite clear differences. This brings us to the analysis’ third step: the readers.

The Readers

Are the Wikipedia articles studied here actually used as sources by the public? And how is that use changing over time and across the three cases? To answer these questions, figure 4 shows analysis of pageview data from July 2015 to December 2017.

[Figure 4 about here]

A first observation concerns the overall use. The Swedish version stands out with consistently higher levels of views. This is as expected given what we saw in the first step of the analysis, where the size of Swedish Wikipedia as well as the number of contributors are higher than in the two other countries. The main target group is also roughly double the size if considering first language speakers.

Over these two years and five months, the article has been viewed 566 803 times in Sweden. Each day, the article is viewed on average 636 times. The corresponding numbers in Norway is 302 553 (340 on average per day) and 130 624 (147 on average per day) in Denmark. The Danish article – found to be volatile and more politicized than the others – is also the source least often used. The static Norwegian one, on the other hand, continues to be consulted through the period.

If we now focus on fluctuations in figure 4, we can get a better understanding of the correlation between major societal events and Wikipedia as a source for the public on the issue of Islam. The basic pulse of the graph follows the week, with weekends representing less activity. The figure points out peaks in the data that temporally fall on, or shortly after, the date for terrorist attacks in the Western world. The first, and by far the highest, is when the concert venue Bataclan in Paris was attacked (November 2015). On six consecutive days, more than 2000 pageviews was registered to the Swedish article, and more than 1000 to the Norwegian. Christmas, Easter and Summer periods are in general visible on the graph with low frequency of use, but 22.-23 of March 2016 is one exception: When Brussel airport was attacked by terrorists, pageviews peak again across the countries, during Easter, but most clearly in Sweden. There are also more distinct peaks, such as time wise matching the Orlando terror in June 2016 (strong peak in Denmark), and the Nice terror in July the same year (most visible in Sweden). The April 4 2017 terror in Stockholm is another such example.

While not all changes in the daily and yearly rhythm of pageviews to these articles easily can be corresponded to terror attacks, it seems reasonable to conclude, first, that Wikipedia serves as a source for the public on the issue of Islam over time and on a consistent basis. Whether or not between 147 and 636 views each day is a little or a lot is debatable, but it at least shows how Scandinavians consult these texts, assumingly in connection with searches or other related uses. Secondly, we can conclude that the role as an available source is highlighted during crises: while we do not know the motivation behind the peaks in views following major international terror attacks linked to Islamist groups, correlations are clear. During turmoil, when Islam is put on the political map and the news agenda, the Wikipedia articles are reached by considerably more.

Conclusion

This article started from an interest in studying Wikipedia as a source and arena for public debate over a controversial issue. I chose a comparative design, utilizing the availability of log data to analyze in three steps the contributors to the “Islam” article in Swedish, Danish and Norwegian Wikipedia.

The analysis of the production of the articles brought out similarities in their early histories, which gave way to differences later on. I have described the Swedish as the one engaging the most contributors, concentrated in a few peak years, while the Danish showed more continuous dynamic change over time. The Norwegian one came across as the most static. My assumption that editorial shifts or bursts of activity would correspond to societal events was not supported.

In the analysis of the texts, I found clear differences. The Norwegian language article I described as a base, portraying Islam as religion. The Swedish version added details and contextualization, but also a new element: Islam as culture, focusing on scholarly traditions, architecture and art. Finally, the Danish text traded culture for identity, presenting Islam through discussions of gender and family roles, sexuality and social rules. I also described the Danish case as the most politicized in the sense that it included the most critical elements among the cases. In that sense, I found support for my assumptions, and correspondence to

previous work on mainstream media coverage of immigration from the case countries (Hovden and Mjelde, forthcoming).

In the third step, when comparing users through pageviews statistics, I discussed the fluctuations in use connected with major terror attacks in the Europe and the US. In this regard, my assumption was confirmed. However, the cases show less co-variance than expected, and I found no increase in readership following the so-called 2015 refugee crisis. This could signal how Wikipedia loses out to other online sources – a speculation that would require studies of other sites (e.g. other encyclopedias).

Taken together, the three steps show how Wikipedia functions differently as an arena and source for the public in the three cases: The Swedish article is produced and continuously revised and adjusted by a fairly high number of contributors, with comparatively little concentration to a small group of top users. By late 2017, it is a comprehensive text, used regularly, and also viewed in large numbers at times of crisis. The Norwegian article is static, more basic, but still serves as a matter-of-factly presentation of Islam as religion to a stable amount of views. In contrast, the Danish article is at once more dynamic through more changes up until recently, it portrays Islam differently with a distinct focus on identity issues, and it is read less often. By studying all three aspects of the articles, we get a better understanding, for instance of how the Danish is less authoritative, which is reflected in edits, content as well as use. Such nuanced discussion depends on comparison between similar cases. A question for further research is whether the findings presented here resonates with the Wikipedias in these countries more generally. Is the Norwegian one, for instance, by and large the more well-ordered, less dynamic, source?

I aimed to give attention to the kind of public communication not regularly studied by media scholars interested in democracy and political communication. The analysis illustrates how studying Wikipedia, as both an arena and a source for the public, can bring more light to the receiving end of what goes on in the public sphere. The analysis also illustrates how our understanding of the online realm profits from a “groundedness”, and how comparison of similar sites in different languages can yield insights into cultural as well as political differences, and their implications.

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