Wikipedia = Heterotopia

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyses the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia using Michel Foucault’s (1926–1984) concept of heterotopia. In Foucault’s writings, heterotopias are both similar to and distinct from the conditions that give rise to them. The paper undertakes a case study of one entry on Wikipedia (the entry for the “Episteme”) focusing primarily on the main entry and the talk page. The methodology is content analysis with a directed approach: data were gathered in November–December 2020. The paper argues Wikipedia can usefully be analysed as a heterotopia because it exposes the contentious conditions of knowledge production, which is not standard practice for an encyclopaedia. The article adds to our understanding by applying the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia to a specific Wikipedia entry, highlighting how knowledge is produced out of dispute and subjective discourses.

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Introduction
This paper analyses Wikipedia, using Michel Foucault’s (1926–1984) concept of heterotopia. Heterotopia is a useful perspective because it identifies Wikipedia as both connected to and distinct from traditional academic production.

Wikipedia mirrors and challenges how knowledge is produced and distributed. It looks like an online encyclopaedia but is published without peer review or editors. Heterotopia, as a concept in Foucault, identifies sites that are simultaneously similar to and distinct from the conditions that give rise to them; Johnson (2013) argues, “Heterotopias are not separate from society; they are distinct emplacements that are ‘embedded’ in all cultures and mirror, distort and react to the remaining space” (p. 794). Foucault’s examples range from cemeteries to holiday camps to honeymoons to brothels to ships, the latter having both continuities with their ports of origin while at the same time developing their own micro-communities with rules and conventions.
Heterotopia has previously been used in research on technology-enhanced learning, a field relevant to Wikipedia as an educational resource, “a place of potential intellectual innovation” (Barnes, 2004, p. 573). Hope (2016) analysed the educational use of Facebook from the perspective of heterotopia, and Gourlay (2015) used heterotopia to critique open learning. Willis (2013) used heterotopia to analyse Massive Open Online Courses. Previous papers have also analysed Wikipedia in relation to digital culture and hypermedia (Di Lauro & Johinke, 2017), and heterotopia in relation to digital culture and hypermedia (Zlatić et al., 2006), but this is the first paper to use heterotopia as a lens through which to analyse Wikipedia within a broader digital culture and hypermedia framework. The paper applies heterotopia to a specific product of digital culture.

Haider and Sundin (2010) evaluated Wikipedia as heterotopia, but their article was a position paper with no original research and Wikipedia has grown a great deal in the decade-plus since the article was published. Heterotopia is a valuable framework for analysis because it shows how digital resources for learning both reproduce and simultaneously depart from analogue tools: Wikipedia resembles the traditional encyclopaedia but its mode of production is radically different.

This paper summarises Wikipedia, defines heterotopia, analyses Wikipedia as heterotopia and analyses the main entry and talk page of one Wikipedia entry as a case study. The paper applies a Foucauldian lens to Wikipedia, highlighting its relevance to twenty-first century modes of producing, distributing and using knowledge. It argues for Wikipedia’s value in highlighting the nature of knowledge production and the provisionality of knowledge itself.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is the world’s largest encyclopaedia and one of the world’s most popular websites. It launched in January 2001, originally in English, with the first edition in another language (German) appearing in March 2001 (Jemielniak, 2014).

Wikipedia was an offshoot of Nupedia, which began as an online encyclopaedia in the Encyclopaedia Britannica mould, with expert writers and peer reviewers; all Nupedia contributors had to have a PhD (Emigh & Herring, 2005). However, Wikipedia grew rapidly, displacing its predecessor, and contributions to Nupedia stopped in September 2003 (Emigh & Herring, 2005; McGrady, 2009). Microsoft had its own encyclopaedia project with Encarta, originally as a CD-ROM, but this was discontinued in 2009 (Haider & Sundin, 2010). The structural advantage conferred by the digital medium, namely rapid publication and constant updating, was disregarded by Nupedia and Encarta but exploited by Wikipedia, which recognised the change in the mode of production and adapted its publication to the new
technology. The impact of Wikipedia can be gauged by the decision of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to stop publishing a print edition in 2012 and, as Schopflin (2014) notes, libraries purchase online products rather than hard copy encyclopaedias (p. 498).

Wikipedia shows the creation of knowledge is not the preserve of individuals with extensive formal education but can be undertaken by anyone through collaborative work, and can be published at speed and with no cost to the end user (that said, most of its contributors tend to be male and white [Hinnosaar, 2019]). Wikipedia took advantage of the new conditions but continued to publish in a recognisable form, with entries, sub-headings and references, imitating the editorially produced encyclopaedia (Schopflin, 2010). Separate tabs were available to highlight the editing process but the core interface resembled, sufficiently, a form with which readers were familiar. Its appearance promoted engagement through familiarity, with typographical features including paragraphs and white space: Wikipedia pages still look like encyclopaedia pages (Schopflin, 2014, p. 485, 499). Wikipedia is an example of skeuomorphic design, right down to its name which conjoins a beginning synonymous with the digital age (a wiki being a collaboratively authored online document) with a suffix drawn from “encyclopaedia”.

Wikipedia shows how knowledge can be produced, distributed and used outside the academy. It is also detached from commercial practice. Wikipedia is a not-for-profit organisation run by the Wikipedia foundation registered in San Francisco, by-passing the need for investors expecting a return. Conversely, encyclopaedias are published by commercial companies and are often owned by institutions rather than individuals (Blair, 2010; Schopflin, 2014).

Wikipedia employs few staff and relies on volunteers for both funding and content (Greenstein & Zhu, 2012; Klapper & Reitzig, 2016). Furthermore, Xu and Zhang (2013) found Wikipedia improved the information environment in financial markets: while corporate websites control information, Wikipedia enables independent expression. Wikipedia can claim value by not being an arm of corporate communication, offering more authentic information with use value (see also Flavin, 2021). As universities become more like corporations, with diminishing state funding and large costs for users, Wikipedia, paradoxically, produces knowledge and makes it freely available.

Wikipedia acknowledges its imperfections and incompletions. Furthermore, it acknowledges that knowledge itself is incomplete and open to challenge. Hartelius (2010) states, “Many articles begin with a notice that ‘this article needs additional citations for verification’. … Nothing comparable to this hortative discourse appears in traditional encyclopaedias” (p. 514). Wikipedia seeks out contributions and enhancement and encourages everyone to be a producer as well as consumer of knowledge. Furthermore, Schopflin (2010) argues an encyclopaedia, “should be authoritative, accurate, up-to-date, fit-for-purpose, comprehensive, easy-to-use and affordable for its readership” (p. 11).
Wikipedia is up-to-date by being in a continual stage of development. Its interface is easy to use and it is free.

A key, structural feature of Wikipedia entries, because they are produced digitally, is hyperlinks. Hartelius (2010) argues, “The hyperlink is disruptive, even revolutionary … For centuries, encyclopaedists laboured tirelessly to facilitate cross-referencing. They created indices and intricate ways of getting from shorter articles to longer essays and from one article to another … The advent of hyperlinks made cross-referencing both rapid and potentially infinite” (p. 510). The hyperlink stresses the heterotopic departure from traditional encyclopaedia publishing. The shift from analogue to digital in this instance encourages lateral thinking and practice, sidestepping traditional demarcations between disciplines because of the ease with which a user can click on a hyperlink. Rajan (2007) argues the encyclopaedia, “stored rather than synthesised knowledge” (p. 335) but the hyperlink in the digital encyclopaedia makes interconnection and synthesis easier. Moreover, Schopflin (2010) notes an encyclopaedia is customarily arranged alphabetically (p. 10) but Wikipedia does not have this constraint. The reader engages with a search box, obviating the need for a contents section at the beginning or an index at the end. In one sense the hyperlink suggests ongoing value in traditional cross-referencing: users expect the facility to cross reference in an encyclopaedia (Schopflin, 2014, p. 499). However, digital cross-referencing through hyperlinks is faster and simpler and more convenient, comprising hypermedia through the combination of links, text and, frequently, images. Wikipedia encourages users to find new knowledge and linkages, perhaps in unexpected places. It enables and encourages self-directed learning.

Heterotopia

Heterotopia is a concept in Foucault’s work, featuring in the preface to The Order of Things (first published in 1966) and in a talk given to architecture students in 1967, subsequently published in English in 1986. The term heterotopia refers literally to a bodily tissue that is displaced. It is not hazardous, it is just found in a place where it is not expected to be (Johnson, 2006). Heterotopias defy norms. They have a recognisable point of departure but go on to do something unexpected. They are both connected to and separate from the conditions that gave rise to them. Their difference opens up new possibilities, of tissue doing something unexpected, finding a new form and function.

Heterotopia first features in the preface to Foucault’s The Order of Things, where it is positioned against utopia:

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold … Heterotopias are disturbing … because they shatter or tangle common names … they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences. (Foucault, 2005, p. xix)
Heterotopias are an alternative but not an idyllic alternative. They are possible rather than imaginary. Utopias are a departure from the present but heterotopias both engage with and question the present by enacting an alternative, destabilising established practices and understandings in the process. Topinka (2010) argues heterotopias, as they feature in The Order of Things, “work to undermine text; they attack the space on which text is written. Clearly, a tension exists between The Order of Things, which seems to describe heterotopias as primarily textual, and “Of Other Spaces,” where heterotopias are physical spaces”(p. 58). The movement in the locus of heterotopia from text to site is significant because it gives heterotopias enhanced physical form, making them easier to identify and characterise. In The Order of Things heterotopias are primarily a feature of language, but in Foucault’s later writings on the subject they have formal embodiment.

Foucault’s main text on heterotopia, a lecture given to architecture students titled “Des Espace Autres”, dates from 1967 and was first translated into English as, “Of Other Spaces”, in 1986. It defines heterotopias as deviant and closed spaces, characterised by juxtaposition, historically contextualised and having a relationship with the wider society (Foucault, 1986; see also Guan & Blair, 2021). Foucault (1986) defines heterotopias of deviation, “in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (p. 25). Wikipedia is a site of heterotopic possibility, as its contributors require no academic attainment or affiliation, and Saldanha (2008) argues heterotopias are countersites existing in a largely oppositional relationship to mainstream society (p. 2081).

In his lecture, Foucault indicates heterotopias’ relevance to a project to log and retain knowledge, to create a knowledge archive:

Museums and libraries have become heterotopias in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit, whereas in the seventeenth century, even at the end of the century, museums and libraries were the expression of an individual choice. By contrast, the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century (p. 26).

If the museum and the library are proper to western culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Wikipedia is proper to the digital age, adding mobility to Foucault’s formulation. Wikipedia is a site of perpetual accumulation but it is also easy to access and use, and is available in 313 languages (Wikipedia, 2021a). It is free to anyone with access to a networked device. It is based on collaborative production, undertaken primarily from a wish to contribute and not in expectation of receiving renumeration. Wikipedia as heterotopia resembles,
sufficiently, an existing form of publication yet simultaneously deviates from it in terms of formal innovation and fluidity of content. Saldanha (2008) argues Foucault is especially known for his interest in the intersection of power and knowledge; Wikipedia expresses this interest because it implies knowledge can be produced in conditions other than those of power sanctioned through formal educational attainment.

Foucault argues that, to gain admittance to the community of the heterotopia, the “individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures” (Foucault, 1986, p. 26). Similarly, Wikipedia has changed, “from the encyclopaedia that anyone can edit to the encyclopaedia that anyone who understands the norms, socialises himself or herself … and still wants to voluntarily contribute his or her time and energy can edit” (Halfaker et al., 2012, p. 683). Openness is compromised by the specific conditions in which contribution is possible. Wikipedia is open to technologically adept individuals with time to spare but is not fully open in practice, echoing Foucault’s argument: “In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible” (Foucault, 1986, p. 26), underlining the argument that heterotopias are closed spaces. Wikipedia as heterotopia produces knowledge but it also exposes its production, showing how knowledge arises out of argument, through having a talk page as well as a main entry.

Foucault argues, “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (1986, p. 25). Wikipedia is an eclectic, multi-authored site yet it is located in one online space, a space which is continually evolving and expanding. Wikipedia offers contrasting sites; the main entry comprises an organised presentation of knowledge whereas the talk page is turbulent, exposing the disagreements and contentions out of which knowledge is produced and published. The talk page itself functions as a “knowledge generator” (Joseph, 2019, p. 166) and underlines Wikipedia’s status as heterotopia because it deviates from the traditional encyclopaedia while, at the same time, the main entry continues to look like a traditional encyclopaedia. Wikipedia is an encyclopaedia yet it simultaneously, heterotopically, exposes its own means of production.

Dey and Mason (2018) argue, “many of today’s grand challenges are rooted precisely in people’s inability to envision reality outside of the realm of dominant imagination”. Heterotopias enable innovative, imaginative practice. They postulate an alternative which is yet connected to the recognisable present. They are sites of possibility, implying a bridge between the present and a different space. Unlike utopias they are not idyllic, but realisable. Wikipedia represents heterotopic possibility because it expands the community of knowledge producers, thus democratising knowledge itself. As a wide-ranging concept, Foucault’s heterotopia has been applied to a range of practices, including aviation in Canada (Salter, 2007) and gated communities in South Africa
(Hook & Vrdoljak, 2002). This paper adds to the interdisciplinary applications of heterotopia, applying it to Wikipedia as an example of hypermedia.

**Materials & methods**

Content analysis (Bryman, 2016) was used for this paper because the research was fundamentally interested in the examination of language on Wikipedia. The research was interested in both manifest and latent content: Bryman (2016) argues content analysis is as interested in omissions as in what does get reported (p. 287), and Krippendorff (2013) argues, “Content analysts are as interested in what is not said as they are in what is said” (p. 360). However, as Wikipedia has pages showing how each entry is created, the gap between manifest and latent content is narrower. The latent content is apparent, albeit not on the main entry page, and is less a matter of conjecture than a matter of observation.

The accessibility of the talk pages exemplifies Wikipedia’s status as heterotopia. It is an encyclopaedia that exposes the conditions of knowledge production. The surface level of engagement with a Wikipedia page brings the reader to the genre of encyclopaedia, including both the language used and how each entry is structured. The talk pages deviate into how the surface level was produced and modified. In line with Foucault (1986), the talk pages create a juxtaposition. Furthermore, the analysis of Wikipedia talk pages was previously undertaken by Luyt (2012) in a critical study of the sources used to support a Wikipedia entry on the history of the Philippines, and Schneider et al. (2010) undertook manual content analysis of Wikipedia talk pages. Talk pages are a valid form of heterotopic analysis because, and in line with Foucault’s (2005) original definition of heterotopia, they undermine the comparative lyricism of the main entries. While the main entries are, in general, fluent, having clear sub-sections consistent from entry to entry and written in sentences, appropriate for an encyclopaedia (Schopflin, 2014, p. 484), Wikipedia talk pages are truncated, informal and turbulent.

Content analysis is also unobtrusive (Bryman, 2016, p. 303): there was no direct interaction with human subjects in the course of the research. The content analysis in this paper has a directed approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), as Foucault’s concept of heterotopia is used to analyse Wikipedia. The concept of heterotopia directs and systematises the analysis because examples of heterotopic practice are identified and discussed, in both the main entry and the talk page. The data gathering was undertaken iteratively in November–December 2020, maintaining online observation of the relevant Wikipedia pages. The data were the Wikipedia entry and the talk page for the entry on “episteme” (Wikipedia, 2020b; 2020c).

Episteme is also a concept from Foucault, presented in *The Order of Things*, though the roots of the term go back to Ancient Greece. Foucault divides the
history of knowledge in western societies into epistemes: “there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge” (2005, p. 183). In The Order Of Things, History is not a smooth continuum but experiences jolts. One system of knowledge is replaced by another: the Renaissance (characterised by similarity), replaced by the Classical era (characterised by order and categorisation), replaced by the Modern which, for Foucault, is characterised by the centrality of humanity. The nature of epistemological development, however, implies humanity’s centrality is only a temporary state of affairs, an historically specific condition which may change, hence Foucault’s closing image in The Order Of Things, of a face traced in sand on a beach, being erased by the tide. Humanity is central but also, Foucault argues, transient.

The entry on episteme was chosen because it was considered relevant and potentially productive to apply a Foucauldian analysis to a Foucauldian term on Wikipedia. It was also a term with which the author was familiar, which made it easier to analyse and evaluate both the main entry and the talk page, looking for evidence of heterotopic practice. By analysing one Wikipedia entry as a case study, it was possible to see how the entry for episteme both resembled traditional encyclopaedia production, and also how the entry deviated from traditional encyclopaedia production. Jones (2019) also examined both the main entry and the talk page from a heterotopic perspective in a case study of the Wikipedia entry for Tokyo, with particular focus on issues of translation.

**Results**

The Wikipedia entry for episteme is a stub article. It begins with the word’s etymology and its genre (a philosophical term in Ancient Greece). The subsequent section, headed “Western philosophy,” begins with Foucault’s understanding and usage of episteme: “French philosopher Michel Foucault, in his The Order of Things, uses the term épistémè in a specialised sense to mean the historical, non-temporal, a priori knowledge that grounds truth and discourses, thus representing the condition of their possibility within a particular epoch” (Wikipedia, 2020b).

The entry has the familiar construction of an encyclopaedia. The more divergent possibilities emerge through the use of hyperlinks which, in the extract above, feature on: “Michel Foucault”, “The Order Of Things”, “a priori”, “discourses”, “condition of their possibility”, and “epoch” (Lamprecht et al. [2017] found evidence that users clicked more frequently on links located close to the top of Wikipedia articles). The entry has the traditional features of the encyclopaedia but also benefits from technology’s added capabilities. It is both similar to and distinct from a traditional encyclopaedia entry. It is an example of cloud heterotopia, “assemblages not of bodies, but of
communications, with images, texts and links” (Beckett et al., 2017, p. 176). The entry is more catalytic than conclusive, perpetually unfinished while encouraging connections to other topics.

The next section is headed, “Relation to Kuhn’s paradigm” (Thomas Kuhn 1922–1996, coined the term “paradigm shift”). The section distinguishes episteme from paradigm:

Whereas Kuhn’s paradigm is an all-encompassing collection of beliefs and assumptions … Foucault’s episteme is not confined to science—it provides the grounding for a broad range of discourses (all of science itself would fall under the episteme of the epoch)

The section concludes, “Kuhn’s and Foucault’s notions are possibly influenced by the French philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard’s notion of an ‘epistemological rupture’. as indeed was Louis Althusser”. There is a typographical error: a full stop is placed after “rupture” though the sentence continues thereafter. The error is heterotopic by exposing the fact that Wikipedia has no proof readers, only other readers who identify errors, together with Wikipedia’s own “bots”, which execute decisions without human intervention, operating from dedicated and recognisable Wikipedia user accounts (Flavin & Hulova, 2018; Tsvetkova et al., 2017). Geiger (2017) notes that Wikipedia, “is heavily algorithmically assisted”: the presence of bots highlights the distinction between analogue and digital production and is heterotopic because it comprises a separate site of production while the text itself continues to resemble a traditional encyclopaedia.

On 28 November 2020, a new sub-section was added, “Episteme according to Giano Rocca”. It comprised one paragraph of 675 words, without footnotes. It included a link to the author’s page on Academia.edu.. The author appeared not to have an academic affiliation. The new entry included, “it must know knows how to propose an alternative model” (Wikipedia, 2020b). Other phrases in the paragraph included, “closed societies are characterised by the extremization of a certain conception, which is assumed to be the only one allowed, and every slightest deviation from it: it is punished with the utmost ferocity, and extirpated from the social body”. The subjectivity of the passage and its demarcation into a sub-section headed by the name of a writer without apparent academic affiliation is heterotopic, publishing a position without formal peer review or editing. The author of the sub-section used an IP address and appeared to be in Turin, Italy (WhoIs Gateway Beta, 2020).

Minor formatting changes to the entry as a whole were added by a separate user on 2 December 2020. The final part of the entry has two suggestions under “further reading”: Foucault’s The Order of Things, and The Archaeology of Knowledge (the latter not featuring in the entry for episteme).

The core structure of the entry is not indicative of the diversifying aspects of heterotopias, only the familiar aspects. However, the use of bots, hyperlinks and
the typographical errors highlight Wikipedia’s distinctiveness in relation to the traditional, printed encyclopaedia. The Wikipedia entry has heterotopic features but it is also familiar in the sense that it is structured through a series of sub-headings. The entry provides definitions, origins of the term in Ancient Greece and its subsequent use in western philosophy, while also providing more subjective content. The reader can make a decision on which aspects of the article to accept, and which to challenge.

Heterotopia is more explicitly manifest in the talk page of the entry for episteme (2020c), last updated on 11 February 2019. The entry is not complete and final (Wikipedia’s core architecture ensures the provisional nature of entries); specific points of disagreement are exposed. The first entry under the “Comments” sub-section is:

This entry should be re-written to eliminate or at least radically minimize the Foucault stuff. The focus should be on the Greek linguistic points, and on the use of the term in Greek philosophy. The Foucault stuff should be ditched, or moved to the Foucault entry. (Wikipedia, 2020c).

The informal language (“the Foucault stuff”; “ditched”) expresses a subjective view and a dispute, in contrast to the objective tone of an encyclopaedia entry. Wikipedia is heterotopic by showing the back-office of academic production. Sources that can present themselves as authoritative are produced out of a conflict of subjective discourses, a process concealed in many publications but exposed in Wikipedia. Wikipedia mirrors academic production but challenges it at the same time by exposing the conditions in which it is produced.

The comments on the talk page also contain the following exchange, with a spelling mistake: “At one point the article mentions a prori. Why use a term that has no clear meaning in an encyclopaedic article” (Wikipedia, 2020c). Despite reading as a question, the sentence does not conclude with a question mark. The dispute seems to be one of genre; a philosophical term within an encyclopaedic source. The contribution is heterotopic, exposing a disagreement in published form within a publishing genre, the encyclopaedia, associated with authoritative, synoptic information.

Opposition to the article as it stands is, in places, explicit:

I find it astounding that a concept so fundamental to the history of philosophy can have an entry that is exclusively devoted to the philosophy of a single individual philosopher, and a modern one at that! This page needs serious help.

Well, help it then …

I could not agree more. This page is useless as the lead-in is one line, and the rest of the (stub) article is based on one (modern!!) philosopher!. (Wikipedia, 2020c)
The plethora of exclamation marks, the retort to the first complaint and the identification of the post as “useless” are all anathema to the surface level of traditional encyclopaedia production. It is likely that dispute conducted in informal language is characteristic of encyclopaedia production (as it is in other forms of collaborative knowledge production) but the published product of an encyclopaedia entry projects objectivity. Wikipedia is a heterotopia: both a recognisable site for knowledge but also a forum for disagreement expressed in subjective, vehement terms. Wikipedia is also heterotopic by exposing the nature of knowledge production and, in so doing, by questioning the objective state of knowledge itself. Wikipedia is both familiar and strange, conforming to the core appearance of an encyclopaedia while simultaneously exposing the inner workings of knowledge and its provisionality.

Discussion

The general history of the encyclopaedia has been towards democratisation:

In Eighteenth-century Europe, the mission of the encyclopaedia became not solely about collating knowledge, but also about distributing it, making it accessible to the general population. This commitment is evident in the shift from writing encyclopaedias in Latin, to writing them in the vernacular language. (Hartelius, 2010, p. 508).

Wikipedia extends that democratisation from readership to authorship. Wikipedia redefines how knowledge can be produced and by whom. It challenges the idea of gatekeepers because anyone can potentially contribute. The necessity of expert peer review is excluded, as is academic editorship. Instead, collaborative production creates outputs which can have use value. If individuals outside academies can create an encyclopaedia, there is no in-principle reason why they cannot create other forms of knowledge. As higher education becomes increasingly monetised in many countries, Wikipedia’s heterotopia indicates a possible alternative direction whereby knowledge is produced, exchanged and archived outside the academy, free of cost. Saldanha (2008) argues heterotopias “unconsciously propel society forward” (p. 2083) and Wikipedia can achieve progress by highlighting how knowledge production is a practice available, theoretically, to anyone.

In the case study for this paper, the Wikipedia entry for episteme resembled an encyclopaedia, yet aspects of the article were heterotopic, such as typographical errors highlighting the absence of formal editorship. The entry both resembles and deviates from traditional encyclopaedia production. Heterotopia is more explicitly evident on the talk page, which exposes the argumentative, tendentious basis of knowledge production. During the editing stage of this paper, it was noted that the sub-section of the Episteme article, “Episteme according to Giano Rocca” was deleted on 3 January 2021 by an experienced
A Wikipedia editor, on the grounds of “Apparent self-promotion” (Wikipedia, 2021). Heterotopic practice can enable effective quality assurance.

Foucault (1986 [1967]) argued museums and libraries had become twentieth-century heterotopias. Barnes (2004) states, “heterotopias are always in the process of being made, ordering rather than order” (p. 576). Wikipedia is a twenty-first century heterotopia. It is a wide ranging source but it is also perpetually unfinished. The last word is never had on Wikipedia because the debate is never closed. Wikipedia resembles, skeuomorphically, a traditional encyclopaedia. Heterotopically, its similarity to a traditional encyclopaedia is countered by its conspicuous difference as, paradoxically, a permanently provisional site, populated with contributions from individuals with varying levels of formal qualifications, or with none.

One of the examples of heterotopia given by Foucault is the boat, a community set apart from the general population but which retains some of its norms. It is both a reflection of and an alternative to the community from which it has departed. For Foucault, heterotopias are important because of the alternative possibilities they generate and highlight: “In civilisations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates” (1986, p. 27). The boat, the heterotopia, represents expedition and possibility, though Harvey (2001) argues the commercial cruise ship can be seen as heterotopic yet is the antithesis to emancipation and liberation. Wikipedia as heterotopia has value beyond the texts it continually publishes. It shows knowledge can be created, shared and used outside the academy. It uses hyperlinks, a feature of hypermedia, to cross-fertilise knowledge across and beyond traditional disciplinary silos. It shows production can happen for reasons other than money. It highlights collaborative human potential.

Future work in this area might look at a number of Wikipedia entries rather than one case study, to enhance the reliability of the method. There is also scope for analysing current or controversial articles on Wikipedia, in which the tension between the talk pages and the evolving main entry may be starker and more polarised, though Schneider et al. (2010) found, surprisingly, that controversial Wikipedia pages did not have substantial discussion. Future research might also analyse the edit page as well as the main entry and talk page, or compare versions of individual Wikipedia entries over time, as each version is archived. Wikipedia provides different layers and forms of data, all of which can be analysed. Heterotopia as an analytical lens might also be used for other aspects of digital knowledge production, including social media technologies. This paper offers an enhanced understanding of Wikipedia as heterotopia; both continuity and innovation. It shows how Wikipedia, as an example of digital culture and hypermedia, constructs knowledge through conflict as well as consensus. Wikipedia, as a constantly evolving knowledge
repository and site of knowledge production, generates new data for analysis every day.

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