

THE ADVENT OF OPEN SOURCE DEMOCRACY AND WIKIPOLITICS: CHALLENGES, THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract: *It has been claimed that the Web 2.0, the open source movement, and the emerging mode of peer production have inaugurated a new era of debate about openness, participation, and cooperation as bedrocks for rebuilding the civilizations of the modern world. By way of introducing the concept of wikipolitics, this paper examines whether, and if so how, politics and democracies can benefit from this emerging participatory spirit and modern ICTs, and to document possible dangers of such a shift in the democratic process*

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A radical change in the organization of information production has been observed during last decades. Two parallel shifts have taken place: The most economically advanced societies are moving towards an information-based economy (i.e., emphasis on financial services, marketing, software, science, and culture), while the declining costs of information and communication technologies (ICTs) make them available to a much wider portion of the world's population (Benkler, 2006). This has led, in turn, to the creation of a new communicational, interconnected, virtual environment in which a new social, productive, and exchange model has emerged that is radically different from the industrial one (Benkler, 2006). This new paradigm has been described by Benkler (2006) as commons-based peer production, which reduces the value of proprietary strategies and makes shared information more important through large-scale, cooperative information production efforts. Bruns (2008) has called this era "produsage," where "producers" (producers + users) simultaneously innovate, produce, distribute, and consume, all premised on an ethos of participation, sharing, communication, and collaboration. Therefore, peer production, in this context, is a new mode of production that has been enabled through Internet-based coordination, where decisions arise from the free engagement and cooperation of the people who coalesce to create common value. It is a mode arguably more productive in the creation, production, and distribution of

nonmaterial value (i.e., knowledge, information, or culture), in which the creative energy of multitudes is coordinated into meaningful projects without the traditional hierarchical organization (Bauwens, 2005a, 2005b; Benkler, 2006). The on-line free encyclopedia Wikipedia, which hosts millions of pages of information and knowledge; the thousands applications of FLOSS (i.e., free/libre/open source software, e.g., Linux); the Apache Web server that provides a foundation for open, collaborative software development projects; and the LibriVox project, a digital library of free public-domain audio books read and recorded by volunteers, are just a few examples of the legion of the ongoing peer production endeavors. Simultaneously, it has been frequently argued (Bauwens, 2005a; Benkler, 2006; Lessig, 2004) that culture is becoming more participatory and self-reflective, “where many more of us participate actively in making cultural moves and finding meaning in the world around us” (Benkler, 2006, p. 15). Millions of blogs, the open access movement, and the free dissemination of music, photography, and literature via Creative Commons licenses provide an account of the so-called “free culture movement” (Lessig, 2004).

The present paper, by and large, subscribes to this perspective and takes it as its framework and starting point. This, in turn, leads to several questions. If producers in the economic arena can create common value via open, self-governed, networked, virtual communities—especially regarding nonmaterial production—what should and/or could be done in the procedure of democratic discourse? If, as argued by Surowiecki (2004), the crowds are actually wiser than the few experts and capable of making better decisions under certain conditions (that is, the crowd needs to be diverse and decentralized with independent members), then how can modern ICTs of the so-called networked area, in coordination with the open source culture, summarize citizens’ opinions, arguments, and suggestions into a collective verdict that may provide societies with co-created political value? What effect can the open source movement in software and knowledge production have on enhancing and enriching modern democratic structures? What are the dangers of such a shift of the democratic process? This paper addresses the concept of wikipolitics, examining whether and how wikipolitics can facilitate an environment for peer production in the political field, and discussing the potential dangers, based on the study of a prominent peer project, Wikipedia.

INTRODUCTION TO WIKIPOLITICS

Staring at Open Source Democracy

Historically, democracy has been in an arduous search process of reinventing itself: “Like fire, painting or writing, democracy seems to have been invented more than once, and in more than one place” (Dahl, 1998, p. 8). And because democratic processes are tightly connected with information flows and communication nowadays, new opportunities, mainly induced by the technological progress especially in the ICT sector, are emerging and simultaneously transforming and being transformed by a refreshed subjectivity. Bauwens (2005a, 2005b) argued for the emergence of the peer-to-peer (P2P) concept. This specific form of relational dynamic, based on an assumed equipotency (i.e., no prior formal filtering for participation) of its contributors and organized through the free cooperation of equals in view of the performance of a common task, creates a common good, with forms of decision making and

autonomy widely distributed throughout the network. How can this networked environment facilitate a better democratic discourse or, in other words, a better democracy and indeed a better society? Before addressing that, what do we really mean by better democracy? How do we perceive the enhancement of democratic structures and the democratic discourse? Democracy could be said to be about the resolution of competing claims and visions of the good society in an arena open to all (Alexander, 2003). The democratic utopia is perceived as a number of processes based on equal and open participation in decision making, where every person has its say. So, in this paper, the enhancement of democracy is understood as a step closer to the aforementioned utopia. Some scholars (Bauwens, 2005a, 2005b; Benkler 2006; Bruns, 2008; Lessig, 2004; Rushkoff, 2003, 2007) claim that the participatory context, within which the myriad commons-based peer production endeavors are blooming, signals the return to autonomy, cooperation, and collectivity: New social norms are emerging. At the same time, numerous political scientists highlight the need for embracing cooperation, because otherwise the world would be ruled by “one power structure in terms of economic-technological development, military power and knowledge production” (Suoranta & Vaden, 2008, p. 182). Moreover, Sen (2002) underlined the importance of sharing common good in order to enrich human freedom.

Rushkoff (2003) demonstrated that the current political structures can be changed:

Transparency in media makes information available to those who never had access to it before. Access to media technology empowers those same people to discuss how they might want to change the status quo. Finally, networking technologies allow for online collaboration in the implementation of new models, and the very real-world organisation of social activism and relief efforts ... We are heading not towards a toppling of the democratic, parliamentary or legislative processes, but towards their reinvention in a new, participatory context. (p. 63)

In 2007, Rushkoff considered the modern information age as a second renaissance:

Printing press, perspective, extended metaphor, circumnavigation of the globe, re-invention of the “individual”, the beginnings of calculus all find their modern parallels in the internet, holography, hypertext, orbiting the globe, re-invention of the collective, the beginnings of systems theory.... old, repressed ideas, like the value of collaboration and cooperation, are being reborn in the next context of connectivity. (Answer 1, para. 1)

During the original Renaissance, people were transformed from passive recipients into active interpreters of the world. In the current renaissance, people are playing new roles: the role of author, the role of creator (Rushkoff, 2003). ICTs, or what Rushkoff (2003) calls “interactive media,” can arguably provide the tools to develop collective narratives while remaining connected to each other. In a networked, information-based society (Bauwens, 2005a, 2005b; Bell, 1976, 1978; Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2000, 2003), in which a participatory, open, and free culture is emerging, societies aspire towards “a highly articulated and dynamic body politic: A genuinely networked democracy, capable of accepting and maintaining a multiplicity points of view” (Rushkoff, 2003, p. 51). The promise of this “networked democracy” lies in encouraging broader participation and taking advantage of the collective wisdom and the perspectives of the crowds. According to Jenkins (2006), ICTs induce a participatory culture that contains low barriers to civic participatory engagement and activism, as well as new forms of social connection, solidarity, and collectivism.

“Open source democracy” (a concept introduced by Rushkoff, 2003) is related to a “model for the open-ended and participatory process through which legislation might occur in a networked democracy” (p. 56). Members of open source communities experience the way that their actions affect the whole and, as a result, they are more conscious of “how their moment-to-moment decisions can be better aligned with the larger issues with which they are concerned” (Rushkoff, 2003, pp. 60–61). Open source democracy deals with interconnected local communities that are experienced as places to design and implement policies incrementally; this eventually will have an effect on the whole. It can be said that open source democracy is actually a strand of on-line participatory democracy, or “eDemocracy,” since it concerns a particular context of democratic goals: enabling participation through input and consultation; inducing engagement and deliberation; and having no relation, for instance, with e-voting or simple digital feedback. In a nutshell, it tries to redefine modern democratic discourse in the digital information age. Open source activity is, in some ways, similar to “crowdsourcing,” although I prefer using the term *open source* because it stresses concepts such as openness, the common good, and collaboration.

Wikipolitics constitutes those sociotechnological applications and processes that can exploit the untapped collective intelligence resources. It aims to strengthen democratic processes by facilitating electronic input within policy development and on-line policy consultation. After all, it is about content co-creation. So wikipolitics, where “networking technologies allow for online collaboration in the implementation of new models” (Rushkoff, 2003, p. 63), is a means with the potential to give rise to open source democracy. But, as Clift (2004, p. 3) noted, “There is no ‘leap frog’ path that easily leads to responsive governance that supports human and economic development.” Getting over the hype in media coverage of the early 1990s, the Internet and ICTs are not inherently democratic or capable of leading absolutely on their own towards a democratic revolution. “ICTs might be functional to implement a certain kind of democracy, while it might lead to undemocratic results in another institutional setting,” said Hilbert (2007, p. 7). However, nowadays, as will be explained in the next section, technology reflects a change of attitude towards participation and openness, expressed in the formation of new interactions—P2P relations—while new forms of political and productive organization are emerging. Open source democracy, along with wikipolitics, is being built upon this new relational dynamic at work.

The Evolution of Technology and the Emergence of a New Social Order

At this point, it will be helpful to shed light on the evolution of technology and the emergence of new modes of social organization, specifically following Bauwens’ (2005b) analysis developed in his “P2P and Human Evolution” essay, since this provides a framework for the analysis to come. According to Bauwens, premodern technology was participative in a nondifferentiated world: The tools of the artisans were extensions of their bodies, and their societies were not differentiated, meaning people were part of a whole that was dominated by spirits (their ancestors, spirits of nature, objects, etc.). In the modern era (industrial capitalism), technology became less participative but more differentiated: Nature was considered an object (i.e., a resource to be used), while tools no longer served as an extension of the human; rather, the human became an extension of the machine. In the industrial system of production, humans and machines were of the same nature, both cogs in the system.

Nowadays, in the postmodern, information-based, networked era, machines are intelligent, but in a way different than humans (i.e., machines lack creative innovation, problem-solving, and decision-making capabilities). During the process of “informationization,” a new paradigm has emerged (although coexisting with the old one): Computers are becoming extensions of the human brain while humans cooperate with them, thus enabling an effective communication among a much wider human community.

According to this argument, technology would reflect a change of attitude towards participation. This change is expressed in the formation of new P2P relations, while new forms of political and productive organization are emerging. These new forms do not offer solutions to the problems per se, but they constitute alternative, new processes for arriving at solutions. An increasing number of people are now able to manage their political, social, and productive lives through a variety of interdependent networks. These trends contribute to the formation of a social order increasingly based on meaningful cooperation. These new forms of civilization combine subjectivity (new values), intersubjectivity (new relations), objectivity (an enabling technology) and interobjectivity (new forms of organization; i.e., peer production as a new mode of production in the information and knowledge sector) that mutually strengthen each other in a positive feedback loop.

It can be said that there are two primary questions to be answered. The first one is an ontological question: How is technology transforming us? The second question, and the focus of this paper, is a political one: What can we make out of technology (Feenberg, 1998)?

The Essence of Wikipolitics

The advent of Web 2.0 has enabled large-scale interactions (O’Reilly, 2006) via emerging Web technologies such as wikis. Butler, Joyce, and Pike (2008, p. 1108) arrived at the conclusion that the “true power of wikis lies in the fact that they are a platform that provides affordances, which allow for a wide variety of rich, multifaceted organizational structures.” According to Suoranta and Vaden (2008, p. 11), wikis ideally exemplify the Habermasian potential of digital technology and communication (see Habermas, 1984) because they “seem to promise almost limitless global open collaboration in terms of content production, discussion and argumentation.” Wikipolitics is only a means to an end. According to Rawls (2003), the focus in the design of democratic information and communication processes should be premised upon procedures, rather than on truthful results. In addition, a great challenge for wikipolitics is to “efficiently steer and correctly administer the information overflow of a very large number of participants” (Hilbert, 2007, p. 21). Indeed, “new information technologies are not simply tools to be applied, but processes to be developed” (Castells, 2000, p. 31).

Is there any specific example of wikipolitics being put into practice? This paper will deal later with three projects that can be considered wikipolitics cases because they have many of the characteristics of wikipolitics, as described above, and bring some empirical results. They will be briefly introduced here already. The first one is the Deliberatorium platform initiated by Iandoli, Klein, and Zollo (2008), scholars from MIT and Naples University. The researchers were trying to create a platform that would allow for collective deliberation, suggestions formulation, and decision making concerning important, complex issues, such as climate change. The second wikipolitics project studied here was called wikipolitics.gr;¹ it is now inactive. Developed by PASOK,² the dominant socialist party in Greece, and supported by the

on-line journal *Re-public* and the newspaper *Ta Nea*,³ this platform facilitated collaborative politics. Future Melbourne,⁴ the third wikipolitics project, dealt with “the transformation of a traditional city planning exercise governed by a few, to a global, wiki-based collaboration on the future of Melbourne, Australia,” according to Mark Elliot (2008, para. 1), a key contributor. The goal was to leverage the potential of collaboration and to take advantage of Web 2.0 opportunities. Therefore, the city’s 10-year plan was migrated “to a wiki-based collaborative environment for both internal and public consultation” (Elliot, 2008). All these cases were studied in winter 2008-2009, and, exactly after 2 years, they were re-examined and their progress is documented within the relevant sections that follow in this essay.

As was mentioned above, if the crowds are really wiser than a few experts, and democracies are not as transparent and participatory as they could be (and assuming transparency and participation are good, and indeed essential, for democracy) a question comes to the fore. Under these circumstances, can the modern ICTs, in coordination with the open source culture, summarize citizens’ opinions, arguments, and suggestions into a collective verdict that may provide societies with co-created political content?

Varoufakis’ (2007) main objection to the wikipolitics notion was that “these splendid hopes rest entirely on an erroneous diagnosis: Namely, that our democratic deficits [sic] is a technical problem in search of a technological solution.” He explained,

As long as our societies are typified by a stark separation of the political from the economic sphere, reserving equal rights for the former while allowing the latter to be characterised by increasing inequality in the allocation of property rights, wiki...can play no significant role in civilising them. Wiki may help democracy but only if it is employed in the context of a wider political project of redesigning property rights in such a way as to make possible a world in which people form units of production which create and distribute value in a participatory manner; in a manner such that no one employs anyone, everyone contributes labour and ideas, while each is rewarded according to contribution but also need. Until then, all wiki can achieve is, at best, interesting experiments in non-price spontaneous order (like Wikipedia) and, at worst, an e’Mob that is as distant from an e’Demos as Genghis Khan was from a contemporary critic of nationalist divisions. (Varoufakis, 2007)

In a similar vein, Pawley (2007) noted,

It is perhaps the case that to be optimally effective, such re-imaginings of political action must be accompanied by a re-imagination of the institutions that provide them. Such a solution, while optimistic, offers the best chance of transcending tensions between participation and passivity, centralisation and subsidiarity, and past and future.

But perhaps such an institutional redesign is under way as well, closely related to technological facilitations of participation. In nonmaterial production, humans co-create and distribute value in a participatory manner: The production of knowledge and politics becomes diffuse; it is distributed throughout the system and, thus, disrupts former spatial and temporal continuities (Hartzog, 2007). It is not accidental that the emergence and the conceptualization of wikipolitics and open source democracy coincide with the observed emergence of what has been called new modes of property and governance: peer property and peer governance. Peer property includes the universal common property regimes and legal means for social reproduction of peer projects, which are inherently more distributive than both public and private property (Bauwens,

2005a, 2005b). For instance, the General Public License or some forms of the Creative Commons licenses are examples of peer property legal regimes. In other words, peer property is a modern form of communal shareholding whereby resources are held in common and each individual contributes according to his/her willingness and ability (Fiske, 1991). Peer governance is a new mode of governance and a bottom-up mode of participative decision making that is being tested in peer production projects such as FLOSS production and Wikipedia (Bauwens, 2005a, 2005b). Thus, peer governance is the way that peer production, the process where common value is produced, is organized and managed. It could be argued that the emergence of peer processes supported by the Commons and the open access movements facilitates a wider political context in which reimagining politics at the institutional level is possible.

An important question that could be posed, however, is whether citizens will actually embrace the possibility for participation. Hilbert (2007, p. 129) noticed, “The argument is that the average citizen has many other private interests and does not want to get bogged down in political details. The common counterargument is that citizens see no point in participation because of the limited civil influence allowed by political institutions.” Hence, Hilbert (2007, p. 129) concluded, “Political apathy is the consequence.” In Barber’s (2003, pp. 265, 272) words, “The taste for participation is whetted by participation: Democracy breeds democracy ... [Citizens] are apathetic because they are powerless, not powerless because they are apathetic.” Despite the fact that I do not completely agree with such a linear, one-directional causal explanation, I share Hilbert’s view (2007, p. 129) that “digital transparency in the public sector would ... stimulate people’s willingness to participate.”

Another important issue concerning wikipolitics is transparency and its democratic nature. The programming of an ICT tool determines “the democratic institution that channels and guides public deliberation” (Hilbert, 2007, p. 117). Hence, it must always be ensured that ICTs cannot be manipulated. Open source software and open protocols have to be used in order to ensure transparency in the process. Elliot et al. (2007) highlighted two key threats facing the use of Internet nowadays as a medium for open source democracy:

[the] exploitative manipulation of the medium through the harvesting and subsequent misuse of personal information, as well as the biasing of the Net’s infrastructure through legislation associated with net ‘non-neutrality’. Such moves undercut public trust and faith in the system to protect their rights while providing an accurate representation of the digital world. (para. 13)

Regarding the protection of privacy, wikipolitics must balance the “democratic independence of the individual, the increase of information efficiency for the benefit of the individual and the protection of the public from criminal individuals” (Hilbert, 2007, p. 120).

One of the most significant challenges is that of on-line accessibility, that is, the standards and methods in order to ensure equal access to content across the barriers of distance, cost, and usability (Elliot et al., 2007). Having no access to digital infrastructure and being digitally illiterate constitute important barriers to equal access in open source democracy. As with other technologies, the distribution of ICTs follows a center–periphery scheme: The center is distinguished by certain characteristics (higher income and level of education), whereas the periphery tends to be at a lower level of development (Hilbert, 2007). This follows long-established patterns of inequality (Hilbert, 2007), which, following Elliot et al. (2007, para. 14), “might also be seen as a signal for the need to provide digital network access as a basic, free

service.” It can be claimed that more access to emergent forms of on-line democracy might also help spur many more forms of social, civic, and economic participation (Elliot et al., 2007).

Therefore, if the goal is to consider wikipolitics as a medium for democratizing democracy, it is necessary to widely distribute essential ICTs to ensure the availability of information regardless of time and location. Already movements such as the One Laptop per Child⁵ and the two world summits on the information society⁶ have focused on safeguarding the right to ICT access. In that context, it is encouraging that the costs for ICT equipment are falling and the mechanisms for collaboration are blooming. However, Suoranta and Vaden (2008) maintain that even in the Western world, let alone the rest of it, giant strides to reach satisfactory levels of digital literacy are necessary. Nonetheless, as Clift commented in 2004, “Waiting for the digital divide to close will eliminate the opportunity to build social expectations for civic uses of the Internet while the medium is still relatively new.”

WIKIPOLITICS CASES

Web 2.0 and Virtual Communities

It has been argued (O’Reilly, 2006) that with the advent of the Web 2.0 large-scale interactions take place via the emerging Web technologies such as blogs, forums, wikis, e-mail, podcasts, and so on. Therefore, using such “collective intelligence technologies” nowadays makes it possible to “draw together knowledgeable individuals, analytic tools and information sources on a scale that was impossible a few short years ago” (Iandoli et al., 2008, p. 1). The emergence of new ICTs, along with growing on-line virtual communities, gives rise to new practices in the production of politics. However, several differences exist between on-line virtual communities and traditional organizations. Interaction within the virtual community takes place mainly or solely via the Web; individual contribution is basically voluntary and limited to three forms: knowledge provision, knowledge rating, and knowledge organization (e.g., classification; Iandoli et al., 2008). According to these authors, a virtual community is a self-organized system where top-down management and centralization can be found only to a very limited extent.

However, as Iandoli et al. noted, in order for virtual communities to work properly, three important governance problems have to be addressed:

Attention governance: We must attract a considerable number of users, reduce the risk of premature convergence and enable sufficient exploration of the search space by countervailing the influences of informational pressure, social pressure and common knowledge;

Participation governance: We must retain a critical mass of motivated diverse users, and provide them with support and incentives for evidence-based reasoning as well as the sharing of unique personal knowledge;

Community governance: We must identify the rules and the organizational structures of the community in terms of the process and roles that enable attention governance and effective participation. (2008, p. 6)

The *Re-public* team developed the wikipolitics.gr platform. The interview with their developers involved, among others things, the three challenges raised by Iandoli et al. (2008)

and how the team was dealing with them during the operation of wikipolitics. Moreover, the strengths and weaknesses of such a platform were identified and speculations about the future of democratic discourse were made. The e-mail exchange with Mark Klein regarding Deliberatorium followed a similar vein. The examination of Future Melbourne was built on an on-line discussion that took place at P2P foundation's blog⁷ in the middle of 2008, as well as on material extracted from the project's official Web platform.⁸

Discussion with Priftis and Hatzopoulos of PASOK's Wikipolitics Platform

The wikipolitics.gr project began in 2007 with a wide-ranging on-line interview with PASOK's leader, and current (from 2009) prime minister of Greece, George Papandreou. More than 1,000 citizens submitted their questions, which were evaluated by about 50,000 citizens. Then Papandreou replied to those with the highest rating. In late 2008 the wikipolitics-parliament project was launched. In early 2009 I interviewed Thanasis Priftis and Pavlos Hatzopoulos, the initiators of the wikipolitics.gr platform and editors of *Re-public*, and our discussion focused more on the parliamentary usage of wikipolitics.gr that had just completed its first phase. Later, in mid-2009, two open discussions (with various evaluation processes) about education affairs as well as green development took place via wikipolitics.gr. In late 2009, before the national elections in Greece, wikipolitics.gr gathered citizens' suggestions for the agenda of the first 100 days of cabinet, if PASOK would rise in power, which it did. After that the platform became inactive, and was superseded by the more sophisticated opengov.gr that is the web page of Greek prime minister's office for open government, run by almost the same people.

It is still interesting to address the 2009 interview with Priftis and Hatzopoulos,⁹ the people behind wikipolitics.gr and, now, the main figures of Greek prime minister's office for open government, since many of their views have been the cornerstones of their efforts "*to empower democratic structures through ICT*" (Priftis). The beginning of the conversation dealt with the correlation between modern ICTs and participation in politics. They viewed ICTs promoting participation as only partly true since, on one hand, the "*Web is really us*":

In theory, the more you adopt participatory ICT, the more possibilities you have towards the realization of an open party: Openness opens the way for investment in people. On the other hand, when trying to adapt this idea to real life, things are not so easy as they might seem. The existing bureaucratic, hierarchical model of governance and organization within a political party—even if its leadership wants to—is very difficult to relinquish. Only a few PASOK members of the Parliament, say nine or ten, have understood the dynamics of this open culture. But they cannot act very differently in an old-fashioned political scene; where hierarchical filters gobble up a large part of the bottom-up voices.... Furthermore, the use of ICT does not guarantee that it will effectively strengthen democracy. Culture and social norms, law, and faults in implementation threaten such an initiative. (Priftis)

The methodology of wikipolitics.gr is quite simple:

We are trying to convert a bureaucratic process [at that time, the process involved the submission of questions to the Greek Parliament] into a more transparent one by connecting it to the digital world. Such a process predicates open access to information and wants to deliver accountability that will win citizens' approval. (Priftis)

As Priftis noted, at that period of time, the implementation of the wikipolitics.gr project was in an early phase: *“We are experimenting and creating fissures in the existing mechanism... After all, we are trying to build up a momentum in order to ensure and strengthen democracy in the information age.”* Their work aspired to show that all of the questions to be submitted to the Parliament would be at least open to a more transparent process where citizens could have their say. For instance, Anna Diamantopoulou, a prominent PASOK member who became Greece’s minister of education and innovation policy when PASOK came to power in 2009, submitted a question to the wikipolitics.gr platform while still a member of Parliament for open discussion about converting the ugly roofs of the housing blocks in Athens into green gardens. The comments made by the citizens offered many interesting insights and inputs, so that the question actually submitted to the Greek Parliament was really coauthored by Ms. Diamantopoulou and dozens of active citizens, as Priftis and Hatzopoulos told me. At the time of our interview, citizens were to start discussing and evaluating the suggestions of PASOK about technical education in Greece. *“The next step,”* Priftis said in 2009, *“is that all the questions of the PASOK members of the Greek Parliament would be available for discussion at the wikipolitics.gr platform.”* This is now taking place at the opengov.gr platform for several, but not all, of the bills that are to be presented in the Parliament for passage.

When asked about the function of their platform, Priftis and Hatzopoulos replied that a stable team of people maintains wikipolitics.gr, while a critical mass of citizens quite often offer their commentaries. *“In the beginning, we were worried about the prevalence of quantity over quality... We are constantly trying to create clearly defined ways to gather and assess the inputs,”* Priftis said. In a similar vein, Clift (2004, p. 28) advised that *“without structured ways to gather, evaluate, and respond to public input online, there will be diminishing value received or perceived with each additional public comment.”* In addition, Priftis and Hatzopoulos realized the need for a more automated mechanism regarding the coordination between their team and the members of Parliament:

We push the comments and the formulated ideas to the PASOK members of the Parliament. With our platform, we want to show that every citizen should have the right to participate in the debate over particular issues, even via lottery. (Hatzopoulos)

Our conversation ended with Hatzopoulos’ speculations about the future of politics:

We live in a contradictory, globalized society. Peer production and Commons coexist with the capitalistic, speculative production and the exclusive ownership. Every effort, so far, to subvert capitalism was “symmetrical,” and thus doomed to failure: symmetry in a world that is asymmetrical and contradictory. Hence, we believe that we are moving towards a mixed political system that includes discrepant and asymmetric elements that coexist. Societies have to devote time and resources to have a better understanding of the real threats and potential of wikipolitics, as the dystopia is always a possible scenario.

Discussing the Deliberatorium Platform

In 2009, I discussed this platform via e-mail with Mark Klein, a principal research scientist at the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence and one of Deliberatorium’s main developers. According to Klein, the initial results (from three evaluations—200 people in Naples, Italy,

300 people in Zurich, Switzerland, and 100 people at Intel in Massachusetts, USA) showed that large numbers of people, without special training, could effectively use this tool to create large deliberation maps on complex topics. Klein told me that next steps included the development of new functionalities aimed at (a) making it easier to find/enter content in large maps; (b) collecting metrics on the progress and problems in a deliberation; and (c) integrating deliberation maps with social media tools that are based on narratives and conversations (e.g., chat, e-mail, wikis). The current version of the Deliberatorium tool has incorporated many of these changes and can be found on-line.¹⁰ The access is open and some of the collected data is analyzed as part of an ongoing study on improving the support of large-scale web-mediated collaborative work, as their website states.

Klein was also asked to articulate his ideas regarding the effects that Deliberatorium could have on the production of politics, that is, decision-making and problem-solving processes. Klein hoped that,

The Deliberatorium will make it possible for large numbers of people to much more effectively and systematically collect and evaluate a wide range of ideas concerning how to solve complex problems. I believe it can help in two ways:

- *Take better advantage of the cognitive diversity our societies offer to increase the range of solutions being considered. In current social computing systems, all too often only a tiny fraction of the possible solution ideas see the light of day, because of problems such as redundancy and dysfunctional collaboration dynamics.*
- *Foster decision-making based on evidence and logic rather than bias and emotional manipulation. The Deliberatorium is designed to encourage people to explain why they support given ideas, and uses a community-rating scheme that rewards coherent, well-supported arguments.*

Talking about open source democracy and wikipolitics, as realized in the current research project, I asked Klein whether he agreed with the view that the Deliberatorium platform could be one of the means towards open source democracy. He replied,

Open source democracy has different meanings to different people. I think many see it as being about giving everyone an equal voice in making decisions that affect them. While I appreciate that value, my focus is more on finding ways to use our collective intelligence to identify the best possible responses to pressing problems. Since I am exploring the use of reputation and proxy voting systems, you might even say that the Deliberatorium embodies meritocratic, rather than democratic, principles. But I think it is compatible with open source democracy, since my work aims to help people identify possible solutions and is agnostic about the process by which people eventually decide which of these solutions is adopted.

Finally, Klein referred to the main strengths and weaknesses of that platform. He mentioned that its main strength is that “*it allows us to tap, in ways not previously possible, the skills and knowledge of large numbers of people in the service of solving complex multi-disciplinary problems.*” On the other hand, Deliberatorium’s main weakness is the fact that “*it is based on a style of interaction that is somewhat formal and artificial.*” However, as Klein clarified, their goal is “*to integrate the strengths of a deliberation map with the narrative conversational modes of interaction that people find natural.*”

The Future Melbourne Project

According to Elliot (2008)¹¹, Future Melbourne was the first project in Australia that used a wiki for public consultation and the first one in the world that did it so extensively in a city planning process. It contained more than 150 targets to measure the city's progress towards achieving them through six key goals: a city for people, a prosperous city, an eco-city, a knowledge city, a creative city, and a connected city. In 2007, the vision that gave rise to the Future Melbourne project was the reengineering of Melbourne's city process for generating its next 10-year strategic plan (2010-2020). Elliot (2008) noted,

Previously, such plans were produced using cooperative participation (contribution of discrete elements that are synthesized by someone other than the contributors). However a requirement of this project was that the new plan be produced by collaborative participation (contribution with the capacity to add/edit/delete by all in order to inclusively represent the perspectives of all involved through collective contribution and synthesis). (para. 2)

In a nutshell, according to Future Melbourne's Web platform, this project constituted a community plan that aimed to

- Engage citizens in creating a vision for the future, setting priorities, and contributing to decision making;
- Value and utilize local networks;
- Focus on people and places, requiring a more flexible and joined-up [collaborative] approach to policy and service delivery;
- Connect the top-down and bottom-up policy processes that influence resource allocation.

The strategic planner and wiki administrator of the project (Dale Bowerman, "6 Responses," item 6, in Elliot, 2008), deemed that this new form of on-line consultation/participation would need some time before the majority of people feel comfortable in taking part. Discussing the maturity of this new mode of governance, Elliot wrote,

It won't be long until special interest groups and lobbyists develop a better understanding of the potentials. This will likely spawn more conflict (along with healthy debate) surrounding the struggle for the representation of a decision. However, I see this in no way as a drawback; rather it would simply be an indication of maturity of the medium through the mirroring of life's normal activities within it. At which point, our dispute resolution policies would no doubt develop accordingly and given enough time, perhaps the need to be able to represent more perspectives/interests in policy would exert pressure upon government to rethink how "valid" policy is formed, created and updated. (2008, "6 Responses," item 2)

Coordination problems on interpersonal and interorganizational levels, as well as gaps concerning the interests and the identities, were often to be found in virtual communities and may result in subsequent conflicts. Therefore, Future Melbourne had a specific plan (informed by the Wikipedia experience, Elliot, 2008, "6 Responses," item 2) for conflict resolution.

Further, Bauwens (commenting in Elliot, 2008) assumed that the separation of the idea formation from the representational and interest-based decision making is a key step for the success of such a wikipolitics project. He believed,

What is happening until today is that “interests” distort not only representation, but also crucially the input phases of solution-seeking, so that solutions are filtered a priori with interests already in mind, thereby prohibiting good ideas to filter through. But if we have a mechanism to allow good ideas to filter through, then it becomes a lot more difficult, with that transparency build in, for illegitimate interests to come through to the back door, and they can only acquire legitimacy by engaging with the good ideas, not filtering them out a priori. (Bauwens in Elliot, 2008, “6 Responses,” item 3)

With regard to Bauwens’ comment, Elliot (2008, “6 Responses,” item 4) stated, “This sums up the ideal role ... providing a publicly accessible means of developing the ideas, which opens them up to scrutiny and discussion, while enabling the further development of the ideas in a transparent and open-access way.” Elliot thought that the Future Melbourne project had already achieved this.

At the moment Future Melbourne has accomplished its mission and the “Post Implementation Review” conducted by Collabforge (n.d.), an organization specialized in social media and government using modern ICTs, investigated the degree of its success. According to this report, wikis are a viable platform for public consultation that should be further examined. Following the review, important recommendations in this regard are that the opportunities for further implementation of collaborative on-line consultation must be explored; that a link between the delivery of on-line consultation and the development of digital literacy is necessary; and that policies for the development and the implementation of an innovative change management program, which adopts and integrates the new ICTs and processes in a sustainable way, are of a crucial importance.

WIKIPEDIA PROJECT

Wikipedia, the popular free, on-line encyclopedia, is often hailed as a prominent peer production project where individuals voluntarily participate and produce a vast knowledge base. However, various criticisms (Bauwens, 2008; Butler et al., 2008) have been recently leveled against Wikipedia regarding the mode of governance that is followed. Although Wikipedia is not a wikipolitics project, it is a virtual community and shares several similarities with wikipolitics. So, using the Wikipedia project as a point of departure, I will try to identify and draw some conclusions regarding the dysfunctional and problematic situations of the governance mechanism. This study will allow for further considerations concerning the dangers of misplaced openness and participation for open-source democracy and wikipolitics projects.

Introduction to Wikipedia

The Web 2.0 has triggered large-scale interactions in unprecedented ways and gave rise to many collaborative projects, such as the well-known free encyclopedia:

Wikipedia is a free, web-based, collaborative, multilingual encyclopedia project supported by the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation. Its 18 million articles (over 3.6 million in English) have been written collaboratively by volunteers around the world, and almost all of its articles can be edited by anyone with access to the site. Wikipedia was launched in 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger and has become the largest and

most popular general reference work on the Internet, ranking around seventh among all websites on Alexa and having 365 million readers.

The name *Wikipedia* was coined by Larry Sanger[10] and is a portmanteau of *wiki* (a technology for creating collaborative websites, from the Hawaiian word *wiki*, meaning "quick") and *encyclopedia*. (Wikipedia, 2011, para. 1 & 2)

This is how Wikipedia defines itself. It uses the wiki technology that allows anyone to create and edit content on-line, in an open access and participatory context. Wikipedia is actually what Bruns (2008, pp. 104, 137) calls "representations of knowledge" rather than a "synthesis of a unified position of, and on, knowledge or 'truth' itself":

[It] provides a central, accessible, and easily editable space for the compilation and maintenance of such communal knowledge and an effective means for the aggregation of multiple and diverse such community knowledge bases into a unified, single project devoted to the compilation, synthesis and extension of representations of human knowledge about the world. (p. 104)

In other words, Wikipedia offers a draft of history that is subjected to continuous revision (Rozenzweig, 2006), so it is about unfinished artifacts in a constant process of creation and evaluation (Bruns, 2008). The content creation remains always incomplete, since it relies on the constant constructive participation of the community (Bruns, 2008). Bruns further commented that the government processes in Wikipedia are not related to any form of direct democracy. The heterarchy¹² structure, however, is constantly at risk of transforming itself into a more inflexible hierarchy of administrators. In the next subsection, the main governance problems are discussed, based on the study of internal forums, external Websites concerning Wikipedia, and e-mail interviews with (ex-)Wikipedians and experts.

Governance Problems

The Wikipedia project is premised on values such as transparency, mass collaboration, equipotentiality,¹³ holoptism,¹⁴ heterarchy, communal evaluation, and sharing. However, the creation of an allegedly open playing field occasionally entails the prevalence of active and organized minorities or individuals over less active members of the community. Group polarization is another danger that open, virtual communities, such as Wikipedia, face: "Discourse among like-minded people can very quickly lead to group polarization ... which causes opinions to diverge rather than converge... [so], it is very probable that the strongest groups will dominate the common life" (Hilbert, 2007, p. 120). Further, according to Bauwens (2008), a power structure in Wikipedia has been created that is largely invisible and hence vulnerable to the tyranny of structurelessness, as described by Freeman (1970):

Contrary to what we would like to believe, there is no such thing as a "structureless" group. Any group of people of whatever nature coming together for any length of time, for any purpose, will inevitably structure itself in some fashion. The structure may be flexible, it may vary over time, it may evenly or unevenly distribute tasks, power and resources over the members of the group. But it will be formed regardless of the abilities, personalities and intentions of the people involved. The very fact that we are individuals with different talents, predispositions and backgrounds makes this inevitable. Only if we

refused to relate or interact on any basis whatsoever could we approximate “structurelessness” and that is not the nature of a human group. (para. 5)

Freeman’s argument is that even seemingly structureless groups possess some structure, even if it is hidden, that may impose various practices and processes on the rest. An unregistered user of Wikipedia who I contacted at random in a forum¹⁵ cynically commented that Jimmy Wales, one of Wikipedia’s co-founders, created “*the structurelessness of a tyranny*” (personal correspondence, Informant 1, January 2009). Another user observed that Wikipedia lacks “*functional system architecture*” and “*functional social contract*” (personal correspondence, Informant 2, January 2009). A user named Yehuldi noted, “*There is a social contract, and most users and most admins adhere to it. The fundamental flaw is that there is no way to deal with the minority of admins who don’t*” (personal correspondence, Informant 3, January 2009).

Wikipedia is constantly at risk of transforming itself into an inflexible, despotic hierarchy, while new disputes are emerging about the governance mode of content creation. As the size of Wikipedia increases, it becomes continually more difficult for a relatively small group of administrators to keep track of everything that happens “in the far-flung [reaches] of the site” (Bruns, cited in Kostakis, 2010). Based on my observations (Kostakis, 2010) and discussions, coordination problems on interpersonal and interorganizational levels, as well as gaps concerning the interests and the identities of the inter-Wikipedia communities, result in governance crises (conflicts about participants’ editing practices, unjustified bans, power abuse by administrators, the so-called battle among inclusionists and deletionists, as documented by The Economist, 2008, etc.) and threaten the sustainability of the project. Further, the vagueness of the distinction between the social and technical powers of the administrators (who sometimes take more authoritative roles and increasingly make “moral” decisions about user behavior) leads to power accumulation in one section of the community (Forte & Bruckman, 2008). According to interviews I conducted with active (ex-)Wikipedians (Kostakis, 2010), a functional resolution process for resolving content disputes and an unambiguous community social contract model are lacking. Wikipedia may follow certain rules regarding content creation that in many cases are mutually inconsistent and conflicting. Thus, administrators who are adept at gaming the system can pick and choose among the hodgepodge of rules, “clobber” their adversary, and justify a deletion, a block, or a ban. Moreover, another problem to be solved is the balance between participation and selection for excellence; in other words, “how to make sure that truth does not become the rule of the majority and that expertise can find its place” (Bauwens, cited in Kostakis, 2010).

Reflections in Relation to Wikipolitics

The study of the Wikipedia case (Kostakis, 2010) brought to the fore several potential threats and problems that on-line, virtual, open communities—including wikipolitics sites—face. In a nutshell, the documented dysfunctions and threats are the following:

- Active and organized minorities may prevail over the uncoordinated majority and other individuals, and individuals adept at the function of the platform can adroitly handle it and dominate their opponents
- Group polarization
- The tyranny of structurelessness with hidden hierarchies

- An overload of information that makes it difficult for administrators to keep track of everything
- Coordination problems on interpersonal and interorganizational levels, as well as gaps concerning the interests and the identities of the intercommunities, may result in governance crises.

Of course, wikipolitics projects differ from Wikipedia in that, for the moment at least, they are not self-governed: Administrators in wikipolitics projects are paid employees that manage and maintain each project. The examination of Wikipedia's governance problems showed how important the presence of a clear and consistent set of rules and principles is, in other words, a community social contract¹⁶ that will reduce the chance of power abuse, protect from the danger of corruption provoked by unsavory individuals (or group of individuals), and facilitate selection for excellence when needed.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the current paper was to contribute to the theory of open source democracy and provide an understanding of the nature, the effects, and the potential of the concept of wikipolitics for a revitalized democratic discourse. The research issues were approached from both a theoretical and a pragmatic perspective. In theory, I demonstrated that, on the one hand, modern ICTs offer new ways for humans to produce and organize their economic, cultural, and political lives, as the economically advanced world seems to shift towards new paradigms that appear less hierarchical and more transparent, based on a participatory ethos. On the other hand, the threats and the problems of an open source approach, and consequently of wikipolitics, were documented: There is no leapfrog path that can instantly transform democracy. Minority prevalence, group polarization, the tyranny of structurelessness, information overload, platform manipulation, protection of privacy, an unambiguous and clear social community contract enforced by law, a user-friendly architecture with natural narrative conversational modes of human interaction, and a change in the attitude of some politicians and citizens are only some of the issues and the problems that a scrupulous and scientifically designed wikipolitics project must confront.

Although open source democracy introduces new forms of democratic practice, it remains unclear whether and how they can effectively redefine democracy. Still, fiducial solutions are needed for several governance problems that on-line communities face. Moreover, as democracy deficits are not merely a technical problem in search of technological solution (Varoufakis 2007), change in the attitude of both people and politicians is needed. To make this point clearer, and to end on a more personal note, it might be suitable to quote Carlota Perez, the prominent theorist on great surges and techno-economic paradigm shifts, about technological utopianism and the efforts Greece has made under George Papandreou to take advantage of modern ICTs. In the name of openness and transparency some politicians, who seemed at that point to share that vision, thought that if we masquerade the bureaucratic elephant (e.g., Greece) as a white horse using a technological veil, then it will run as fast as a horse: Looking like a horse, the elephant can easily enter the village, and while villagers are admiring its beauty, the short-tempered elephant can launch deadly attacks. What most of the

villagers would think is “How evil these white horses are!” and never trust horses again (Personal communication, Carlota Perez, 2009).

The investigation of the three cases of wikipolitics (Deliberatorium, wikipolitics.gr, and Future Melbourne) showed that their empirical results so far seem positive and capable of splitting the traditional hierarchical paradigm. In general, all the examined cases showed that there are possibilities for large numbers of people to effectively collaborate in the formulation and the evaluation of a wide range of ideas regarding the solution of complex problems. We saw that some of the theoretical conclusions articulated by the Deliberatorium team had been verified by the function of the wikipolitics.gr platform: The three main governance issues to be dealt with in an on-line community (attention governance, participation governance, and community governance) are vital towards sustaining it. However, the ICTs used in wikipolitics projects have to become less artificial and formal and adopt more natural narrative or conversational modes of human interaction. Also, they have to be user-friendly so that users can easily and quickly grasp and handle them. Some of the discussions echoed Clift’s (2004) advice that significant barriers to successful wikipolitics application are the bureaucratic fears of quantity over quality and the scarcity of time faced by citizens. Therefore, well-structured ways for content submission and evaluation are needed, something that seemed to happen in the case of Future Melbourne. In addition, during our discussion with the wikipolitics.gr team, it was understood that the traditional hierarchical modes of organization within political parties and societies, in general, arise as an obstacle towards a new, more participatory era for democracy.

It becomes obvious that the open source approach, which entertains openness and cooperation in various fields of human activity, has a long way to go towards rebuilding a tolerant, integrated civilization of the modern world. Because ICTs are rapidly evolving, and their application and practices are quite recent, reliable empirical data are still rare. Moreover, it is considerably difficult to assess the future of democracy. “Our economic life determines the political life” a Marxist would say. Peer production, a mode of production based on collaboration and communication, rings the bell for the creation of nonmaterial value: Together we have everything; together we know everything. Hence, it is up to us—the citizens—to achieve the next step towards to the genuinely democratic utopia: Together we decide everything.

ENDNOTES

1. The main page of wikipolitics.gr can be found at <http://www.wikipolitics.gr/>
2. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panhellenic_Socialist_Movement for more info about PASOK.
3. The main page of Ta Nea is accessible from <http://ta-nea.dolnet.gr/>
4. The main page of the Future Melbourne project can be found at <http://www.futuremelbourne.com.au/wiki/view/FMPlan>
5. The URL to main page of the OLPC initiative is <http://laptop.org/en/laptop/software/index.shtml>
6. Background and information on the World Summit on the Information Society Geneva 2003 – Tunis 2005 can be found at the following Websites:
<http://www.itu.int/wsis/index.html>
<http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/poa.html>
<http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html>
7. The discussion can be found at <http://blog.p2pfoundation.net/future-melbourne-the-dawning-of-the-age-of-p2pgovernance/2008/06/06> (retrieved April 30, 2009). Elliot’s post includes interesting comments by

Michel Bauwens (founder of the P2P foundation), Zbigniew Lukasiak (user interface consultant), and Dale Bowerman (strategic planner and wiki administrator of the Future Melbourne project).

8. See the dispute resolution plan at http://www.futuremelbourne.com.au/wiki/view/FMPlan/PoliciesAndGuidelines#Dispute_Resolution
9. Pavlos Hatzopoulos and Thanasis Priftis were interviewed in person in Greek and, thus, their quotes have been translated in English by the author.
10. The Deliberatorium platform can be accessed at <http://franc2.mit.edu/ci/login>
11. All of the quotes concerning the Future Melbourne project are derived from an on-line discussion that took place at P2P foundation's blog in the middle of 2008, as well as on material extracted from the project's official Web platform.
12. Peer production projects such as FLOSS or Wikipedia do not operate in strict hierarchies of command and control. Rather they operate "in a much looser [environment] which...allows for the existence of multiple teams of participants working simultaneously in a variety of possibly opposing directions" (Bruns, 2008, p. 26). The "leadership is determined through the continuous communal evaluation of participants," and "through the degree of community merit they are able to build in a process" (Bruns, 2008, p. 26). In this sense, peer projects' heterarchies are not simply adhocracies, but ad hoc meritocracies.
13. In peer production projects, such as FLOSS or Wikipedia, all participants have an equal ability to contribute, although not all the participants have the same skills and abilities, a situation termed *equipotentiality* (Bauwens, 2005a, 2005b).
14. *Holoptism* is the ability for any part to know the whole (Deleuze, 2005). In peer production projects, holoptism allows participants free access to all information, in contrast with *panoptism* where participants have access on a need-to-know basis only (Bauwens, 2005b).
15. The conversations with three former Wikipedians contributors (two anonymous and one with the username Yehuldi) took place randomly in Wikipedia's Review forum in February 2009 at <http://wikipediareview.com/index.php?showforum=19>; see also the interview information provided in the Appendix.
16. Regarding Wikipedia, Barry Kort, a MIT Media Lab scientist and active Wikipedian, said to me in an interview, "The whole Rules and Sanctions paradigm is ill-conceived and should be scrapped in favor of a 21st Century Community Social Contract Model consistent with collegial norms of academic and scholarly enterprises."

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APPENDIX

Consent for publication has been given by all participants for interviews and conversations conducted for this research project:

Bauwens, Michel, interview in February 2009 via e-mail exchange; subsequent Google talk, April 2009.

Bruns, Axel, interview in February 2009 via e-mail, with semi-structured questions.

C., G., and F. are active (ex)Wikipedian users wishing to keep their anonymity and were contacted regarding questions about the problems of Wikipedia's governance in February 2009. The structured interviews took place either via email or via the message tool of the website Wikipedia Review at <http://wikipediareview.com/> (membership is required).

Hatzopoulos, Pavlos, interview in April 2009 via e-mail exchange.

Klein, Mark, interview in February 2009 via e-mail exchange. I had contacted all of the initiators of collaboratorium (the former name of Deliberatorium, i.e., Iandoli, Zollo, and Klein). They decided that Klein would answer my (semi-structured) questions.

Kort, Barry, interview in 2009. He received structured questions via email in the beginning of February and returned the responses to me in March.

Priftis, Thanasis and Hatzopoulos, Pavlos, face-to-face interview in Athens, Greece, in February 2009. The 90-minute conversation in Greek was recorded and the most significant points were translated into English. The interview was semi-structured.

Yehuldi and two other anonymous Wikipedia users took part in a discussion that took place in Wikipedia Review forum, in January 2009. These informants noted within the article.