January 2016

Wikia: Between Documentary Simulacra and Documented Fictions

Caroline Courbières
University of Toulouse, carolinecourbieres@gmail.com

Sabine Roux
Toulouse University, sab.roux@gmail.com

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you through this survey. Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.
Follow this and additional works at: https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam

    Part of the Communication Technology and New Media Commons, Digital Humanities Commons, and the Social Media Commons

Introduction

Wikis are digital community spaces that have attracted high traffic but virtually no study as socio-communicational platforms. These platforms offer individuals the possibility of engaging in unique writing activities by defining a distinct material configuration and imposing a protocol of enunciation. The principle behind these digital spaces relates to what Yves Jeanneret calls the "practice of distributed writing" (Jeanneret, 2014). Wikis are platforms developed through the contributions (in new material or edits) of any and all web users, and constitute collaborative encyclopedias devoted to a cultural topic, such as a novel, a game, a film, etc. Wikis are thus characterized by a truly documentary communicational aim, and by the choice of a given topic.

This article more specifically examines the Harry Potter Wiki, which is devoted to the literary universe of J.K. Rowling and is among the 20 most extensively developed wikis, with more than 20 national editions (English and French but also German, Spanish, Catalan, Polish, Italian, Portuguese, Indonesian, Czech, Turkish, Japanese, etc.). Both the French and Anglo-Saxon versions of the wiki were studied for this text.[1] The English Harry Potter Wiki, created on July 5, 2005, counts 12,163 articles (content pages), 923,866 modifications, and a total of 154,292 pages (for all pages of the wiki, including discussion pages, redirect pages, etc.). For its part, the French version, created on October 25, 2007, counts 5,293 articles, 194,406 modifications, and a total of 34,621 pages.

The semiotic-communicational analysis set forth in this text deals with the structure, authors, and contents of this wiki. The article's purpose is to show the conditions by which this type of community writing space documents a given topic, namely Harry Potter. The article will first explore the materiality of this media device and study the actors who contribute to its development. An examination of the structure of the wiki and of the hierarchy of its users will then shed light on the knowledge production process involved in this seemingly unlimited space.

The Media Device

A Distinct Info-communicational Platform

Wikia, Inc. was founded in 2006 by Angela Beesley and Jimmy Wales, the creator of the online and open source encyclopedia Wikipedia. Wikia defines itself as follows: "Infinite and Interconnected. As the Social Universe for Fans, by Fans, we represent the infinite potential of collaboration. Content and fandom are interconnected, woven together through shared pursuit and dedication. Our network of communities is expansive, fresh and dynamic, but

---

1   The latest records cited for the various figures in this article are dated August 12, 2015.

1

we operate as one."[2] The media device covers seven pop-culture themes: video games, films, television, comic books, music, books (Wikia Books), and lifestyles.

Fig. 1: Wikia slogan

The Wikia slogans "Create. Collaborate. Be original" (Anglo-Saxon version) and "*Creez. Participez. Unissez-vous*" (French version) offer a starting point for understanding the nature of Wikia. In this type of platform, two core values are exploited: on one hand, the creation associated with originality ("Use Wikia to express your creativity with polls and top 10 lists, photo and video galleries, apps and more"), and on the other, collaboration ("Start small, grow big, with the help of others"). Each version (such as French or Anglo-Saxon) tends to emphasize one of these two goals. Moreover, the notions of interest and knowledge are mutually associated within the context of this info-communicational platform, in both the production process ("Share what you know and love") and the reception process ("Discover and explore subjects ranging from video games to movies and TV"). Wikia's promotional arguments thus leverage future members' desire to become part of a community by enabling them to "be part of something huge" or "connect with people who share your passions and interests."

However, Wikia also defines itself by what it is not. The platform claims to have independent editorial status: "Wikia is not a place to advertise

---

2   The French version of the wiki likewise reads, "*L'univers social pour les fans, par des fans! Le potentiel infini de la collaboration. Le contenu et le* fandom *sont interconnectés.*"

2

another website. Wikia is to be used for community editing, not just to put up links to another website. Non-official advertising is not permitted." Nor Wikia a "link farm": "Wikis on Wikia should contain actual content, not just be a link repository pointing to other sites." Wikia also strives to set itself apart from Wikimedia: "Wikia, Inc. and Wikimedia are separate organizations"; "Wikia is not Wikipedia and we aim to not duplicate Wikimedia projects. Although Wikia shares some of the goals of Wikipedia, the two are not 'sister projects' since Wikia is not a Wikimedia project." The following clarifications can also be found in the Harry Potter Wiki:

- "The Harry Potter Wiki is not a free host or webpage provider.
- The Harry Potter Wiki is not the place for fanfiction or roleplaying.
- The Harry Potter Wiki is not a forum for discussion of Harry Potter.
- Your user page is not your primary contribution to this wiki."

Wikis are thus presented as unique platforms that distinguish themselves from other spaces of digital writing such as fanfiction sites, forums, or personal blogs. This particularity is in fact part and parcel of the platform's materiality.

Regardless of the version (French or Anglo-Saxon), the platform structure is always in the form of a double row of tabs for the different categories of the wiki: "On the wiki" (1) / "Books" (2) / "Films" (3) / "Characters" (4) / "Community" (5), for the Anglo-Saxon version, and "*Sur le Wiki*" (1) / "*Saga*" (2) / "*Monde magique*" (3) / "*Univers réel*" (4) / "*Wiki*" (5), for the French version. Each of these categories in turn drops down into a series of clearly identified tabs. In both versions, the first category ("On the Wiki") is divided into the tabs "Wiki Activity," "Random page," Videos," "Photos," and "Chat" (with the French version containing the three additional tabs "*Forum*" / "*Contact*" / "*Règles*"). For the following categories, the French and Anglo-Saxon versions have their own respective set of tabs, as shown below.

Harry Potter Wiki (Anglo-Saxon):
(2) The Seven Novels / Rowling's Companion Writings / Other Written Works
(3) The Eight Films / Other films / Documentaries / Actors / Directors
(4) Students / Teachers / Order of the Phoenix / Ministry of Magic / Death Eaters
(5) Forums / Chat / Policies / Administrators / Help / Sandbox / Recent changes

Harry Potter Wiki (French):
(2) *Livres / Livres sonores / Films / Bandes originales / Jeux vidéo / Autres sources*
(3) *Personnages / Créatures / Lieux / Objets / Potions / Sorts / Quidditch*
(4) *Équipe des livres / Équipe des films / Acteurs / Autres acteurs / Doubleurs*

3

(5) *Communauté / Règles / Modèles de base / Divers / Voir aussi*

Hence, from the moment one accesses the wiki, standardization can be observed in the organizational structure for various types of writing. Owing to its very structure, the info-communicational platform circumscribes the scope of action of its authors, who must first and foremost become users of the wiki: "Become a user and start creating and expanding articles."

Wikia Authors: Users First and Foremost

Although the main way to contribute to a wiki is to write an article, a potential contributor must first register as a user. The Harry Potter Wiki states, "We're always looking for new members—if you have an interest in Harry Potter, why not create an account?" The French Harry Potter homepage presents the procedure to follow: "How can you contribute to the wiki? *For starters*, creating an account is the best way to begin to enjoy the wiki's many advantages. *Next*, read the wiki's rules. *Finally,* improve existing pages or create new ones!!" (French version, free translation). Although "the Harry Potter wiki is a free encyclopedia that anyone can contribute to" (French version, free translation), one must register as a *user* before one can become an *author.*

Fig. 2: Harry Potter wiki registration form

The traditional procedure for joining collaborative sites is to fill out a form including username, email address, password, and date of birth (the user can also register through Facebook, which implies that the four above elements have already been provided). The user is then guided through the process of developing his or her personal page, which has four tabs: Profile,

4

Talk page, Blog, and Contributions. Each personal page of a wiki typically contains an introductory section (banner) in which the user is invited to introduce him- or herself using a fixed format.

Hence, the user can display an avatar (contact image) and his or her name, followed by the role of wiki administrator, if applicable. The space below this title is reserved for the number of the user's edits (with respective dates) since joining the wiki, along with "My favorite wikis." In the right-hand part of this introductory section, the user is invited to provide up to four personal characteristics: "I live in" (geographical location), "I was born on" (birthday), "My occupation is" (occupation), and "I am" (gender). These four elements can be left blank; when they are filled in, their content varies depending on the user. The user's stated geographical location can thus be real (Occitania, India, Michigan, Marseille, up North, England, Essonne, Phoenix, etc.) or fictional (Hogwarts, Skyloft, Gardenia, Aquifolia, etc.). Similarly, the user's occupation can be related to a real-life status or activity (I am High school student, College student, Fan of Percy Jackson, Content Editor, Graphic Designer, Stay at home, Sadness, etc.), or a purely imaginary one (I am Emperor of the Seas, Flower, Professor of Transfiguration, Mage, Peace, etc.).

The second "I am" statement, which indicates the user's gender, generally follows the traditional bipolarization of denominations. The designations of female and male, which are sometimes already given in the mention of the occupation, tend to be explicitly stated in terms of male/female, man/ woman, or boy/girl, and will also appear in the advanced profile. Some users, however, choose novel formulations, such as "I am a man (I think, I'm not sure, I should check)" or "I am a serious, reserved, and funny girl who is a die-hard fan of German and Dutch soccer teams!!!" or "I'm an Obvious, isn't it?"—obvious indeed, in light of the user's information, such as nickname (Papa Acachalla), favorite wikis (BBC wiki), or occupation (Drinking beer, annoying kids), at least according to a stereotypical interpretation… Among all the profiles examined, it can been seen that very few users omit this information, which can also be provided below the user information section, in the space provided for the user's advanced profile. In the Harry Potter wiki, writing in this space must follow a pre-established format with two parts, namely a presentation of the user ("You can introduce yourself or tell us about your passion!") and of his or her favorite pages ("You can add links to your favorite wiki pages here!") (French version, free translation). In order, these favorite wiki pages are "my favorite characters," "my creatures," "my locations," "my books," and "my movies."

This personal page encapsulates the user's ability to inhabit a relatively free space of expression. Indeed, the architecture of the wiki info-educational platform limits the scope of action by marking out invisible boundaries. These boundaries, which can be observed in the very structure of the wiki, make it possible to keep users' actions within defined and limited spaces. They are a

5

fundamental part of this distinct form of knowledge production.

The Production of Knowledge

A Space of Control (Exercised by Administrators)

Knowledge production in a wiki is primarily based on a hierarchy of users, only a few of whom will be able to exercise control over proposed contributions. Indeed, while all the wiki's users can contribute to the wiki by editing and modifying articles, some can have other duties and thus play a well-defined role in wiki administration. A distinction must be made, first, between ordinary users and "active users," i.e., users who have performed an action within the last 30 days. For example, the latest records show 59 active users for the French Harry Potter wiki and 382 for the English wiki. The next user level (in ascending order) is Wikia Star, a status given to users "recognized as leaders within their communities" (or "*choisis pour leur bon travail*" in the French version). Users with this status (113 for the Anglo-Saxon edition and 106 for the French edition of the Harry Potter wiki) are given the label of "Wikia Star" next to their name on their user page. These stars have no other global rights, but can access the wiki of the Community Council (a group of Wikians selected by Wikia staff to give preliminary feedback on new features that are under development).

Moving up in the hierarchy, there are several categories of administrative roles that allow a minority of users to hold specific rights pertaining to the platform's operations. These additional rights, which are detailed on a help page regarding "user access levels," thus give some users authority over the activities of all other members of the wiki. The list of users who hold these various privileges can be accessed via the wiki's Community tab. These special "poweruser" roles, some of which are mentioned after users' names on their personal pages, are a hallmark of the Wikia hierarchical system. In addition to the functions of Chat Moderator and CheckUsers, the other main administrative roles are Administrator, Bureaucrat, Rollback, and Admin Mentor.

The Rollbacks are part of the wiki's maintenance team and manage the changes made by contributors to each page or section; they can also revoke article modifications. By default, the users with rollback rights are not given any particular label on their personal page (although they can be identified via the page where they are listed). The administrators are "trusted users, who are generally chosen by the community," and who hold the privileges granted to the Chat Moderator and Rollback groups, as well as certain additional technical rights: for instance, they may delete pages, articles, and downloaded files, or conversely protect a page to prevent it from being modified or renamed. These editors can also block IP addresses or usernames, revoke unwanted changes, and modify the wiki interface. Those who hold the status

6

of administrator are given the mention of "admin" next to their user name on their profile page. There are, for example, 3 admins for the French edition and 19 admins for the Anglo-Saxon edition of the Harry Potter wiki. It is worth mentioning that a given administrator may manage several different wikis.

Bureaucrats are one level above administrators but do not have any of the latter's rights. In fact, they can only modify user rights, promote and revoke the rights of Rollbacks, Chat Moderators and Administrators, and appoint new Bureaucrats. By default, the Bureaucrats are not identified on their user page. If a Bureaucrat is also an Administrator, only the label of "Administrator" will appear. "Adminmentors," for their part, belong to what Wikia refers to as the Admin Mentor Program (AMP), i.e., "a group of experienced admins on Wikia using their expertise to empower Wikia admins with the knowledge and skills they need to best manage their wikis." According to Wikia, "They are friendly faces to turn to with any questions about wiki creation and management."

In addition to these administrative roles, the platform also gives some users the status of robot: a robot (or "bot") is "any automated process, program, or script that makes it easier for a user to make tedious or repetitive edits and actions on a wikia." On Wikia, users wishing to use a bot are asked to set up a separate account for it, then consult other users on the wiki to see whether the bot's modifications should be masked or shown. "After discussing it with the community, the bot owner or admin can request the bot be flagged." The community must be unanimous about giving any user the status of "bot," and the bureaucrats can revoke a user's bot status in the event of a malfunction, for example.

Finally, there are also Meta Admins who belong to the Wikia, Inc. publishing platform: this category includes employees with full access to all Wikia wikis. The Meta Admins are listed on the "Special:Listusers/staff" page for all wikis and often have a special signature when they sign their comments. These staff members have tools that enable them to assist and maintain all of Wikia. For their part, Assistants are volunteers who help and enhance non-Anglophone communities. They have most staff rights on all wikias, and can be recognized by the "Wikia" label in their signatures.

These various roles and the rights they confer to a minority of users—who can combine several different statuses—play a key role in controlling the wiki space. Wikias thus reveal themselves to be authority-producing platforms that are based on a hierarchy of users. This extremely rigid hierarchical control is complemented by a standardization of content via Wikia policies.

Content Standardization

Development of the wiki is subject to a series of very strict rules. These rules, shared by all wikis, are grouped together under the heading of Policies (*Conventions d'édition* in the French version). More specifically, the rules are

7

"intended to make the Harry Potter function as smoothly as possible" (French version, free translation). All users are required to follow these policies, failing which they will be penalized by wiki administration. If, as we have seen, the writing platform's structure demands that users make their contributions using a fixed format, these highly rigorous policies go a step further by configuring the very content of these contributions. The number one rule put forth in these Policies has to do with the documentary aim of Wikia: "First and foremost, the Harry Potter Wiki is exactly that—a wiki, or an editable online encyclopedia on the Harry Potter universe. We host information, facts, images, and official theories related to Harry Potter on this site, as well as discussions about the material presented here."
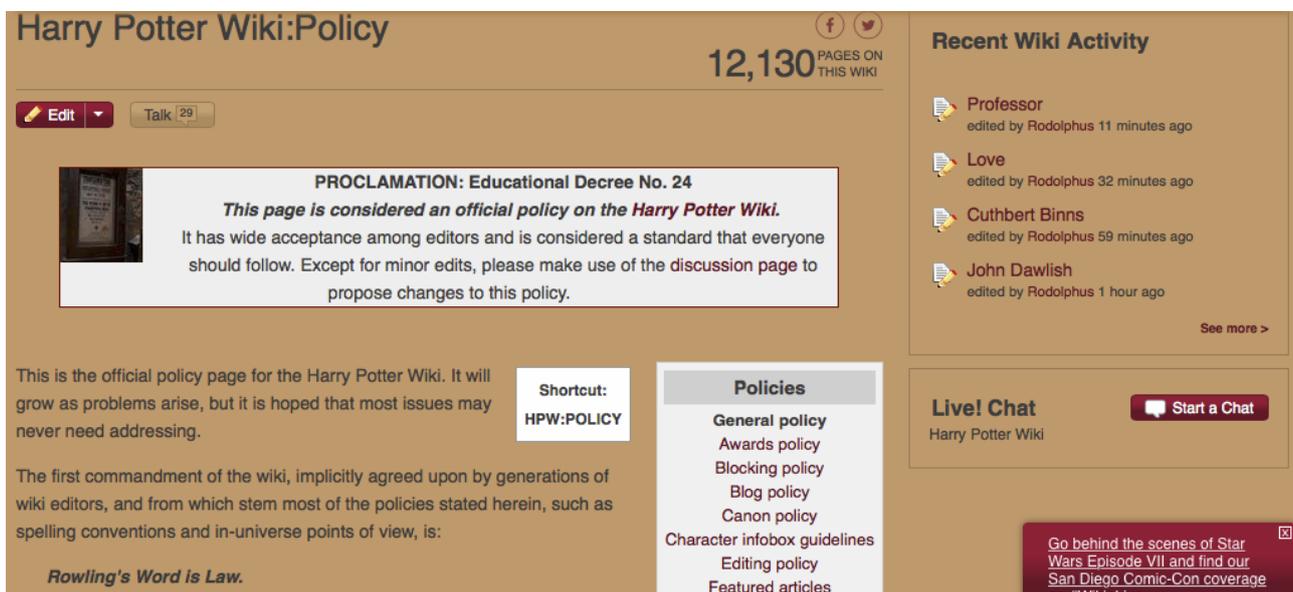

Fig. 3: Harry Potter Wiki policies

The platform's documentary guidelines or "regime" is clearly set out in its policies, whether regarding the material to use for writing contributions, matters of style, or the nature of content. Users must "[base themselves] on primary sources such as books, films, and games... at [their] disposal. This excludes content from unofficial guides, Wikipedia, other Harry Potter sites, and even foreign-language wikias" (French version, free translation). This constraint is intended to make sure "newly created pages are properly documented" (French version, free translation). The length of contributions, too, is standardized: "A one-sentence article goes against our policies. Even if the article you create is only a draft, it must contain a minimum of rich information" (French version, free translation). The notion of information can be defined in this context by the first criterion of adopting a "neutral point of

view": "NPOV (Neutral Point Of View) is a fundamental Harry Potter Wiki policy which states that all articles must be written from a *neutral point of view*, representing views fairly and without bias." Moreover, the style of writing must be consistent with an "in-universe" point of view: "all articles written about people, places, or things *within* the Harry Potter Universe have to be written from an 'in-universe' perspective rather than from a 'real world' perspective." The info-communicational aim that is displayed comes under the wiki's encyclopedic goal: "The aim of this policy is to reinforce the informative value of content on the Harry Potter wiki" (French version, free translation).

This expected informative value is subsequently summed up as mere data: "For reasons of clarity and efficiency, all character pages (Harry Potter, Dobby, etc.) must abide by certain essential elements. These elements must be provided for visitors" (French version, free translation). Here again, the wiki platform lays down a predefined framework for the writing of contributions, namely the use of an "infobox": "The infobox is a small table of key character-specific data summarized in a small table, namely name, date of birth, etc. Feel free to provide as much information as possible, if known" (French version, free translation). The content of wiki articles thus comes down to a documentary rewrite of fictional content. The documentary regime is here connected with the notion of knowledge as it is promoted in the wiki. This is echoed, for example, in the registration form: "Start working with millions of people all over the world who come together to share what they know and love" (French version, free translation). However, the content also comes under a fictional regime owing to the imposed topic itself—all writing must be "on topic"—and its related creation process.

This creation process, proclaimed by wiki slogan "Create / Be original," is further clarified by the editing policy. Users must first write a draft and then break down pages into paragraphs. The texts that are added must be original, verified, and written by the user; this editing policy relates to the third rule of user behavior (and one of the user conditions to accept when registering), namely that users are prohibited from "trying to impersonate another user or another person" (French version, free translation). The wiki rules put special emphasis on the user's responsibility as an author: "You are solely responsible for the content, including but not limited to photos, profiles information, messages, search results, edits, and other content that you upload, publish or display .... You may not submit content to the Service that you did not create or that you do not have permission to submit." At the same time, paradoxically, the user is encouraged to be bold: "Don't be afraid of editing pages: be bold! We encourage you to become a user and start creating and expanding articles about Harry Potter! Don't be afraid of 'breaking the wiki'; pages can be restored back to how they were before if you make a mistake."

The imperative of creation and originality that is displayed by wikis

9

likens them to FanFiction (or "fanfic") sites, which are info-communicational platforms with the slogan "unleash your imagination." In these writing spaces, users develop their own (fan)fiction based on a reference topic. For example, the French Harry Potter Fanfiction, created on June 3, 2004, today counts more than 29,686 registered members including 6,289 writers. These writers have written 19,838 fanfictions and 92,733 chapters, for a total of 210,079,050 words. In turn, these fanfictions have garnered 425,977 written reviews. But unlike wikis, fanfiction sites are much more loosely controlled as info-communicational platforms: "FanFiction ("unleash your imagination") does not filter content and is an open system that trusts the writer's judgment." Fanfic sites have their own etiquette that serves as a veritable writing guide for users; in contrast with Wikia policies, it is the value of the writing that is deemed paramount in fanfiction, which is premised on "the duty of the writer to perform to the best of his/her ability."
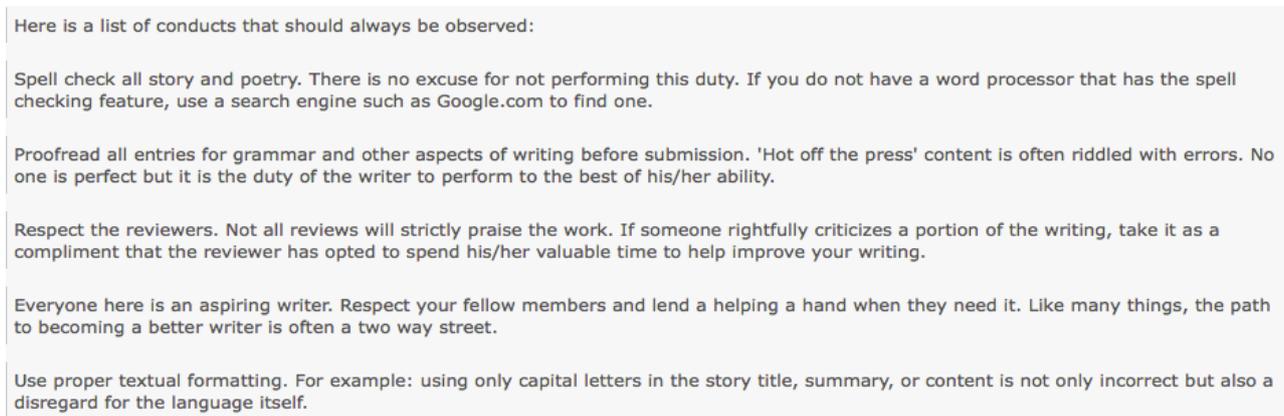
Here is a list of conducts that should always be observed:

Spell check all story and poetry. There is no excuse for not performing this duty. If you do not have a word processor that has the spell checking feature, use a search engine such as Google.com to find one.

Proofread all entries for grammar and other aspects of writing before submission. 'Hot off the press' content is often riddled with errors. No one is perfect but it is the duty of the writer to perform to the best of his/her ability.

Respect the reviewers. Not all reviews will strictly praise the work. If someone rightfully criticizes a portion of the writing, take it as a compliment that the reviewer has opted to spend his/her valuable time to help improve your writing.

Everyone here is an aspiring writer. Respect your fellow members and lend a helping a hand when they need it. Like many things, the path to becoming a better writer is often a two way street.

Use proper textual formatting. For example: using only capital letters in the story title, summary, or content is not only incorrect but also a disregard for the language itself.

Fig. 4: Rules and guidelines for FanFiction

In addition, users of fanfiction sites are described as writers ("aspiring writers"), in contrast with Wikia contributors who remain mere users. In a sense, the wiki platform can be said to eliminate the auctorial function. This process of rendering the contributor anonymous, which is already evidenced by the use of a nickname to mask real-wold identity, is consistent with the encyclopedic aim promoted by the platform. In summary, the wiki's content merges together a fictional regime (associated with the creation process) and a documentary regime, both of which connect knowledge production with a given topic.

Where fanfics develop original stories based on a fictional topic, wikias contribute to creating documentary artifacts, that is, to producing what Benoît Berthou calls "a knowledge on fiction" (Berthou, 2011). In the case under study, this knowledge on fiction does not refer to a scientific study of the initial topic (e.g., the results of a stylistic or semiotic literary study of a given

10

passage from *Harry Potter*), but rather constitutes knowledge created through the extraction and rewriting of information elements related to the source fictional content: "If you don't have anything of real informative value to contribute … then scram"!

Conclusion

As per the goal of Wikia, Inc., the communicational aim of the wiki we have studied is to apply a documentary regime to an identified referent. In the wiki context, this fictional referent (the agents of the Harry Potter saga) gives rise to both closed and open worlds: closed in that they are pre-built, open in that they encompass elements stemming from an auctorial imagination that originates from a traditional process of fictionalization (written fiction, with subsequent film and commercial products).

Based on this specific topic, the info-communicational system puts in place a delimited digital space that establishes a production platform of singular authority, where pseudo-authors may act only within pre-set guidelines. The present analysis of the Harry Potter wiki shows how the principle of standardization plays out through the materiality of the media device itself, the pyramid-like structure of intellectual authority by which it is managed, and the fixed terms and conditions by which it is edited.

The control imposed by both the structure of the writing platform and by the constraints placed on its articles' content implies the production of what might be referred to as "documentary simulacra". Ultimately, the digital space of the wiki brings to light a novel scriptural world at the crossroads between fictional regime and documentary regime, where only the rewriting of pseudo-documents—which blend together these two generally opposed semiotic regimes—appears to be unlimited.

References

Berthou B. (2011). Fiction et forme encyclopédique : *Wookieepedia*, *Dragon Ball Wiki* et Cie. *Strenae*, 2.

Jeanneret Y. (2014) *Critique de la trivialité : Les médiations de la communication, enjeu de pouvoir*. Paris : Éditions Non standard.

11