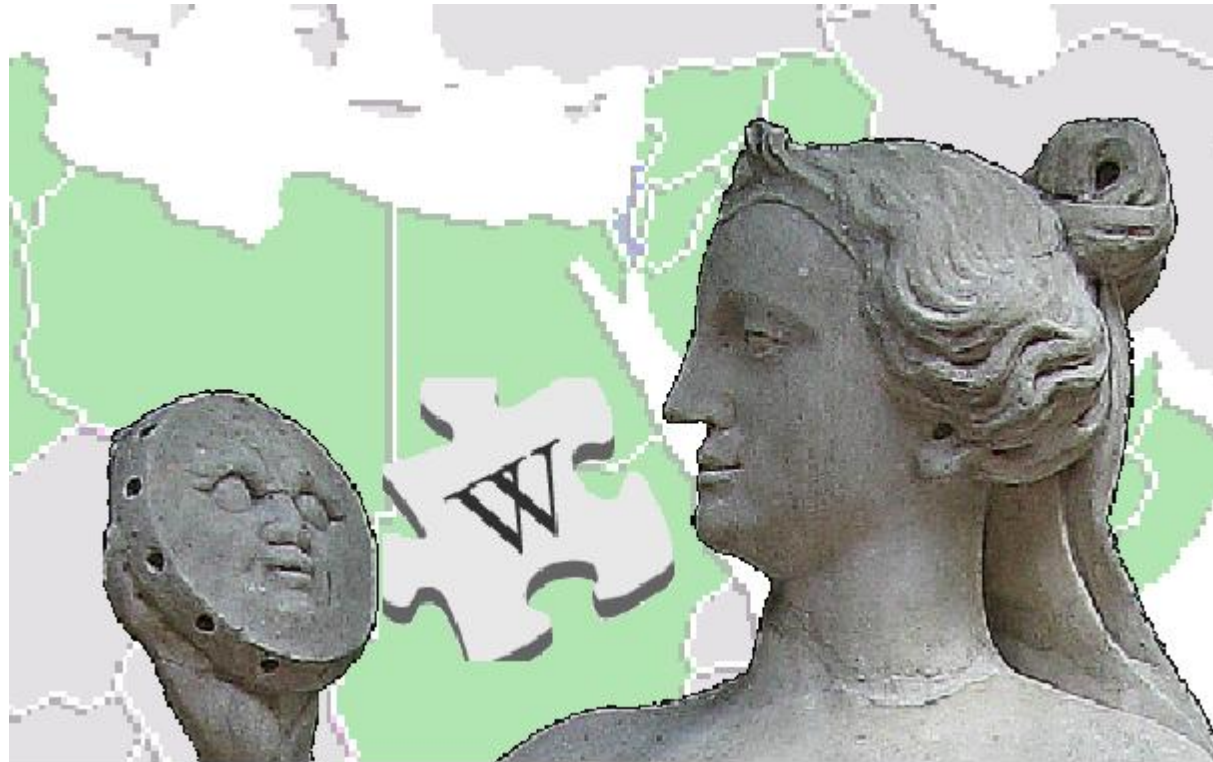


My Side, your Side and Wikipedia

The tension between neutral information and narrative knowledge on Wikipedia demonstrated with articles about the Middle East conflict



WikiWars Conference

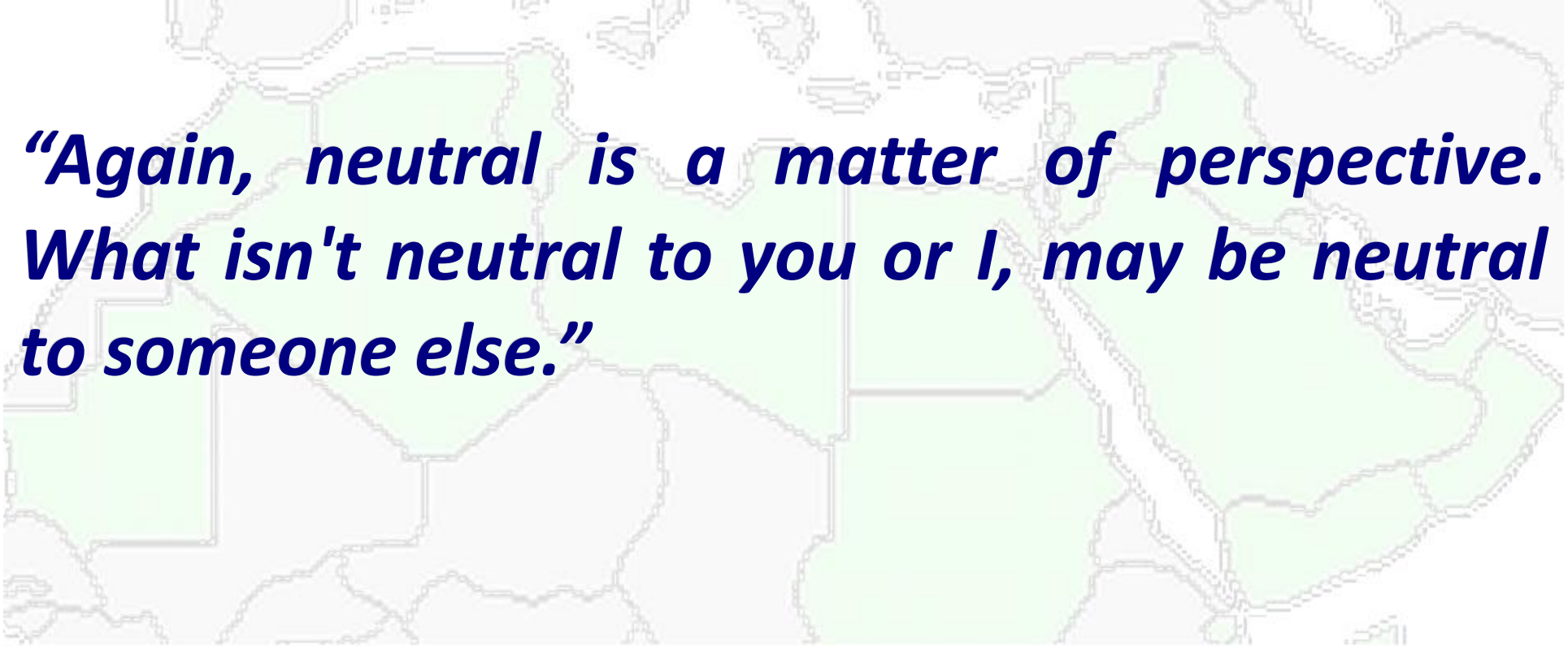
Dror Kamir



Bangalore, India

January 2010

Neutral is a matter of perspective



***“Again, neutral is a matter of perspective.
What isn't neutral to you or I, may be neutral
to someone else.”***

***English Wikipedia, Talk:Israel,
Request for Comment/Jerusalem, 21:41, 7 January 2010 (UTC)***

Talk:Israel

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Request for Comment/Jerusalem

This RFC has been notified in Wikiproject Israel and Wikiproject Palestine and the neutrality noticeboard.

Again, neutral is a matter of perspective. What isn't neutral to you or I, may be neutral to someone else. Certainly the BBC or NBC isn't considered "neutral" in the muslim world. If we are going to question the neutrality and WP:UNDUE of listing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, we should also make sure that the name of the nation isn't given the same undue weight. After all, with the exception of Egypt and Jordan, none of Israel's neighbors recognize the nation. Nor does most of the muslim world... Seriously, a line has to be drawn at some point, or every article will be laced with notations and exceptions. Sadly, this whole debate reminds me of a bad case of WP:IDONTLIKEIT. --nsaum75^{!שיחת} 21:41, 7 January 2010 (UTC)

I agree that a line should be drawn somewhere, I just don't think it should be drawn neatly around the POV of the Israeli government to the exclusion of any differing opinion. Good luck with your campaign to change the name of Israel. --FormerIP (talk) 21:45, 7 January 2010 (UTC)

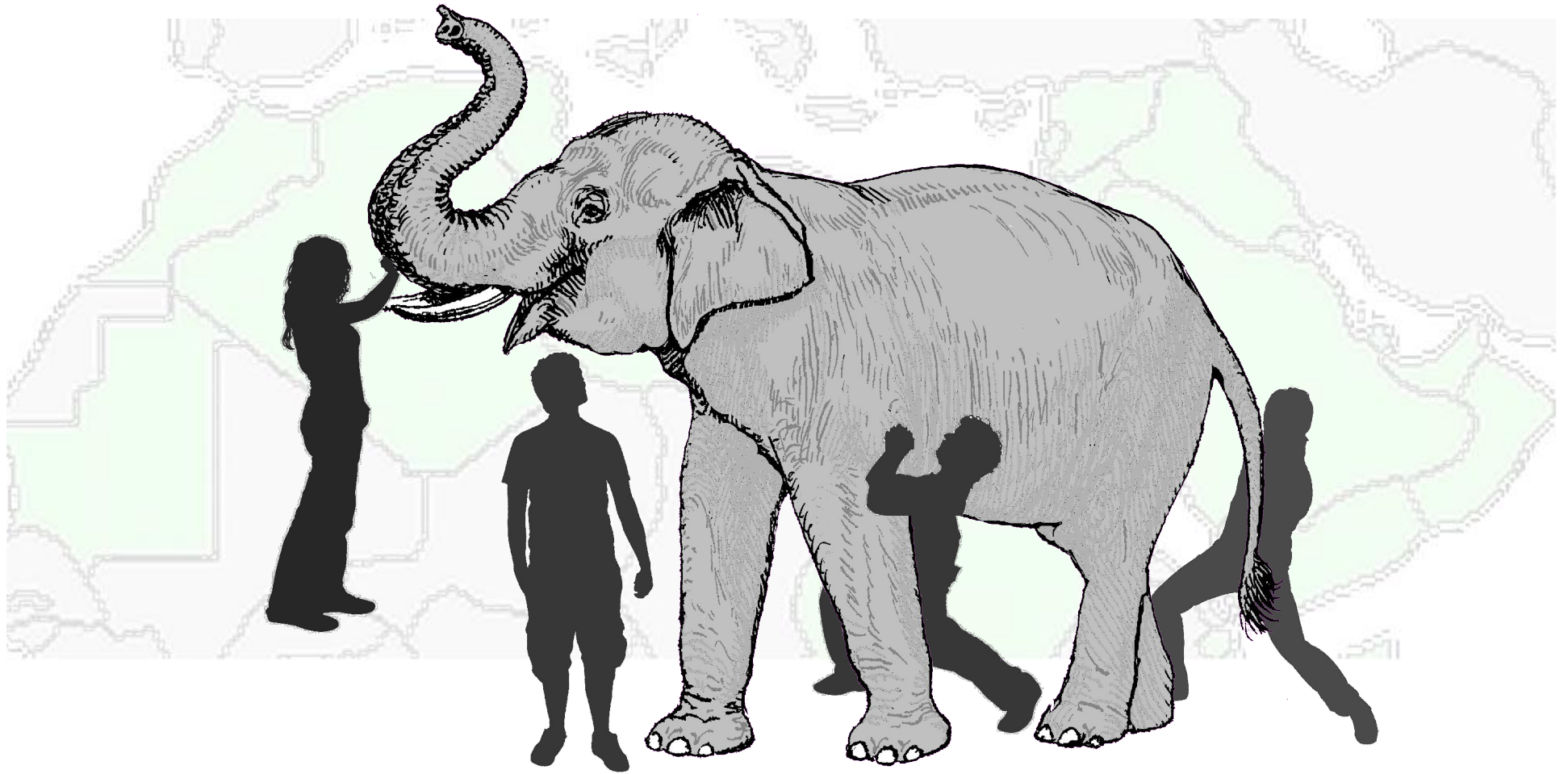
There are some things that are POV and some things that are fact (much like the sky appears blue). This seems to be an attempt to change a fact and replace it with an opinion because some people in the world do not like the reality of things.--nsaum75^{!שיחת} 21:54, 7 January 2010 (UTC)

Wikipedia's classical approach: Conflating the pieces of knowledge

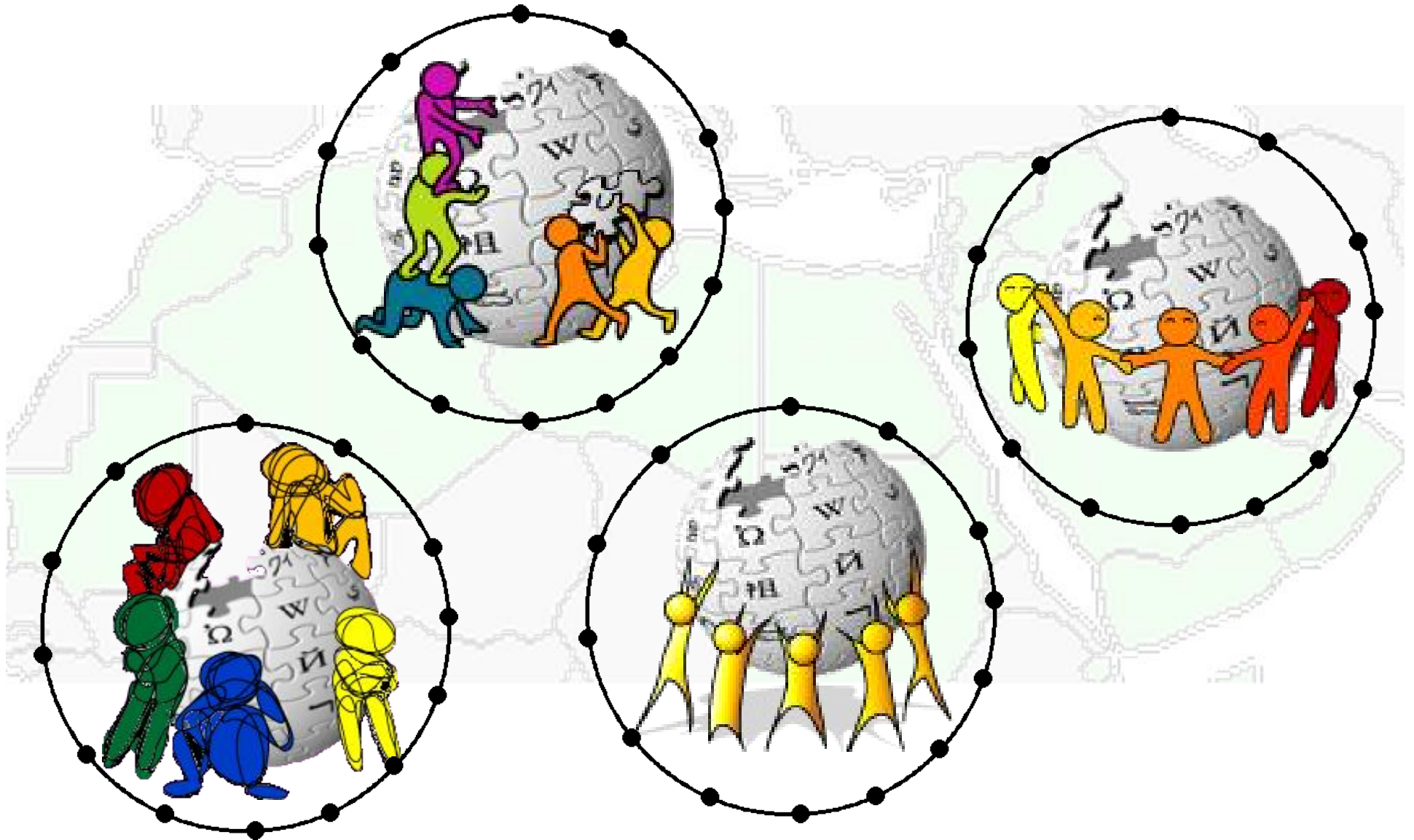


***Too often do people try to force
their own home-made complete puzzle...***

...Or figuring out the elephant together



Community autonomy



Conflict of Principles



Narrative, truth and knowledge

“At the heart of narratives of struggle and response is collective memory. Such memory need not reflect truth; instead, it portrays a truth that is functional for a group’s ongoing existence.”

Robert I. Rotberg, 2005

“Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict – History's Double Helix”

A project to create a neutral encyclopedia

“Wikipedia is a project to create a neutral encyclopedia. Use of the site for other purposes, such as advocacy or propaganda, furtherance of outside conflicts, publishing or promoting original research, and political or ideological struggle, is prohibited.”

The English Wikipedia Arbitration Committee, January 2008

Conflict of principles: Is it “West Bank” or “Judea and Samaria”?

The West Bank
and Gaza Strip

הגדה המערבית ורצועת עזה

Judea and Samaria
and the Region of Gaza

יהודה והשומרון וחבל עזה

השטחים הכבושים

The Occupied Territories

“The Territories”

“השטחים”



Community autonomy

Can we do without the name "Israel" here?

إسرائيل
Israel

فلسطين
Palestine

Occupied Palestine

فلسطين المحتلة

Palestine of '48

فلسطين 48

Historical Palestine

فلسطين التاريخية



The guy who changes “Palestine” to “Israel”

المراجعة الحالية (08:35، 11 يوليو 2008) (تحرير)
(رجوع)
Drokk (نقاش | مساهمات)

مراجعة 23:12، 10 يوليو 2008 (تحرير)
80.90.161.117 (نقاش)
→ الفرق السابق

سطر 6:

سنة = 2006 |
خريطة = [[صورة:haifa map.png|150px]] |
+ بلد = [[إسرائيل]] |
موقع = http://www.haifa.muni.il/Cultures/ar-EG |
{{

""حيفا"" (بالعبرية: חֵיפָה) هي مدينة [[إسرائيل|إسرائيلية]] تقع على [[جبل الكرمل]] وشواطئه، وهي من أقدم مدن فلسطين التاريخية. حيفا هي من أهم [[ميناء|موانئ]] شرق البحر الأبيض المتوسط ومقر سكة الحديد الإسرائيلية الرئيسية. تتميز المدينة بتعددية الطوائف التي تعيش فيها. يعود تأسيس المدينة حسب تقديرات علماء الآثار إلى عهد

سطر 6:

سنة = 2006 |
خريطة = [[صورة:haifa map.png|150px]] |
- بلد = [[فلسطين]] |
موقع = http://www.haifa.muni.il/Cultures/ar-EG |
{{

""حيفا"" (بالعبرية: חֵיפָה) هي من أقدم و أكبر مدن [[فلسطين]] التاريخية تقع على [[جبل الكرمل]] وشواطئه، داخل الخط الاخضر و تديرها اليوم السلطات [[إسرائيل|إسرائيلية]]. حيفا هي من أهم [[ميناء|موانئ]] شرق البحر الأبيض المتوسط ومقر سكة الحديد الإسرائيلية الرئيسية / الفلسطينية سابقا. تتميز المدينة بتعددية الطوائف التي تعيش فيها. يعود تأسيس المدينة حسب تقديرات علماء الآثار

My Side, your Side and Wikipedia

The tension between neutral information and narrative knowledge on Wikipedia demonstrated with articles about the Middle East conflict



WikiWars Conference



Bangalore, India

Dror Kamir

January 2010

1

The establishment of Wikipedia^① was inspired by the notion that knowledge is an independently existing entity, that can be described objectively by joint effort of different people who hold segments of this knowledge^②. However, some of the policies currently governing the work on Wikipedia are not in line with this notion.

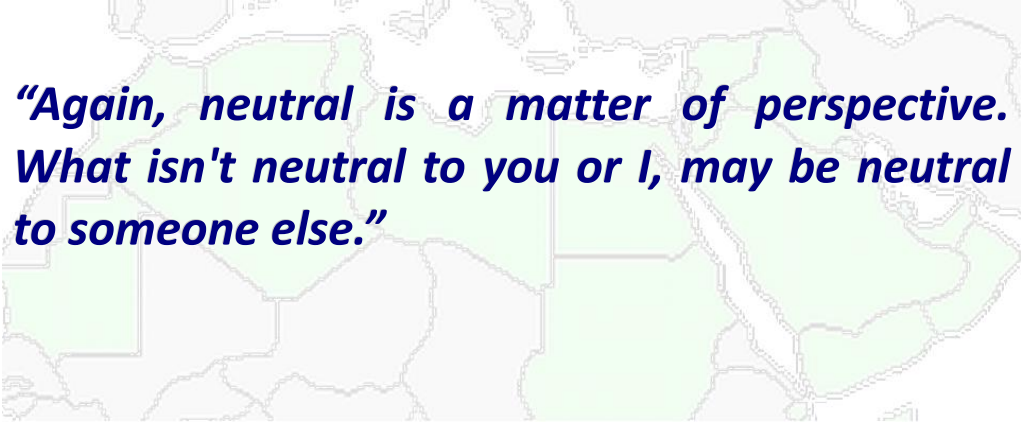
In the picture^③, Veritas, the Roman goddess of truth, is holding the Mouth of Truth in her hand, looking at it in anticipation for its objective truthful statement. A piece of Wikipedia's puzzle-globe logo stands between them, while the nature of its relations with Veritas and the Mouth of Truth is unclear. At the background – a map of the Middle East, a region which presents one of the hardest challenges to the notion of objective neutral conveyance of information when describing its geopolitical reality.

① Jimmy Wales mentioned being influenced by Ayn Rand's theory of Objectivism. See his talk at the Ford Hall Forum (11 September 2008).

② The picture is based upon **Yair Haklai's photograph of Marino Gropelli's statute** in Summer Garden, St. Petersburg, Russia, published under either CC-by-sa 3.0 or GFDL 1.2 licenses.

③ "Wikipedia" here means the entire set of projects, in all different languages.

Neutral is a matter of perspective



“Again, neutral is a matter of perspective. What isn't neutral to you or I, may be neutral to someone else.”

*English Wikipedia, Talk:Israel,
Request for Comment/Jerusalem, 21:41, 7 January 2010 (UTC)*

2

Many interesting remarks and ideas regarding the nature of Wikipedia vis-à-vis concepts of knowledge and information have emerged during the heated debates over Middle East-related articles. The paradoxical remark above, posted in the course of a discussion about the status of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital, reflects, to some extent, the essence of the objective knowledge versus narrative knowledge dilemma. Seeing neutrality itself as a matter of perspective, implies that objective knowledge is a “holy grail” never to be found.

Talk:Israel

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Request for Comment/Jerusalem

This RFC has been notified in Wikiproject Israel and Wikiproject Palestine and the neutrality noticeboard.

Again, neutral is a matter of perspective. What isn't neutral to you or I, may be neutral to someone else. Certainly the BBC or NBC isn't considered "neutral" in the muslim world. If we are going to question the neutrality and WP:UNDUE of listing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, we should also make sure that the name of the nation isn't given the same undue weight. Afterall, with the exception of Egypt and Jordan, none of Israel's neighbors recognize the nation. Nor does most of the muslim world... Seriously, a line has to be drawn at some point, or every article will be laced with notations and exceptions. Sadly, this whole debate reminds me of a bad case of WP:IDONTLIKEIT. --nsaum75תתי 21:41, 7 January 2010 (UTC)

I agree that a line should be drawn somewhere, I just don't think it should be drawn neatly around the POV of the Israeli government to the exclusion of any differing opinion. Good luck with your campaign to change the name of Israel. --FormerIP (talk) 21:45, 7 January 2010 (UTC)

There are some things that are POV and some things that are fact (much like the sky appears blue). This seems to be an attempt to change a fact and replace it with an opinion because some people in the world do not like the reality of things.--nsaum75תתי 21:54, 7 January 2010 (UTC)

3

Putting the aforementioned statement back in its original context, shows that it is less sharp than one could think. The Wikipedia editor who posted it actually referred to the problem of judging the neutrality of sources, namely the difficulty of telling a neutral source from a biased one, when the very person who passes judgment could not be impartial. Returning to the classical Wikipedia approach, this editor says later on: "There are some things that are POV and some things that are fact" (POV=a matter of "Point Of View", i.e. opinions, in the Wikipedia jargon). Then again, when one recalls Wikipedia's strict rule of Verifiability, namely publishing only facts that can be attested to by a previously published reliable source, the task of telling "things that are POV" from "things that are facts" seems awfully hard, if one questions our ability to assess the impartiality of sources.

**Wikipedia's classical approach:
Conflating the pieces of knowledge**



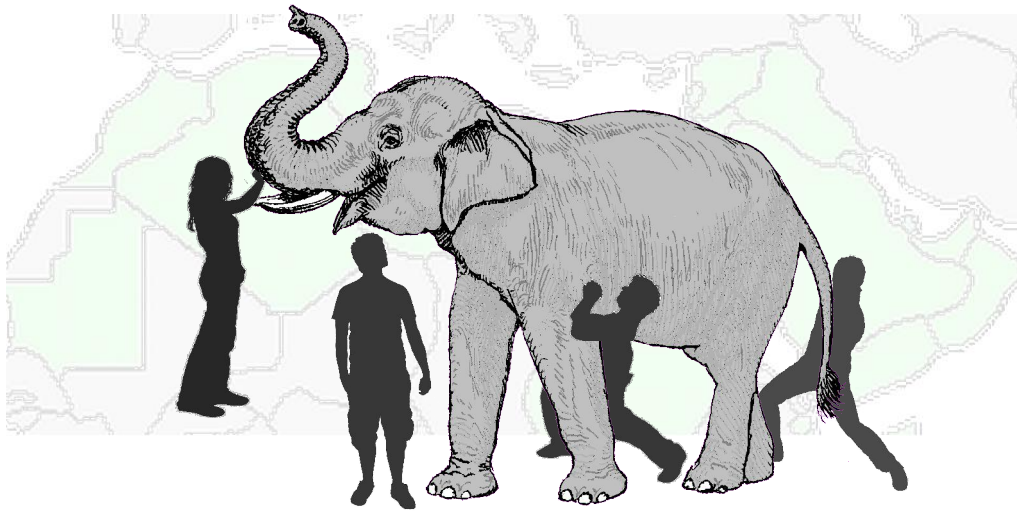
***Too often do people try to force
their own home-made complete puzzle...***

4

Drawing in the center: Mariana Ruiz Villarreal, Mexico

The classical Wikipedian approach may be visualized as a huge group of users, each bearing a piece of the jigsaw puzzle of human knowledge, Wikipedia itself being the platform on which these pieces are placed together in the right order. This approach has a potential, unfortunately only occasionally fulfilled, to change the way people think. Jimmy Wales referred to that in his recent visit to Jerusalem (October 2009), saying Wikipedia was a good tool for promoting peace because it directed people toward reaching consent rather than debating. In practice, many users tend to act as “ambassadors” of their communities, rather than seek consensus with users from the other side. When writing in their own native tongue, they do their best to repel pieces of information which might put their community’s narrative in question. When writing in a foreign language they try to introduce as much as they can of their community's views into articles dealing with the conflict.

...Or figuring out the elephant together

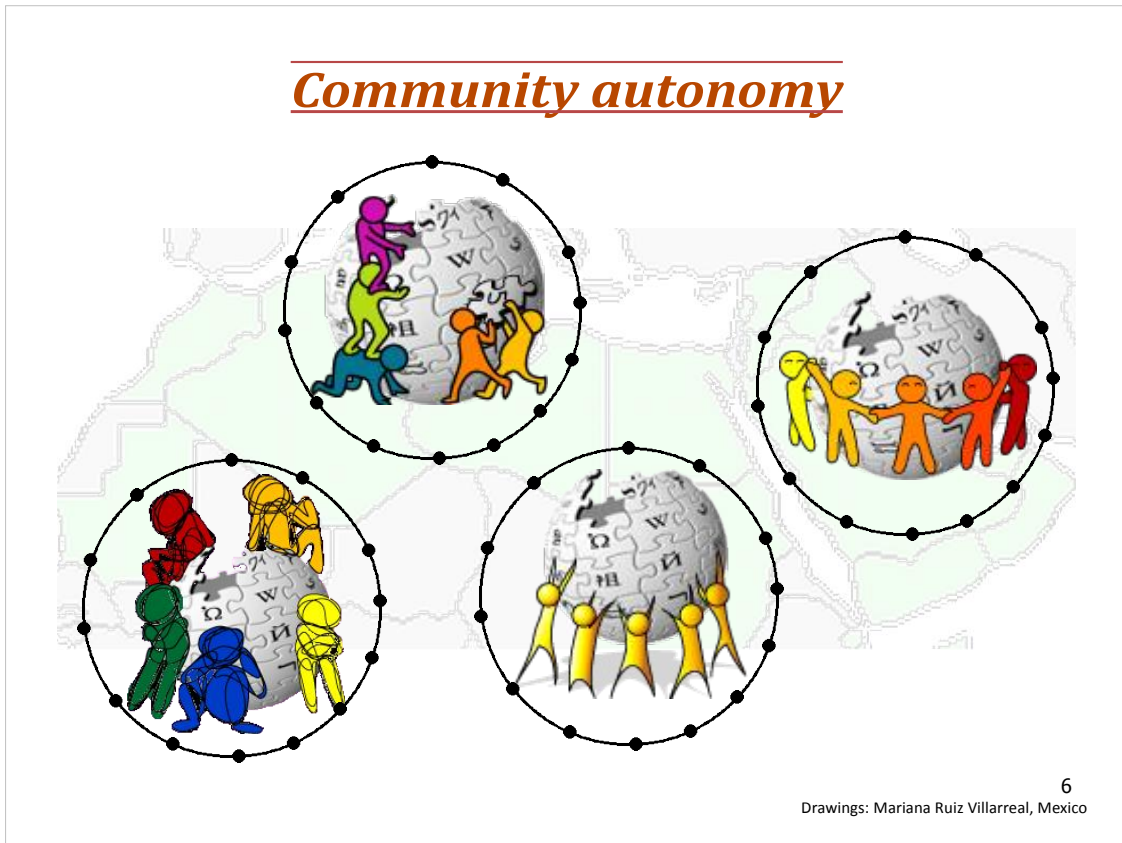


5

An alternative visualization could be the famous tale about the blindfolded people who tried to figure out what an elephant was. Each of them took a position near the elephant and tried to gather information about it without being able to see it. The person who touched the tail thought an elephant was a kind of mouse, the one touching the trunk thought of the elephant as a kind of snake, and the one who listened to its voice considered it to be a trumpet of some sort. Only by communicating and comparing observations could those blindfolded people get closer to the truth about the elephant's nature. Wikipedia is supposed to be a platform for such communication, but some policies that developed over the time of its existence tend to discourage such communication.

Of course, each blindfolded person is entitled to describe the elephant from his angle (e.g. “an elephant is something that feels like a snake, but, as we know from other sources...”), however, if s/he is interested in facts, s/he must be careful not to ignore his partners' observations or impose his own observations on them.

Community autonomy



6
Drawings: Mariana Ruiz Villarreal, Mexico

Community autonomy is a policy that evolved into an almost sacred principle of Wikipedia, and other Wikimedia projects. It can be defined as regarding the volunteer editors of each language version as self-governing community that sets its own rules and policies. Community autonomy goes as far as to determine the acceptable tone of articles, accepted and unaccepted terminology, subjects that are not eligible to articles, the sources that are considered reliable, and many other issues that greatly affect the extent of the provided information the way in which it is provided. Community autonomy is a principle that discourages exchange of information among editors with different worldviews, and between opposing groups of editors representing different sides of a conflict. It often creates pressure on editors to adhere to the narratives common in their societies, when the informative nature of Wikipedia could be better served by negotiating different possible representations of the information. This is especially true for small language communities, and in cases, such as the Middle East conflict, where each of the belligerent sides has its own language.

* Drawings (without the rings and background additions) were made by **Mariana Ruiz Villarreal from Mexico** as a tribute to the Hebrew Wikipedia on its fifth anniversary. The drawings are based on Wikipedia's logo, which is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation.

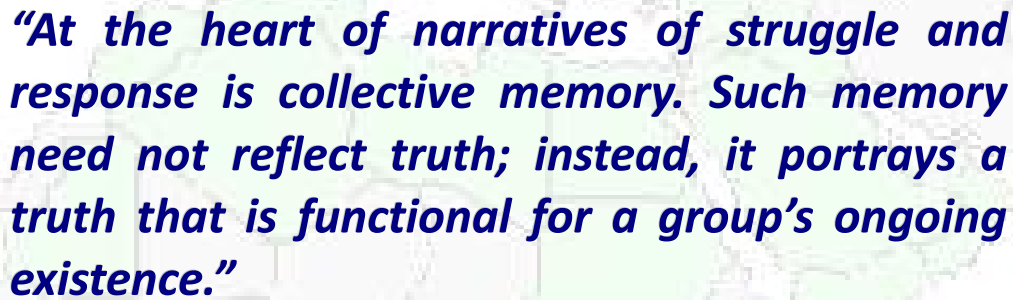
Conflict of Principles



7

The three principles upon which the informative nature of Wikipedia is established are entitled “Neutral Point of View” (NPOV), “No Original Research” and “Verifiability”. NPOV determines that in case of controversy, a Wikipedia article must not promote a certain opinion and all relevant opinions must be described in equal manner. No Original Research determines that new analyses and interpretations by the editors must not be introduced into the articles. Verifiability determines that only pieces of information that can be attested in a reliable source should be introduced into the articles. Whereas these rules are aimed to serve one single goal, they can often contradict one another, and yet they are not hierarchized. This means that a “conflict of principles” always ends up in a dilemma and opens the door for either deliberate or unconscious manipulations.

Narrative, truth and knowledge



“At the heart of narratives of struggle and response is collective memory. Such memory need not reflect truth; instead, it portrays a truth that is functional for a group’s ongoing existence.”

Robert I. Rotberg, 2005

“Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict – History’s Double Helix”

8

It is hardly surprising that the longstanding conflict in the Middle East, with its various ramifications, is the subject of so many articles on the different versions of Wikipedia, neither is it surprising that the editing process of such articles became so flaming. Beside seriously affecting the lives of millions of human beings, this ongoing conflict has become a fundamental part of the national identity of at least two peoples. It also receives international attention well beyond that given to many other similar conflicts. Factual descriptions of issues related to the Middle East conflict are hard to attain, mainly due to the significant gap between the involved communities in the way they tell the story of the conflict. Not only do their narratives vary due to particular interests, but they also change in the course of time with social changes and with new historical facts being revealed. The statement above is **Robert I. Rotberg's description of this situation in a book reviewing the Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian-Arab narratives of the Middle East conflict.** (Rotberg, Robert I. (2005). “Building Legitimacy through Narrative”, in Rotberg, Robert I. (ed.), *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict – History’s Double Helix*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2006, p. 4).

A project to create a neutral encyclopedia

“Wikipedia is a project to create a neutral encyclopedia. Use of the site for other purposes, such as advocacy or propaganda, furtherance of outside conflicts, publishing or promoting original research, and political or ideological struggle, is prohibited.”

The English Wikipedia Arbitration Committee, January 2008

9

The Middle East conflict served as a reason to reiterate and reaffirm the idea of Wikipedia as a neutral informative source of knowledge. This happened when the editing process of articles related to the conflict became fervent insomuch as as to impel one of the editors to address the English Wikipedia's “Arbitration Committee”. The Committees decision opens with the statement above.

(Statement taken from the English Wikipedia, “Wikipedia:Requests for arbitration/Palestine-Israel articles”, Final decision: Principles, version from 18 November 2009 at 05:50

http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Requests_for_arbitration/Palestine-Israel_articles&oldid=326486806#Principles).

Conflict of principles: Is it “West Bank” or “Judea and Samaria”?

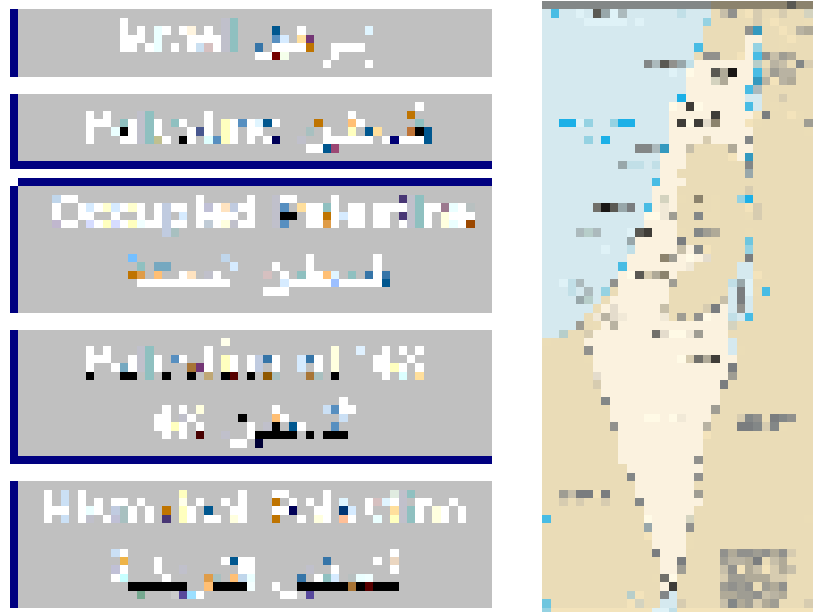
The West Bank and Gaza Strip הרשות הממשלתית המזרחית
Judea and Samaria and the Region of Gaza הרשות הלאומית המזרחית
השטחים הכבושים The Occupied Territories
"The Territories" "השטחים"



10

A typical case of dilemma would be the use of names and terms. For example, the territory between Israel and Jordan, known in English as “the West Bank”, has several alternative names in Hebrew; each carrying political implications. While all names are mentioned and explained in the article dedicated to the subject, there is still a need to choose a certain term to be used in the article’s title and other neutral contexts. The name chosen eventually was *Yehuda ve-Shomron*, “Judea and Samaria”, a term used officially in Israel since the late 1970s and implies right-wing political approach regarding the fate of this territory. The choice was justified by the claim that this was the ancient Hebrew name for the region, while the main alternative name “the West Bank” was new and borrowed from foreign languages. This reasoning is not accurate, and somewhat influenced by Israeli official texts of public diplomacy. An easy solution would be inventing a descriptive name to be used in neutral contexts; however this solution is overruled by No Original Research.

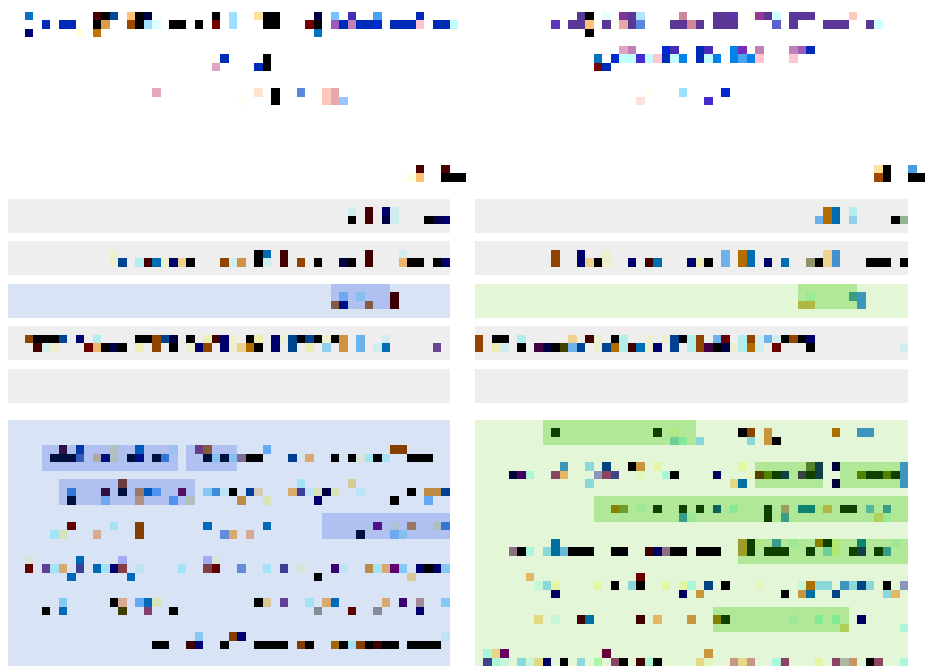
Community autonomy Can we do without the name “Israel” here?



11

The use of the name “Israel” is often contested on the Arabic Wikipedia. Many localities in Israel, especially those having, or used to have, large Arab population, are defined as situated “in Palestine”. *Filistīn*, i.e. Palestine, is indeed the Arabic name for the geographical region in which Israel lies, however, since localities in other countries are defined by the geopolitical entity, i.e. state or territory, in which they are situated, it is expected that the name *ʾIsrāʾīl*, i.e. Israel, be used in similar contexts. For example, the article about the city of Jaffa (south of Tel Aviv) opens with the words: “*Yāfa* (in Hebrew: *Yafō*) is a city situated in *Filistīn*, and it is one of the ancient cities in *Historical Filistīn*”. The history of the article reveals attempts to introduce the name *ʾIsrāʾīl* into the article's lead, and “compensate” for that by writing that the city lies in *Historical Filistīn*, a term often used in the Arabic when trying to differentiate the geographical-historical meanings of the name from its political meanings. These attempts did not last. A similar situation is seen also in the article about the city of Lydda.

The guy who changes "Palestine" to "Israel"



Some users did argue that saying "Haifa is a Palestinian city" is not wrong, but simply a geographical description of the city's location. Then again, no one suggested to describe Baghdad as a city in Mesopotamia. Some users suggested that Israel should not be mentioned as a country bordering Syria, because Syria does not recognize Israel. However, we are not talking about an article on behalf of Syria but an article about Syria, so this claim is not relevant, at least in my opinion. The solution we reached is saying that Syria borders Israel but does not recognize it, and saying that cities like Haifa, Nazareth, Jaffa etc. are Israeli cities and ancient cities of Historical Palestine. I believe this is another example of how debating with the aim of reaching a consensus eventually results in a richer more accurate phrasing.