

# THE DISPUTE OVER FILTERING "INDECENT" IMAGES IN WIKIPEDIA

by

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*In 2010, Wikipedia was accused by individuals as well as some media organizations of hosting illegal and indecent images. The foundation that runs Wikipedia commissioned a report on contentious images and the development of an image filter. This opt-in filter was designed to enable individual-level filtering of images with sexual, violent, sacred, or otherwise contentious images. The plans were considered a first step to censorship by many users and sparked considerable protest in Wikipedia's online community. In-depth analysis reveals that concepts from communication research, such as the Third-Person Effect and Public Opinion, can be applied to the issue. Results of an experiment on the effects of disgusting medical images are discussed.*

## KEYWORDS

*Wikipedia, Online Community, Pornography, Censorship, Public Opinion, Third-Person Effect*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The online encyclopedia Wikipedia is a large text corpus, available in many languages of the world, containing millions of articles on a vast variety of topics. Wikipedia is written by a community of volunteers (Pentzold, 2011) and published under a free license (Roessing, 2010). In addition to the written information, the Wikipedia project also contains millions of files, many

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of them images. The central file archive for all projects of the Wikimedia foundation<sup>1</sup> is Wikimedia Commons. It contains more than 15 million files.<sup>2</sup>

While many files (as well as many articles) are of little or no potential for conflict, others are disputed. Disputed articles and conflicts among active Wikipedia users have been researched in the past and this research is continuing as the project's development continues (Roessing, 2008; Konieczny, 2009; Roessing & Podschuweit, 2012; Roessing, 2013). However, there is little data and scientific analysis available on the non-textual content of Wikipedia. The present study's objective is to analyze the disputes (within and outside the Wikipedia online community) about some of the images. A second goal is to discuss possible effects of graphic images on the audience. The article is based on an analysis of the discussions surrounding the so-called *Harris Report* (on controversial content), a typology of disputed images, and an experiment on the effects of disturbing images on the audience. The theoretical background of the analysis comprises several approaches from communication and public opinion research such as the Third Person Effect (Davison, 1983), Habermas' concept of public discourse (Habermas, 1998), and the Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1984).

## 2. ALLEGATIONS OF 'INDECENT IMAGES'

In April 2010, Larry Sanger, estranged co-founder of Wikipedia, accused Wikimedia commons of hosting child pornography. He later preferred the term "depictions of child sexual abuse".<sup>3</sup> Conservative U.S. media joined his criticism by accusing Wikimedia of distributing – as Fox News put it – "graphic and sexually explicit content" at large.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Fox News not only published reports on disputed images within the Wikipedia projects. The company started to put financial pressure on Wikimedia by alerting organizations that supported the online encyclopedia project. After Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales had started to delete images he thought to be inadequate, FoxNews.com ascribed his actions to their campaign:

"The move came as FoxNews.com was in the process of asking dozens of companies that have donated to Wikimedia Foundation -- the umbrella

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<sup>1</sup> This article uses the name *Wikimedia* for the umbrella organization that runs Wikipedia among other online projects. *Wikipedia* is used for the online encyclopedia, Wikimedia's most prominent project.

<sup>2</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) [2012-12-13]

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reporting\\_of\\_child\\_pornography\\_images\\_on\\_Wikimedia\\_Commons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reporting_of_child_pornography_images_on_Wikimedia_Commons) [2012-12-22]

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/tech/2010/05/07/wikipedia-purges-porn/> [2012-12-22]

group behind Wikimedia Commons and its Wiki projects, including Wikipedia -- if they were aware of the extent of graphic and sexually explicit content on the sites."<sup>5</sup>

The dispute was no longer about depictions of children; it had turned into a general discussion about Wikipedia's visual content.

Jimmy Wales received heavy criticism by many people from Wikipedia's communities. Some of them "argued that the decision to delete was undemocratic and taken too quickly. They also expressed concerns that valid material might be deleted accidentally."<sup>6</sup> Eventually, Wales gave up some of his privileges as founder of the project. Nevertheless, the issue remained on the agenda. In summer 2010, the Board of the Wikimedia Foundation commissioned the "2010 Wikimedia Study of Controversial Content" by Robert Harris and Dory Carr-Harris.<sup>7</sup> The report – often referred to as the "Harris report" – addressed Wikimedia's mission, its openness and the relationship between that and the contentious content, especially images (for details see below). It was published in October 2010.

Based on the Harris report, the Wikimedia foundation decided to develop an image filtering system.<sup>8</sup> This opt-in filter had been planned to enable recipients to block unwanted images from their view screens. Despite this relatively cautious approach to contentious content (for example as compared to deletion or censoring) the idea of the image filter sparked considerable protest within the international Wikipedia community. The German<sup>9</sup> and the French community took an almost unanimous stand against the image filter.<sup>10</sup> In the course of 2011, the White-Bag-Movement became popular among users. Opponents of the image filter put the image of a white bag on their user-profile pages in order to express their opinion towards the issue. In March 2012, the Wikimedia foundation put the development of the image filter on hold "essentially because there are more urgent things to do, and because given the rather extraordinary scale of the debate and all of the con-

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/tech/2010/05/07/wikipedia-purges-porn/> [2012-12-22]

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10104946> [2012-12-22]

<sup>7</sup> [http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/2010\\_Wikimedia\\_Study\\_of\\_Controversial\\_Content](http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/2010_Wikimedia_Study_of_Controversial_Content) [2012-12-22]

<sup>8</sup> [http://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Resolution:Controversial\\_content](http://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Resolution:Controversial_content) [2012-12-22]

<sup>9</sup> The German community includes people from Austria, Switzerland and other countries, because Wikipedia is organised along languages, not nationalities.

<sup>10</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Meinungsbilder/Einf%C3%BChrung\\_pers%C3%B6nlicher\\_Bildfilter](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Meinungsbilder/Einf%C3%BChrung_pers%C3%B6nlicher_Bildfilter); [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Sondage/Installation\\_d%27un\\_filtre\\_d%27image](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Sondage/Installation_d%27un_filtre_d%27image) [2012-12-22]

trovsky, serious reconsideration of our original proposal has been requested.”<sup>11</sup>

### 3. CONTENTIOUS IMAGES AND THE PLAN TO FILTER

The Harris report deals with three types of contentious images: “sexual images, violent images, and certain images considered sacred by one spiritual tradition or another.”<sup>12</sup> However, the report focuses on sexual images. The categories and subcategories around “‘Female toplessness’ and ‘Nude women’”<sup>13</sup> are deemed especially problematic. The report pays far less attention to “images of the sacred” and depictions of violence than to sexuality. Violence is merely discussed as an object of comparison in the context of sacred images. The report does not directly address nauseating images from the areas of medicine and biology.

The proposal for an image filtering software explains its functions as follows: “For example, a wiki’s ‘Content Filter’ category could contain the following sub-categories: ‘Sexually Explicit’, ‘Graphic Violence’, ‘Medical’, and ‘Other Controversial Content’. Images illustrative of sexual techniques could be placed in the ‘Sexually Explicit’ sub-category while images of Mohammed could be placed in ‘Other Controversial Content’ (or even ‘Images of Mohammed’).”<sup>14</sup>

Figure one shows an example for the filter settings panel as it was planned in 2011.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://lists.wikimedia.org/pipermail/foundation-l/2012-March/072370.html> [2012-12-22]

<sup>12</sup> [http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/2010\\_Wikimedia\\_Study\\_of\\_Controversial\\_Content:\\_Part\\_Two](http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/2010_Wikimedia_Study_of_Controversial_Content:_Part_Two) [2012-12-23]

<sup>13</sup> [http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/2010\\_Wikimedia\\_Study\\_of\\_Controversial\\_Content:\\_Part\\_Two](http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/2010_Wikimedia_Study_of_Controversial_Content:_Part_Two) [2012-12-23]

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/Personal\\_image\\_filter](http://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/Personal_image_filter) [2012-12-23]

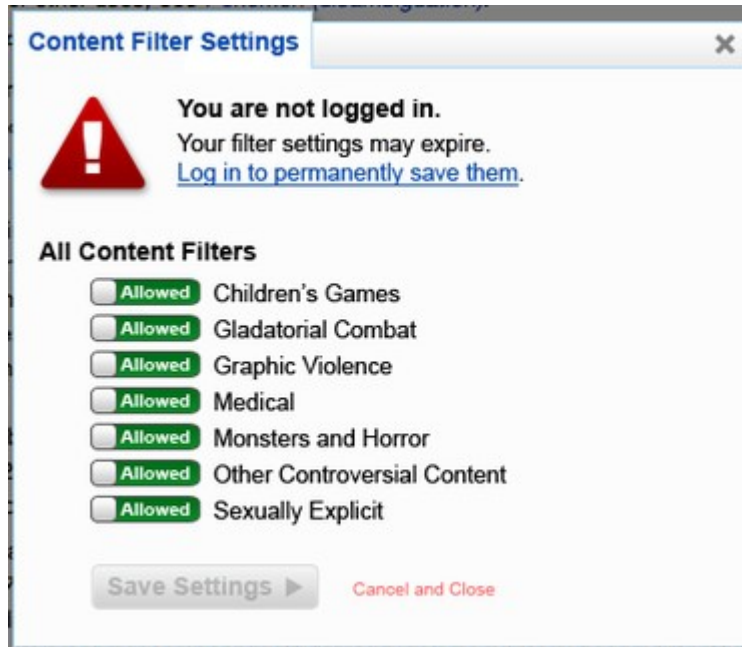


Figure 1: Filter settings panel<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. REACTIONS TO THE IMAGE FILTER

There are different types of community reactions to the foundation's plan for the image filter. First, there was the referendum among community members in summer 2011. Second, there were polls in some of the language versions of Wikipedia, e.g. in the German, French, and Spanish Wikipedia. The third kind of reactions were discussions and opinion statements scattered all over the project. This section of the paper takes a closer look at all three types of community reaction to illustrate the sentiment of Wikipedia's online community. Most of the examples are taken from English and German sites.

For the referendum on image filtering, several questions were asked about how important it was for users to block images they refuse to see. On 11-point scales, the online questionnaire asked, among other things, how important respondents consider the following features:<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> <http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PIF-Proposal-Workflow-Anon-FromNav-Step2.png> [2012-12-23]; Author: Jorm (WMF), License: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Creative\\_Commons\\_Attribution-ShareAlike\\_3.0\\_Unported\\_License](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Creative_Commons_Attribution-ShareAlike_3.0_Unported_License).

<sup>16</sup> [https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image\\_filter\\_referendum/en](https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image_filter_referendum/en) [2012-12-30]

- Offering an image filter to readers of the Wikimedia projects
- Reversibility of hiding images
- Reporting images as controversial by individual users
- Cultural neutrality – “as much as possible, it should aim to reflect a global or multi-cultural view of what imagery is potentially controversial”

It was not possible to simply say ‘No’ to image filtering in general.

Twenty-four thousand and twenty-three users from Wikimedia projects all over the world cast their votes. Regardless of the huge number of voters, this survey is not representative for the Wikimedia community. Self-selection, moderated by involvement with the issue as well as with the community, determines attendance. However, if the Wikimedia foundation intended to listen to those members of the community who are involved with the issue at hand and with the interests of the community, this ballot served them very well.<sup>17</sup> Central results of the referendum were that the community was split over the general question if an image filter should be implemented: With a mean of 5.7 on the 11-point scale (median 6), 10 (very important) received the most votes (4.791) while the second most voted point was 0 (not important at all) with 3,763 votes. Unanimous was the community opinion towards cultural neutrality (mean 7.4, median 9) and the reversibility of blocking images (mean 9.3, median 10).

While the voting indicates that a majority of voters evaluate an image filter to be very important, an analysis of the comments toward image filtering by the Wikimedia foundation revealed a majority of 41 percent negative comments against 29 percent neutral and 30 percent positive comments.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, the referendum indicates that the community would embrace an image filter – but not unanimously.

Following the image filter referendum there were polls on the issue in several Wikipedia communities. These polls are again not representative for the whole community (consisting of registered users as well as casual editors). However, the polls usually give an impression of the opinions of the core users that contribute a considerable share of the everyday community activities. The German language Wikipedia voted as follows: 356 votes

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<sup>17</sup> For the methodological implications of self-selection in online surveys and the use of results from such surveys cf. Selm & Jankowski, 2006; Roessing, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> [https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Comment\\_tone\\_vertBarChart.png](https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Comment_tone_vertBarChart.png) [2012-12-30]

against the filter, 57 votes in favor, and 16 abstentions.<sup>19</sup> Results of the French 'sondage' were 63 votes against the filter, 15 votes in favor, and 6 abstentions.<sup>20</sup> The voting of the Spanish Wikipedia users was similar to the French vote: 74 votes against the filter, 19 votes in favor, and 4 abstentions.<sup>21</sup> Overall, the opinion among active community members towards the image filter is much more negative than the results of the international and cross-project referendum.

General discussions on the issue of image filtering are difficult to analyze, because they are scattered all over the project. The central discussions about the image filtering in the German language version of Wikipedia took place on the discussion pages of the 'Kurier' (internal announcement and opinion building page) and of the poll cited above. The Kurier discussion contains statements on one important motivation to criticize the image filter: the fear of a chain reaction. One regular user (Marcus Cyron) writes: "If we make one step [towards image filtering], others will follow. I guess this could lead to the community falling to pieces."<sup>22</sup>

The discussion page of the poll consisted of 120 threads and addressed a huge variety of related topics.<sup>23</sup> One recurring issue in this discussion was the question if a position against an opt-in image filter collides with freedom of choice (the freedom of the individual to choose which images he or she wants to be confronted with). Another focus of the discussion was the motivation of filter opponents, e.g. if anti-American resentments and to force freedom of information upon other cultures were significant motives. Overall, the German discussion reflected the result of the poll: A majority of discussants took a critical position towards image filtering.

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<sup>19</sup> [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Meinungsbilder/Einf%C3%BChrung\\_pers%C3%B6nlicher\\_Bildfilter](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Meinungsbilder/Einf%C3%BChrung_pers%C3%B6nlicher_Bildfilter) [2012-12-30]

<sup>20</sup> [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Sondage/Installation\\_d%27un\\_Filtre\\_d%27image](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Sondage/Installation_d%27un_Filtre_d%27image) [2012-12-30]

<sup>21</sup> [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Encuestas/2011/Sobre\\_el\\_filtro\\_de\\_im%C3%A1genes](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Encuestas/2011/Sobre_el_filtro_de_im%C3%A1genes) [2012-12-30]

<sup>22</sup> [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia\\_Diskussion:Kurier/Archiv/2011/09/Bildfilter](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_Diskussion:Kurier/Archiv/2011/09/Bildfilter) [2012-12-30]; Original: „Machen wir erst einen Schritt, werden weitere nachkommen. Ich denke, daran könnte über kurz oder lang das Projekt zerbrechen“ [Translation by TRG].

<sup>23</sup> [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia\\_Diskussion:Meinungsbilder/Einf%C3%BChrung\\_pers%C3%B6nlicher\\_Bildfilter](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_Diskussion:Meinungsbilder/Einf%C3%BChrung_pers%C3%B6nlicher_Bildfilter) [2012-12-30]

## **5. ANALYSIS FROM A COMMUNICATION RESEARCHER'S POINT OF VIEW**

The dispute over filtering contentious images has several relations to communication research. This section discusses the process from the perspectives of media effects research and public opinion theory.

### **5.1 THIRD-PERSON EFFECT**

The idea of filtering images is implicitly based on the assumption of media effects. Without the assumption of negative effects, no one would want to filter anything, be it images or polluted water. However, if people expect negative effects from certain images, opt-in filtering is an improper solution. The reason for this is the so-called 'Third-Person Effect'. W. Phillips Davison discovered this effect in 1983. Davison's central thesis is that people tend to overestimate the mass media's effects on others while underestimating or denying those effects on themselves. "In the view of those trying to evaluate the effects of a communication, its greatest impact will not be on 'me' or 'you,' but on 'them' – the third persons." (Davison, 1983, p. 3). The Third-Person Effect has received a considerable amount of attention by communication researchers over the past decades. It has repeatedly been found in survey data on media effects and Davison's theory has been refined and developed further (Perloff, 1993). One important finding from Third-Person Effect research is that the evaluation of the media's content is an important mediating variable in this type of media effect. The Third-Person Effect is usually stronger for media effects that are perceived to be unwanted or negative than for positively evaluated effects (Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996). The central postulate of the Third-Person approach can be summarized as follows: If people expect undesirable effects from mass media content, they believe that they themselves are less strongly influenced by that very content than are others.

What is the relation to the dispute about the Wikimedia image filters? The proposed image filter had been designed to be strictly opt-in. This means that individual users would be enabled to block images they do not want to see, e.g. because they expect an undesirable effect on themselves. However, it is very unlikely that this solution would satisfy critics of Wikipedia's visual content. People usually do not reject 'sexually explicit' content (only) to protect themselves from seeing 'female toplessness'. They usually



have in mind protecting others (especially younger people) from the expected negative effects of this kind of images. Fox News explicitly stated in its article about the contentious images in Wikipedia: "These images were and in some cases still are easily accessible to anyone, including school children, many of whom receive unfiltered access to Wiki projects in schools across the country. A child doing homework research on the educational website could easily stumble upon pornographic photos — including close-ups of genitalia and people having sex and masturbating."<sup>24</sup> Speaking in terms of the Third-Person Effect: An opt-in filter would protect 'me', maybe 'you', but not 'them', all those third persons all over the world who are using Wikipedia. It is indeed very likely that an image filter would be turned from opt-in to opt-out or stronger measures following some future 'Wikipedia is porn' scandal.

## 5.2 PUBLIC OPINION

Another approach from the field of communication research that can be applied to the image dispute in Wikipedia (and other Wikimedia projects), is public opinion theory. In fact, there are two theories of public opinion that can be utilized to explain some of the processes described above: The normative approach to public opinion by German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, and the social-psychological theory of public opinion by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. Both theories have little in common but the name. However, both can be applied to explain different aspects of the image filter dispute.

Habermas' (1998) theory is concerned with the features a public discourse must have in order to be rightfully called 'public opinion'. This classical tradition of public opinion theory is "very much concerned with the problem of what the proper relation between public opinion and democratic government *should* be." (Lazarsfeld, 1957, p. 49; emphasis original). Habermas' (and other's) requirements for such a discourse include the following (Berelson, 1952, pp. 316-327):

- Those people who participate in a public discourse should be interested and involved with the issue at stake.
- Electorate decisions require information and knowledge.
- Public opinion requires the possession of principle, i.e. "stable political principle or moral standards, in contrast with fluctuating impulses or whims" (Berelson, 1952, p. 320).

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/tech/2010/05/07/wikipedia-purges-porn/> [2013-01-01]

- The democratic process requires communication and discussion.
- Public discourse should be rational.
- Public opinion should be based on accurate, objective observation of social reality.

The classical approach has been developed for traditional societies and is very popular among historians. However, with the approach of the Internet, many scholars expected at least parts of the requirements for true public opinion to become reality (Dahlberg, 2001). Normative theories cannot be empirically tested, because norms are unaffected by reality. However, it is possible to determine if certain processes meet the normative expectations of the classical tradition in public opinion theory.

As outlined above, more than twenty thousand users took part in the image filter referendum. Discussions on the issue spread over large parts of the Wikimedia projects and filled many pages at least in the English, German, French, Italian, and Spanish Wikipedias. While the participants in these discussions are no representative cross-section of the project's users, it is safe to assume that those discussants were interested in the issue and involved with the well-being of the project. The discourse therefore meets the first criterion of the classical tradition.

During the conflict over the image filters, there has never been complete information and not every discussant had complete knowledge on what was going on. However, knowledge is easily obtainable in an online encyclopedia and many discussants made use of links on further information. The German Wikipedia offers an overview with links to in-depth information on the issue. The requirement of an informed discourse is therefore partly met.

The dispute over contentious images in the Wikimedia projects was obviously based on strongly held principles if not truly moral standards. On the one hand, there were conservative U.S. media like Fox News and the Harris report evaluating 'female toplessness' as problematic. On the other hand, many discussants rejected the image filter based on their conception of free information and free education. One German discussant (bennsen) even criticized the debate as overly concerned with morals and values: "This voting makes it easy to see how narrow-minded, self-righteous, and

one-dimensional German speaking people are discussing concepts like 'freedom', 'censorship', and 'moral'".<sup>25</sup>

If the democratic process requires 'communication and discussion', this dispute is quite qualified to be a true democratic process. As pointed out above, there were plenty, and long, discussions as well as voting on the issue. The discussion page of the German voting with its 120 major threads is 720,549 Byte long<sup>26</sup> and converted to PDF it fills 175 pages.

So far, the dispute over contentious images in Wikipedia met several of the classical tradition's criteria for public discourse. However, the criteria of rationality and objectivity seem to be less applicable. Compared to other areas of dispute in Wikipedia, the German discussions were civilized – but emotional. Length and intensity of the debates indicate that many users were motivated beyond pure reasoning. With morals, sexuality, violence, freedom, and censorship at stake, at times emotions raged high on either side. One user (adornix, supporter of the image filter) called the German voting "evidence-free, strongly prejudiced anti-American shit".<sup>27</sup>

Several users complained that they felt treated in an unfair manner just for voicing their opinions on the issue. One user (Sargoth) wrote: "Unfortunately, given the highly emotional nature of the issue, it is not possible to list arguments in favor of the image filter without being massively insulted."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the climate of opinion in the online discussions put supporters of the image filter under heavy pressure to conform or to be silent. This indicates that another theory of public opinion is applicable to the dispute over contentious images: the spiral of silence theory of public opinion in the tradition of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. This theory, first published by Noelle-Neumann in 1974, has sparked a considerable amount of research all over the world (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). The central hypotheses of the spiral of silence theory include the following:

<sup>25</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia\\_Diskussion:Meinungsbilder/Einf%C3%BChrung\\_pers%C3%B6nlicher\\_Bildfilter](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_Diskussion:Meinungsbilder/Einf%C3%BChrung_pers%C3%B6nlicher_Bildfilter) [2013-01-01]; „An dieser Abstimmung kann man wirklich gut ablesen, wie borniert, selbstherrlich und eindimensional im deutschsprachigen Raum über Begriffe wie ‚Freiheit‘, ‚Zensur‘ und ‚Moral‘ gesprochen wird.“

<sup>26</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia\\_Diskussion:Meinungsbilder/Einf%C3%BChrung\\_pers%C3%B6nlicher\\_Bildfilter&action=history](http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia_Diskussion:Meinungsbilder/Einf%C3%BChrung_pers%C3%B6nlicher_Bildfilter&action=history) [2013-01-01]

<sup>27</sup> „indizienlosen aber vorurteilsstarken antiamerikanischen Scheiss“; [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia\\_Diskussion:Meinungsbilder/Einführung\\_persönlicher\\_Bildfilter](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_Diskussion:Meinungsbilder/Einführung_persönlicher_Bildfilter) [2013-01-02]

<sup>28</sup> „Leider ist es bei diesem offenbar hochemotionalen Thema nicht möglich, die Argumente aufzuführen, die für den Bildfilter sprechen, ohne massiv beleidigt zu werden.“ [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia\\_Diskussion:Meinungsbilder/Einführung\\_persönlicher\\_Bildfilter](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_Diskussion:Meinungsbilder/Einführung_persönlicher_Bildfilter) [2013-01-02]

(1) Individuals constantly evaluate the climate of opinion in order to avoid social isolation by inappropriate public speech or behavior.

(2) When people notice that their opinion is losing ground, they tend to fall silent. This makes the affected opinion camp appear even smaller, silencing more and more of its own supporters. This part of the theory became famous as the so-called spiral of silence.

(3) The latent (mostly unnoticed) function of public opinion is to resolve conflicts and hold societies together (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004).

The range of the spiral of silence is limited by a set of preconditions. For example, the issue at stake must be likely to influence people emotionally. If an issue lacks the power to make people afraid of social isolation, a spiral of silence is very improbable. Other conditions for processes of public opinion are societal conflict, opinion dynamics, and the involvement of the media (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004).

It is very difficult to test the assumption that processes similar to a spiral of silence can be found in an online community like Wikipedia. The central reason is a lack of empirical data about the minds of the people behind their online accounts. Scientists can rarely determine if fear of isolation (or the lack thereof) is a motive behind online expressions of opinion. However, it is highly plausible that people in favor of image filters had a difficult time expressing their views in the votings and discussions (at least those of the German Wikipedia). The preconditions for a spiral of silence in Wikipedia are also met by the issue at hand: There was a conflict (about filtering images), there was a certain dynamic (from the first allegations by Sanger to the image filter referendum and beyond), mass media were involved (e.g. Fox News). That the discussions were at least partially led in an emotionalized way has been explained above. Overall, looking at the discussions from the perspective of the spiral of silence theory, the findings are consistent with other studies that have revealed the possibility of silencing spirals in online environments (Woong Yun & Park, 2011; Roessing, 2013).

## **6. AN EXPERIMENT ON THE EFFECTS OF GRAPHIC IMAGES**

There is little data on the effects of Wikipedia's images on the audience. A small experiment, conducted by the author in summer 2012, sheds some light on this issue. A distributed web-based experiment was set up with three versions of the same Wikipedia article ("Furunkel", "Boil", an infectious skin disease). The article was presented to one experimental group

without any image, to one group with a neutral image and to one group with a somewhat disgusting image of an infected boil. One hundred and sixty-three participants were randomly distributed to the three experimental conditions. After reading the article, they filled out a questionnaire regarding the article, its content, and its design. An analysis of variance revealed only a few significant differences in the answers of the three groups. Most of them were to be expected. For example, those participants who saw the disgusting image (n=52) regarded the disease to be 'worse' (p<.05) and 'more disgusting' (p<.008) than those who read the article with no (n=59) or the neutral image (n=52). The most interesting results for the Wikipedia community is that the disgusting image enhances the perceived quality of the article: It is perceived to be more fascinating (p=.023) and more worth reading (p=.032) than an article without any image.<sup>29</sup>

More experiments of this kind, testing the effects of sexual as well as violent images, are needed. It will be necessary to conduct these experiments in different cultures and with people of different ages to determine which content under what circumstances has the potential to harm or benefit people or Wikipedia's articles.

## 7. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study can be summarized in eight statements:

1. After Larry Sanger's accusations of indecent images in Wikimedia projects, Fox News put pressure on Wikimedia by alerting organizations that donated to Wikimedia to 'graphic and sexually explicit content'.
2. Wikimedia commissioned the so-called Harris report, a study on controversial content. This report focused on sexual images, especially 'female toplessness' and 'nude women' but discussed images of violence and of sacred entities as well.
3. Based on the Harris report, the Wikimedia foundation started the development of an opt-in image filter.
4. The opinion among active members of Wikipedia communities in Germany, France, Italy, and Spain (among others) was much more negative than the results of the international referendum on the image filter.

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<sup>29</sup> ANOVA, Post-hoc test Bonferroni.

5. From the perspective of Third-Person Effect research, an opt-in filter is not suitable to fight criticism over allegedly harmful images.
6. The community discourse about the image filter resembled public opinion as conceptualized by Jürgen Habermas.
7. There is a high probability that supporters of the image filter were exposed to a spiral of silence as conceptualized by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann.
8. An experiment indicates that images do have effects on the audience. In this experiment, a disgusting image was able to improve the perceived quality of an article about a skin disease.

With the moratorium on the image filter, the discussions have ceased for the moment. However, the players that started the series of events discussed in this article are still active. It is only a question of time until someone will publicly object to images of nudity or violence or sacred entities or something else. If the traditional mass media again join the debate, Wikimedia will again come under pressure to limit access to their content. Therefore, the issue remains an attractive subject for scientists of law, sociology, and communication research.

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