Wikipedia, one of the last remaining pillars of the open and decentralized web, is in existential crisis. This has nothing to do with money. A couple of years ago, the site launched a panicky fundraising campaign, but ironically thanks to Donald Trump, Wikipedia has never been as wealthy or well-organized. American liberals, worried that Trump’s rise threatened the country’s foundational Enlightenment ideals, kicked in a significant flow of funds that has stabilized the nonprofit’s balance sheet. That happy news masks a more concerning problem—a flattening growth rate in the number of contributors to the website. It is another troubling sign of a general trend around the world: The very idea of knowledge itself is in danger. The idea behind Wikipedia—like all encyclopedias before it—has been to collect the entirety of human knowledge. It’s a goal that extends back to the Islamic Golden Age, when numerous scholars—inspired by Muhammad's famous verdict of ‘Seek knowledge, even from China’—set themselves to collecting and documenting all existing information on a wide variety of topics, including translations from Greek, Persian, Syrian, and Indian into Arabic. In the 9th century, a Persian scholar named Ibn Qutaybah collected the first true encyclopedia, 10 books on power, war, nobility, character, learning and eloquence, asceticism, friendship, prayers, food, and women. He was followed a century later by another Persian scholar, al-Khwārizmī who, in addition to inventing algebra, produced an encyclopedia covering what he called indigenous knowledge (jurisprudence, scholastic philosophy, grammar, secretarial duties, prosody and poetic art, history) and foreign knowledge (philosophy, logic, medicine, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, mechanics, alchemy). The Chinese had their own encyclopedia dating back to the 7th century. In Europe, the quest to compile a modern encyclopedia started with the Enlightenment in the 18th century. (Immanuel Kant coined a fitting Latin motto for the movement: “Sapere aude,” or “Dare to know.”) French Enlightenment thinkers like Francis Bacon and Denis Diderot began compiling ambitious encyclopedias, inspiring others throughout France, Germany, England, Switzerland and the Netherlands. The religious ruling class’s discomfort with the effort only helped its financial feasibility; there was an obvious market for these massive collections, often published in numerous volumes, for an increasingly secular middle-class. The first volume of Encycopedie was sold in 1751 to 2,000 subscribers, who would go on to receive the entire twenty-eight-volume set. Notable revolutionary thinkers such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu were involved in the editing of the work and several even ended up in prison. Only 17 years after the publication of the last volume in 1772, the French revolution began, leading to perhaps the most secular state in human history. That trend toward rationality and enlightenment was endangered long before the advent of the Internet. As Neil Postman noted in his 1985 book Amusing Ourselves to Death, the rise of television introduced not just a new medium but a new discourse: a gradual shift from a typographic culture to a photographic one, which in turn meant a shift from rationality to emotions, exposition to entertainment. In an image-centered and pleasure-driven world, Postman noted, there is no place for rational thinking, because you simply cannot think with images. It is text that enables us to “uncover lies, confusions and overgeneralizations, to detect abuses of logic and common sense. It also means to weigh ideas, to compare and contrast assertions, to connect one generalization to another.” The dominance of television was not contained to our living rooms. It overturned all of those habits of mind, fundamentally changing our experience of the world, affecting the conduct of politics, religion, business, and culture. It reduced many aspects of modern life to entertainment, sensationalism, and commerce. “Americans don’t talk to each other, we entertain each other,” Postman wrote. “They don’t exchange ideas, they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials.” At first, the Internet seemed to push against this trend. When it emerged towards the end of the 80s as a purely text-based medium, it was seen as a tool to pursue knowledge, not pleasure. Reason and thought were most valued in this garden—all derived from the project of Enlightenment. Universities around the world were among the first to connect to this new medium, which hosted discussion groups, informative personal or group blogs, electronic magazines, and academic mailing lists and forums. It was an intellectual project, not about commerce or control, created in a scientific research center in Switzerland. Wikipedia was a fruit of this garden. So was Google search and its text-based advertising model. And so were blogs, which valued text, hypertext (links), knowledge, and literature. They effectively democratized the ability to contribute to the global corpus of knowledge. For more than a decade, the web created an alternative space that threatened television’s grip on society. Social networks, though, have since colonized the web for television’s values. From Facebook to Instagram, the medium refocuses our attention on videos and images, rewarding emotional appeals—‘like’ buttons—over rational ones. Instead of a quest for knowledge, it engages us in an endless zest for instant approval from an audience, for which we are constantly but unconsciously performing. (It’s telling that, while Google began life as a PhD thesis, Facebook started as a tool to judge classmates’ appearances.) It reduces our curiosity by showing us exactly what we already want and think, based on our profiles and preferences. Enlightenment’s motto of ‘Dare to know’ has become ‘Dare not to care to know.’ It is a development that further proves the words of French philosopher Guy Debord, who wrote that, if pre-capitalism was about ‘being’, and capitalism about ‘having’, in late-capitalism what matters is only ‘appearing’—appearing rich, happy, thoughtful, cool and cosmopolitan. It’s hard to open Instagram without being struck by the accuracy of his diagnosis. Now the challenge is to save Wikipedia and its promise of a free and open collection of all human knowledge amid the conquest of new and old television—how to collect and preserve knowledge when nobody cares to know. Television has even infected Wikipedia itself—today many of the most popular entries tend to revolve around television series or their cast. This doesn’t mean it is time to give up. But we need to understand that the decline of the web and thereby of the Wikipedia is part of a much larger civilizational shift which has just started to unfold.