Wikipedia: The Knowledge Democracy [C1]

Fondata nel 2001 e con versioni in più di 200 lingue, l'enciclopedia online continua a crescere affermandosi come il progetto collaborativo in rete di maggior successo e ispirazione.

In the late 1990s, Jimmy Wales, an American internet entrepreneur and **former** financial trader, began to put a **lifelong** plan into action: his idea was to establish an online multilingual encyclopedia which would have thousands of volunteers writing and continually updating articles. At the time most of the internet was read-only but in 2001 Wales and project developer Larry Sanger teamed up to develop a wiki project; that is, one collaboratively edited and managed by its audience directly **through** a **web browser**.

COLLABORATIVE

Initially, the project named 'Wikipedia' was supposed to be **profit-driven**, but to Wales' surprise, within days the number of articles was growing rapidly and a small group of editors had formed. Tired of rigid hierarchical structures, these editors proposed broadening the idea into an open-source, collaborative encyclopedia that would accept contributions from ordinary people. This idea worried Wales: could normal people really be trusted to create a robust, self-regulating global community?

THE FOUNDATION

Wikipedia is now twenty-four years old and there are 342 Wikipedia editions in different languages currently active. It has proven one of the most successful, inspirational and democratic projects on the internet. While based in the US, self-governance is increasingly decentralised as the community grows. Academics, who used to joke about its "simplicity," are now its contributors and **champions**. As editors are anonymous, it remains both **humble** and high-quality. To help with maintenance and organisation,

Wales founded the non-profit organisation the Wikimedia Foundation in 2003.

ACCESSIBLE

To find out more about Wikipedia, its past, present and plans for the future, Speak Up contacted Mike Peel, a British astronomer and post-doctoral researcher at Imperial College London. Peel started editing Wikipedia in 2005 while still an undergraduate. He became involved in co-founding and building up Wikimedia UK in 2008 and helped **raise funds** within the international Wikimedia movement. Since 2022 he has been on the **board of trustees** for the US-based Wikimedia Foundation. As Peel explains, Wikipedia is an apolitical project, although it is **reliant** on certain favourable laws in the US. Michael Peel (English accent): Everyone who edits Wikipedia is a volunteer. There's a **core** of paid staff of about six hundred people employed by Wikimedia Foundation, about half [of whom] are actually in the US. The Foundation is **legally incorporated** in Florida, which is where things started but we have a small admin office in San Francisco;they are responsible for keeping the servers running, developing software and dealing with the legal aspects, **trust and safety** and making sure the whole thing is working right. We have **gatherings** of people, but mostly we're working remote-first. Because we do employ people around the world, it's not subject to US visas and things like that. And there's important things, like Section 230 in the US law, which protects operators' websites against any issues with the content on it, because its content is put there by volunteers, the Foundation is not doing the editing or anything like, that so there's legal protections that are **put in place**. But, yes, it's interesting times at the moment, so...

VERIFIED CONTENT

At a time when social media sites are **removing safeguards** such as fact checking, and AI is spreading hallucination-**laden** content online, Wikipedia **sticks to** its principle of "verifiability, not trut," as Peel explains. Michael Peel: It's providing information which is **sourced** from elsewhere, mostly; you have

to put a reference and say this is where it came from. And that's really important for verifiability and it means that other editors can check it and revert it if it's not. So we're very **reliant** on **reliable** information being published and there's a number of sources that Wikipedia has chosen not to use. A **core** principle of Wikipedia is "It's verifiability, it's not truth," because you can argue forever about what exactly is truth, but you can verify content and that's really important.

NEGOTIATION

Many pages deal with controversies. While different points of view are included, there are protections in place for when things **go off tangent**, says Peel. Michael Peel: Everything is open, so if you go to a page on Wikipedia and go to the top right and click 'View history' you can see every edit that's ever been made to that page. Every page also has a talk page so you can go to that and see the discussions that happen around it. There's always edits about politicians who are often controversial. Palestine versus Israel was a good example, because you've got people from all sides, all different perspectives, coming together and writing something which **fairly** represented things from all angles — but that's obviously a really, really **tricky topic** to get right and to work **through**. There are disputes that happen that can lead to pages being protected, so if there's a lot of vandalism going on on a page, it can be protected and then only admins or certain people can edit it.

ANONYMITY IS KEY

Peel is not an anonymous editor, but many people are. As Peel explains, security for editors is being **stepped up**. Michael Peel: I edit underneath my real name, and that's partly because nowadays you've got AI that could **root out** who you are. I know people who do get death threats because they're reverting vandalism, for example, which is something I don't do because my name is there. So then it's important to edit under a pseudonym, and Wikipedia does its best to keep that confidential. At the moment you can just edit as an IP address, which means you can **be tracked down**. That's

going to change soon — so the IP addresses are hidden, and then it's going to be more secure for the anonymous users.

HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

Against the trend of cancelling diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) commitments in the US, there is a constant **push** to make Wikipedia more accessible and democratic. There are incentives for minority groups and small languages to get involved, expanding content on groups that have been left out of history. However, says Peel, this comes with an economic and time challenge for some editors, especially women editors, and especially in the Global South. Michael Peel: The **aim** of Wikipedia is to get all the sum of human knowledge together and accessible for everyone, and that's difficult if you're only coming from kind of the white male perspective. So it's really important to encourage everyone to edit, so people from all different countries [are] sharing content and making information relevant to their area available online. That is really difficult because it depends on what time you have available. So, particularly in Africa and places like that, it becomes much more difficult to volunteer, whereas in Europe and in the US there's much more of a culture of volunteerism, because we've got the support already.

SELF-PROMOTION

There is no advertising on Wikipedia. However, many people try to start up pages to promote themselves. We asked Peel about the importance of neutrality and humility. Michael Peel: There is an 'articles for creation' process where you can set out your article and **submit** it to be reviewed. There's a lot of people trying to advertise on Wikipedia, and that kind of thing is problematic. To build a Wikipedia article, you really need enough **reliable** sources to document what you're saying and that has to be a kind of secondary source — so it can't be a self-published bio or things like that, it has to be a newspaper writing about them, or in a book. And also it's a conflict of interest to write about yourself or about your company, because

you're very **liable** to kind of say "Oh, this is a fantastic company" and not put things in the kind of neutral way that you get on Wikipedia.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

With profit at the heart of today's platforms, Wikipedia insists on a donation-based model. Peel talked more about how this works. Michael Peel: We are financially stable but we also want to make sure that continues in the future. The majority of our **funding** comes from small donors so we do a fundraising campaign every year, we put **banners** across the top of a Wikipedia article encouraging people to donate. I think we've got over a million donors nowadays, so it **mounts up** over time. We have big donors as well, but we're not **reliant** on companies, we're not **reliant** on government, which gives us a lot of independence and means that we don't have **to chase headlines**, which is what a lot of newspapers do. We do also now have an **endowment** which people donate to and it provides a small amount of money from the interest every year that covers **core** things, so we can make sure we're around for a hundred years or more. So it's a really good way of being, I think, because it means we're not subject to political **whims**.

THE WIKIMEDIA MOVEMENT

Wikimedia has a network of affiliates around the world that organises activities,runs editathons, and tries to get employers involved in creating more content for Wikiprojects. A Wikiproject is an affinity group for contributors with shared goals within the Wikimedia movement. The Wikimedia movement has grown with **sibling** projects including Wikimedia Commons, which is photos and other media resources; Wikibooks, which is writing textbooks; Wikisource, transcribing out of public domain books into a wiki environment; and Wikidata, which is data.

Glossary

- **In the late 1990s** = alla fine degli anni '90
- **trust and safety** = sicurezza e fiducia
- **sticks to** = mantenere
- **stepped up** = aumentare
- **funding** = finanziamento
- **to chase headlines** = cacciare notizie da prima pagina
- **safeguards** = protezioni
- **former** = ex, precedente
- **humble** = umile
- **gatherings** = incontri
- **laden** = pieno di
- **go off tangent** = andare fuori tema, divagare
- **through** = risolvere
- **mounts up** = accumularsi
- **lifelong** = per tutta la vita
- **reliant** = dipendente da
- **legally incorporated** = costituito legalmente
- **be tracked down** = rintracciare
- **aim** = obiettivo
- **liable** = incline
- **web browser** = navigatore
- **profit-driven** = motivato dal profitto
- **champions** = sostenitori, promotori
- **raise funds** = raccogliere fondi
- **root out** = scoprire
- **submit** = presentare
- **banners** = annunci
- **removing** = eliminare
- **sourced** = ottenere
- **tricky topic** = argomento delicato
- **push** = spinta
- **sibling** = fratelli
- **board of trustees** = consiglio di amministrazione

- **put in place** = implementare
- **fairly** = giustamente
- **endowment** = donazione
- **whims** = capricci
- **core** = nucleo
- **reliable** = affidabile