

We've seen America's vitriol. Now let's salute Wikipedia, a US pioneer of global civility

For all its shortcomings Wikipedia, now aged 10, is the internet's biggest and best example of not-for-profit idealism

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Article history

Wikipedia is 10 years old this Saturday. It is the fifth most visited site on the internet. Some 400 million people use it every month. I bet most readers of this column are among them. You want to check something, you Google it; and then, as often as not, you choose the Wikipedia link as the best way in.

What is extraordinary about this free encyclopedia, which now contains more than 17m articles in more than 270 languages, is that it is almost entirely written, edited and self-regulated by unpaid volunteers. All the other most visited sites are multibillion-dollar businesses. Facebook, with just 100 million more users, has now been valued at \$50bn.

Visit Google in Silicon Valley and you find yourself in a vast complex of modern office buildings, like a superpower capital. There may still be some trademark playful bits of Lego in the foyer, but you have to sign a non-disclosure agreement before you even get through the office door. The language of Google executives veers strangely between that of a UN secretary general and that of a car salesman. One moment we're talking universal human rights, the next "rolling out a new product".

Wikipedia, by contrast, is overseen by a not-for-profit foundation. The Wikimedia Foundation occupies one floor in an anonymous office building in downtown San Francisco. You have to knock hard on the door to gain admission. (I think they might buy a buzzer, to celebrate the 10th anniversary.) Inside it feels exactly like what it is: a modest, international NGO.

If Wikipedia's principal architect, Jimmy Wales, had chosen to commercialise the enterprise, he could now be worth billions – like Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg. Putting it all under the not-for-profit umbrella was, Wales quipped to me, at once the stupidest and the cleverest thing he ever did. More than any other major global site, Wikipedia still breathes the utopian idealism of the internet's heroic early days. Wikipedians, as they style themselves, are men and women with a mission. That mission, upon which they boldly go, is summed up in this almost Lennonist (that's John, not Vladimir) sentence from the man they all refer to as Jimmy: "Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge."

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To suggest that this utopian goal could be achieved by a world wide web of volunteers – working for nothing, editing anything and everything, with the words they type immediately visible for the whole world to see – was of course a totally barmy idea. Yet this barmy army has come a remarkably long way in just 10 years.

Wikipedia still has major shortcomings. The articles vary widely in quality, both from topic to topic and language to language. Many entries on individuals are patchy and unbalanced. So much depends on whether there happen to be one or two Wikipedians genuinely knowledgeable in a particular field and language. It can be stunningly good on obscure corners of popular culture, and strikingly weak on mainstream matters. On the most mature versions the volunteer editorial communities, backed by the foundation's tiny staff, have gone a long way to improve standards of reliability and verifiability, especially by insisting on footnotes with source links.

I find that you still always need to double-check before quoting any information you find there. A piece about Wikipedia in the New Yorker cited an intriguing distinction between useful knowledge and reliable knowledge. One of the free encyclopedia's biggest challenges over the next decade is to keep narrowing the useful-reliable gap.

Another big challenge is to take this enterprise beyond the post-Enlightenment west, where it was born and remains most at home. An expert told me that some 80% of all its edits originate in the OECD world. The foundation aims to have 680 million users by 2015, and hopes that most of that growth will be in places like India, Brazil and the Middle East.

Yet the puzzle is not why it still has obvious shortcomings, but why it has worked so well. Wikipedians offer several explanations: it arrived relatively early, when there were not countless sites for fledgling netizens to spend time on; an encyclopedia deals (mainly) with verifiable facts rather than mere opinions, the common currency and curse of the blogosphere; above all, Wikipedia struck lucky with its communities of contributor-editors.

Given the scale of the thing, the corps of regular editors is amazingly small. Some 100,000 people contribute more than five edits a month, but the big, mature Wikipedias, such as those in English, German, French or Polish, are sustained by a tiny band of perhaps 15,000 people, who each make more than 100 contributions a month. Overwhelmingly they are young, single, well educated men. Sue Gardner, the Wikimedia Foundation's executive director, says she can spot a typical Wikipedian at a hundred yards. They are the [Trekkies](#) of cyberspace.

Like many of the best-known global sites, Wikipedia benefits from being based in what Mike Godwin, until October Wikimedia's general counsel, describes as "a free speech haven called the United States". All its different language encyclopedias, wherever their editors live and work, are physically hosted on the foundation's servers in the US. They enjoy the legal protections of America's great tradition of free speech.

Yet Wikipedia has been remarkably free of the kind of downward spirals of abuse famously captured by Godwin's Law (coined by that same Mike Godwin) which states that "as an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches 1". Partly this is because an encyclopedia deals in facts, but it is also because dedicated Wikipedians spend a huge amount of time defending standards of civility against waves of attempted vandalism.

Civility – translated as *savoir-vivre* in the French version – is one of the five "pillars" of Wikipedia. From the outset Wales argued that it must be possible to combine honesty with politeness. A whole school of online etiquette – sorry, *wiki* etiquette – has grown around this, with abbreviations such as AGF (Assume Good Faith). Uncivil persons are engaged and courteously argued with and then warned, before, if they persist, being banned. I'm not in a position to judge if this holds true in its Dolnoserbki, Gagauz and Gagana Samoa versions. Wikipedia may have its own long tail of incivility. But if a language community persistently goes ape, the foundation does ultimately have the power to take its rantings off the server. (Wikipedia is a legally protected label, whereas Wiki-somethingelse is not; hence Wikileaks, which has nothing to do with Wikipedia and is not even a *wiki* – a collaboratively edited site.)

We do not yet know if the shooting in Tucson, Arizona, was a direct product of the vitriolic incivility of American political discourse, as heard on talk radio and cable channels such as Fox News. A crazy man may just be crazy. But America's daily political vitriol is an undeniable fact. Against that depressing background, it is good to be able to celebrate an American invention which, for all its faults, tries to spread around the world a combination of unpaid idealism, knowledge and stubborn civility.

