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Wikipedia at 10: a web pioneer worth defending

The greatest threat to this remarkable collaborative model of non-profit information sharing is not commerce, but censorship



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It is 10 years since Wikipedia's founder Jimmy Wales first typed 'Hello world'. Photograph: Guardian

Ten years ago, [Jimmy Wales](#) typed "Hello world" into a wiki, and [Wikipedia](#) was born. Like all new enterprises, nobody knew exactly what to make of it and its goal - to create an online encyclopedia that anyone could edit. In fact, in its early years Wikipedia's philosophy of openness made it an easy target for jokes and criticism - [Stephen Colbert famously exhorted](#) his viewers to vandalise it for fun, and teachers, journalists, and other cultural gatekeepers routinely warned the public it couldn't be trusted.

And it's true that in its early days, Wikipedia wasn't very good. Which is only reasonable: it started from nothing, and building an encyclopedia takes time. But Wikipedia gets more credible, and more trusted, every day. In the

decade since its launch, Wikipedia has grown to be bigger and more comprehensive than any print information resource, and it's become an indispensable part of our daily lives, with more than 400 million regular readers.

When Wikipedia started back in January 2001, it was an experiment. Nobody really thought a wide-open collaborative model could succeed. But it did succeed, and in the years since, its premise been validated again and again: everyone has at least a few crumbs of information, and lots are willing to bring theirs to the common table. Totally ordinary people are willing to help and share with each other, just for fun, out of basic kindness, and to experience the joy of collaboration.

That's why so many people - readers, donors and cultural critics - say that Wikipedia represents the fulfilment of the original promise of the internet: that it's a kind of poster child for online collaboration in the public interest. Because back when the internet started, we figured it would be full of stuff like Wikipedia. Turns out we were mostly wrong: if you take a look at the world's most popular websites, it's hard not to notice that Wikipedia's the only site in the top 25 whose primary purpose is to provide a non-commercial public service.

This shouldn't surprise anyone who's familiar with the history of communications. The telephone, the radio, television: throughout history, new inventions in communications technology have inspired us to imagine a world in which ordinary people communicate freely and without barriers, talking and learning and sharing. That's the dream. The reality, though, is that the development of new technologies is inevitably influenced, often destructively, by a combination of commercial and monopolistic interests.

So, maybe Wikipedia's significance lies in its singularity. In saying that, I don't mean to suggest that Wikipedia's the only site providing an important public service. There are lots of popular sites creating social value in a commercialised context, and there are lots of non-profits doing incredible work online. The internet is hardly a wasteland, as then FCC chair Newton Minow so memorably described TV back in 1961. It's the opposite: the internet has made more information available to more people than ever before in human history. We're living in a golden age.

Even so, I sometimes wonder if the power of Wikipedia to join people together in a vast social enterprise was just an aberration. I fear that the conditions that gave rise to it may be disappearing; I'm not sure they still

exist, or will exist 10 years from today. Because, increasingly, we're seeing national governments restricting what their citizens can do online - not just in countries like China, Burma and Syria, but in the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany and many other parts of the world. Technology firms, with almost no accountability or oversight, are starting to make important decisions that restrict our access to information: last year, Amazon and Apple shut down their distribution of WikiLeaks material, and PayPal stopped processing donations aimed at supporting it. And the fate of network neutrality (the concept that aims to keep the internet open and free) is under attack everywhere, particularly in the mobile space, and I'm continually surprised by how few Americans seem to understand the issue and why it matters. As Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the world wide web, said a few months ago: "Why should you care? Because the web is yours. It is a public resource on which you, your business, your community and your government depend."

So 10 years later, what has Wikipedia taught us? That people want to help each other, and enjoy helping each other, and are willing to work long hours, for free, to do it. That millions of ordinary people can successfully build a repository of knowledge that's bigger and better than anything the world has ever seen before. And that the conditions that have made that possible are worth defending, both for the future success of Wikipedia and more broadly, for the whole of the internet.

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