
PATHS TO KNOWLEDGE EQUITY

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CONTENTS

- 1 **Introduction**
 - 4 **There is no world without other people.
Hannah Arendt, knowledge equity, and Wikipedia**
Marie-Luise Guhl
 - 11 **Volunteerism rethought**
Nikki Zeuner
 - 20 **Knowledge equity and refugee crisis:
the role of the Wikimedia Movement**
Naphsica Papanicolaou
 - 32 **Policy and police in the global village.
EU responses to intermediated access to knowledge**
Anna Mazgal
 - 44 **Note on authors**
 - 45 **Acknowledgements**
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INTRODUCTION

Anna Mazgal

Knowledge equity is both an attractive and elusive concept. In our society, governed by meritocracy, knowledge is deemed of value, though with rates varying significantly: be it university education or street smarts. Knowledge is a non-exclusive resource; learning does not take it away from our peers or teachers. Often to the contrary, an act of learning can educate all involved.

Equity is surely a worthwhile endeavour in liberal democracy as it resonates with capital, investment, powerful people taking decisions with profit as their objective. Material profit can be an exclusive resource, often unevenly distributed. In a liberal economy it is considered a good thing, motivating its participants towards development and growth.

But what comes out of putting the two together: something that is intangible and something that is measurable, into one asset?

Wikimedia Movement, a nebula of volunteers, organisations, cultures, and languages that support and maintain Wikipedia, put knowledge equity on its banner. It is one of the values underpinning its 2030 Movement Strategy. **Wikipedia defines knowledge equity** as a concept referring to social change concerning both expanding what is valued as **knowledge** and seeking to include communities that may have been excluded from knowledge production and sharing through imbalanced structures of power and privilege. So, in fact knowledge equity is based on a transformation. It is more than simply accepting others to the table – it is deciding that the table itself needs to be changed to accommodate all the people that should be sitting at it. Maybe the people who didn't mind the table as it always was, will now have less room. But thanks to the change, everyone will not only fit but also be comfortable participating. There will be no business as usual.

Flipping a table like that is not a change that many boardrooms with people in power would approve of. Not coincidentally do we engage with this metaphor: both knowledge and access are power. If we achieve equity in the boardroom for just

one meeting but the next day all chairs are occupied as usual, we have failed. If we only half-open our Wikimedia projects, performatively include diversity in our documents, put beautiful values in our preambles, but do not dare to imagine what this power sharing should look like today and every day, we have failed. We have failed not only those who are silent at the table or very far away from it. We fail on the path to our vision of a world where every human being can freely share in the sum of *all* knowledge.

So how do we get to that task? Bringing more knowledge equity has conceptual, strategic, practical, and regulatory aspects, and more. Strategizing, conceptualising, planning, and finally doing – have no end: knowledge equity is, like any worthwhile value, a path to walk on, not merely a destination. This collection of four essays is a sample of these approaches as seen by the four authors. They touch on foundational questions but also some very real problems that need to be looked at within the Wikimedia community. One key aspect of this inward gaze is a deep reflection how to start this work with the communities that are silent (or silenced) at the centre – not just by them or for them.

The essays touch on the foundational concepts of Wikipedia, such as objectivity of the editors and neutrality of the content. But neutrality and objectivity source from connectedness and joint human experience, argues Marie-Luise Guhl. Marie is rereading female philosophers and demonstrating that Hannah Arendt was, in fact, a Wikipedian at heart. Nikki Zeuner investigates the effort of collective work and refracts it through the geographical, economic, and racial lenses to point out when and how a fun spare-time activity of adding to the sum of human knowledge becomes free labour. Naphsica Papanicolaou tells a story of her volunteering in a refugee camp in Greece and reflects on the role that the Wikimedia Movement can play – in both on-the-ground activities supporting refugees in their journey from despair to a new life, and as an agent of systemic change in policies that is necessary to alleviate the migrant crises. Systemic change is also at the core of my proposal to the readers. In exploring European policymaking of the Internet that so often prompts regulatory changes in other parts of the globe, I propose ways in which we can influence European policies to be less colour-blind and more responsive to the intersectional nature of problems that they are trying to solve.

This collection's all-over-the-placeness in terms of topics and levels of reflection is, to us, the feature of our project. It is an invitation for our colleagues, friends, and allies to “start where you are, use what you have, do what you can” in imagining a more equitable world, enriched by various protocols and facets of knowledge. We are offering snapshots on what transforming the Wikimedia ecosystem into an

equitable space could entail. Our hope is that these thoughts and proposals will be taken on and critiqued, nuanced, made better, and supplemented. This attempt should not be misinterpreted, though, as a self-serving exercise by four white women from Europe – we never intended for that. We simply start where we are, and use our platform, access, and resources to be of service to those who need to take a seat at the table.



THERE IS NO WORLD WITHOUT OTHER PEOPLE.

HANNAH ARENDT, KNOWLEDGE EQUITY, AND WIKIPEDIA

Marie-Luise Guhl

In her scientific novel *He, She and It*, in which Marge Piercy fictitiously anticipates the internet, she writes: *The ability to access the world's information and resculpt it was the equivalent of the difference between the propertied and the landless in the past of lords and serfs.*¹ Thus, Piercy highlights the power dynamics inherent to information, its creation, and its accessibility. If there is equity in knowledge, an idea that knowledge is intimately bound to justice and in need of attentive care, moderation, and rules, it encompasses not only *access to* knowledge but also *participation in* knowledge production.

But what does all this have to do with Wikipedia? As an encyclopaedic project its goal is to collect, edit, and share knowledge. The community itself observes self-imposed rules and standards to which the articles must conform, such as citing sources and maintaining neutrality in tone and perspective. The goal is not to depict one's own opinion on Wikipedia, but to inform and educate. Nonetheless, as information and power tend to be intertwined, we can ask how important a broad participation in knowledge production is to have a viable, sustainable encyclopaedic platform and to ensure equity in knowledge. By deploying Arendt's concept of plurality, I argue that an encyclopaedic project of collecting and sharing knowledge, such as Wikipedia, has the potential to become, what she calls, a political *space of appearance*: where people appear to one another and discuss and exchange about what is important to them. Thus, promoting equity in knowledge, i.e. depicting a multitude of perspectives, does not only strengthen the shared pursuit of objectivity but also sets free the political potential of Wikipedia.

In order to understand more about the connection between knowledge, power, and being part of society, I turned to Hannah Arendt and the work she published long before the genesis of the Internet, *The Human Condition* (1958). Her ideas about human interconnectedness – a fundamental condition to human existence – seem

¹ Marge Piercy, *He, She and It* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publishings, 1993), 143

to be reflected by the collaborative nature of the Wikipedian project, whose claim is that through a plural and coordinated effort knowledge is sourced most efficiently. Wikipedia has been built in opposition to the idea that only a few are expert enough to write encyclopaedias and gave the task of knowledge collection back to the many. It was this idea that brought me to Arendt who fervently defends the right of everyone to participate through speaking and acting in the matters of the world. But what do plurality, acting, and speaking mean, really?

The human condition: interconnectedness

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt uses the term “plurality” to refer to the interconnected social web that we are all part of.² We can intuitively understand this term as signifying a multitude or diversity, but the concept of plurality in the context of Arendt’s work goes well beyond our daily usage of the word. Sophie Loidolt, a well-known expert on Arendt’s work, claims that the idea of plurality is at the very heart of Arendt’s political theory.³

Plurality is not merely a synonym for the word “many”; it describes our connectedness to one another and to a shared world. When speaking of the world, as Arendt points out, we refer to an abstract horizon of things around us, but what is elementary and implicit in our understanding is that the world always appears to a multitude of people simultaneously, not just to one. To even conceive of a world we live in, actually implies the presence of others with whom we share the world. This is important for our further understanding as it highlights how plurality and world are interdependent. In short, there is no world without other people.⁴

Arendt explains that we reify our human world through action and speech. According to Arendt, not only does language serve the purpose of passing along information in a purely practical manner, but it also leaves room for far more expression of how we see the world, and therefore about who we are. Thus, the answer to the question of who we are lies in the way we speak and act. The acts of speaking and describing are the connective strings that weave the web of plurality and make the world visible around us.⁵

Our interconnectedness is present into the very core of our individuality

Arendt thinks of human beings in terms of their connectedness and dependence on others rather than their separate consciousness or self-regarding individualism.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 175

³ Sophie Loidolt, *Phenomenology of plurality. Hannah Arendt on political intersubjectivity* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2018), 2

⁴ Arendt, 182ff

⁵ Arendt, 95, 175

This is an important distinction to contextualize the way we think of individuals in general and of the way we produce knowledge in particular.

Arendt describes plurality as emerging from our similarities as well as our differences. Our similarities are the foundation of our ability to communicate with each other, yet at the same time, our very need to communicate stems from our inherent differences in constitution, feelings, perspectives etc. Communication is the means by which we attempt to convey to others our unique vision of the world, which would be otherwise unknowable to them. For Arendt, uniqueness is not something we own or possess; it really only comes to exist through our speech and interaction with one another within the web of plurality.⁶

In short, none of us would be an individual were it not for other individuals who recognize our uniqueness and our life and with whom we share the world in which our lives take place. It is important to understand that our interconnectedness is present at the very core of our individuality.

If we accept that an individual cannot exist on its own, then it also follows that the world does not exist without others who perceive it. The world, as such, does not appear to only one mind, one consciousness, but to many. To be in the world means to share the world.

The fiction of the neutral subject

So, we inhabit the world together. But when it comes to reality and understanding it, what role does plurality play in it? The role of intersubjectivity in understanding the production of knowledge has long been neglected. The modern continental philosophical tradition⁷ has been teaching us for a long time that we need to focus on the thinking individual or the mind in order to understand how one makes sense of reality and how one comes to know anything about reality. One of the most influential investigations into the eternal doubtful character of reality was proposed by René Descartes. The methodically applied doubt, which does not even stop at reality, finally finds renewed certainty only in its own thinking: *Cogito ergo sum*, “I think therefore I am”, is the famous conclusion. Accordingly, the thinking subject has a privileged, if not singular access to reality and certainty. In this concept the isolated thought process of a lone individual becomes the basis of all knowledge.⁸

⁶ Arendt, 175f

⁷ Examples for this tradition are, among others, René Descartes' *Discours de la méthode* (1637) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Arendt addresses both in her *The Life of the Mind* (1971), specifically in chapters 6 and 7: “The Thinking Ego and the Self: Kant,” “Reality and the Thinking Ego: the Cartesian Doubt and the *Sensus Communis*.”

⁸ Descartes, Part IV

In this tradition, when we think of our access to reality we only need to think of our individual cognitive processes and can forget about other humans inhabiting and thinking about that same world. For Arendt this approach is flawed as it leads to a false assumption about how we actually access reality, and therefore gain knowledge about the world. Arendt points out that when postulating a theoretical blank consciousness or pure subject we lose touch with reality as this pure subject is never positioned in the world but always inhabits a theoretical (imaginary) space. She reminds us of the contextuality of the self and of the bodily lived experience (involved in living as well as in the production of knowledge).⁹

Addressing Descartes' famous methods directly,¹⁰ Arendt explains that reality itself is something we construct in plurality. A truly isolated consciousness would not be able to distinguish between the world and itself, as every experience of the world would appear absolute to this consciousness. Furthermore, to distinguish reality from dream or hallucination, we need the experience of a shared perception. Our very notion of reality is constituted of having similar but different experiences of the same phenomena in a shared world. In other words, we need to be able to exchange about reality with others. Therefore, the concept of reality, according to Arendt, could not be formulated from the perspective of a single consciousness: "The reality of what I perceive is guaranteed by its worldly context, which includes others who perceive as I do (...)." ¹¹

Further on Arendt describes that it is not enough that the subject ("I") perceives, but that others *though perceiving this object from utterly different perspectives, agree on its identity*.¹² Thus, a being-with (*Mit-Sein*), perceiving-with (*Mit-Wahrnehmen*) constitutes our reality and the knowledge we can have of it.

A relationship to reality that is not mediated by different perspectives is unthinkable to Arendt. She proposes to think of consciousness not as an ideal empty vessel, but as part of a shared world, which implies a somewhat chaotic multitude of perspectives.¹³

Situated knowledge

Common sense might still tell us that knowledge simply is objective and therefore

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1978), 19ff; Arendt deals specifically with our ability to think and to judge (*Urteilskraft*) and defines reality as that which appears to us. This radical sounding statement points to the fact that without a real position in the world, e.g. with sensual and bodily experiences through which the world appears to us, we would have no relationship to reality whatsoever. The loneliness of thought cannot give us access to reality and it is unable to uncover the contextuality of the world around us.

¹⁰ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 19-29

¹¹ Arendt, 50

¹² Arendt, 50

¹³ Arendt, 45ff

devoid of subjectivity. Following this assumption, it would be irrelevant who participates in writing Wikipedia articles. There would be no link, so to speak, between knowledge and equity understood as overcoming systemic barriers of entry to creation of knowledge.

Such a notion of objectivity is an extremely short-sighted and outdated one, as it ignores social practices involved in knowledge production. Donna Haraway's concept of *situated knowledge* can help us understand how the pursuit of objectivity and plurality of perspectives (subjectivities) can go hand in hand. In her 1988 essay, Donna Haraway addresses science's claim to objectivity and critiques it from a feminist perspective.¹⁴ Haraway described the practice of *situated knowledge* as applied awareness of the shortcomings of objectivity. Instead of ignoring the fact that we all occupy a certain position, one makes it a part of the pursuit of objectivity. What one knows and sees about the world may be correct but does not encompass all possible differing and equally correct perceptions. In order to approach a universally valid description, a combination of a multitude of perspectives is needed. The possibilities of what we perceive and how we perceive are dependent on our specific position. In this context, expanding the notion of positionality, a term *possibilities of perception (Wahrnehmungsmöglichkeiten)*, coined by Barbara Holland-Cunz, comes in handy, as it highlights that all possible perceptions lie within the perceived object but cannot be uncovered, so to speak, by one situated individual alone.¹⁵

Haraway's practice of situated knowledge reveals objectivity as a social practice, in which we collectively negotiate our shared knowledge. The goal of a collective and democratic encyclopaedia is first and foremost to provide accurate and valid information. The practice of situated knowledge indicates that in order to approach objective knowledge, a diverse set of authors with many different subjective perspectives/positionalities is not an obstacle, but rather an advantage. In other words, working towards a culture of knowledge equity is not merely of moral or ethical interest; it also benefits the pursuit of complex and multifaceted knowledge production and collection.

Wikipedia: An Arendtian place of worldbuilding

The structure of the website of Wikipedia itself points towards an already existing awareness of the situatedness of knowledge: for every article on Wikipedia it is possible for readers to view the history of the article's versions, to examine previous

¹⁴ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, No. 3 (1988): 575-599

¹⁵ Barbara Holland-Cunz, *Gefährdete Freiheit. Über Hannah Arendt und Simone de Beauvoir* (Verlag Barbara Burdich, 2012)

and altered versions as well as the specific contributions made by the authors. The structure of the Wikipedia platform (e.g. the article itself, the discussion page, and the article history) makes it apparent that the collective effort gives knowledge its validity.

But beyond the validity of knowledge provided, the ability to access and to shape publicly available information holds political power. An encyclopaedic project such as Wikipedia is always a reflection of the worldview and socio-economic background of those writing it, and it shapes the perceptual possibilities of those reading it. What is available to us as knowledge, influences how we apprehend the world, what we see, and what we overlook. In other words, knowledge is power, and anyone who shapes knowledge shares that power by ultimately forming how people see the world around them. Reality becomes dynamic: things and relations appear and disappear from the horizon of our reality, depending on what holds our collective (or individual) attention.

A simple and striking example of how language and knowledge have the power to shape our reality is the ban on information about homosexuality, imposed in Hungary in 2021.¹⁶ The ban seeks to eradicate homosexuality from the public discourse. Homosexuality has been pushed to the edge of what can be spoken about and thus pushed over the edge of our reality.

Is this sufficient to claim that Wikipedia is also a political space? If we were to ask Hannah Arendt, she might ask back, is it a space of appearance?¹⁷ In Arendt's understanding, *a space of appearance is a space where I appear to others as others appear to me*. It is where people get together *in a manner of speech and action*: to discuss the matters of the world and through speech reveal themselves to each other. In these spaces we step out of our limited private lives to engage with others and to discuss the topics that concern us collectively.¹⁸ Political discussion, for Arendt, means to discuss the world we want to live in as the place we are all a part of. The possibility to appear to one another, to see and be seen, is in Arendt's thought equally important as the common debate about shared interests. It is just as important for us to know who says or does something as the thing said or done itself; especially in the political sense, one cannot go without the other. This brings us back to her original concept of plurality, as the political sphere to Arendt is just a consequence of the inherent interconnectedness between people that makes up our human condition. It is in plurality that we become the individuals we are.

¹⁶ Jennifer Rankin, "Hungary passes law banning LGBT content in schools or kids' TV", *The Guardian*, 15 Jun 2021, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/15/hungary-passes-law-banning-lbgt-content-in-schools>
Also, for further information: "Hungarian anti-LGBT law", Wikipedia, URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarian_anti-LGBT_law

¹⁷ Arendt, *The human condition*, 198

¹⁸ Arendt, 198-207

It involves being seen, heard, and acknowledged (or judged) for what we do. The question that Arendt would ask us, therefore, would be: Do you appear as a person when you write for Wikipedia?

Indeed, some strange public appearances take place on Wikipedia: we encounter pseudonyms, anonymous writers whose specific positions are obscured, but who at the same time leave traces of themselves through forms of knowledge collection.¹⁹ In this sense, every text, every act of knowledge production is a trace left by a subject, regardless of whether that subject wants to hide or not. Every article is linked to a discussion page, on which the detailed content of the articles is being negotiated through mutual criticism amongst the authors. Additionally, though, Wikipedia allows readers to retrace the text to the author and to follow the writing history of that individual digital persona. Therefore, the knowledge collected on Wikipedia does appear as not only linked to sources that guarantee accuracy but is also linked to the authors whose identities appear through their interests and contributions.

So does Wikipedia allow its authors to transcend their private lives and step into a more public identity seeking to make an impact in the world, as Arendt would have it? Yes, it does. It is a medium through which the authors shape the world the readers see and thus the authors leave their personal imprint and appear in the space that Wikipedia provides. Following that thought, allowing people to become authors means letting them take part in a political exchange by influencing our collective knowledge.

Wikipedia is not simply an encyclopaedic project; it is also an open and collective one. As such it has plurality built into its very structure and cannot omit its political character. At its very core the Wikipedia is a democratic and plural undertaking, which mirrors Arendt's understanding of the political. The social dimension of knowledge production, and the world-shaping impact of sharing information should not be obscured or forgotten. Plurality is present in the way we come to speak of reality and our knowledge is intimately linked to the many shared perspectives of the world. The pursuit of equity in knowledge is not simply an extravagance, but a necessity: it must translate into a critical attention paid to the political character of knowledge collection in general and to the collective and open effort of a project such as Wikipedia in particular.

¹⁹ And if this were not the case, it would make no sense to make the authorship visible for the sake of transparency and traceability.

VOLUNTEERISM RETHOUGHT

Nikki Zeuner

Wikimedians - not your ordinary volunteers

The Wikipedian, or maybe the cliché of him, has always been different from the image of the do-gooder, selfless volunteer in other social movements. The Wikipedian is there to, yes, make a world a better place (i.e. contribute to the sum of all human knowledge), but also mostly because he (pronoun intended) is an expert on something and can show and share his knowledge. Or because he is a collector of pieces of knowledge, or photographs of artifacts, or lists of cultural data items, an excellent researcher, a passionate lover of his subject of expertise, and he enjoys the collaboration with other experts in his field.

Recently, in times of crises, and in times of increasing misinformation and disinformation on commercial platforms, Wikipedia volunteer editors have been publicly elevated in their purpose, providing peer-edited, reliable information to those in need, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example.²⁰ But still, volunteers in the Wikimedia projects have eluded the stereotypical volunteer image: selfless, heroic, helping / rescuing those in need. Instead, we in Wikimedia tend to think of our volunteers as a hidden army, always on the march in search for the peer-edited truth.

At the same time, they are individuals, many of them introverts, sitting alone in front of their screens, and wordsmithing to represent the knowledge of the world. They are smart, knowledgeable, and each of them knows better than all the other ones. They are not selfless heroes, even though the non-profit-speak of the larger affiliates and the WMF try to push that narrative at times.

Critique of Volunteering

I built the AmeriCorps²¹ program for a large rural area in the US Southwest in the mid-2000s. Over the years it gave hundreds of youths straight out of high school the opportunity to gain job skills, save up for college, learn what it feels like to work

²⁰ "Wikipedia and the COVID-19 pandemic," accessed March 11, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_coverage_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic

²¹ "National Service in New Mexico," accessed March 11, 2024, <https://americorps.gov/national-service-report/nm>

in a team and get stuff done. They sure got awesome swag, too. I still feel good about this. On the other hand, it created a situation in which many rural non-profits developed a dependence on free labour.

Volunteerism—morally-motivated work without any formal remuneration – is a form of civic engagement, and a social construct based in a given context. Its forms and formulas have been diverse, and so has its critique. Volunteers have been accused of taking real jobs from people, lowering the value of labour. Volunteer systems have been criticized for exploiting the labour and skills of people who really should get paid, but volunteer for lack of an alternative (or the alternative may be military service/unemployment).

Finally, the make-a-difference hero volunteerism of the global North has been criticized for being part of the non-profit industrial complex, which perpetuates colonialist and paternalistic systems, inequality, inequity, and allows the privileged to go home satisfied, because they have done their part for the poor/uneducated/homeless/you-fill-in-the-blanks.²² One target of criticism here is voluntourism, now a multimillion-dollar industry. The criticism of philanthropy, through which the privileged give their money to help the marginalized, while perpetuating systems of inequality, is echoed in the criticism of volunteerism, where they give their time to help the less privileged. Everyone goes home happy and nothing changes.²³

So why am I thinking about this critique in the context of Wikimedia Movement Strategy? We have already mentioned that Wikimedia volunteers do not fit the category of make-a-difference heroes, right?

They sure tend to be privileged, though. Looking at the demographics of our volunteer base in the German and the English Wikipedias, our contributors are majority white, male, well-educated, and in their 40-60s.²⁴ Globally, geotagging data of Wikipedia content shows stark inequalities in terms of what is written about and who edits.²⁵ And the Wikimedia projects are their own perfect meritocracies: the more you edit (i.e. the more time you have to engage in editing), the more privileges and decision-making powers you get. So, the volunteers with the largest privilege in terms of time move up in the system and regulate the community. Having less time, because you are working, taking care of kids and elders, or because you are struggling in other ways, means you are less able to rise up in the system.

²² “Criticisms of Volunteering,” accessed March 11, 2024,

<https://karahall-serve.weebly.com/criticisms-of-volunteering.html>

²³ Sue Carter Kahl, “Power, Privilege, and Volunteerism,” last modified June 9, 2020,

<https://www.volunteercommons.com/2020/06/09/power-privilege-and-volunteerism/>

²⁴ “Wikipedia: Wikipedians/Demographics,” accessed March 11, 2024,

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedians/Demographics>

²⁵ “Geotagging Wikipedia is not quite so equal after all,” *The Conversation*, August 18, 2014,

<https://theconversation.com/geotagging-reveals-wikipedia-is-not-quite-so-equal-after-all-30550>

Many studies, newspaper articles, and movement publications have noted, criticized, and analysed the lack of diversity in our volunteer base, and researched its reasons.²⁶ So I am not going to belabour that point here. Many affiliates, educators,²⁷ and volunteers have started programs and projects to address it: a lot of them with the purpose to improve the content specifically by and about women. These efforts have built new supportive subcommunities for women editors and have begun to fill some of our content gaps.

But now, since 2022, we have a new movement strategy that writes knowledge equity in big letters all across our flags. We want to grow the movement across the globe. So it will no longer be enough to improve content for one marginalized group at a time. Something fundamental has to change. I would wager that our definition and our culture of volunteerism will have to be part of the change.

Knowledge equity and volunteerism

Knowledge equity is one of the pillars of the movement strategic direction, which says:

As a social movement, we will focus our efforts on the knowledge and communities that have been left out by structures of power and privilege. We will welcome people from every background to build strong and diverse communities. We will break down the social, political, and technical barriers preventing people from accessing and contributing to free knowledge.²⁸

What if one of the social barriers is volunteerism? The assumption that, just as we did in the first 20 years of Wikipedia in the global North, volunteers will carry the bulk of content creation, may not work for the communities and individuals we think of as underrepresented and marginalized. In fact, as we were writing the recommendations of the strategy, many of the participants from the global South testified that their volunteer capacities were limited. Time is the most finite resource. When your choice is to provide free time to a project or put food on the table for your family, you will do the latter.

²⁶ Alina Selyukh, "Wikipedia at 15: The Struggle To Attract Non-Techy Geeks, last modified January 15, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/01/15/463059593/wikipedia-at-15-the-struggle-to-attract-non-techy-geeks> ;

Hoda Baytiyeh and Jay Pfaffman. "Volunteers in Wikipedia: Why the Community Matters," *International Forum of Educational Technology and Society*, vol. 13, No. 2 (2010): 128-140, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jeductechsoci.13.2.128>

²⁷ "Wikipedia at 20: Why it often overlooks stories of women in history," *The Conversation*, last modified January 14, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/wikipedia-at-20-why-it-often-overlooks-stories-of-women-in-history-92555>

²⁸ "Strategy/Wikimedia movement/2017/Direction," accessed April 26, 2024 https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Strategy/Wikimedia_movement/2017/Direction

From anecdotal evidence I gathered over the last few years from colleagues in West Africa and South America, this is particularly true for volunteers who begin to do more than editing. Those who organize events, start user groups, build partnerships, advocate in their countries for open knowledge, and try to maintain and nurture small communities are especially vulnerable to time constraints. It takes several years to get to the point where you do these things with success, having built the skills. At that point, you are no longer a student, you have a growing family and have to work.

I fear that our movement loses a lot of these leaders who have put in years of their lives, are expected to continuously volunteer, but cannot pull it off anymore economically. With them, we also lose connections to their communities, their partnership networks, and years of knowledge on community building that could support their peers in translocal ways.

My anecdotal evidence providers are people who participated in movement strategy development, so they are already part of the more privileged groups in the context of their countries. What about the truly marginalized and underrepresented we want to include so urgently? When your human rights are violated, your ethnic group is persecuted, your queer identity is met with state violence, your freedom of speech is threatened, your housing and food are not secured - it also happens that your voice is erased. And your voice, your knowledge, your story, your lived experience matter, they are a part of the sum of all human knowledge. But you gotta share it in your free time. Really?

Volunteers vs staff

Volunteers in the established Wikimedia projects are very aware of their own value. They know the quality and quantity of the content depends entirely on them, providing free knowledge for readers, and thus they are instrumental in attracting donations. In Germany, volunteers are entitled to all the services paid for by less than one month of online fundraising. This fundraising is managed by the German chapter, Wikimedia Deutschland (WMDE). Volunteers can apply for project support, and easily get funding, training, and organizing assistance from the chapter. They receive stipends to go to Wikimania and WikiCon, they use local meeting places, with the rent paid for by the chapter. They check out equipment, use libraries, and get expenses paid. Surely, they also pay for many expenses themselves, because they can. The chapter and its staff also work to make knowledge available from GLAMs, to open up science, it advocates in Berlin and Brussels for legislation supportive to open knowledge and works to increase awareness of the projects and free knowledge issues with institutions and the general public.

That the division of labour between staff and volunteers is not without conflicts can also be felt in some movement conversations, mostly online or in chats. After the strategic direction was developed, in Phase II of developing the strategy, we convened in working groups to recommend actual structural reforms of the antiquated, colonial power relationships in our movement. In this endeavour, volunteers and staff from all over the world worked together well, incorporating a diversity of perspectives into the recommendations of each group. I learned a lot from the brilliant volunteers and staff people in my working group and at movement gatherings. The recommendations benefited tremendously from merging the staff and volunteer/community wisdom.

But once in a while, staff gets hit by a load of distrust and disdain, when volunteers feel critical of staff decisions. 'Assume good faith' is such a tired phrase in the movement at this point, because it is said every time someone just wants to say, 'please be nice to me'. I have more than a few times been made to feel bad about being a paid employee, as if that somehow made me less noble and more corrupt. This is where the heroic volunteer narrative somehow does get utilized, and by the volunteers themselves.

Chapters and their staff are responsible for performing functions that volunteers may not undertake, such as fundraising, advocacy, fiscal management. This is true for other movements and International NGOs as well - Greenpeace, Amnesty, the International Red Cross, Médecins Sans Frontières all function based on a division of labour between volunteers and staff.

The framing of "volunteers vs. staff" is misdirected, and a result of the dysfunctional movement power structures.

To reorient towards knowledge equity, we need to reframe the problem to tackle the underlying tension of balance of power in our movement. This division becomes less clear when we transfer the model to the emerging open knowledge communities of the global South.

In this context, rather than distinguishing privilege by volunteer/employee status, we should distinguish it by the economic starting place of a person who wants to contribute to the mission. This starting place consists of a budget of time and money. Should it not be possible to equalize this, to a degree, by adding time and/or money where they are missing?

Is paying volunteers the answer?

If we are serious about knowledge equity and equity in decision making, we need to have a conversation about volunteerism. We need to ask where, in its purist Euro-American definition, the concept and the practice become exploitative, and how to change it. This starts with acknowledging that volunteering is contextual, like all the variables that shape the growth of our movement. Contextual dimensions are socio-economic, political, and cultural.

In the process of formulating the movement strategy recommendations, several working groups discussed how economic inequities could be mitigated, allowing more people to share their knowledge. Often these conversations resulted in strong reactions from established volunteer community members. Editing Wikipedia should not be paid - this is one of the taboos of the movement. Avoiding paid editing is one of the principles that the global North knowledge projects were built upon, to assure maximum neutrality of the content and independence from economic interests. This pretty much cemented our movement's deep roots in volunteerism and helps preserve the reputation of the content we provide.

However, the line does get blurry in places. English Wikipedia, German Wikipedia, and the Wikimedia Foundation have written policies²⁹ that prohibit editing without disclosing remuneration, but they do not prohibit it per se. There are Wikimedian and Wikipedian in Residence programs, where these individuals are paid to produce content, or guide others in doing so. This also requires disclosure according to our policies. Some residence programs have shown great success in bringing in new perspectives and adding content. They also paved the way for institutions and individuals to contribute to our projects. We would not want to miss the impact of these programs as we grow the movement. Given the editor community's scrutiny, the remuneration disclosure policies seem to work most of the time, or at least in cases where it matters,³⁰ and could be adapted to other situations and contexts if needed.

Paid editing is well restricted and regulated and should probably stay that way. But what about admins? What about fundraising, community organizing, event management, partnership building, hackathons, participating in movement meetings? Just one example: When I visited the Cote d'Ivoire User Group on behalf of the Movement Strategy Working Group on Capacity Building in 2019, the families of my

²⁹ "Wikipedia: Paid-contribution disclosure," accessed March 11, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Paid-contribution_disclosure#Wikimedia_Foundation_Terms_of_Use

³⁰ Jan Christian Muller, "Nach Kritik: DFB entschuldigt sich wegen geändertem Wikipedia-Artikel", *Frankfurter Rundschau*, last modified January 23, 2021, <https://www.fr.de/sport/fussball/deutscher-fussball-bund-dfb-wikipedia-seite-friedrich-curtius-general-sekretaer-statement-90172530.html>

meeting partners cooked the yummy food we had for lunch. My Wikimedian hosts spent several days preparing the meeting, then shuttling me around Abidjan, introducing me to people, translating and discussing capacity building in their context. We all had a lovely time, but none of this time was remunerated, nor were most of the costs of transportation and food. Did we build or drain capacity?

All the talk about leadership development rings hollow if our leaders cannot eat. We need to find ways to cover the costs, both expenses and time, so that these movement activists can continue the work. But how do we do this without destroying the spirit of volunteerism, disrupting communities, increasing inequities, and creating unsustainable dependencies? A look to the development and humanitarian field seems appropriate to understand promising practices and skip over mistakes made by those movements and NGOs over the last decades.

There are examples of volunteer remuneration practices in the global South,³¹ in development and humanitarian work. In such cases, the volunteers typically come from the marginalized communities to be 'supported' by aid. More thoughtful remuneration systems consider the livelihood situation of participants, are rooted in community assets, and weigh how remuneration supports resilience. Some also try to be aware of how remuneration could disrupt the social fabric of volunteer communities by shifting the motivation for engagement from mission-driven to a financial one. In some anecdotal cases, the discontinuation of payments has caused people to stop engagement that had been there before anybody was paid.

In my view, the separation of motives (generating income vs. a higher calling or mission) comes from the Euro-American, privileged understanding of volunteering, which includes a perceived purity coming from not getting remunerated. Other research in Africa suggests that these motivations are not mutually exclusive or competing, and that any small financial incentive can help keep people engaged in their communities.³²

I imagine payments can take away the pressure and help reconcile voluntary activity with activities needed to maintain the livelihood. The payments should not replace income-generating activities needed for livelihood; salaries should be viewed as distinct from volunteer reimbursement, compensation, or remuneration.

³¹ Matt Baillie Smith et al. "Volunteering Hierarchies in the Global South: Remuneration and Livelihoods," *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, Vol. 33 (2022): 93-106, last modified August 6, 2020

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11266-020-00254-1>

³² Stale Wig, "The purchase of volunteerism: Uses & meanings of money in Lesotho's development sector," in *Volunteer economies: The politics and ethics of voluntary labour in Africa*, eds. R. Prince & H. Brown (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer Limited, 2016), 75–95

It will be important to not undermine local economies or violate the rights of workers by remunerating volunteers to the point of creating additional precarious jobs. The International Labour Organization distinguishes between cost coverage and remuneration – funds received that amount to more than one third of local market wages are considered remuneration rather than reimbursement or cost coverage.³³

There could be a variety of reimbursement mechanisms³⁴ depending on the situation: stipends to individuals, reimbursement of actual costs, per diems, incentives and rewards, or investments in infrastructure, such as office space, equipment, and internet access. Childcare is also often named as a factor, the absence of which prevents especially women from contributing, so it would be important to increase equity in participation by providing some coverage of childcare costs. It will also be important to sustain the program over time, making it a reliable resource and avoiding the engagement drop-off effect described above. Finally, the program should be transparent and easy to access. To make sure that we retain highly qualified volunteers who benefit from the support, the program should be connected with any leadership and employment opportunities within the movement, which may serve as a next step after volunteering.

Finally, volunteer payments can help equalize relationships between volunteers from different geographic areas of the movement, assuring that volunteers from economically disadvantaged regions do not feel inferior or demoralized. We have practiced this in the past through stipends for attending conferences.

Combined with these instruments to enable individual participation, we will need to create a targeted and customized system of capacity building grants to emerging organizations that include personnel costs as well as supplies and equipment, rent, and utilities. Here, too, we do not necessarily want to replicate the organizational development stories of European chapters sketched above. However, to grow the movement, we will need professional staff-based structures at regional and national levels that support editor communities and free knowledge activists. These organizations do not have to replace informal structures and user groups, but they should complement the work of volunteers and lend themselves to acting as fiscal agents, policy advocates, and as corporate entities for formal partnerships wherever that is possible and desired. New and different divisions of free knowledge labour will develop in these contexts between organizations, people, profes-

³³ International Labour Organization, *Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work*, 2011, accessed March 15, 2024, https://webapps.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgre-ports/---stat/documents/publication/wcms_162119.pdf

³⁴ Ellis Paine et al, "A rose by any other name... Revisiting the question: 'What exactly is volunteering?'" Working papers series: paper one, Institute for Volunteering Research, 2010, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.ifrc.org/docs/IDRL/Volunteers/a-rose-by-any-other-name-what-exactly-is-volunteering.pdf>

sionals and amateurs, staff, and volunteers (remunerated and not remunerated).

The cost of not investing in people

Paying volunteers? I have seen the raised eyebrows... heard the concerns about accountability, potential misuse of funds. I am less concerned about this than about what could go wrong if we don't invest in marginalized communities and economically disadvantaged leaders. I am concerned with what we will miss if we continue down the path of funding projects, not people. If we fund based on outputs. If we repeat the mistakes of the development aid organizations and humanitarian programs that for decades have failed to put trust in local communities and have opened their own local offices instead of investing in community leaders and civil society. Many recent lessons for the design of financial instruments can be learned from the failures and some successes of the humanitarian and development communities.³⁵ Volunteer remuneration can work for us if we embed it in equity. It will empower those ready to make progress on our goals. It will create spaces for others to focus on volunteer editing.

Some of us are privileged to volunteer time. Others are employees of non-profit organizations. And still others will be in between, giving their time and getting their expenses offset. The motivation doesn't get less noble if you get reimbursed. We should be all working together, joined by the mission, the vision, and the strategy of this movement.

³⁵ See, for example, The Grand Bargain's website, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

KNOWLEDGE EQUITY AND REFUGEE CRISIS: THE ROLE OF THE WIKIMEDIA MOVEMENT

Naphsica Papanicolaou

Coming to Greece

"Absolutely shameful", declared the High Commissioner for Refugees at UNHCR in August 2016, referring to the situation of migrants and refugees who landed on the Greek islands from Turkey.³⁶ Alexis Tsipras, then the Prime Minister, admitted that this problem completely overwhelmed Greece, which had suffered an unprecedented economic crisis since 2008 and was now facing extreme difficulties with very few resources to deal with a humanitarian crisis.

I felt personally affected by this disaster, both because of family history and through the work I had just done. My great-grandfather became a refugee when he fled to Egypt after the Turkish invasion of Greece in the 1920s. In 2016, during an internship at the European Commission I wrote a *dossier* on the Schengen Agreements and the migration crisis³⁷ in Greece. After that, I decided to go to Greece and do what I can to help these women and men who had fled their land. I also felt for the Greeks, already struggling during the aftermath of the Subprimes crisis: in 2012, the minimum wage was reduced from €751 gross per month to €586 (and even €510 for those under 25).³⁸

I spent almost six months volunteering in a refugee transit camp of Piraeus, lending a hand to the associations on the spot supporting the refugees arriving from the islands of Lesbos and Ios.

The so-called 2015 Syrian refugee crisis in Europe did not end in 2016, or after. Since then, millions of refugees came to the European Union (EU), mostly people

³⁶ Geoffrey Marain-Joris, "Sur les îles grecques, la situation « honteuse » des réfugiés en transit," *Les Echos*, last modified August 7, 2015, <https://www.lesechos.fr/2015/08/-sur-les-iles-grecques-la-situation-honteuse-des-refugies-en-transit-269163>

³⁷ GRASPE, Groupe de Réflexion sur l'avenir du Service Public Européen, vol. 27 (2016) : 45-57, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://graspe.eu/document/grasp27.pdf>

³⁸ Marina Rafenberg, "Dix ans après la crise des dettes, les Grecs ont du mal à tourner la page," last modified April 5, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2022/04/05/-dix-ans-apres-la-crise-des-dettes-les-grecs-ont-du-mal-a-tourner-la-page_6120600_3234.html

from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.³⁹ Europe has been facing an enormous challenge of helping people in humanitarian crises who flee from war, drought, poverty, and persecution. The need to provide for Ukrainian refugees escaping Russian invasion proves it again today.

Through the lens of my experience as a volunteer in a refugee camp in Greece I would like to examine the role of free knowledge activism in support of refugees in crisis. The Wikimedia movement aims at enabling everyone to access the sum of human knowledge. How can the people who have no consistent access to information and education use Wikimedia projects to improve their situation? How can they be included in the knowledge creation process where it is important for them? How can we truly serve them?

To provide perspective on these questions I will examine the needs of refugees as I encountered them at the Piraeus refugee camp. I will look into differences between the groups and the failings of the support system to meet their basic needs. This includes the role of access to information and knowledge as a basic need. I will examine the barriers that Wikimedia and similar knowledge-generating projects face when attempting to create conditions for meaningful inclusion of people with an experience of a crisis, such as refugees. I will outline strategies to overcome barriers and limits that a movement like ours can implement to better serve refugee communities. I will touch upon the necessary systemic approach, including advocacy to influence political decisions. I will also suggest ideas stemming from the knowledge equity approach to both the content of our projects, such as Wikipedia, and the practical ways of reaching outside our community to increase impact of this important work.

I arrived in Athens without really knowing where to start and was advised to go to the port of Piraeus, the city's main seaport. There the situation was alarming – almost 4,000 refugees had been living on a vast concrete plain that was baking in the heat, awaiting their political asylum and an opportunity to go elsewhere in Europe. They were supported by just about forty volunteers while no camp had yet been built by the Greek government. There were tents, some worksite toilets, and a small shack where we stored all the basic necessities. Meals were given by the Greek army and clothes were bought by the citizens of Athens. Primary needs.

One could expect that when people arrived with nothing of value to a new place

³⁹ “UNHCR, Global Trends,” accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends>

where they didn't speak the language nor had a place to live, they would not think about anything other than their primary needs.⁴⁰ And, certainly, they would not reflect on the importance of free knowledge. Yet in this new situation access to information became a primary need for many.

Indeed, life of refugees in the camps was marked by stress and uncertainty of the future and they were affected by constant waiting filled with boredom. The few activities that we set up could not alleviate the anxiety or the sense of lack of purpose. The distress of the refugees was exacerbated by a consistent lack of access to information, from instruction on the asylum process in a native language, to news from the old country, to some form of entertainment that could help cope with the situation. Without such access it was impossible for them to assert a meaningful level of control over the situation, not to mention keeping in touch with their families back home. All that seemed secondary to the lack of toilet access, but it was not: it was as important for the mental wellbeing of a person whose life in the old country has ended and the life in the new one hasn't really begun.

We tried to get organised as well as we could. First, we needed to get to know the refugees in the camp to better understand their needs and to help them in obtaining asylum – a formal status enabling them to leave the camp and start a new life. The volunteers did not speak Arabic or Farsi, the languages used by the refugees, so English was our language of communication. To improve it and to give them some skills helpful in the next stage of their life in Europe, we organised English lessons.

Learning together

Setting up courses in English while lacking any pedagogical background was not that easy. We did not have any books to guide us either. We managed with the means at hand: we tried to remember the English lessons we had all in school (most of the volunteers were from Europe, mostly from Spain, Portugal, and Sweden) and apply these methods. We had pens but very little paper and it was complicated for the refugees to keep loose sheets together from day to day. We started with the basic vocabulary, and it was more of a learning by talking and conversation. Even if it was very laborious, some refugees were able to handle conversations after a few months, which was relevant for a better integration in Europe and a better understanding of their situation. Sometimes, when translators were not available, we used online translation tools to make ourselves understood.

⁴⁰ Maslow's *A Theory of Human Motivation*, uncovers five (groups of) basic needs: physiological needs, safety needs, belonging and love needs, esteem needs and the need for self-actualization. See more: "Maslow's hierarchy of needs", accessed March 15, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs

The children and youth in the camp did not have books or games to be occupied with, and there were no materials that could help them understand what was going to happen in their new situation, adapted to their level of understanding. Knowing that there were children in the camp, Athenians brought some textbooks. It was a very moving gesture, but the supply was a small random selection, all in Greek. It was impossible for the refugees to make meaningful use of these gifted resources, let alone continue any learning, interrupted by the passage to Europe.

Because of the unpreparedness of the authorities – and, in effect, the EU – to handle the refugee absorption, children and youth at the Piraeus camp were outside any formal or informal educational frameworks. This was not an unusual situation for refugees: according to a UNHCR report,⁴¹ only 22% of the global adolescent refugees have access to secondary school whilst only 1% have access to university. These statistics are quite demoralising. Indeed, the integration of young refugees and the access to professions requiring several years of study is almost impossible. The chances of young refugees to get on with a daily structure, learn together with their peers and ensure a better future in their new life situation, are distressingly low. Their generation is “lost” as soon as they spend their lives in camps, no matter what talents they have. Less education also means less mobility and opportunities, which perpetuates trauma and crises for the current and, likely, the future generations.⁴²

Access to education is clearly the primary need for these young people. First, it enables personal development, and it is a factor in alleviating poverty and inequalities,⁴³ while supporting adjustment in the country the refugees are in. In addition, it also allows them to improve their general wellbeing on a daily basis. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate refugee children into the formal educational system in the country of their stay immediately, as the consequences of not being at school will impact their whole lives.

A window to the world

It is easy to imagine that the lack of basic infrastructure for housing and hygiene extends to a lack of organised access to the online world. Indeed, the refugees only had online access if they possessed a mobile phone.

⁴¹ “UNHCR reports crisis in refugee education,” last modified September 15, 2016, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/news-releases/unhcr-reports-crisis-refugee-education>

⁴² Mario Piacentini, “PISA data on students with an immigrant background,” OCDE, last modified accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/1A-Piacentini.pdf>

⁴³ “The right to Education,” UNESCO, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/right-education>

A mobile phone provides a connection with family and networks from before the relocation and its portability makes it a good internet access point. Mobile services used most frequently are calling and texting, but refugees would like to use the mobile internet to a greater extent than they usually can, due to data costs or power access – as confirmed by conclusions of the M4H program.⁴⁴

Considerations about the ways in which refugees access the internet need to inform everything that we do with and for them. Wikimedia projects will only be useful if they are optimised for a cell phone use or are energy- and data-efficient. Otherwise, we need to offer alternatives that work efficiently in breaking connectivity or, once downloaded, offline.

Improving the infrastructure of Wikimedia projects

The Wikimedia Foundation (WMF) takes on a range of efforts to make Wikimedia projects more sustainable, steadily decreasing overall carbon emissions.⁴⁵ These efforts could and should be expanded, in time, to include monitoring and efficiency improvements aiming at making Wikipedia and other projects even more energy- and data-efficient – an important factor in better serving refugee communities.

Wikipedia Zero⁴⁶ provides an experiment by WMF to improve accessibility of our projects. The Foundation created Wikipedia Zero in 2012 to address one barrier to participating in Wikipedia: high mobile data costs. To do this, the WMF partnered with mobile operators, who in turn waived data costs for access to Wikipedia. Throughout the program's six-year tenure, the WMF partnered with a total of 97 mobile operators in 72 countries, providing over 800 million people with access to Wikipedia and its sister projects free of mobile data charges.

As of February 2018, the Wikipedia Zero program has been discontinued. Besides a significant drop in adoption and interest in the program, it stirred a lot of controversy in the Wikimedia movement and beyond as a very bad precedent of privileged network access. Such practices eventually allow wealthy companies to take over the audiences from other sources as users can save money by using data-cost-free

⁴⁴ M4H, funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and supported by the General System for Mobile Communications, aims to promote a new digital approach in humanitarian aid in which mobile and digital solutions will help improve access to services and the monitoring of news for people affected by a crisis, or likely to suffer from it. More on the research, including the report and the accompanying blog and a video resource on the GSMA's website, last modified July 16, 2019, <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/the-digital-lives-of-refugees/>

⁴⁵ Deb Tankersley, „Wikimedia Foundation Environmental Sustainability Carbon Footprint Report for 2021,“ last modified June 27, 2022, <https://diff.wikimedia.org/2022/06/27/wikimedia-foundations-carbon-footprint-report-for-2021/>

⁴⁶ “Wikipedia Zero,“ accessed March 15, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_Zero

services. This result impacts mostly less privileged communities⁴⁷ and the Wikimedia movement didn't want to contribute to that effect.

Meeting people where they are

While Wikipedia is among ten most visited websites in the world, it is not known enough among the communities that could benefit from free access to knowledge the most: non-Western refugees and migrants. To address this, the WMF experimented with new projects and partnerships to increase awareness of Wikipedia, and the WMF has experienced some initial success in this work. In Iraq, for example, the WMF raised awareness of Wikipedia by more than 30%.

In Europe there are over 25 communities and organisations affiliated with the Wikimedia movement. Because of their location and scope of activities, they have special responsibilities in serving and assisting refugees and migrants in European countries, as they try to both adjust to new life and keep in touch with the old traditions, knowledge, and identities. The starting point of this process is to understand who these people are, where they are from, and what languages they speak. It is necessary to bring awareness of our projects and create space to center the needs and requests of these communities regarding access to free knowledge.

Recognising the refugee crisis as a chance to make refugees' lives easier as a disseminator of information is key to creating a set of interventions on our end. Our efforts may provide any factual information about the mass migrations as well as the information specifically needed by the refugees.

Our movement has a precedent in seeking meaningful partnerships to help alleviate negative consequences of a crisis. Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic doubling with the viral spread of online disinformation on the topic, in October 2020 the World Health Organisation and the Wikimedia Foundation, collaborated⁴⁸ to increase public access to the most recent and reliable information on COVID-19. Wikipedia editors have also been on the front lines of preventing the spread of false information⁴⁹ around the coronavirus by ensuring that information about the

⁴⁷ Leo Mirani, "Millions of Facebook users have no idea they're using the internet," *Quartz Magazine*, last modified February 9, 2015, <https://shorturl.at/ektuW>

⁴⁸ "The World Health Organization and Wikimedia Foundation expand access to information about COVID-19 on Wikipedia," last modified October 22, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news/item/22-10-2020-the-world-health-organization-and-wikimedia-foundation-expand-access-to-trusted-information-about-covid-19-on-wikipedia>

⁴⁹ Noam Cohen, "How Wikipedia Prevents the Spread of Coronavirus Misinformation," *The Wired*, last modified March 14, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/how-wikipedia-prevents-spread-coronavirus-misinformation/>

pandemic is based on reliable sources and updated regularly in the encyclopaedia.

Of course, useful information for people relocating to another country will not always be as universal and straightforward as the recommendation to wash hands to prevent a COVID-19 infection. We need to take a different approach. One of our projects, Wikidata, is a system of codifying information and can be used by anyone who wants to ensure that the information they produce is easily updated and transmittable across online services. It enables codification of information to be read by machines, which opens up possibilities of machine translations and localisation of information.

Crotos, a free search engine⁵⁰ as well as Kohesio, a European Commission website on EU funding, use Wikidata, opening new possibilities in creating a multi-actor free knowledge ecosystem. Investigating how Wikidata can be useful in creating information about crises and possibilities on the ground in a rapidly evolving environment could be an exciting Europe-wide endeavour that could be of direct use to the refugees. All that information does not need to become part of Wikipedia if that makes it difficult for the refugees in terms of access. Our task is to create documentation and design user experience directed at recipients who are organisations and individuals working with refugees and to help them understand the usability of that system for the purpose of keeping important information for refugees up to date across services and languages.

Welcome home – knowledge equity and refugee communities

Knowledge equity is a perspective introducing social changes regarding the expansion of what is valued as knowledge and how communities may have been excluded from this discourse by unbalanced structures of power and privilege. The displaced, vulnerable communities that had to leave their countries and their social positions may become particularly excluded from both knowledge production and access. As seen in the example of Scaramangas refugee camp, absorption⁵¹ systems are ill-equipped to centre refugees' fundamental needs regarding language, continuity of education, and ability to stay informed, as well as ability to produce knowledge. Not addressing these needs may further prevent individuals from making informed decisions and thus disempower them in shaping their new lives.

Wikipedia as a source of knowledge may not be the immediate location where refugees would look for information regarding their first steps in the new life situa-

⁵⁰ Julia Giannella, "Crotos: a project on visual art-works powered by Wikidata and Wikimedia Commons," *MediaScopium*, last modified September 11, 2018, <https://www.visgraf.impa.br/mediascopium/crotos-a-project-on-visual-artworks-powered-by-wikidata-and-wikimedia-commons/>

⁵¹ "Knowledge equity," accessed March 15, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge_equity

tion, but it can become a useful tool for people who are rebuilding their lives in new places. Examples from Marseille, Ivory Coast, and Greece, show that putting themselves and their experiences “on the map” – and thus contributing with knowledge production – can have an affirmative effect on individuals in transition.

In this spirit, an edit-a-thon was organised in Marseille in 2015 to improve Wikipedia’s ⁵² definitions, particularly of the terms migrants versus refugees and foreigners versus immigrants. Members of the Italian community in Marseille provided details on the Panier district ⁵³ rue Lacydon, where families of Italian migrants were settled. The Armenian community gave testimonies used to illustrate articles on Camp Oddo in Marseille, their settlement in Martigues and the construction of a church in La Cabucelle.

There are also attempts in the movement to work within refugee camps. Two Wikimedian volunteers in the Ivory Coast have set up training for the refugees living in the camp of Nyarugusu, Tanzania, on how to contribute to Wikipedia. They are also considering training the refugees who want to become instructors themselves so that they can continue to educate people living in the camp. This initiative may provide more evidence whether becoming knowledge contributors can help refugees improve their wellbeing.

All these efforts and projects must take into account the fact that many refugees, especially women and children, are illiterate or nearly so. This group can still be included through audio-visual materials that could, when prepared for them, help them understand the information they need to find and, when created by them, inform the refugee-receiving communities about their culture, countries of origin, etc.

An ability to record and present to the world one’s memories, traditions, songs, or poems from homeland can be a powerful tool for continuity in a life broken by the experience of forced migration. It also can help mitigate an experience of erasure or social invisibility ⁵⁴ and marginalisation in the places of destination. For example, refugees of the Smyrna disaster of 1922 on the island of Syros in Greece have given audio testimonies that have been digitised and processed by the Historical Archives of Cyclades (Greece). This led to the creation of a fact sheet on the American Orphanage of Syros, in French and Greek, with a link on Wikipedia in Greek.⁵⁵

⁵² “Camp Oddo,” accessed March 15, 2024, https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp_Oddo

⁵³ “Vieux-Port de Marseille,” accessed March 15, 2024, https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vieux-Port_de_Marseille

⁵⁴ Graziano Battistella, „From Invisibility to Recognition: Reflections on the Conditions of Migrants in Our Society,” last modified October 31, 2017, <https://cmsny.org/publications/invisibility-recognition/>

⁵⁵ “Amerikániko Orfanotrofeio Syrou” [American Orphanage of Syros], accessed March 16, 2024, <https://shorturl.at/uxAH3>

Wikimedia's role in systemic change

Our community understands very well that some barriers for free knowledge are systemic. We are advocating for changes in the copyright laws to ensure better access to knowledge notably through a copyright exception to freely use copyrighted content for educational purposes. We were also involved in the discussions over the regulation on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online that effectively regulates political speech.⁵⁶ Its broad definitions threatened that – in the name of sanitising the internet from terrorists – some perfectly legal content, or that serving to document human rights abuses (also in places where many refugees flee from or places recorded by them) would be removed.

Freedom to access and impart information is a fundamental human right that Wikimedia communities work to protect. The problem is that the barriers that refugees face in exercising this freedom will not be alleviated solely with better copyright laws or better accountability of online platforms.

Besides functioning copyright exceptions for education, in a more practical way Open Educational Resources (OER) can serve refugees and their needs in refugee camps and beyond. Accessible online and modifiable, they can offer some sort of continuity and connection with the “life before” while also being free from propaganda of a regime that may have been the cause of escape. Our OER community can work with refugee organisations to identify needs and assist the creation of educational materials for specific groups of refugees - both through advocacy and through participation in the production process.

To ensure that refugees can access free knowledge projects, or even basic information concerning a refugee status in European countries, they need to have access to infrastructure that the escape from their country of origin deprived them of. While it is not our role in the Wikimedia movement to organise access to broadband or give away equipment, we can use our public visibility to increase awareness of those barriers. We should also actively advocate for programs and policies that ensure that refugees in camps can get mobile devices, which can be provided through upcycling of post-market devices if needed. And that they can access local mobile networks for free when in a refugee camp.

⁵⁶ Anna Mazgal, “Terrorist clicks? Drastic measures to moderate online communications under the anti-terrorist banner,” last modified November 18, 2020, <https://wikimedia.brussels/terrorist-clicks-eu-officials-continue-to-push-for-drastic-measures-to-moderate-online-communications-under-the-anti-terrorist-banner/>

Wikimedia community cannot do all that work by themselves. Nor should we, as we cannot aspire to represent communities and groups that we have the best intentions to help. Only refugees themselves can best identify how we can support them and help them be better heard while carrying out advocacy in our movement and towards public authorities. Knowledge equity is put in practice when refugees who are systemically and infrastructurally excluded from basic services can use access to our audience, within Wikimedia community and towards public authorities, our capacities, and resources to empower and advocate for themselves. We have a precedent: Women in Red,⁵⁷ sans pagEs project for women⁵⁸ or the Noircir Wikipedia initiative for the African culture and heritage.⁵⁹

From migration rupture to joy

Mass migrations and displacement unfolding as a result of climate change and military activity become a defining crisis of our time - politically and socially. From Ukraine alone, over eight million refugees crossed EU borders as of February 2023, and almost five million of them seek temporary protection.⁶⁰ Several hundred thousands people seek a better future in Europe each year, crossing the unfriendly land on foot, braving the sea, or have been facing repeated inhumane pushbacks as at the Polish-Belarusian border.⁶¹

While Wikimedia Movement's mission is not centred around refugees and displaced people, if we treat our vision of letting everyone in the sum of human knowledge seriously, we cannot entirely disregard the needs of refugees. Knowledge equity framework we so readily adopted in our 2030 strategy enables us to frame our own paradigm in relation and together with refugees. Whatever the interventions that we design in that area, they all must centre on the usefulness and benefits for refugees and their communities, and not primarily on the usefulness for our projects.

⁵⁷ "Wikipedia:WikiProject Women in Red," accessed March 15, 2024,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Women_in_Red

⁵⁸ "Projet:Les sans. pagEs," accessed March 15, 2024,

https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Projet:Les_sans_pagEs

⁵⁹ The website is available in French and Spanish, last accessed March 15, 2024,

<https://noircirwikipedia.org/fr/accueil/>

⁶⁰ "Ukraine Refugee Situation, » UNHCR Operational Data Portal, last accessed March 15, 2024,

<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

⁶¹ Sertan Sanders, „EU und UNHCR raise alarm over pushback methods in Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania," *InfoMigrants*, last modified January 10, 2022,

<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/37885/eu-and-unhcr-raise-alarm-over-pushback-methods-in-poland-latvia-and-lithuania>

A careful look at our existing resources is necessary and directing some of them to infrastructural changes such as increase of energy- and data efficiency is the first logical step. Our model of creating knowledge based on joint community governance lends itself to creating spaces and possibilities for those who want to make a connection between their lives before and after the displacement. A lot of work involves looking into our structures and balances of power at Wikimedia and asking ourselves where we are lacking necessary practices to create space for refugees to participate in the sum of human knowledge. Initiatives like the ones in France, Ivory Coast, and Greece should become a part of our regular programming and be organised in cooperation with the refugee community. Leveraging our existing partnerships in the OER community can also bring more attention and resources to the most pressing needs of refugees, such as access to education in refugee camps and absorption centres.

As a global movement already exercising our “advocacy muscle” we need to see knowledge equity as a practice of overcoming systemic barriers. Some of these barriers are access to networks and hardware that allows refugees to stay in touch and get information necessary to make informed decisions about their lives. We also need to support policies and legislation promoting rights to information for refugees - and organisations that are experts in this field to ensure proper impact.

Epilogue

After five months of volunteering in Piraeus I went back to my life in Paris. Toward the end of my stay, the refugees were transferred from Piraeus to one of the government camps, Skaramangas, about 40 minutes away from the port. Greek law enforcement came one morning to take the refugees there but most of them did not want to go. They were afraid to be stuck there for the rest of their lives.

A few volunteers and I tried to go see them, but since neither we nor the foreign associations working in Piraeus were appointed by the government, we were prohibited from entering the camp, which we thought very unfair. Therefore, we passed over the barriers and entered illegally. The living conditions were fortunately better than in our transit camp: the refugees were in groups of six to eight in each small bungalow, they had running water, electricity, electric fans, toilets, and showers.

Their state of mind, however, was quite conflicted. On the one hand, they were relieved to no longer be crammed into tents on the tar of a port wharf in 45 Celsius degrees, with absolutely nothing. On the other hand, they were afraid that they

would be stuck in the government camp forever, and that they would never be granted asylum to start a new life in Europe.

Fortunately, the fear did not become reality. Most went to northern countries like Germany, Great Britain, or Sweden. Some stayed in Greece because they felt indebted to the country and the locals who helped them. I haven't seen any of them again, but I am still in touch with a few through the Internet and social media.

In this way, we – as a movement – should continue more than ever to make sure that Wikimedia projects are known all over the world and not just in one part, the West. All the projects for refugees – voluntary or not – should not only continue but should be actively pushed by the WMF. Indeed, it would be more than relevant to ensure that projects are not “just” at a precise time and isolated, but as the project is in the process of being set up in Ivory Coast, that there is an engraving in time possible. This is how Wikimedia projects will be able to have their full place and importance for these populations and how knowledge equity will truly take on meaning.

POLICY AND POLICE IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE – EU RESPONSES TO INTERMEDIATED ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE

Anna Mazgal

A founding myth

There are a few terms overused in pop culture that bring a smile on the face of any nerd: “cyber”, “information highway” or “global village”. I am old enough to remember these as exciting buzzwords that stirred our collective imagination to envision a bright, tech-aided future.

In retrospect, “global village” seems to have the most persisting allure even if we may cringe slightly when we hear the phrase. A vision of our vast world becoming small, familiar, and accessible is a foundation myth of the Internet as we know it today. Many free and open projects were founded upon this narrative; at the same time, it is also a persuasive pretext for surveillance capitalism. Thus “global village” myth fuels both Wikimedia’s mission to let everyone be part of the sum of all knowledge and Meta’s practice of following people throughout their internet journeys, with clever usage of cookies.

At the same time the global village dream is still not entirely fulfilled, even with the few social media platforms that have a somewhat global reach. As Rebecca MacKinnon observed in 2012 “digital infrastructure ... is largely engineered and coordinated by people in the economically prosperous West. It is a fact of life that people who have been living in the economically prosperous democratic West all of their lives (no matter how well-meaning they may be) have difficulty understanding and anticipating other people’s linguistic and cultural identities – let alone economic and political aspirations.”⁶² This has not changed since, except the emergence of services built in China or Russia aiming at these local audiences. We still have a lot of work to do if we want the global village to become truly global: built with sensitivity and respect within and for diverse social and cultural experiences.

⁶² Rebecca MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle For Internet Freedom*, (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 411-412

The European Union is based on a vision similar to a global village. In its official anthem, “Ode to Joy”, the phrase “All people become brothers” represents a related sentiment: that if we act upon our best instincts and cooperate rather than wage wars, we are bound to accomplish incredible things.

The most immediate, even if the least romantic, result of that vision is the EU-wide harmonised legislation. The EU is in need of a number of legislative pushes such as a robust climate action and a sound migration policy. At the same time, it also needs a good digital policy leading to an internet without borders within the Union.

Merging the two dreams – that of a global village and that of a Europe united in diversity – into a great framework for the digital future, is an exciting opportunity. The realities of the 21st century, however, call for a redefinition of a basic assumption regarding Europe. That assumption being, as Johny Pitts observes in his book *Afropean. Notes from Black Europe*, that “European” is still used as a synonym for “white”.⁶³ Meanwhile, the Europeans of today are not all white, not all bourgeois, not only born on this continent or native to its languages.

The global village narrative will be helpful in this redefinition if it includes connection, proximity, and reconciliation with the European colonial past. It should also demonstrate openness to intersectionality of experiences that are not stereotypically European. European cohesion in the online space needs knowledge equity as the key element of a resilient European solidarity. In the Wikimedia lingo, knowledge equity embodies the same sentiment as the global village narrative. This type of equity centres knowledge and communities that have been excluded so far because of power structures and privileges.⁶⁴

In this essay I attempt to look into how to carry the “global village” dream into a European future that ensures equity in access to knowledge. I contrast this concept with recent and emerging EU policies regulating the internet and its key actors. I contextualise this within the trend of network effects and surveillance-based online intermediation concentrating the data and information traffic in the hands of a small number of global players. The centripetal force of concentration of data-powered surveillance is coupled with a centrifugal force of various jurisdictions modelling their own concepts of how the internet should (and should not) serve their populations. I make a point that legislative efforts focused on measures by platforms against their users’ bad behaviour do not result in a systemic shift towards knowledge equity.

⁶³ Johny Pitts, *Afropean. Notes from Black Europe*, (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 4

⁶⁴ “Our strategic direction: Service and Equity,” Wikimedia Movement, accessed March 21, 2023, https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Strategy/Wikimedia_movement/2017/Direction#Our_strategic_direction:_Service_and_Equity

I strive to demonstrate how open and free projects are crucial to save the Internet as a more sustainable space for a public life, a private life, and a secret life.⁶⁵ It is because the potential of communities developing these projects to bring about knowledge equity is unparalleled and unprecedented. These communities have the mindset, the knowledge, and the mandate to come up with a policy agenda that proposes access to knowledge-based equity for all participants.

Blowing and popping the bubbles

In 2024 there is no global village in the sense of an expanded and accessible world where the distance between people has shrunk. As our social media bubbles are fuelled with the confirmation bias, they develop an impenetrable shell and drift apart from each other. It inevitably leads to a replication of the offline divisions between cultures, identities, and geographies.

But the Internet also contains “the good bubbles”, on social media and beyond, where creating a positive online experience along with worthwhile content happens every day. Arguably, Wikipedia communities can be an example of such a space despite all the fights, bitterness, and other friction that the collaborative experience of writing an encyclopaedia while being human brings.

For the online communities that didn't give up on the idea of creating, if not a global village, then at least a district of online sanity, the key success factor is collective ownership and governance of the spaces they inhabit. In these online spaces, from Wikipedia to Mastodon, both the vibe and the quality of content determine the wellbeing of a community and its individuals. The responsibility that the participants feel and act upon is significant. These spaces are in stark contrast to the quality of social experience on social media; their pace is different, and their output is less prone to be lost in time, compared to Instagram stories for example. Their governance is decentralised, as the community can make their own rules that differ according to language, geography, and culture.⁶⁶

Maybe that's the dream? Instead of millions speaking at once in a vast space of a centralised platform, is it better to have a network of bubbles that talk and listen to one another across the Internet?⁶⁷ It is of course complicated, because the features that empower people to shape their community experience and express

⁶⁵ Gerald Martin, *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 198

⁶⁶ For example, see the English Wikipedia guidance on notability
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability>, accessed March 21, 2023

⁶⁷ Notably, Indigenous communities self-organise online in an ethical and decentralised way. Indigenous Friends Association explores opportunities of technology outside of centralised platforms offering, among others, access to a virtual tipi, through their Indigifriends App
<https://www.indigenousfriends.org/app>, retrieved on March 21, 2023.

their individuality enable all sorts of people to act like themselves (and some people like being a jerk). The Croatian Wikipedia, a community-led project, turned into an alt-right propaganda machine because there was a critical mass of participants willing to do so through democratic deliberation.⁶⁸ Allowing the plurality to flourish creates a risk of forming authoritarian spaces that in the end exclude plurality.

Then, stifling free speech backfires at underrepresented communities first and the hardest since even in a relatively permissive culture of debate they are exposed to harassment and backlash. Without a modicum of a safe space for underrepresented voices we cannot dream of any form of justice, let alone equity. How to strike the right balance: to preserve diversity of voices while ensuring that those of us who now are excluded from public debate won't be silenced by their harassers?

Regulating for better and for worse

Platforms try to strike the balance between freedom and safety by moderating the content provided by users - removing statements or, in extreme cases, user accounts. These self-regulating practices haven't been successful in preventing social networks from becoming a dumpster fire of hate and harassment in a battlefield of bots pedalling fake news.⁶⁹

The EU legislators are convinced that Union-level regulation is necessary to curb a number of problems with the Big Tech, including content moderation. Their idea is to force the use of various tech tools which the platforms, and especially the social media sites, need in their content moderation practices to effectuate a better atmosphere for a civil (and civic) exchange.⁷⁰ The problem is that what people say online is protected as free speech and it is very difficult, if not impossible, to create a general rule on speech policing. The European legislators seem to realise that, and they resort to mandating removal of content that is already considered illegal through various pieces of legislation.

⁶⁸ Catalin Cimpanu, "Wikimedia bans admin of Wikipedia Croatia for pushing radical right agendas", *The Record*, last modified June 21, 2021, <https://therecord.media/wikimedia-bans-admin-of-wikipedia-croatia-for-pushing-radical-right-agendas>

⁶⁹ Meta Oversight Board is an example of a voluntary self-regulating mechanism. Since its creation in 2020, the Board looked into 35 cases; its functioning didn't visibly augment the existence of hate speech and divisive content available on the platform. Meta plans to improve its functioning - see Sheila Dang, "Meta Oversight Board to begin reviewing cases more quickly", *Reuters*, February 15, 2023, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/meta-oversight-board-begin-reviewing-cases-more-quickly-2023-02-14/>

⁷⁰ For example, the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act aim to create a safer digital space where the fundamental rights of users are protected; see: European Union the Digital Services Act Package, 2022, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>

There are two manifest examples of EU laws that prioritise forcing platforms to make sure illegal content is not available: Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market (DCSM) and Regulation on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online (TERREG).⁷¹ As evident in their titles, each directive regulates actions against a specific type of content: copyrighted and that which can be considered terrorist, respectively. These two acts of law share a similar approach to solve the problem of illegal content while preserving the freedom to receive and impart information. This freedom is in turn necessary to ensure that people can produce knowledge coming from different perspectives and share their unique experiences, both being premises of knowledge equity.

Unfortunately, the tool chosen to achieve the balance between removing what is illegal and leaving what is not, deems them unsuited to the task: both legal acts point to technological solutions in sorting out between wanted and unwanted content and eliminating the latter. The CDSM Directive points to the use of algorithmic content filtering as a way to escape liability for copyright infringements committed by the users of a platform. The TERREG effectively coerces the platforms into using these tools if they want to be protected from liability.

Algorithmic filtering is very problematic because it is difficult to sort out automatically what is allowed if it comes to copyrighted content. There are exceptions allowing users to quote, create parodies, or use copyrighted materials for scientific or educational purposes, as well as political commentary.⁷² Public domain material may become part of a copyrighted work,⁷³ “confusing” the algorithm as to what exactly has been allowed. Artistic works are filtered out by various platforms because Disney trademarked names of Norse deities.⁷⁴

What is confusing in copyright, both to algorithms and to humans, becomes impossible to do well through algorithmic sorting in the context of political speech that could cross a boundary with terrorist propaganda. Cultural and historical contexts play an important role, together with the level of risk a society is willing to allow in

⁷¹ European Union, Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market, 2019, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/790/oj>;

European Union, Regulation on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online, 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex:32021R0784>; both accessed March 21, 2023.

⁷² To complicate the situation even more, the exceptions to copyright are not implemented to the same degree across the entire EU; for reference see <https://copyrightexceptions.eu/>

⁷³ See tweet thread by [@linernotesdanny](https://twitter.com/linernotesdanny), April 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/linernotesdanny/status/1246212524837609475> (retrieved on 2023-03-21)

⁷⁴ Heather Greene, “Disney trademarked Loki, the Marvel movie character. Some fans of the Norse god were not happy.”, *The Washington Post*, July 2, 2021, accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/disney-loki-redbubble-trademark/2021/07/02/d59908ec-d9c0-11eb-8fb8-aea56b785b00_story.html

debating difficult issues such as racism, post-colonial realities, and the complicated outcomes of the war on terror.

It is of course humans, and not algorithms, who determine which voices are to be heard: the algorithmic bias is programmed by the engineers. Platforms rely on human moderators looking at content and making takedown/staydown decisions. Platforms have an underlying objective to avoid the risk of liability for content created by us, their users. Activists and users alike have been calling on the platforms' overlords to improve content moderation strategies for years, sometimes contacting staff members personally.⁷⁵

Platforms tend to err on the side of caution and transfer all liability risks on users by overpolicing their activity and speech to comply with these laws. As a result, the measures that could potentially help to hear more voices online, effectively silence them.⁷⁶ We already see how algorithmic inability to account for context and nuance is backfiring. To name a few examples, Palestinians are outraged that Facebook overblocks their voices⁷⁷ and teachers complain that educational resources on dangers of fascism are being removed from YouTube.⁷⁸

Missing pieces

The EU legislators seem to be quite short-sighted and tend to overlook a landscape opening up where the domain of the GAFAM⁷⁹ ends. This is bound to backfire at the self-governing decentralised communities: an unintended consequence of CDSM, for example, was the initial inclusion of Wikimedia projects into content filtering obligations. The legislators patched it up by creating a carveout for online encyclopaedias – a happy end to a problem that had been perfectly avoidable in the first place by a better definition of a business model that should be targeted by the measure.

⁷⁵ In her book *Silicon Values. The Future of Free Speech Under Surveillance Capitalism* (Verso Books, 2021) Jillian C. York evokes numerous instances of contacting (then) Facebook in order to clarify content moderation decisions.

⁷⁶ Hadi Al Khatib and Dia Kayyali, "YouTube Is Erasing History", *The New York Times*, October 23, 2019, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/23/opinion/syria-youtube-content-moderation.html>

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Dwoskin, Gerrit De Vynck, "Facebook's AI treats Palestinian activists like it treats American Black activists. It blocks them.", *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2021, accessed March 21, 2023,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/05/28/facebook-palestinian-censorship/>

⁷⁸ Jim Waterson, "YouTube blocks history teachers uploading archive videos of Hitler", *The Guardian*, June 6, 2019, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jun/06/youtube-blocks-history-teachers-uploading-archive-videos-of-hitler>

⁷⁹ GAFAM is an acronym including Google, Facebook (Meta), Amazon, and Microsoft

Users are not Big Tech's real clients. The platforms are interested in selling products and services are the real customers. Deprioritising the humans who interact on platforms, the business model of Big Tech is based on practices that are detrimental to knowledge equity online. The value of an audience, and therefore the level of care and attention its members can enjoy from platforms, has a lot to do with its purchasing power.⁸⁰ Second, platforms cater to these clients by keeping users engaged as long as possible to maximise their exposure to products and services. This is also not a great circumstance for a plurality of voices to flourish; platforms figured out a long time ago that engaging people around divisive, hateful content is good for the attention economy.⁸¹ And hate needs a scapegoat, such as a minority or a marginalised community, to thrive.

Third, constant surveillance, behavioural profiling for the purposes of advertising – or because governments and politicians are interested in the data – puts vulnerable communities into a difficult predicament online when they are subjected to political manipulation. Excessive data collection by platforms leads to political pressure to reveal identities of people who express their political opinions and ends up with their prosecution or even killing.⁸² Recourse to access to courts is often impossible, either because of the prohibitive costs or by the political denial of access – one of many violations of political activists' rights.

Finally, legislation in the form of CDSM or TERREG moves all the decisions on what is and isn't accepted speech in the hands of platforms who have a conflict of interest whether to follow the law or make money and, above all, who are not courts. This privatisation of oversight or freedom of expression is another far-reaching consequence of the recent short-sighted legislative efforts. In the age of algorithms, code surely is the law, but so are the terms of service.

A step beyond damage control

What could be improved on top of content-driven legislation? In the current legislative term, the EU legislators changed course and focused on laws that go beyond a topical focus. Proposals for the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets

⁸⁰ In 2021, concerns surfaced about (then) Facebook being used as a tool to trade and sell maids in the Mideast, see John Gambrell, Jim Gomez, "Apple threatened to pull Facebook and Instagram from its app store over human trafficking", *PBS*, October 25, 2021, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/apple-threatened-to-pull-facebook-and-instagram-from-its-app-store-over-maid-abuse>

⁸¹ The topic of the Dark Triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) a set of traits exploited by Facebook to increase and monetize engagement is extensively covered by Christopher Wylie in his *Mindf*ck Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America*, (New York: Random House, 2019), chapter 7

⁸² "Iran Had Access to Private Info of Facebook Users: Documents", *Iran International*, February 9, 2023, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302098881>

Act (DMA), presented by the European Commission at the end of 2020 that entered into force in 2022,⁸³ became pivotal in expanding the regulatory realm from content (and, in practice, user behaviour) to responsibilities of platforms.

The shift of emphasis from policing users to providing them with clearer rules and mechanisms to complain is a much better strategy for protecting users' rights. Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) in the DSA have additional obligations and limitations and they are distinguishable from the rest by a high number of active monthly recipients in the EU (equal or higher than 45 million). Additional obligations around online advertising and increased transparency are envisioned to curb VLOPs susceptibility to spreading divisive content. At the same time, ignoring the business model while composing the criteria for VLOPs is a missed opportunity for meaningfully cutting the negative effect that the platform environment has on the wellbeing of users.

The DMA is disappointingly “diplomatic” in devising the criteria for a gatekeeper, a provider of core platform services that not only does enjoy entrenched position but also has a significant impact on the market, reflected in a high turnover and high market value.⁸⁴ Again, the issue of what strategies help a company achieve such a high valuation becomes “the elephant in the law”.

With all fairness to the DMA, it aims at preventing aggregation of data derived from users' activity across multiple services. This provision could help deal with what Shoshana Zuboff calls a behavioural surplus,⁸⁵ the self-repopulating data and metadata output allowing platforms to precisely target ads. This way the business model is tackled indirectly, through the limitation of an activity rather than of the structural setup.

Both DSA and DMA are a step in the right direction, but the journey is much longer to ensure that a diverse array of communities enjoys both freedom and an adequate platform for their various forms of expression. The toxicity of the business model founded on peddling hostility and misinformation⁸⁶ will perhaps

⁸³ European Union, Digital Services Act, 2022, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32022R2065> and Digital Markets Act, 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX-%3A32022R1925&qid=1679400052456>)

⁸⁴ The turnover is set at least 7,5 billion euros in each of the last three financial years and its average market capitalisation or its equivalent fair market value is at least 75 billion in the last financial year

⁸⁵ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, (London: Profile Books, 2019), 74-75

⁸⁶ Julia Carrie Wong, “Down the rabbit hole: how QAnon conspiracies thrive on Facebook”, *The Guardian*, June 25, 2020, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jun/25/qanon-facebook-conspiracy-theories-algorithm>

be a bit better exposed by the DSA/DMA framework. But none of the remedies is an equivalent to a proton torpedo aimed for the reactor core of the Death Star of surveillance capitalism.

State-technological complex

It would be a grave simplification of the legislative landscape to paint the platforms as the rogues and the EU legislators as principled sheriffs fighting for justice. There are many representatives of the legislature that see benefits of closing down on user activity as a way to sanitise the Internet from undesirable information.

In other words, when making the Internet a better place, it is not only the platforms that have a conflict of interest. Both the Member States and the EU bodies benefit from the existing setup where the control over online social spaces is in the hands of four private entities, because it is easier to control and probe the four big corporations than an array of smaller entities.⁸⁷ Sometimes those reasons are as vile as manipulations aimed at securing Brexit for example.⁸⁸

Various EU agencies have their own stake in shaping the regulation as they weaponize available technologies based on racist assumptions. Europol, for example, publicly calls for a crackdown on “soft” terrorist propaganda, such as imagery of terrorists having a good time together or citing poems.⁸⁹ It is very easy to imagine how these requests mullied by algorithms result in removals of videos of brown people swimming or of creative works in Arabic, for example.

Both TERREG and DSA enshrine that thinking in a mechanism of removal orders that competent authorities can issue to platforms. TERREG determines maximum time for removal at one hour from receiving the order identifying terrorist content, making it impossible not only to question but to meaningfully check the substance of the request. So as long as the flagged URL is working, content will be removed. Again, it is easy to see how it may backfire at people whose opinions are not illegal but simply unwanted by politicians.

Platforms overreact to all this with deployment of automated tools and underinvest in humans providing content moderation both in terms of volume and of support, including to those who developed PTSD looking at despicable content on the job. It is well worth noting that Facebook settled to pay 52 million USD to the affected

⁸⁷ Google, Apple, Meta, Amazon

⁸⁸ Wylie, *ibid*

⁸⁹ “On the Importance of Taking-down Non-violent Terrorist Content,” VoxPol at the request of Europol, May 8, 2019, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.voxpol.eu/on-the-importance-of-taking-down-non-violent-terrorist-content/>

moderators, but the preliminary settlement covers those working in California, Arizona, Texas, and Florida.⁹⁰ The thousands of people outsourced to do the dirty job in Asia and other geographies are left unsupported and unprotected.⁹¹ Limiting equity online is a consequence of a system in which real life discrimination and cost reduction is baked into securing an ever-growing profit margin.

Oasis in the desert?

The open movement seemed to have worked out a theory of change based on the product: a societal shift to a more collaborative, fair, and inclusive society will happen if there are enough free and open resources. Today we see that free knowledge, as necessary as it is, did not free the world.

As activists and creators of the commons we need to face the possibility that the strategies based on this theory of change have reached its limit of growth. It is because no matter how many articles we write, there still be imperfect laws that enable a private police made of proprietary platforms to remove content they don't like without either regard or full understanding of freedom of expression. This does not mean that as of now we should stop putting energy and love into collaboration and into centring those of us who have been voiceless. As we are wrangling with the necessity of re-evaluating our strategies, we need to open up to creating a broad political agenda of overcoming intersectional barriers in both accessing information and sharing it. One that takes us back to the founding myth of the Internet, the global village and that turns it into practice through knowledge equity.

Any change is a crisis of sorts, and a good crisis should not go to waste. Discussing this with my fellow Wikimedians and Wikipedians I often see how the idea of having such a political agenda creates a conflict between what they understand as the neutrality of our free knowledge projects and taking a political stance.⁹² I agree wholeheartedly that the objective for Wikipedia and other projects is to search for facts and produce verifiable information that is impervious to any ideology. The more we can exemplify and explain that another Internet is possible, the better we make use of this crisis. There is urgency to that task, however.

⁹⁰ Casey Newton, "Facebook will pay \$52 million in settlement with moderators who developed PTSD on the job", *The Verge*, May 12, 2020, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/12/21255870/facebook-content-moderator-settlement-scola-ptsd-mental-health>

⁹¹ The neglect is well depicted in the 2018 documentary *The Cleaners* by Hans Block and Moritz Riesewieck, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7689936/>, retrieved March 21, 2023.

⁹² "Wikipedia: NPOV means neutral editing, not neutral content: Revision history," Wikipedia, accessed on March 21, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:N-POV_means_neutral_editing,_not_neutral_content&action=history

In the 21st century, more than ever, providing true information has become a political act. It is so because many people, and especially voiceless and marginalised communities, face grave consequences for speaking truth to power.

It is also because information became warfare. Disinformation is dangerous because it leads people to make decisions disastrously affecting their lives (not getting vaccinated for example) or the lives of those most vulnerable (blaming immigrants for problems in reality caused by a growing wealth concentration and colonial legacy). Moreover, exposure to disinformation brings people to the conclusion that truth is impossible to ascertain, and this is when they give up trying, doubt everything, and become passive.

Without the pushback through an adequate legal framework, any good coming from distributed or federalised bubbles will be limited in effect and confined to a limited scale at best, like an oasis in a dry and hostile landscape. At worst it will keep fuelling a global platform ecosystem that will use it even more to perfect its tools of oppression. European Union law, with its immediate effect on 27 national jurisdictions, is a good place to start to carve out that space where diverse pockets of online sanity can flourish and, thanks to the adequately regulated European online space, connect, exchange, and learn from each other.

Our own Social Contract

The good news is that our community, which is much broader than the Wikimedia/Wikipedia movement,⁹³ has a lot to offer beyond constant adding to the corpus of free knowledge. It is the practice of creating a community based on deliberation and disagreement. It is the living experience of being with others and not calling it quits just because we don't like the opinions of absolutely everybody involved. It is a community that despite real problems with a toxic culture keeps trying to make that culture better. As we internally discuss how we can become of service to marginalised individuals and communities, advocating for laws that make the internet better for the vulnerable is an equally important mission.

We put in practice what John Perry Barlow imagined in 1996 in A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace: "Where there are real conflicts, where there are wrongs, we will identify them and address them by our means. We are forming our

⁹³ For context see the example of the Big Open concept engaging the leadership of Wikimedia, Creative Commons, and Mozilla in 2018, see: "The Big Open. Katherine Maher, Ryan Merkley and Mark Surman at MozFest," video, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://www.mozillapulse.org/entry/2171>

own Social Contract.”⁹⁴ Wikimedians and Wikipedians are building their own version of a global village. In order to do that successfully we need to understand the implications of our own phenomenon to the world through research and stories that help us extrapolate our experience into a more universal working mode that can help build bridges between the North and the South, the East and the West.

Barlow also warned the governments of the Industrial World that “[t]his governance will arise according to the conditions of our world, not yours.” Perhaps in 2024 we have to reckon with the fact that in the absence of a government the invisible hand of the market has taken over and this way Barlow’s “civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace” has not become significantly “more humane and fairer than the world your governments have made before.” So rather than sanctioning the retreat of power from politics, we should demand that the governments step back into their function of advancing the interests of their populations.

Takeaways from our lived experience can provide evidence to the lawmakers that “the European way” of the Internet can be human-centred and human-sized. This effort should be completed with mobilising the communities in our movement around a sound political vision that offers practical solutions for practising knowledge equity in the European online space. This vision has to tell a better story than the market concentration, the bubble effect, and the counter-effectiveness of policing tools. It should prioritise access to information and services for Europeans, both by birth and by choice. It should also emphasise the political dimension of self-governance of online spaces and their deeply democratic character.

If even only 10% of people who are in our community rally around such a vision, that will be a force to reckon with, one that can tip the scale. Doing our main work, free knowledge production, we at times retreat from conversations on policy, politics, and policing. But when the topics, opportunities, and ideas finally converge, it always leads us somewhere beautiful.

⁹⁴ John Perry Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, February 8, 1996, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>

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