WIKIMANIA

Each summer, the staff of Wikipedia get together with their most fanatical contributors for a five-day conference called Wikimania, a sort of WrestleMania for the brainy and pedantic. There is soul searching, navel gazing, pulse taking and crystal balling, not forgetting punch pulling and verbal flame throwing. Popular issues for discussion include inclusion, deletion, citation, representation, notability, harassment of editors, empowerment of users, and the open-source software operating system called Ubuntu. Astonishingly, perhaps, the event sells out fast. In 2014 the venue was London, in 2018 Cape Town, in 2019 Stockholm.

Like the textual behemoth that inspired it, Wikimania goes high and low. You turn up from all corners of the globe, get the bright yellow T-shirt, and within minutes you're embedded in a break-out group called 'Wiki Loves Butterfly', or 'Serbia Loves Wikipedians in Residence', or 'Let's Completely Change How Templates Work!'. The conference also holds board meetings, and pledges to do better next year on issues of gender and racial diversity. It even announces its Wikimedian of the Year, a title awarded in 2020 to Emna Mizouni, a Tunisian human rights activist praised for organising the conference WikiArabia and contributing to the photographic project Wiki Loves Monuments.

And then, as the sky darkens, and should you have the stomach for such things, you may join the gatekeepers of the world's knowledge as they knock back tequila-based wikishots and indulge in their 'passion projects'. You would be surprised if these didn't include making snow globes, real-life Quidditch, 'being awesome 'and jail-friendly power yoga, at the very least.

Wikipedia is a universe unto itself, its ambition unequalled and its scale unprecedented. Its staff are fond of a single phrase: 'Thank God our enterprise works in practice, because it could never work in theory. 'In theory, Wikipedia should be a disaster. The work of world experts and world amateurs, creators and vandals, anarchists and trainspotters, super-grammarians and super-creeps, many hundreds of thousands of each from

all the world's nations, every one vaguely suspicious of everyone else, some using Google Translate in hilarious ways, all battling for some sort of supremacy in a multiverse of ultimate truth – that doesn't bode well. And yet that's what Wikipedia is – an errant community of career-long academics and lone-wolf information crackpots that continues to create something of brilliance with almost every keystroke.

In 2021, Wikimania was scheduled for Bangkok, and the focus was on Wikipedia's twentieth birthday, but the party was derailed by Covid-19. In all other respects, Wikipedia flourished under the pandemic, tracking the first weeks in a masterful way, and like nothing else. It was on the ground everywhere, in 100 languages, keyboarded up. Many thousands of people contributed their knowledge of the virus and its impact on their lives and local area (as always, for no financial reward). Sometimes it seemed as if the virus itself was contributing, such was the speed of the spread. The number of words grew from a few hundred in mid-January 2020 to a few hundred thousand by mid-March; many hundreds of useful links brought the reader to current medical journals, historical accounts of pandemics, and an early discussion on the efficacy of masks. Conspiracy theorists were given very little credibility, and deliberately malicious information was removed within minutes.

Between December 2019 and April 2020 Wikipedia pages relating to the pandemic received on average 163 edits per hour. By 23 April 2020 there were about 4500 pandemic-related Wikipedia pages across all languages. All of this led the writer Noam Cohen of *Wired* magazine to suggest that Wikipedia had 'developed a conscience', which was not something regularly attributed to an encyclopaedia, and would not always be considered a compliment. But it stayed free of hysteria, and as free it as it could from propaganda. It was, ultimately, instantly useful.

Since its creation in January 2001, Wikipedia has grown into the world's largest online reference work, attracting more than 500 million page views per day and 1 billion unique visitors each month (who make 5.6 billion monthly visits in total and hang around for an average of four minutes). It offers a total of more than 54 million articles in about 270 languages, including – at 11.25 GMT on Saturday 9 October 2021 – 6,390,565 articles in English that have been subject to 1,044,294,099 edits (with 19.21 edits per page). That makes it 93.11 times the size of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and the equivalent of 2979.7 *Britannica* volumes.

According to the analytics company SimilarWeb, Wikipedia is the world's seventh most visited site, sitting behind Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the Chinese search engine Baidu. (Wikipedia is actually seventh-equal with Czech-based X Videos, and only just ahead of Cyprus-based Pornhub.) In the UK, Wikipedia stands ninth in the charts, overtaken by eBay and the BBC. (Since you're wondering, the highest ranked porn site in the UK is Pornhub at number thirteen, which is just one place above the *Daily Mail*.)

More than any other float in this parade, Wikipedia settles arguments and ignites debate. It sends you down rabbit holes so fathomless that you emerge gasping, astonished at what other people know and consider important, dismayed at where the time has gone. Its offshoots help you with your degree (Wikiversity), your wedding speeches (Wikiquote), your journals and presentations (Wikimedia Commons), your online sightseeing and travel adventures (Wikivoyage), and your spelling (Wiktionary). The rest of it just helps you with your life, and the placing of it within contexts both modern and historical. It combines every highbrow piece of technicality with every lowbrow piece of junkery. It has the track length of the fourth song on the third album by a band you've never heard of and never will, a list of the seventy-four churches preserved by the Churches Conservation Trust in the English Midlands, the complete text of Darwin's treatise *The Various Contrivances by which Orchids are Fertilised by Insects*, and a biography of the mathematics teacher Riyaz Ahmad Naikoo (also known as Zubair), one of the top ten most wanted rebels in the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir. (If you need more of this, @depthsofwikipedia is a great Twitter feed; it may suck up all your waking hours.)

But obscurity never overwhelms relevance. I watched in awe as its Covid-19 pages expanded in number, depth and sober analysis from the first cases at the end of 2019 to its global peak seven months later, as it diligently modified facts, trends and theories as they emerged. There was nowhere else with such a calm and comprehensive global approach, and nowhere else where the common reader could go for a comparative overview of every other deadly virus in our richly plague-ridden past.

You could make a strong case for suggesting that Wikipedia is the most valuable single site online, and the most eloquent and enduring representative of the Internet as a force for good. It has indeed completely

changed how templates work. It strives for democracy in its performance and neutrality in its effect. It is ad-free, pop-up free, cookie-free and free. It confounds human venality and appeals to our better nature.

It certainly confounds its co-founder Jimmy Wales. Wales set up Wikipedia to supplement an earlier online open-source encyclopaedia he had founded with Larry Sanger the year before, named Nupedia. The problem with Nupedia was its concept: its articles were written by experts and peer-reviewed, which rendered it much too slow for mass appeal in the digital world. Wiki means 'quick 'in Hawaiian, and Wikipedia joined the growing number of online communal wikis already available that could be compiled and edited swiftly by anyone with a basic knowledge of digital etiquette. Everyone who contributed to Wikipedia was a volunteer, and from the start the site was governed by its contributors.

'Although I have often described myself as a "pathological optimist", ' Jimmy Wales told me via email for an *Esquire* story I was writing in May 2020, 'I don't think I really understood the depth of the impact that we would have. I certainly didn't foresee how some very early decisions against collecting, sharing, and selling data would end up setting us fundamentally apart from the sector of the Internet that people are increasingly uneasy with. '

The techlash against Facebook and Twitter has left Wikipedia largely unscathed. Or rather, Wikipedia is saddled with many of the same sorts of criticisms and shortcomings it has always had. Wales calls these 'difficult questions about behaviour'.

'We are humans, and people do get into arguments, and people who "aren't here to build an encyclopaedia" show up to push an agenda, or to troll or harass. And dealing with those cases requires a great deal of calm and sensible judgment. It requires building robust institutions and mechanisms. If we were to deal with some problems in the community by allowing the Wikimedia Foundation to become like other Internet institutions (Twitter comes to mind), where policing the site for bad behaviour is taken out of the hands of the community, we'd end up like Twitter – unscalable, out of control, a cesspool. '

I asked Wales what he thought of his own Wikipedia entry, which includes his nickname (Jimbo), his background in the financial sector, and his

involvement in an online portal that specialised in adult content. 'It's as right as the media about me is right, 'he replied. 'I don't think it mentions that I'm a passionate chef, which is a pity. But I think that's because it's never been covered in the press. You can mention it – that'll set the world to rights.'

(The mention of cookery in the *Esquire* article had its desired effect. A few days after the story appeared, the following line was added to his Wikipedia entry: 'According to Wales, he is a passionate chef.')

Wales is now chair emeritus of the Wikimedia Foundation. When I asked him to describe his present role in the empire, he made an unusual comparison. 'I think UK audiences will understand this better than other audiences. I view my role as being very much like the modern monarch of the UK: no real power, but the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, and the right to warn. '

I wondered whether he regretted not being a billionaire like all the other pioneers on that top ten chart: did he never regret not monetising Wikipedia in some way? ('Just a bit of advertising, 'I suggested facetiously. 'Think of all the good that money could do . . .')

He replied, 'No, I'm content with where we are. In 500 years Wikipedia will be remembered and (if we do our job well in setting things up with a long-term perspective for safety) still be informing the public. I doubt many of our commercial colleagues will even be remembered, much less still here.'

In December 2021, Wales auctioned his first personal Wikipedia entry – 'Hello, World! – 'as a non-fungible token (NFT). Christie's listed the item as a 'digital sculpture', and it was a living thing: in a nice twist, Wales enabled his entry to be edited, while also setting a digital timer that would reset the page to its original state. 'The idea is not just to have an NFT of this moment in time, 'he explained, 'but to have an NFT which recreates the emotional experience of the moment: here it is, Wikipedia, ready to edit. What will you make of it? What will it become? Will it succeed? Can it really change the world? '

It sold for $750,000, while the strawberry-coloured iMac on which Wales composed the words went for $187,500.

Writing in the New York Review of Books in 2008, Nicholson Baker conjured a cute image of Wikipedia's early methodology. It was like a giant community leaf-raking project in which everyone was called a groundskeeper. Some brought very fancy professional metal rakes, or even back-mounted leaf-blowing systems, and some were just kids thrashing away with the sides of their feet or stuffing handfuls in the pockets of their sweatshirts, but all the leaves they brought to the pile were appreciated. And the pile grew and everyone jumped up and down in it having a wonderful time.

But there was a problem. Not long into adolescence, 'self- promoted leaf-pile guards appeared, doubters and deprecators who would look askance at your proffered handful and shake their heads, saying that your leaves were too crumpled or too slimy or too common, throwing them to the side. ' What is and isn't valued knowledge, and how best to present it, has been the recurring headache of every encyclopaedia editor in history. Add in the digital world's perfectionists, elitists, sticklers and bullies, and you have a recipe for chaos. So certain policies and guidelines evolved to keep the leaf pile both useful and valuable.

While its freeform open-access ethos still holds (anyone can contribute new articles and edit old ones), the appearance of new material on the site is subject to approval from the rest of the editing community. You cannot, for example just go in and write that your teacher or boss is a feeble-minded moron, however accurate that may be, and expect it to be hyperlinked to the site's many other feeble-minded morons, or the history of feeble-mindedness, or the Ancient Greek derivation of the word moron. If you have some sort of published evidence, though, that's a different matter; very early on, Wikipedia decided that it would not publish original unsourced material on its site, relying instead on information published elsewhere.

The funny thing is, Wikipedia used to be considered a joke. When, around 2005, an editor emailed to say that he was putting together an entry on my work and would I be prepared to supply some additional information, I let the email pass. I wasn't sure it was genuine. And even if it had been, Wikipedia was unreliable and prone to so much misinformation that I didn't think much of being a part of it.

Although many early elements were sound, large portions resembled a six-year-old's birthday party. Some entries have become famous for their uncompromising subjectivity; among the most elegant was an early article on the poodle, which remained on the site for some time and stated simply, 'A dog by which all others are measured. 'Nicholson Baker found incisive early entries on the Pop-Tart: 'Pop-Tarts is German for Little Iced Pastry O'Germany . . . George Washington invented them . . . Popular flavours included "frosted strawberry, frosted brown sugar cinnamon, and semen". '

Although most large errors are corrected by a system of flags and checks (many Wikipedians enjoy nothing more than controlling bad new entries like minesweepers on a beach), a large number of new small errors are inserted every day, either mischievously or inadvertently, and some persist for a long time. Often, the closer one is connected to the truth of a topic, the harder it can be. One is not allowed to edit anything with which one may have a personal connection (and therefore insider knowledge). One cannot edit one's own biography, for instance, or ask anyone associated with you to do it. Case in point: the entry on the bestselling chronicler of the human condition Yuval Noah Harari. On 28 October 2020 he appeared on the podcast *The Tim Ferriss Show*, and Wikipedia came up at the very beginning:

Yuval Noah Harari: It's good to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

Tim Ferriss: We're going to start in an unusual place, perhaps. And that is with correcting my pronunciation on a word, M-O-S-H-A-V. How do you pronounce that, and what does it mean?

Harari: M-O-S-H-A-V. Oh, that's actually a mistake on Wikipedia. It's a moshav. It somehow got around that I live on a moshav, which is some kind of socialist, collective community, less radical than the kibbutz, but one of the experiments of socialists in Israel like decades ago. And it's just not true. I live in a kind of middle-class suburb of Tel Aviv.

Ferriss: So this is an example, for those listening, of something that some people call the Wikipedia echo effect because I actually—

Harari: Yes. I tried to correct it so many times, and it's just, I gave up. It's stronger than me. [Wikipedia stated that Harari lived at the moshav with his husband.]

Ferriss: Right. So, at some point, it got into Wikipedia, then it ended up in the *Guardian*. Then, other people cite the *Guardian*, and it just will not go away. So, it just keeps coming back.

Wikipedia has thousands, and probably tens of thousands of these kinds of mistakes, and it would be strange if it didn't; given that it is the largest store of global information ever assembled, and given that it is written by humans, it would be *untrustworthy* if it didn't. It would also be untrustworthy if these kinds of errors weren't corrected, and at 08.54 on 1 November 2020, three days after the podcast with Harari was released, Paco2718 removed the line stating 'The couple lives in a moshav (a type of cooperative agricultural community of individual farms) in Mesilat Zion, near Jerusalem. 'Paco2718 also removed three references in which this statement appeared, in *Haaretz*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Financial Times*. In the six months before this correction, Paco2718 had made small amendments to entries on Socrates, the Barack Obama 'Hope 'poster, and the Big Bang. In the six months after, he made small changes to Brontë Family, Republican Senator Ted Cruz and Mount Everest. His brief biographical entry on his Wikipedia user page reads 'Hi! I am Amir. I don't understand how everything works here but I am doing the best I can. '

These kinds of errors, however, are only one of Wikipedia's dilemmas. More involved issues, and the attempts to solve them, were acknowledged in a company progress report in 2017: 'Toxic behaviors and harassment have had a negative impact on participation in our projects. Our success has generated an overwhelming amount of maintenance and monitoring, and we have addressed these challenges with tools and practices that have turned good-faith community members away . . . the structures of our movement are often opaque or centralized, with high barriers to entry. '

The fact that Wikipedia is a non-profit organisation that doesn't track its readers (and thus doesn't sell on a reader's information) must necessarily raise the question of how it keeps going: it has a lot of servers and cyber security to maintain, as well as about 550 staff and contractors, and its headquarters in San Francisco, and it has a legacy-maintaining charitable foundation to run. Part of the answer lies in an email I received a while ago from Katherine Maher, Wikimedia Foundation's executive director. The

subject was 'Simon – this is a little awkward', and the message, which came with a photograph of the smiling sender, was an appeal for a donation.

Two years earlier I had responded to another appeal. Wikipedia received the occasional large donation (in 2018, Amazon gave it $1 million, not least, one suspects, because Alexa mines it for information), but most of its $100 million-plus annual income comes from small personal donations from users. In 2017 I donated the huge sum of £2 to carry on its sterling work, but the foundation was insatiable – it wanted yet more.

Maher wrote in her email: '98% of our readers don't give. They simply look the other way. And without more one-time donors, we need to turn to you, our past donors, in the hope that you'll show up again for Wikipedia, as you so generously have in the past. 'If I didn't give again, she feared, Wikipedia's integrity was at stake. 'You're the reason we exist. The fate of Wikipedia rests in your hands and we wouldn't have it any other way. '

I ignored it. But a month later Katherine Maher wrote to me again. There was a new photo of her, still smiling, but she had a darker message: the email was titled 'We've had enough'. It explained how every year Wikipedia has had to resist the pressure of accepting advertising or selling on information or establishing a paywall, and every year they've been proud to resist. But 'we're not salespeople, 'Maher wrote. 'We're librarians, archivists, and information junkies. We rely on our readers to become our donors, and it's worked for 18 years. 'Katherine Maher now wanted another £2, although there were also click-buttons to give £20, £35 or £50.

Obviously these weren't personal emails – hundreds of thousands of others received the same messages – but I thought I'd make it personal by going to see her. As with Wikimania, the virus scuppered our plans, so we met on Zoom, which meant I got to watch her eat breakfast eggs on her partner's sourdough at her home in San Francisco.

She told me she was in her late thirties and that her surname rhymes with car. She says she began editing Wikipedia as a university student in 2004, an article about the Middle East which she doesn't think survived on the site for very long. She joined the Wikimedia Foundation in 2014 as chief communications officer after a career in communications technology at

UNICEF and a digital rights company. Soon after becoming executive director in 2016, she encountered a problem about herself: the freshly created Wikipedia page detailing her appointment and early career was marked for deletion. 'I wasn't notable enough, 'she told me. 'The thinking was, "just because she runs the foundation doesn't mean that she's actually done anything of great note in the world".' She says she loved this utterly compliant nature of the beast she was now running, although she wondered whether the proposed deletion also had a gendered element to it. The article stayed.

Our chat necessarily led to a discussion of what, after four years in the job, she would now regard as the most notable achievements of her tenure. She spoke in terms of an ongoing battle. 'While Wikipedia is not a site on the Internet that has really obvious issues of harassment . . . it is not an environment that is particularly welcoming to new people. It is not an environment that is particularly welcoming to women. It is not particularly welcoming to minorities or marginalised communities. '

She says the aggressive approach she's taken towards those editors she sees as destructive has occasionally 'blown up in my face', not least her decision last year to ban an editor she saw as 'prolific, but not productive . . . somebody who was driving other editors away through their behaviour'. She has upset others by her insistence that the world in which Wikipedia will operate in the future will demand large additional and alternative sources of revenue. Machine learning and artificial intelligence will require new tools that are computationally expensive. The site, though efficient, may need a complete aesthetic rethink (it does look increasingly twentieth century). And the expansion into emerging communities in Africa and elsewhere will also require new resources.

When we spoke again a few weeks later, our conversation turned philosophical. 'I don't think Wikipedia represents truth, 'she began. 'I think it represents what we know or can agree on at any point in time. This doesn't mean that it's inaccurate, it just means that the concept of truth has sort of a different resonance. When I think about what knowledge is . . . what Wikipedia offers is context. And that's what differentiates it from similar data or original research, not that that isn't vital to us. '

Original research is what news organisations push out every single day. Maher mentions a YouGov poll from 2014 that found Wikipedia to be

more trusted in the UK than the BBC. 'I think for a lot of companies, they would say, "That's wonderful, we beat our competitors." My response was, first, the BBC is not a competitor. And second, that's not wonderful at all. If there's a trust deficit with the sources that we rely on then ultimately that deficit will catch up with us as well. We require that the ecosystem be trusted. '

Maher calls herself an inclusionist, arguing against those who wish to keep Wikipedia on a high intellectual footing, reasoning that anything that involves a learning journey is beneficial. 'If we don't have your Bollywood star, or pop singer, then you'll come to us and you'll bounce right off, because you don't see anything that's relevant to your life. '

She says the people who are most excited to meet her are the ones who use Wikipedia every day, but the ones who give her frosty looks are those who have the highest public profile. She recalls sitting next to two distinguished female scientists at a recent conference. 'I introduced myself, and very often in a context like that it's "Oh, another woman who's going to be a speaker and that's fantastic." So I say I run the foundation that runs Wikipedia. And the first thing I heard was, "We don't like our articles." One of the things they reflected on was, "Look, my body of work has changed dramatically since the article was first written, and it hasn't kept up to date with my newest thinking in the area." And that's a very legitimate concern. '

But at least they had an entry, which was not the case with Canadian scientist Donna Strickland. On 2 October 2018, Strickland was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for her work on chirped pulse amplification, something that may have a direct bearing on the future of eye surgery and other medical laser applications. But good luck trying to find more information on her on Wikipedia the day after the announcement. Her absence became a cause célèbre. There had been an entry prepared about her, but it was rejected on the grounds of insufficient references from secondary sources. That is to say, because she was only famous in the world of physics, and had not previously been written about in the popular media, she then couldn't be written about in the world's most popular encyclopaedia.

No one was keener to point out the anomaly than Maher. Soon after Strickland's entry finally appeared, Maher blogged that as of the beginning

of October 2019, only 17.82 per cent of Wikipedia's biographies were about women. She is proud that women gather frequently for day-long 'editathons' to improve this figure, and flags up the site's recent focus on improving and expanding articles concerning women's health and the history of the black diaspora. This is not merely a worthy ambition; it is regarded as crucial to Wikipedia's global standing. Maher has a neat phrase for another cultural imbalance: 'Too many articles on battleships, not enough on poetry.'

Conversely, Maher says there is a 'whole industry' based upon changing existing Wikipedia profiles from people who don't like what's written about them. It's considered 'black hat editing', and the community really gets upset by it. 'We encourage people not to do it, because usually you'll get caught, and when you do get caught white-washing your own Wikipedia page it's not a good look. We always tell elected officials this.'

Even Boris Johnson seemed to grasp the difficulty. In June 2020, referring to the destruction of statues of dishonoured men, he columnised thus: 'If we start purging the record and removing the images of all but those whose attitudes conform to our own, we are engaged in a great lie, a distortion of our history, like some public figure furtively trying to make themselves look better by editing their own Wikipedia entry.' Was I the only one to think he was writing from experience?

Between our two chats, Maher had attended a Zoom board meeting that sounded like every other board meeting: performance reviews, financial shortfalls, expansion or the lack of it. But then there were more specific issues: how to celebrate Wikipedia's twentieth anniversary in January, and continuing discussions about the impact of small screens on people's ability to absorb content and make edits. Does this inevitably mean less deep reading, or does it vastly increase accessibility? Both. Between March and May 2020, 43 per cent of users accessed Wikipedia on a computer, and 57 per cent on a phone.

Wikipedia's mobile app is a fascinating thing in itself, not least its article randomiser. This is an addictive lucky dip through millions of its pages: you click on a dice symbol and you get a nice way to spend a minute or a day. On one occasion it threw up the following, in the following order: Peters's wrinkle-lipped bat; Roads in Northern Ireland; Eddie Izzard *Live at the Ambassadors*; Proper palmar digital nerves of median nerve [nerves

in the palm of your hand]; Vincenz Fettmilch [early seventeenth-century gingerbread maker]; Herman Myhrberg [Swedish footballer who played in the 1912 Olympics]; List of Guangzhou Metro stations; *Hand Cut* [1983 album by Bucks Fizz]; Methyl isothiocyanate [chemical compound responsible for tears]; and Lusty Lady [defunct peep show establishment in Seattle which once boasted a marquee wishing passers-by 'Happy Spanksgiving'].

The thing that set Wikipedia apart from everything else that had fired the digital world over the past three decades – Google and other search engines, Facebook and other social media – was that Wikipedia's code wasn't new; all the software and hardware already existed and was being made use of elsewhere.

What distinguished Wikipedia was – as sappy as it sounds – a belief in humanity and the triumph of good behaviour over bad. There were other things too, including a commitment to information sharing, a celebration of specialisation and exactitude, and a deep and fundamental acknowledgement of the value of accumulated learning.

The very first home page, composed at 19.27 GMT on 15 January 2001, stated:

This is the new WikiPedia!

The following day at 19.00, Office.bomis.com created a mission statement:

This is the new WikiPedia! The idea here is to write a complete encyclopedia from scratch, without peer review process, etc. Some people think that this may be a hopeless endeavor, that the result will necessarily suck. We aren't so sure. So, let's get to work!

Its creator, Office.bomis.com, made the first edit twenty- three minutes later, adding a list of subjects WikiPedia should contain. 'Foundational disciplines 'included Philosophy and Logic, Mathematics and Statistics. Natural Sciences included Physics, Chemistry, Astronomy, Earth Sciences, Biology, Botany and Zoology. There were also to be sections on Social Sciences, Applied Arts, Urban Planning, Aerospace Technology, Classics, Performing Arts, Religion and Recreation, the last category including Sports, Games, Hobbies and Tourism.

Just over an hour later, the page received its first edit from an external contributor, Eiffel.demon.co.uk, who made a few small changes to the priority and presentation of the subject list, and added the topics Air Transport, Rail Transport, Road Transport and Sea Transport.

And the day after that, just after midnight on 17 January 2001, user Dhcp058.246.lvcm.com, who was evidently connected to the project, elaborated on the mission statement, added some links, and rallied the troops:

This is the new WikiPedia! The idea here is to write a complete encyclopedia from scratch, collaboratively. Add a page, come back tomorrow, look what others have added, and then add some more. We think this might be fun . . .

The links included WhatIsaWiki?
WhatsaWikiFor?
WhyOnEarthWouldIWantToContributeToaWiki?

The new entry ended with a forceful announcement. This wiki is an experiment. But, for those who might be confused about this point, it is not Nupedia. Nupedia is a serious encyclopedia project found at http://www.nupedia. com. This wiki is a proposed 'fun 'supplement to Nupedia!

Its founders Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger would subsequently fall out over several issues, not least factors surrounding the protocols of the reliability of entries. Sanger departed in 2002, and four years later formed his own knowledge website Citizendium, designed as a more rigorously fact-checked and peer-reviewed site than Wikipedia. Although launched with much publicity, and an initial burst of activity, the project soon lost momentum. (According to Citizendium's own statistics, quoted by Wikipedia, by 27 October 2011 the site had fewer than 100 active members, and Sanger had relinquished his post as editor-in-chief. As of 24 September 2020, it had 17,103 articles, of which 166 had achieved editorial approval, and sixteen contributors who had performed an action in the previous thirty days. Sanger left Citizendium entirely in 2020, announcing he would be forever cheering it on from the sidelines.)

By the end of its first year, Wikipedia had approximately 20,000 articles, including many entries on the original subject list, and many that would

not have been included in more traditional encyclopaedias. Some of the earliest articles took for their subject matter the American philosopher William Alston, the singer Fiona Apple, the slapstick silent film director Mack Sennett, the civil rights activist Rosa Parks, a list of the amendments in the US Constitution, a full list of the characters and locations in the novel *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand, details about the number of people in the Algerian military, a definition of oligopoly, a description of duopoly, the French actress Leslie Caron, and a list of female tennis players. Because its creators were also its readers, from the outset it reflected a world as varied as the interests of its inhabitants. In the first few weeks there were also articles on the meaning of the word Machiavellian, the postage stamp, a track listing of the album *Horses* by Patti Smith, a description of uric acid, and a brief biography of the soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. The randomness reflected the joy of the blank page: 'We're tiny and new, so Just Write anything! 'Twenty years later it has become

very difficult to find anything that doesn't have an entry. And then Wikipedia got bigger. By the end of 2003, Wikipedia had more than 100,000 articles in English, and in 2005 the figure exceeded 750,000. By 2008, the figure topped 2 million, and by October 2021 the figure was 6.39 million. The total number of words on the site (not including discussion and other behind-the-scenes entries) has increased from 4.8 million at the beginning of 2002 to 1.8 billion in 2010 to 3.98 billion by 20 October 2021. The number of people who had used Wikipedia up to that date came to 42,410,237.

The first mention of global warming – an eighty-word article noting an increase in surface temperature over the last 150 years and stating 'whether this increase is significant or not is open to debate – 'appeared in October 2001. By 23 October 2021, a week before the global climate summit in Glasgow, the name of the entry had become Climate Change and stood at almost 8640 words. It had received 25,396 edits at an average rate of 4.4 per day. There were 14,252 links directing readers to the article from other pages, and 924 directions to external links. There were 347 references, and hyperlinks to more than 200 peer-reviewed sources. Over the previous year the entry had been viewed 1,911,705 times.

The entry titled Climate Change, like a great many other articles on topics deemed important, was 'semi-protected': it meant there were restrictions on new edits that could be made at any point. Anyone wishing to make a

change would have   had to be a 'confirmed 'user, which meant having a registered account for at least four days and making at least ten other edits in that time. An edit would then be moderated, and possibly challenged or removed for a stated reason, often due to a lack of a recognised source.

(By contrast, on Britannica.com the article entitled Climate Change is longer, at 12,126 words, and has been principally written by one person, Stephen T. Jackson, Professor Emeritus of Botany at the University of Wyoming. Revisions have been made by five named editors as well as the unnamed 'Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'. There are only eighteen major edits listed from 2008 – four in 2021 and five between 2013 and 2020. There is an extensive list of Further Reading, but a small fraction of the links and sources available on Wikipedia. Apart from 100 words, the article is all behind a subscriber paywall.)

Long after it was shown to work, and once it had become hugely popular, the executives at Wikipedia found themselves skilled at coming up with retrospective summations of desire. 'When we talk about Wikipedia being a free encyclopaedia, 'one said, 'what we're really talking about is not the price that it takes to access it, but rather the freedom that you have to take it and adapt it and use it however you like. 'Someone else had another thought: 'We make the Internet not suck. '

Wikipedia has an obvious and magnificent advantage over the print stores it supplanted: incredible speed. *Britannica* in particular had the habit of being published in the same month as calamitous events. (A new printing of the fourteenth edition arrived from the printers just three weeks before Germany invaded Poland; a new printing on thin Indian onion paper in July 1945 narrowly managed to miss the dropping of the first atomic bomb.) These days, when someone notable dies, the cause of death is on Wikipedia before the funeral.

Similarly, the prevalence of what may best be described as dubiousness in print might have a pernicious effect for decades, much to our amusement today. How best to treat tuberculosis, for example? 'The most sovereign remedy, '*Britannica*'s first edition assured, 'is to get on horseback everyday. 'Childhood teething could, the encyclopaedia assured, be treated by the placing of leeches beneath the ears (in those days leeches cured *everything*). The ninth edition, published volume by volume between 1875 and 1889, advised its readers on how to become a vampire (get a cat to

jump over your corpse), while thirty years later the eleventh found werewolves 'in leopard form 'among 'the people of Banana (Congo)'.

I looked up 'People of Banana 'on Wikipedia and found this: 'The page "People of Banana" does not exist. You can ask for it to be created, but consider checking the search results below to see whether the topic is already covered. 'The search results included Banana, Banana republic, Banana leaf, Banana Fish, Banana ketchup, Speech banana, Banana Yoshimoto and everyone's favourite, Banana sundae.

So I asked for 'People of Banana 'to be created. I prepared my entry: 'The "People of Banana" is said to be one location where you may find werewolves. 'I cited 'Entry on Werewolves, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th Edition (1910–11), as referenced in Britannica's special 250th anniversary collector's edition, 2018. '

I didn't hold out much hope. My submission joined 2160 other pending submissions, 114 of which had been waiting five weeks for a Wikipedia administrator to approve or dismiss it (other recent submissions included items whose titles I didn't understand: 'Dog Puller', 'IBTS Greenhouse ' and 'Bug Music').

My administrator would probably dismiss my Banana entry on the grounds that it did not pass muster. 'There is a very good chance that the topic is not notable and will never be accepted as an article, 'the guidelines informed me. Other reasons why my entry could be rejected were divided into thirty-four subcategories, including 'declined as a non-notable film', 'declined as jokes', 'declined as not written in a neutral point of view 'and – the ultimate ' −declined as not suitable for Wikipedia'.

I had a vague twenty-first-century fear that something – anything – connecting banana with Africa might be rejected on the basis of racial assumption. But then, with almost all hopes dashed, I found that I had mis-searched, and a place called Banana in the Democratic Republic of Congo did indeed have its own entry, albeit a tiny one. There was no mention of the people of Banana specifically, and none of werewolves, but I learnt that Banana was a very small seaport situated in Banana Creek, an inlet about 1km wide on the north bank of the Congo River's mouth, separated from the ocean by a spit of land 3km long and 100 to 400m wide.

The article, like all articles on Wikipedia, was accompanied by its own 'History 'page, a behind-the-scenes catalogue of the edits that had made the page accurate and compliant, and attuned to house style. Often, these 'making of 'comments are more fascinating than the article they scrutinise. In this case, a Danish contributor called Morten Blaabjerg – one of relatively few to use a real name (other editors on this Banana page plumped for Warofdreams, Prince Hubris and Tabletop) – added the 'Henry 'to 'Henry Morton Stanley '(Stanley used Banana as a starting-off point for an expedition in 1879).

That edit was made in July 2005. The page had received relatively few edits since its inception the year before, although for a short while in 2007 there was a nice little hoo-ha over whether Banana was a seaport or a township. As far as contributor Morten Blaabjerg goes, we learn that he now lives in Odense, but was born in 1973 in the small southern Danish town of Strib, near Middelfart.

(End of Part One. For Wikipedia Part Two, consult the book!)