

DATA DIALOGUES PODCAST
Season 3, Episode 1

Madhuri Karak

So when we first start learning about something, Wikipedia is often our first stop, right? Whether it's about the newest planet in our solar system, or the different kinds of cheese out there, or the botanical name of the tree outside your window, or the history of an environmental justice issue. Wikipedia is often the most straightforward, most accessible information that we need.

But where does Wikipedia fit in when it comes to climate change - a supercomplex multi-dimensional, urgent topic like no other.

So today, we'll hear from Evelin Heidel, Program Director at Wikimedia Worldwide, who'll talk to us about exactly this. Evelin is also one of the founding members of the open climate community and she has been involved in various open and cultural projects over the past decade. And more recently, she has been also exploring the environmental side of things as well. Welcome to Data Dialogues, Evelin.

Evelin Heidel

Hey, thanks for having me here.

Madhuri Karak

So I'm just going to jump right into it. There is just such an information overload when it comes to climate out on the internet, right, there is opinion, scientific resource, statistics, news, policy - it's just very difficult to know where we should start, right? And as researchers, activists, advocates, or just simply say, you know, habitants, right, of this rapidly transforming planet, where do you think we should start, you know, in this process of discovering what is out there about climate on the internet?

Evelin Heidel

Well, I think Wikipedia is often the first stop. And informally among other Wikipedia editors, we always say like, this is the first place where you should start, but probably it's bad if it's also where you end up landing. So this is just like the start of the journey, but it shouldn't be the end. As we know, Wikipedia's mission is to document human knowledge. And that makes it the most ambiguous first stop for anyone searching for information on core climate concepts.

But then you should follow all the sources, all the references that are on Wikipedia articles. And more importantly, when we mean documenting the sum of all knowledge, we also mean, documenting probably other ways of experiencing the climate crisis that are not necessarily in scientific papers. And I think this is an important part of what we do when we talk about editing Wikipedia for climate knowledge.

Madhuri Karak

Thank you. You know, something that I think many folks don't necessarily know about is that, you know, paid third party apps, like, you know, your AI naturalist or even Siri, right? They are often answering the questions we asked them by tapping into the Wikipedia universe, right? So I just want to talk a little bit about what it means for the information that Wikipedia hosts and how we find that information or engage with that information. Because that's not just via the Wikipedia platform, right? We are, unbeknownst to us, also encountering Wikipedia hosted information in all these other fronts as well.

Evelin Heidel

Yeah, an important part of Wikipedia has to do with the licenses that Wikipedia uses. So all the information that you can find on Wikipedia or even on Wikimedia Commons, which is our multimedia repository, all this information is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution, Share Alike license, and other licenses as well like public domain.

And that allows for everyone, including some of these third party websites to use that information into their apps. And more and more, what's happening is that Wikipedia is sort of becoming this infrastructure of the internet, where a lot of other third party systems are relying on the information that is found on Wikipedia, and that puts a lot of pressure on Wikipedia in two ways.

Like the first way is that by becoming an infrastructure, you are also facing a lot of challenges on how you actually become visible to people, so they actually know that the information is coming from you, and that they can also contribute to that information. And so that's like challenge number one, let's say.

And the second challenge that we have related to that is that it's putting a lot of pressure on the information on Wikipedia being more and more reliable. And for it to be more reliable, we need more people actually helping with editing articles, with also adding sources or references, and the like.

And I think the other important aspect, too, is that Wikipedia is sort of this multi generational effort. And when it comes to environmental conflicts, and in general, we're talking about environmental information is also a great place to document some of these problems. Often what happens is that if an environmental conflict happens somewhere, then it's in the public news for a few weeks or a few days, but then it disappears from the public side. And where do you go to learn more about these environmental conflicts? Well, Wikipedia is a place where some of these environmental conflicts, environmental issues can be thoroughly documented, and then retreat back like five to 10 years from now. And all of this is facilitated by the open licenses, but also by the humans that are behind this whole idea of sharing access to knowledge and ensuring access to information.

Madhuri Karak

I'm definitely coming back to the humans behind Wikipedia in just a bit but want to, you know, understand a little bit more of this openness, right? This open value system that Wikipedia is founded on and why open is so critical for climate justice advocates, how we receive and understand and engage with climate related knowledge, why is open so, so important for how we tackle climate change as an issue?

Evelin Heide

Well, I'm gonna feel old by saying this, but I think that the internet, as we have it right now is very different from the internet that we had 10 to 15 years ago, it has changed dramatically. And right now, we're not actually participating in the open internet anymore. What is happening to us is that we are sort of drifting from one walled garden to another. And that could be social media platforms, but also paid platforms.

Nowadays, for example, it's very hard to actually access any news or information without finding a paywall, or that you have to log in to an account in order to read some piece of news. And this is becoming more and more the norm on the internet. And it's very complicated to participate on these platforms. But also, one of the main things that happens with these platforms is they respond to their shareholders, since most of them are businesses, they do not respond to the public interest, they respond to whatever business decisions they have to comply with.

And that means that the information that you put in some of these platforms can be arbitrarily shut down, or become very costly very quickly, without you or your environmental group, even realizing that that's

gonna change or like without you having enough time to change and move in to another platform. So this is the first problem.

The second issue is that Wikipedia is still a very visible website. And this is true in all the free over 300 languages that Wikipedia is written in, which is kind of a major feature of Wikipedia that is not often talked about, like the amount of languages that this knowledge ecosystem is being put out there.

But articles have a lot of visibility on the open web on the internet. And so sometimes people get really excited because maybe they got 100 or 200 likes on a post. I'm not going to mention any company here. But for example, what if I told you that the fossil fuel article on Spanish Wikipedia has over 15,000 views a month and so understanding that some of these articles are spaces where you can intervene, where vital information that people are trying to access. This is like the key aspect of, "yeah, like it is open both in the sense that anyone can have access to" but it's also open in the sense that anyone can contribute to this, and can help improve it and give more people access to the information that they are looking for online.

And the third thing that I think is very important is that climate information needs to be open. This is fundamental for adaptation needs or for mitigation needs. And we also know that Wikipedia is committed to keep on being open, in a more broader sense, than other platforms. And this means as well, that this information, the climate information that we put out there, is going to remain open as well.

Madhuri Karak

You know, just before our conversation, I went to the Climate Change entry on Wikipedia, and it's currently available in 153 languages. And, yeah, it's just incredibly moving that, you know, 153 volunteers, you know, wrote that very exhaustive and detailed entry for, you know, just the belief that people should have this information. So, it's just really incredible what the humans behind Wikipedia accomplish daily.

And so, you know, tell us a little bit more about the communities who are behind the scenes, the Wikipedians, who act as this bridge, right, and public understanding, getting us to think about scientific research between everything really - news, history, in more accessible ways, in our languages. What is that community like? How are they acting as a bridge? Particularly, you know, because you started with talking about how the mission of Wikipedia is to document human knowledge. So who are the humans behind Wikipedia? And, you know, yeah, well, the humans?

Evelin Heide

Yeah, I think that I'm just gonna make a small correction there. Because I think that this is actually, like, how invisible some of those workers, yet how vital it is. So for example, climate change on Wikipedia, it's in 150, free languages. But that doesn't mean that we have 150, free editors, it actually means that we have way more than that. So for example, if you go to the climate change page on Wikipedia, it's over 5000 editors that actually engage with the content in one way or another.

And then if we go to the Spanish one, it's a similar number, I'll tell you in a bit because it's still loading, but it's around 2000 editors as well, right. And so that's only for two languages, but we have over 7000 people involved in some way or another in improving this article. And I think that this is speaking about the numbers not so much about the essence of the community. But in a way it's a very large community that is involved in being the sort of intermediary in scientific media and diplomatic spaces. It is a way for us to intervene with climate knowledge.

But also we know that Wikipedia is read by a lot of people a lot of different people that are in different stages in life - it could be high school students, it could also be politicians, it could be diplomats, people that are trying to address some climate topic in a different way or in their like day to day jobs. So it's important that they have access to this information.

And so in a way Wikipedia is trying to be this bridge in how we understand some of these core concepts and improving their understanding. And the more important thing around this ecosystem is that it is all powered by humans, it is all powered by communities. And this is like the major strength and the reason why it's the major strength is because this community speak a lot of different languages. I'm part of the working group on climate justice and Wikimedia projects in Latin America. And this is a group that was formed by some Wikimedia affiliates, that came together through an important editing campaign that we've been running for the last two years or so on Wiki for human rights, the right to a healthy environment. And what we do there is we promote, we try to get other people to join us in this effort of documenting the environmental and climate crisis.

And so far, people have actually joined us in this endeavor. And I think the Wikimedia movement more and more is understanding how important this topic is to gain a voice and a space in Wikimedia platforms, but also to be addressed collectively as part of our movement. And so this is an important part. It's like the communities sort of feed each other, both in editing but also in acting on some of these topics.

Madhuri Karak

Thank you so much, Evelin. This was really inspiring to learn that you know, Wikipedia is not just about learning anything and everything about topics, but also how it's tackling the challenge of knowledge, equity, as well as, you know, climate and environmental issues all over the world. Thank you, Evelyn, for joining us for the very first episode on Data Dialogues Season Three.

Evelin Heidel

Yeah, thanks for inviting me.