

Title: An Oral History of Wikipedia, the Web's Encyclopedia

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It's hard to **imagine** the internet without Wikipedia. Just like the air we **breathe**, the definitive digital encyclopedia **is** the default resource for everything and everyone — from Google's search bar to undergrad students **embarking** on research papers. It **has** more than 6 million entries in English, it **is** visited hundreds of millions of times per day, and it **reflects** whatever the world **has** on its mind: **Trending** pages this week **include** Tanya Roberts (R.I.P.), the Netflix drama *Bridgerton*, and, oh yes, the 25th Amendment to the United States Constitution.

It **was** also never **meant** to **exist** — at least, not like this.

Wikipedia **was launched** as the ugly stepsibling of a whole other online encyclopedia, Nupedia. That site, **launched** in 1999, **included** a rigorous seven-step process for **publishing** articles **written** by volunteers. Experts would **check** the information before it **was published** online — a kind of peer-review process — which would theoretically **mean** every post **was** credible. And **painstaking**. And slow to **publish**.

"It **was** too hard and too **intimidating**," **says** Jimmy Wales, Nupedia's founder who **is** now, of course, better **known** as the founder of Wikipedia. "We **realized**... we **need** to **make** it easier for people."

Now 20 years later — Wikipedia's birthday **is** this Friday — nearly 300,000 editors (or "Wikipedians") now **volunteer** their time to **write**, **edit**, **block**, **squabble over**, and **scrub** every corner of the **sprawling** encyclopedia. They **call** it "the project," and they **are dedicated** to what they **call** its five pillars: Wikipedia **is** an encyclopedia; Wikipedia **is written** from a neutral point of view; Wikipedia **is** free content that anyone can **use**, **edit**, and **distribute**; Wikipedia's editors should **treat** each other with respect and civility; and Wikipedia **has** no firm rules.

Behind the site itself **is** the Wikimedia Foundation, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that **takes** care of the servers, **fundraising**, legal challenges, and many initiatives that **advance** the project. Its most essential task: delicately **handling** volunteer editors, about 40,000 of whom **are** most active on English Wikipedia and more than 500 of whom **have** active "admin" status, which **allows** them to **wield** powers such as **blocking** and **editing protected** pages.

It **is** not perfect. There **is** **trolling**. There **are** vandals. There **is** **bullying** of "newbies" by editors. And there **are** imposters who **edit** not for the greater good but to **serve** the greed, vanity, or ambition of self-interested (sometimes **paying**) parties. And, yes, there **are** many, many weak and thinly **sourced** articles (only about 40,000 out of the site's 6 million entries **meet** the higher standard of **being** "good articles"). There **is** also a gender imbalance within the domain of Wikipedia — in English Wikipedia, more than 80% of editors **are** men and just 18% of biographies **are** about women.

Regardless, Wikipedia **is** now a cornerstone of life online. How many wives **did** King Henry VIII **have**? Where **does** the word "fuck" **come from**? Why **did** people **wear** bearskin shoes? Wikipedia **has** all the answers.

So on the 20th anniversary, *OneZero* **asked** the individuals who **made** Wikipedia what it **is** today how it all **started**.

In the 1970s, as the Department of Defense and companies such as IBM **continued** to **develop** computer technology and personal computers **appeared** just over the horizon, a movement **emerged** to **connect** the increasingly nimble devices through electronic mail, as well as through the formation of the internet. By the 1980s, Ward Cunningham, a computer programmer in Portland, Oregon, who **used** to **tinker** with ham radios and **dreamed** of **connecting** computers through them, **was** **looking** for ways to **innovate** how software **was written**.

Ward Cunningham: We **had** to change how we **thought** about **writing** software. We **said** we **need** a new way to **write** about computer **programming** because the history **was** to **write** about computer **programming** as if it **was** mathematics. But when it **comes** to actually **satisfying** customers who now **have** computers on their desks, they couldn't **tell** you what they **wanted**. And the engineers **didn't** **know**.

In the 1990s, Cunningham **ran** his own computer **consulting** company, Cunningham & Cunningham, with his wife, Karen. He **created** something he **called** the Portland Pattern Repository for fellow programmers to **publish** software design patterns on his website, C2.com. He **wanted** to **give** them a way to **collaborate** from their homes on the internet.

Ward Cunningham: I **was** **addressing** a community that **had** about 500 people in it. I **programmed** [the earliest form of what would **become** a wiki] in a day or two. And when I **operated** it, the most **overwhelming** feeling that I **had** **was** that it **was** very quick. I **was** **thinking**, "Well, this **is** **going to be** important. I **have** to **name** it something." I **thought**, "Quick Web." But I **knew** that in Hawaiian **wiki** **meant** quick. And I **said** Wiki Wiki Web because it **had** an alliteration and it also would **be** WWW which **is** the same as the World Wide Web. I **announced** it in March of '95. I **said**, "**Look**, I **built** this system and here's how to **use** it."

Katherine Maher: It **was** radical in the way that it **enabled** accessibility to **publishing** on the web and also **enabled** collaboration. So you not only **didn't** **have** to **learn** how to **build** your own page in HTML, you **could** **do** this and you **could** **do** it with other people dynamically. It **was** the first step toward products like Etherpad or Google Docs. It **took** control over the web and **put** it into the keyboards of people.

Ward Cunningham: The key thing **is** you **click** on a link, and it **says**, "I **don't** **have** that [information]. Why **don't** you **put** it in?" You're not just a reader now, you're an author.

In 1996, Jimmy Wales, who **had** **been** **working** as a trader for an options and futures finance company in Chicago, **started** an internet company **called** Bomis with his boss, Michael Davis, and a colleague, Tim Shell. They **created** Bomis to find new business opportunities on a **burgeoning** World Wide Web. **Started** in San Diego, California, Bomis **moved** to St. Petersburg, Florida, before **settling** in San Francisco.

Jimmy Wales: [Shell] **was** largely in charge of content while I **led** the business/software side of things. We **were** just **trying** to **get** traffic that we **could** **funnel** to other business ideas. We **had** a lunch delivery service and things like that.

At the time, how to **categorize** the potentially endless body of knowledge on the web **was** a central question for the industry. Yahoo!, originally a directory of websites, **was** **created** in January 1994 by Jerry Yang and David Filo, electrical **engineering** graduate students at Stanford University. Google, the internet search engine, **was** **founded** in September 1998 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, who **were** also grad students at Stanford.

Andrew Lih: Yahoo! **was** the king of the hill. Google **was** just **getting** **started**. And the [predominant] idea of **trying** to **figure** **out** where to **go** on the internet **was** to **look** at a directory like it **was** a phonebook.

Bomis **had** to **decide** how the company would **build** its websites.

Jimmy Wales: The big battle **was** between Google and their algorithmic search, and Yahoo!, which **categorized** things. They manually **approved** links, and they **put** them into categories. And nobody **knew** which **was going to prevail** as the dominant way of **searching**.

I thought, “Gee, [Yahoo!’s model] **doesn’t scale** very well, because Yahoo! **has to hire** people to **do** it. [Instead] we **could just let** anybody **come** and **create** a category.”

[Bomis **created** a model for information discovery **called**] a web ring. And people **could come** and **create** web rings on any topic. One of the first examples **was** somebody **collected** a bunch of links about Jupiter and they **made** a web ring about Jupiter.

Andrew Lih: It **was trying to create** an open source version of Yahoo!.

Jimmy Wales: We **asked**, “Who’s **looking** at all [these web rings]?” Well, it **was** men in their twenties. So, we **did** a baseball blog web ring. That **went** nowhere. Tim Shell **built** a web ring for Pamela Anderson, the actress, and it **was** like, unbelievable traffic. And then it **turned out** that people **loved building** web rings for actresses and models and porn stars. We **didn’t set it up to do** that.

Andrew Lih: They **were trying to do** lots of things in parallel. Not only a directory like Yahoo!, but also the Bomis Babe Report, which **was** an image aggregator for all that they **would dub**, “content for men.”

Jimmy Wales: We **were saying**, “We’ve **got** this audience. What **would appeal** to them?” I **had been watching** the growth of open source software and I **had** this concept of a free encyclopedia. There **wasn’t** a huge amount of **thought** about business model. I just **thought**, “Who **knows**? We’ll **put** ads on it or something.”

*In October 1999, Bomis **launched** the web-based encyclopedia, Nupedia, which **was to be written** by volunteers. Articles **were to go through** a seven-step process that **included being reviewed** by expert editors. Wales **hired** Larry Sanger, a PhD philosophy candidate who **was also dabbling** on the internet, to **be** its editor-in-chief.*

Larry Sanger: Jimmy **was** specifically **interested in finding** an historian or philosopher to **lead** the project. I **maintained** from the start that something really **could not be** a credible encyclopedia without oversight by experts. I **reasoned** that, if the project **is** open to all, it **would require** both management by experts and an unusually rigorous process.

*[Some of Sanger’s quotes in this oral history **come from** earlier statements; all of which **were approved** for use by Sanger for OneZero.]*

Britta Gustafson: Larry Sanger **was bringing** some academic rigor to the project.

Larry Sanger: In the fall of 2000, Jimmy and I **agreed** that Nupedia’s slow productivity **was** probably **going to be** an **ongoing** problem and that there **needed to be** a way in which ordinary, **uncredentialed** people **could participate** more easily.

*By the turn of the millennium, the Wiki Wiki software that Cunningham **had created was being used** by computer programmers around the world to **share** computer code.*

Jimmy Wales: One of the very influential essays back then **was** Eric Raymond’s “The Cathedral and the Bazaar,” where he **talks** about two models of software development, one **being** the cathedral model, which **is** a set of high priests **working** in secret and then the other **was** the bazaar model, like a marketplace of ideas with people. There **was** a **growing understanding** that Nupedia **wasn’t**

working. It **was** too hard and too **intimidating**. We **realized**, “This cathedral model **isn’t working**. We **need to make** it easier for people.”

*There **is** disagreement **regarding** who first **thought** of the idea of **marrying** the Wiki software with an encyclopedia. Sanger **claims** that it **was** his suggestion that **prompted** Wales. Wales **doesn’t deny** that Sanger **suggested** it, but he **maintains** that Rosenfeld **suggested** it to him first.*

Jeremy Rosenfeld: A buddy of mine, a software engineer, **was looking** for a way to **share** photos with his family. He **had found** the Wiki. And in one of those informal conversations at the [Bomis] office, I **introduced** that to Jimmy. He **was excited** about it.

Larry Sanger: I **was thinking** hard about how to **create** a more open system [when] I **had** dinner with an old internet friend of mine, Ben Kovitz. We **were** out at a Pacific Beach Mexican restaurant on January 2, 2001, **talking** about jobs, techie stuff, and philosophy, no doubt... Ben **explained** the idea of Ward Cunningham’s WikiWikiWeb to me. Instantly, I **was considering** whether wiki would **work** as a more open and simple editorial system for a free, collaborative encyclopedia.

Jimmy Wales: When I **came back** to work in January, I **was** just ready to **make** decisions and **tear** things **up**. And so, I **said**, “I **am going to** just **install** this software.” So, I **downloaded** Use Mod Wiki [the wiki engine **written** in the Perl **programming** language, which Cunningham **used** to **build** the Wiki Wiki Web], which **was** a very simple way of **making** a webpage that anybody could **edit**.

*Though the argument over who really **introduced** the Wiki model to Wales **rages on**, the Wikipedia community **seems to have decided** its position on the matter. In Sanger’s Wikipedia page, it **is written**, “Sanger **proposed using** a wiki to **solicit** and **receive** articles to **put through** Nupedia’s peer-review process.”*

Larry Sanger: I **came up with** the name “Wikipedia,” a silly name for what **was** at first a very silly project, and the newly independent project **was launched** at Wikipedia.com on January 15, 2001.

Jimmy Wales: The first thing I **did** to test it, I **wrote**, “Hello, world!” Which **is** meaningful to programmers because when you **write** a new **programming** language, the first thing you **do is write**, “Hello, world!”

We made lists of things and made links, and they **were** just like, **to-do** projects. We probably **created** A through Z. We **thought**, “Oh, we **need** an entry on every U.S. state. So, here’s a list of all 50 states.” And then you **make** links — you **go through** and **start writing** them one after another. It **was** quite easy to just **say**, “Africa **is** a continent.” It’s not very good, but it’s safe and it’s a start.

Magnus Manske: There **was** something that **said**, basically, “We **want to get** to 200,000 articles and we currently **have** 19.” We all **thought**, “Oh, yeah. We **hope** this will eventually **get** there.” [We **wanted to get to**] the size of *Britannica*. I **think** the common guess **was** 10 years until we **reached** 100,000.

Larry Sanger: By the end of January we **had** approximately 600 articles; there **were** 1,300 in March, 2,300 in April, and 3,900 in May. Of course, an “article” **meant** any page with a comma.

*Wikipedia **was** totally open and accessible, **allowing** anyone with basic computer skills to **add** pages and **edit** them freely, **prompting** early entries on Siberian huskies and Celtic music. In contrast, Nupedia **appeared** sluggish, stodgy, and elitist.*

Jimmy Wales: We **ran** [Nupedia and Wikipedia] in parallel for a little bit, but it **was** very obvious that Wikipedia **was getting** more work **done** much faster, and **was going to be** a potentially successful model. So Nupedia **withered**.

Larry Sanger: If you **were working** on Wikipedia, it **was**, “Nupedia **is boring**.” If you **were working** on Nupedia then you **saw** Wikipedia **as** unserious and **lacking** credibility. I **was spending** probably 80% of my time on Wikipedia and 20% of my time on Nupedia. My notion **was** that Wikipedia **was** extremely **exciting** and that it **was** finally **making** the project of **creating** a free encyclopedia **take off**. But I **didn’t want to** entirely **give up** on Nupedia. I **wanted** Nupedia to **be** a review mechanism for Wikipedia.

*The September 11th attacks on U.S. soil, which **took** place just nine months after Wikipedia **was founded**, **became** “a transformational moment” for the initiative. In a moment of crisis, readers **turned to** the site in search of answers.*

Katherine Maher: I **remember waking up** that morning, **hearing** this news of a plane **hitting** the World Trade Center and **walking** the five feet from my bunk bed to my laptop in my college dorm room, **trying to get** on the *New York Times* website and **having** the site **be down**. I **knew** that this **was** a traffic surge. Millions of people **were** online **seeking** information beyond what the television could **tell** us.

Jimmy Wales: You just **saw** [videos of the attacks] over and over and over, and you **saw** the **talking** heads **speculating** about who **could have done** it.

Katherine Maher: People **were seeking** information, and Wikipedia **was** available in a way that really **met** a need.

Jimmy Wales: We **had been cranking along** reasonably well, **writing** an encyclopedia. It **was** planets and historical figures and so on. And this **was** the first time that the community **responded** to a news event, **doing** something that **was** different from journalism, but complementary. People began **responding** to the news by **filling** in the background information.

Andrew Lih: There **was** definitely a cognitive surplus post-9/11 because the economy **took** a dive; a lot of people with a lot of time on their hands. That **contributed** a lot to the activity on Wikipedia.

Britta Gustafson: There **was** a lot of 9/11 material, but I **didn’t** really **get** involved in that. Poker, *The Simpsons*, objectivism **were** the more robust sections. I **was** about 14 years old. I **was spending** a lot of time on the computer at the school library. I **was** a harp student and there **was** no article for the harp. I **thought**, “Well, I can **write** that.” I **had** a harp calendar which **had** a history of the harp on the front page. I **used** that for material. But, mostly, it **was** just off the top of my head. There **were** no real requirements for **sourcing**, and there **was** no real way to **incorporate** a citation. My younger sister, she **was** in seventh grade, **had written** a little report about Pablo Neruda. So, I **took** her school report and **turned it into** the Wikipedia article on Pablo Neruda.

*Meanwhile, only two dozen articles **had made** it through Nupedia’s review process and **were** ultimately **published**. Sanger’s salary **was reduced**, and he **left** the project in early 2002. Nupedia **was** “put in mothballs.”*

Jimmy Wales: Larry **deserves** more credit than he normally **gets**. He **was** instrumental in the early days. I always **feel like** people **want to make** a controversy where there **shouldn’t be** one.

*As Wikipedia **grew**, so **did** the organization’s financial needs.*

Stephen Harrison: Jimmy **posted** on the listserv for Wikipedia something like, “Well, we **might explore** advertisements for Wikipedia.” It **was** exploratory. [*The reaction from community members **was** severe.*] The Wikipedia community in Spain **was** so **upset** that they actually **fragmented off**... It pretty much **made** it so that Jimmy Wales **couldn’t commercialize** Wikipedia.

Jimmy Wales: The decision in 2003 to **move** it **into** the nonprofit structure **was** a big moment for us because it **didn't have to happen**. It **was becoming** evident as traffic **was growing**, “Oh, this **is going to get** expensive soon.” I **thought**, “Well, we **move into** a nonprofit and maybe that's a path to **get** some money that won't **require putting** ads on the site.” The real question **was**, “Will people **donate** money for this?”

*Wikipedia.com **became** Wikipedia.org in 2003.*

Steven Pruitt (3.8m **edits**): If it **started selling** ads, that alone probably would not **get me to leave**. What would it **have done** to Wikipedia as a whole? I **don't know**. I **don't think** it would **change** the project much. But it would **change** people's perception of the project. And I **think** that alone could **be** problematic.

Richard Farmbrough (1.7m **edits**): I think there'd **be** a fork. Probably more than one.

Katherine Maher: What we always **say** [about ads] **is**, “Never **say** never... But no.”

*Wikipedia's struggle for accuracy **has been marred** by questions about bias — **was** it an authoritative source, or a scratchpad for amateur historians?*

*Over the years, Wikipedia **has listed** numerous erroneous claims of **living** people **being** dead: from comedian Sinbad to Senator Robert Byrd. In 2008, a teenager **edited** the page of a coati, a member of the raccoon family most commonly **found** in South America, so that it **said** that it **was**, “also **known** as... a Brazilian aardvark.” **Intended** as a joke, the “fact” **made** its way into a number of publications and even a book **published** by the University of Chicago.*

*In May 2005, the Wikipedia article on journalist John Seigenthaler **was edited** to falsely **state** that he **was** a suspect in the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and his brother, Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy. Seigenthaler **had** once **worked** for the younger Kennedy.*

Jimmy Wales: John Seigenthaler **called** me and **said**, “Hey, this article about me **says** this terrible thing.” And I'm like, “Oh, dear, so sorry. **Let me look** into it.” And within 10 minutes, it **was fixed**. I **thought**, “Oh, well, that's **annoying**. But that's the end of it.”

Richard Farmbrough: My initial reaction **was**, well, why **didn't** he just **edit** the page? Of course, you're **discouraged** from **doing** that if it's a page about yourself.

Jimmy Wales: Then he **published** this **scathing** editorial in *USA Today* about [Wikipedia] **being** dangerous.

*Seigenthaler **wrote** about the personal hurt he'd **experienced** and **condemned** the site; “Wikipedia **is** a **flawed** and irresponsible research tool,” he **wrote**. The media coverage of the incident **skewed** the site's flaws of the website, namely its reliability and vulnerability to **tampering**. But, as the New York Times **reported** at the time, it **was** also a moment to **reflect** on how the encyclopedia **had become** a “spectacular success.”*

Katherine Maher: Wikipedians always **took** the work that they **did** seriously, but also **took** joy in it as a project. And here you **had** somebody who **was** very vocal in the harm that it **had caused**. It **sent** a shockwave through the community.

Rich Farmbrough: I **think** it **hurt** our reputation, but I **think** it **was** quite useful to **help** people **understand** more how Wikipedia **works**.

Jimmy Wales: We **realized** that we **weren't** just a little side project on the internet. We're **having** an impact on the world.

Andrew Lih: The main policy that was created after that is called the BLP, or biographies of living persons, which says that if you encounter anything in an article about someone who's alive, there's an extra high standard of sourcing, of accountability, and accuracy you must abide by.

In 2004, concerns emerged that Google searches for the word "Jew" turned up an anti-Semitic website. Google declined to tweak its algorithm, so activist Daniel Sieradski organized a "Google bomb," the manipulation of links so that a particular site rises in the Google search engine. Sieradski chose to link "Jew" to the Wikipedia entry for that word, a milestone moment that spoke to the site increasingly being perceived as a neutral and authoritative source of information.

In December 2005, Nature published a peer-reviewed report that suggested that in terms of accuracy, Wikipedia wasn't too far behind Encyclopedia Britannica. In the report, 42 expert reviewers found that Wikipedia's science articles had about four mistakes per item and that Britannica had about three. Britannica disputed the findings and called the report "fatally flawed." Nature defended its article.

Katherine Maher: The lore goes that Encyclopedia Britannica immediately wrote a letter to the editor of Nature disputing this. But Wikipedians immediately wrote a letter to Jimmy asking him to get a copy of the study, so that they could go fix the Wikipedia errors.

Steven Pruitt: People look at it from the other perspective — there's nothing stopping somebody coming in and putting crap in the article. True. But there's no barrier towards somebody else coming in and taking that crap out.

Wales credits Tim Shell for having come up with the separate "Talk" page so that editors can converse on an adjoining page behind an article. All edits are recorded and traced to individual editors. The debates that have raged between editors have been legendary and have led to accusations of bullying, sexism, and individuals being banned — which isn't common and normally for a limited period of time — from the site. The site sometimes trips itself up with its own policies.

But eventually, issues get resolved. Justin Knapp, the first Wikipedian to record a million edits, has gotten into his share of scrapes over entries of particular interest to him, such as the political realities and fate of the disputed territory of Western Sahara in Africa. "I got a lot of blocks for the first year or so," he concedes. "I learned the hard way about best practices, collaboration, and wars of attrition."

Britta Gustafson: My own personal theory is that the power of the know-it-all powers Wikipedia.

Steven Pruitt: I always expected to be in some kind of an academic setting. And the nice thing about Wikipedia was that it wasn't constrained in the way that schoolwork was constrained. I try to do at least a few edits at the beginning or the end of the day.

Wikipedia increasingly became a reference point in mainstream culture. "Weird Al" Yankovic name-dropped the site in his 2006 song, "White & Nerdy," affirming its reputation for bookishness. And Stephen Colbert occasionally takes satirical potshots at the site, deriding its legitimacy and asserting that its entries are dictated by groupthink rather than actual facts.

"Fuck them," Colbert barked in one 2006 episode, referring to the site's entry about his merely popularizing the word, "truthiness," rather than making it up. Because of its runaway growth, the Wikimedia Foundation announced its first executive director in 2007, Canadian journalist Sue Gardner, who was given the task of ensuring "the project" would be able to handle its ballooning capacity and maintain its core directives.

Jimmy Wales: Sue came in when we were very tiny. We were based in Florida, still a handful of employees. She deserves credit for building the Wikimedia Foundation from, I'm going to venture to say, probably five or six employees, into quite a large organization after several years of time.

Katherine Maher: Sue Gardner established the infrastructure that has enabled Wikipedia to become a platform at the scale that it is. [Ed: There are now over 200 employees, and in 2007 the foundation moved to San Francisco.] She built out the necessary effective governance, strong

fundraising capacity, and ensured that the institution had what it needed to make it through a period of growth.

In 2007, Wikipedia reached the 2 million-article milestone with the addition of an article on El Hormiguero, a Spanish television show. After exponential growth in volunteer editors between 2001 and 2007, the number of volunteers has largely plateaued, with about 130,000 editors contributing each month on English Wikipedia. The number of editors working on other language Wikipedias are still growing, though. In 2014, Gardner was replaced by Lila Tretikov, a software engineer, who lasted until 2016 when she was replaced by Katherine Maher.

Jimmy Wales: Katherine was [previously] our head of communications. We always have these complicated issues around the community and the foundation, where there can be mistrust and lack of understanding.

Katherine Maher: When I have a big idea or a thing that I'd like us to do, the way to do it is to go to the community with humility. They're probably going to find all the flaws in it, and it's going to be painful. And then at the end of the process, it's going to be better.

In the fiscal year ending 2020, Wikipedia raised over \$120 million in donations. The site spent \$112 million to maintain operations. Over 85% of its operating budget is funded by small-dollar donations. The average donation is \$15. Wikipedia received funding from Twitter through employee-directed matching gifts. In 2019, Google announced that it would contribute \$1.1 million to the Wikimedia Foundation and \$2 million to the Wikimedia endowment. Wikipedia is especially open about its finances, which is very important to its volunteer editors.

Andrew Lih: The fundraising messages you see every year seem pretty dire, right? I keep telling people, "The reality is that the organism is very healthy. It has a surplus."

Jimmy Wales: We always have to be really serious about the fundraising, because we do need money to run Wikipedia. But we've also found that the public supports us. Revenue on mobile is lower than the revenue on the desktop. It's harder to type in your credit card number on your phone. It is an issue that we have to cope with.

Katherine Maher: We missed the boat a little bit on mobile but we now have a fully-integrated full-service mobile-editing feature. Mobile is now the primary way in which people access Wikipedia.

This year, Wikipedia's desktop pages are getting their first full redesign in a decade, with changes to elements such as a nimble Table of Contents and collapsible sidebars.

Toby Negrin: We undertook a multiyear project to improve the Wikipedia desktop experience because we wanted to create an experience that felt similar to our long-time users, and at the same time straightforward and intuitive for new Wikipedians. Wikipedia is a collaboration, and so our process to introduce new features to Wikipedia on the desktop is built on that same spirit of iteration, collaboration, and consultation. The new features we chose to develop are overwhelmingly based on community requests or community-built gadgets, projects and ideas. Currently, we're doing a staggered rollout of these new features as we test them on a wide range of Wikipedias.

Katherine Maher: If you look at 6 million articles in English, it sounds like an awful lot. But the number of potential notable things in the world, at least calculated by one Wikipedia editor, is above 100 million. That includes every village, elected official, painting of note ever painted. You start to realize how vast this aspiration is to collect the world's knowledge and how we've made good progress, but there's so much more progress to be made.

Today, Wikipedia *is* such a cornerstone of the internet that the public often *takes it for granted*. But it occasionally *enters* the public discussion, most often because of controversies *regarding* inclusion, bias, or inaccuracies.

In 2020, users *discovered* that the Scots Wikipedia *had been* largely *written* by an American teenager who simply *aped* the dialect; in 2019, North Face *hired* an *advertising* company in Brazil to *replace* otherwise neutral photos of people in nature with images of people *using* North Face gear *turning* the site into a *branding* opportunity. (Wikipedia *has* guidelines to *prevent* such conflict-of-interest *editing*, but not everyone *plays* by the rules.)

Now, 20 years after he *helped establish* Wikipedia, Sanger *is* probably the site's "most *outspoken* critic," or at least, its most consistent.

Larry Sanger: It's *become* both opaque and *centralized, centralized* in the sense that the authority to *participate* in Wikipedia *has been* greatly *restricted*. You can *be* completely anonymous and even *be* a top-ranked Wikipedia user with administrator rights. So, they *could be working* for various corporations, various government spy agencies, maybe for criminal organizations.

In response, the Wikimedia Foundation *told* OneZero that Wikipedia *is* an immense *undertaking*, and it *can be* hard to *control* but there *are* systems in place to *prevent* and *root out* abuses. "A common misconception about Wikipedia *is* that it's very easy to *vandalize*. While everyone *can edit*, it's harder to *keep* a bad edit up than people *may think*," a representative *wrote*. "[The] open, collaborative model *is* intentionally *set up* so that no singular authority *can exert* control over articles."

Steven Pruitt: That people *will violate* the trust *placed* in them: That's true of many realms of human experience, *isn't it*? I *don't dwell* on it.

Stephen Harrison: Steven Pruitt *told* me he *could* once *write* about every mountain in Antarctica and no one *would touch* [his articles]. It *was* still blue ocean territory. Nowadays, if you're a new contributor, your edits *are scrutinized* to *make* sure that they're not *violating* Wikipedia policies.

Steven Pruitt: The act of *creating* content *is* more *codified* than it *was* [when Wikipedia *started*] and I think ultimately it *makes* it less friendly for novice users. For the self-guided editor, it's not as easy as it *was* for me.

Ward Cunningham: I *don't think* the future of Wikipedia *is guaranteed*. But then hardly the future of anything's *guaranteed*. *Staying* current as new knowledge *becomes* available *is* a lot of work. But they *do* that pretty well. And *fighting off* abuse *burns out* editors. But I *think* there's a lot of smart people who *understand* that they've *built* something fabulous. If they *can* just not *look* at how much money Facebook *is making* and *say*, "Well, we *made* something better than Facebook."

Toby Negrin: It *used to be* that teachers *said*, "Don't *look* at Wikipedia." Now, it's "Use Wikipedia. But *use* it as a *jumping-off* point." We've *built* trust. The community *has been dedicated* to the original idea.

I'm old. I *remember* when knowledge like this *was* hard to *find*. This *is* the promise of the internet. These people *are writing down* all of knowledge for everybody. It's the radical concept that information should *be* free and that knowledge *belongs* to everyone. We've *gone* from plucky nonprofit to *being* a global icon.