Jan Gerlach, Wikimedia: The community simply does not allow hate speech

Wikimedia Foundation encompasses Wikipedia and ten other projects founded on the principles of open knowledge and open access. Jan Gerlach is one of the experts that takes care of public policies at the foundation. He stresses that is important for the internet to work and to contain safeguards that enable inclusion and benefits for all. On Monday, he participated at the Open Education Day, organized in Ljubljana by the Intellectual Property Institute and the institute Danes je nov dan.

There is a lot of talk on how to limit the spread of hate speech and lies on the internet platforms. Wikimedia did not find itself in any bigger scandal, even though it is one of the largest platforms in the world on which content is created exclusively by users. How is that possible?

The answer is probably more complicated, but I would like to focus on two things. First is the commitment of the community of Wikipedia to ensure that only high quality and good information meeting Wikipedia's rules and principles, from objectivity to neutrality and verifiability, is published. Many of our people are involved in this quality control. They check new contents and articles, new documents and respond to them: whether something is good or is bad and has to be taken down. The work of the community prevents the spread of hate speech and stimulation of violence on Wikipedia. The second thing I would like to emphasize forms part of the design and architecture of our platform. Wikipedia does not have a share or like button and as such is not an ideal place for hate speech. Other platforms enable greater reach and echo. Part of the architecture is also the absence of a recommendation button - most of the problems come from recommendation systems. Social networks offer us content because something has been shared by a lot of people or because we have previously looked into something. Wikipedia does not function this way. The third factor worth mentioning is that extremist content in its essence contradicts Wikipedia's goals. It is not neutral nor is it objective. It does not follow the rules followed by the community. It might sound absurd, but this rules apply very quickly. Elsewhere, hate speech will remain under the pretext of freedom of expression.

How do these rules work?

Wikipedia's rules include the principles and guidelines regarding cooperation and content. Attacking others is prohibited, and what is important are the principles of civilization, neutrality, objectivity and verifiability, which excludes the results of original research. This means that other recognized sources summarizing a certain research must be indicated as sources. This practical and logical safeguard prevents hate speech finding its way on Wikipedia. The community, on the other hand, does its very good job by monitoring and reacting to violations. This is the most important.

In any case, do you notice more attempts to publish white-supremacy content or intolerant, hateful beliefs about the superiority of a certain group of people? Media that spreads hateful news or lies is becoming more and more skilled in creating apparent legitimate sources. Is this a challenge also for you or only a problem for the media?

Of course, these are important issues for Wikipedia as well. We like to think about it as a social mirror and also as a mirror of journalism. We are allowed to write on Wikipedia only about the things that are already documented in other sources of information, knowledge, media. Partiality is more tolerated on marginal media with extremist ideas. Someone may even cite an extreme right or other extremist web portal or review and put its content on Wikipedia in this way. Wikipedians tackle this issue quite successfully with the help of lists of sources that are not to be trusted. On the basis of these lists, sources and links to articles found in media that commonly publish and spread conspiracy theories will not be accepted. The judgement may also depend on context, but these lists can help.

"Safeguards are necessary. Trust functions only to a certain degree."

Do these lists exist on the global level and especially in the USA?

Linguistically, Wikipedia is organised through a horizontal scheme. The list surely exists for English articles, however, I am not aware whether the Slovenian team also has it. But this scheme can be transposed into any language group. These groups are largely independent from one another, even though some members work in different groups on areas on which they are most familiar with. The partiality of the content might be an issue, however, we do not deal with this problem centrally. Open knowledge means knowledge on which there is consensus in the community.

The expansion of marginal, extremist theories in society might represent a threat for such content to appear and spread also on Wikipedia. Nevertheless, Wikipedians currently perform an excellent work in preventing this and the community plays an essential role in this. Wikipedia is a system that is based on acceptance and the opinion of peers. If we have hundreds and thousands of people acting as 'editors' and looking into and checking the same articles, sometimes together, then we will be able to create a more neutral space of knowledge and information. People correct one another and find space for consensus. If we have only one or five people deciding on the content, the probability of partiality is much higher.

When it comes to regulation, you say it is not right for internet corporations to decide on the existence of hate speech and thus of criminal offences instead of countries. You also say that algorithms cannot decide instead of people. Why is that?

We tend to communicate more and more on the internet and on platforms - whether Whatsapp, Twitter or Facebook. If we make the managers of these websites liable and if we demand that they control communication and limit some content, we lose not only the layer of democratic but also the layer of judiciary control. With this functions and decisions made

by courts (which opinions are acceptable and which are not) are being outsourced. This also means the privatization of the authorities of police and national enforcement bodies on a field that interferes with the right to communicate and where rules on how we communicate are being set. This is problematic. Communication is what makes us human.

On the other side, companies that want to make profit. Because of this, they are reluctant to take risks and would rather err on the side of 'caution', especially when there is the thread of being imposed a fine. Excessive blocking is problematic for freedom of expression as well as for freedom of other people to access knowledge.

If I relate to the current proposal of EU rules on preventing terrorist content, there is an intent to force platforms to automatically remove terrorist content encouraging violence. There is a threat that platforms will remove much more than necessary. Archiving documentation of war crimes in Syria can have an important probative and historical value. Platforms will rather erase such recordings than risking penalties.

"And this is now crucial - how to stimulate the feeling of being welcome and wanting to participate. Open knowledge is always an exciting idea, but the environment, in which we operate, has changed. Internet has changed."

In western countries, we are critical towards countries wanting to transfer the responsibility of control on corporations, while we also criticize corporations if they cooperate with the authorities in controlling and limiting our rights.

Yes, there have been many calls to enable control of state authorities over the corporations that manage social media and even over the internet. This idea is not well-accepted in regions, where people have bad experiences with authorities controlling and censoring media or even infringing human rights at a large scale. However, compromises regarding the respect of human rights, concluded by corporations to please the authorities and enable the possibility to enter a new market, are equally problematic. Nowadays, people on the internet rely on those corporations to protect them. In many cases, social networks are the only channels through which they can communicate. Wikimedia's researches in Africa and Asia have shown that there Facebook equals internet for many people. Content accessed through social media is often the only content they get. Such centralization of services can pose many threats if corporations blindly cooperate with authorities. With this almost all aspects of communication of an individual are interfered with.

Is progress moving towards a future where only few corporations will dominate an entire field of communication and information?

I hope not. But I do not know. Unfortunately, some legislative proposals and regulations regarding communication on the internet favours big platforms and corporations. Filters, that control everything we upload on internet platforms, as well as licenses are requirements that will easily be fulfilled by big corporations. At Wikipedia, we would rather see the existence of more diverse platforms. Now we see only takeovers and centralizations. In the USA and EU

this is being fought with legislation in the field of competition protection. This is one possible way.

In this aspect, Wikimedia seems safe.

Safe in the sense that they cannot buy us, yes. Everyone can copy, use and share us. The key question is who can create a similar community than ours is. A community that will contribute and check the quality of the content, which for us is the most important. We are not afraid that we will have to stop working or that we will be taken over.

Will there ever be ads on Wikipedia?

No, there will be no ads.

Capitalism is excellent at appropriating different models. Is there enough revolutionary eagerness in the idea of open access and open knowledge as in the beginning?

The market reality seems to be that these ideas are not likely to remain as exciting as before. But I think that today these ideas are more important than ever. Wikipedia celebrated 18 years. In 2001, there were more people writing their blogs and creating their websites on the internet. The internet was more free. Today, people write in closed platforms and silos. However, the idea of an open knowledge is more exciting than even in many aspects: Wikipedia is bigger than ever, audio-visual documents and many truly fascinating and beautiful pictures and other content is uploaded on Wikimedia Commons. This is still extremely exciting. We are interested in enabling people to easily and attractively cooperate and be part of this community. In this way, they will still want to contribute their part and use knowledge and information for their own work. And this is now crucial - how to stimulate the feeling of being welcome and wanting to participate. Open knowledge is always an exciting idea, but the environment, in which we operate, has changed. Internet has changed.

What connects the Wikipedia community?

There is not only one common denominator. Wikipedia is an encyclopaedia and many Wikipedians are truly interested in the world surrounding them. They want to contribute that the knowledge they have with others. Many Wikipedians might be interested only in a very specific theme: the architecture of a certain building or the number of certain species of birds. The Wikipedia community represents different things for them: some feel home, they meet people, with which they can discuss. Similar to a local sports or other societies.

Does the foundation consciously strengthen these communities or do they develop on their own?

We have a special department for the cooperation with communities, that takes care of the protection of users, there is also a co-financing program, where co-creators of Wikipedia can

apply to with their projects, and there is also the program that co-finances events, on which members of the community meet and discuss how Wikipedia functions. The global conference Wikimania will be held in Stockholm this year. There are local meetings, theme sessions of working bodies, etc. We do not have loud and shiny actions, we support the self-strengthening of communities.

About a year ago, the local communities in Nigeria, India and Egypt created materials to explain to the local population how Wikipedia works and why the program is interesting. They did that by themselves though the raising awareness program. We leave this to linguistic, thematic and project communities. They know what is best and most needed for them.

"We need to gain back trust. Internet is here and will not disappear. The question is, how will we enable that it will work for everybody."

Does Wikipedia truly trust in people?

There surely must be a certain degree of trust amongst people working in such a community. Internet and the majority of activities on open platforms are based on trust, but there are also some kind of safeguards made by communities. Wikipedia members can be disabled from editing. This can be done by trusted users that have been part of the community for a long time. Users continuously abusing the participation of others can be blocked. If they keep abusing their powers, access to certain projects can be disabled. These safeguards are necessary. Trust functions only to a certain degree, but it is surely a prerequisite. Meetings in person where people can connect the work to a certain face and exchange experiences are also important. We also believe that people should be given the possibility to work on Wikipedia under pseudonyms. Individuals can have valid reasons for not wanting to perform publicly or they can live in a country where the authorities control and prosecute them. Our principle is to collect as little data as possible about people and users.

This is principle is also something lawmakers should consider in your view?

Yes. It is important for us that collecting user data is neither expected nor required for platforms and companies. When companies have information about people, they can abuse it or they can be forced to hand it to authorities. Trust on the internet is definitely a very interesting concept.

Is seems that there was a lot of trust as the beginning and that now there is very little left.

We need to gain this trust back. Internet is here and will not disappear. The question is, how will we enable that it will work for everybody. If people lose trust in it, this will be very hard. Journalists know this. When readers lose their trust in media, this can not mean anything good.

Do you feel being listened to by decision-makers when you talk about the importance of open knowledge and open access?

No. More effort has to be put into it. Civil society will have to create more pressure in the years to come. It is hard. Time and resources are limited. Volunteer work has its limits. When the EU passed the new copyright directive, decision-makers were not listening to us. They see open access as something opposing copyrights. This is not true. Open access and open knowledge are relatively complex concepts, while the opposite site has always a very simple message: it is about rights, about the rights of authors! This also is not true. It is about the regulation that affects how we communicate. But the simplified message has persuaded the majority of politicians. We will have to find ways how to change that. We are also aware that politicians are more receptive for promises about jobs and economic growth. Here, we are still badly equipped with numbers and information we could react with. Education for all and knowledge are hardly quantifiable and transferred into simple numbers. We advocate strengthening cooperation and the possibility of including everybody.

You said that open knowledge is not free lunch. Can you explain that?

It is not only about the money. It is about how people cooperate, how they are included and how they can contribute, how can they use and reshape knowledge. It is a process in which we cooperate and which is decentralized - we do not get a plate with pasta and tomato sauce, but we create and co-decide what will be on the plate at the end.

Wikimedia is based on the principle that everybody can participate. How do politicians and political processes follow this idea?

Politics and policy-makers see the information ecosystem as divided between creators and consumers. But the internet has made us all creators and consumers. Wikipedia functions on the following rule: you can be the reader and the creator of content at the same time. Politics did not keep up with and adapt to this.

In politics, decisions were long made by elites that had followers who would only say yes or no. Today, we remain voters, but we can also help shaping policies and measures through debating. The space for debate has increased extremely, also beyond traditional media - it is happening everywhere and all the time. Politics will have to acknowledge that. We are becoming more and more politically active, not only once every four years when we go voting.

Many social media offer the appearance of cooperation and loudness, however, their influence is not clear. Wikipedia offers a different form of co-creation and the quality of communication.

Wikipedia has been a community, a common project from the very beginning. Wikipedians build and create articles together. This is different to Twitter, where every tweet stands by itself. No one can change it, people can comment, report it if it is extremely offensive, but the

final decision on its removal will be made by the manager of the platform. On Wikipedia, every creator and user can affect and co-create the final appearance of an article. The architecture and the design of the projects are of crucial importance.