Motivating and Retaining Volunteers

Let's Connect, July 2023

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Wikimedia depends on volunteers

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Wikimedia depends on a steady influx of volunteers

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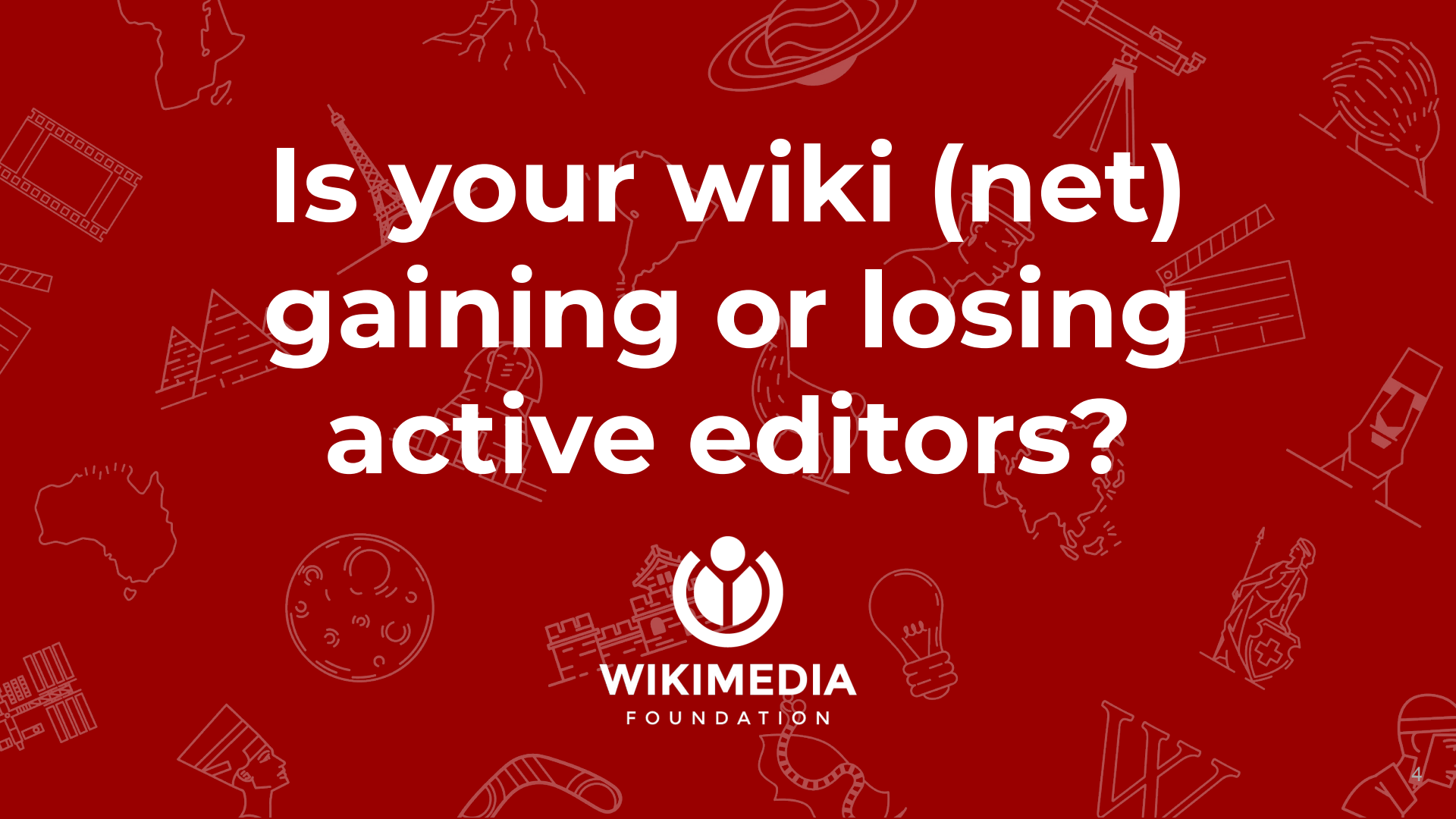
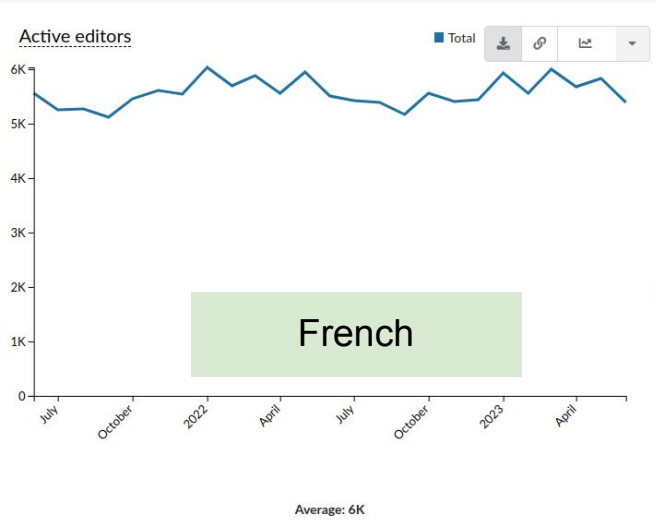
Is your wiki (net) gaining or losing active editors?





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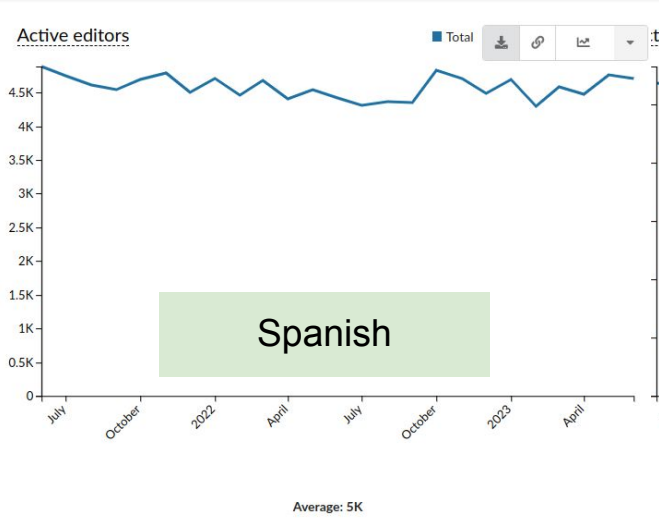

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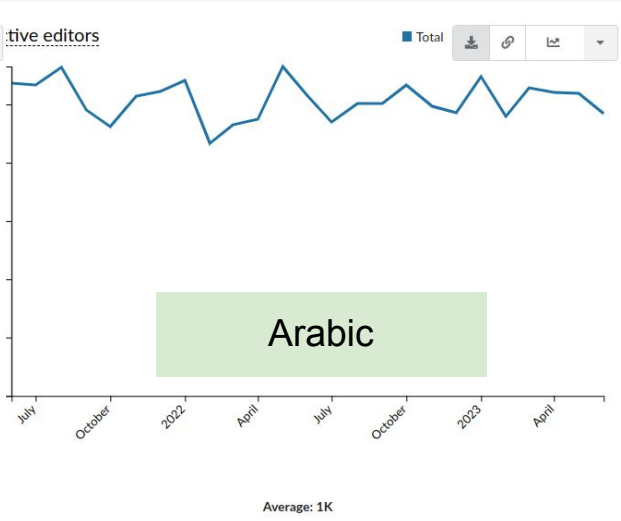

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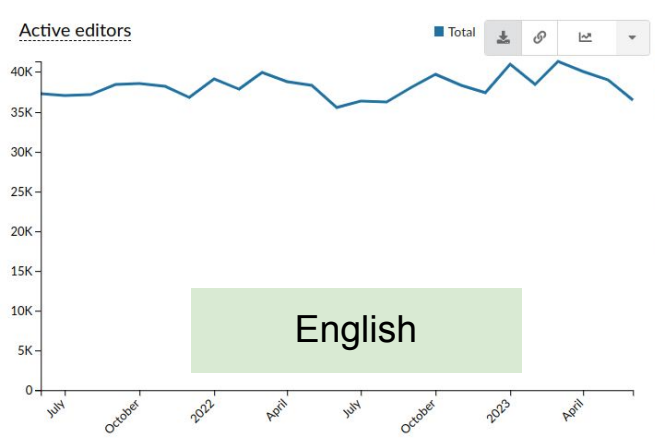

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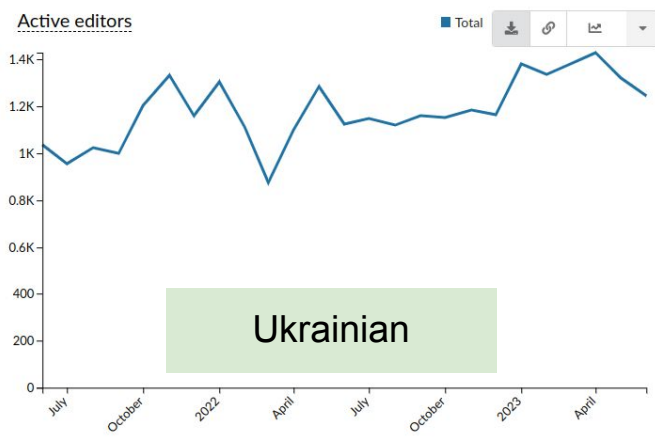

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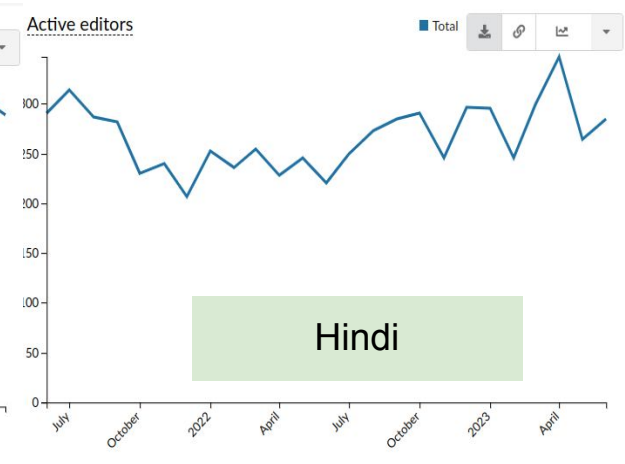

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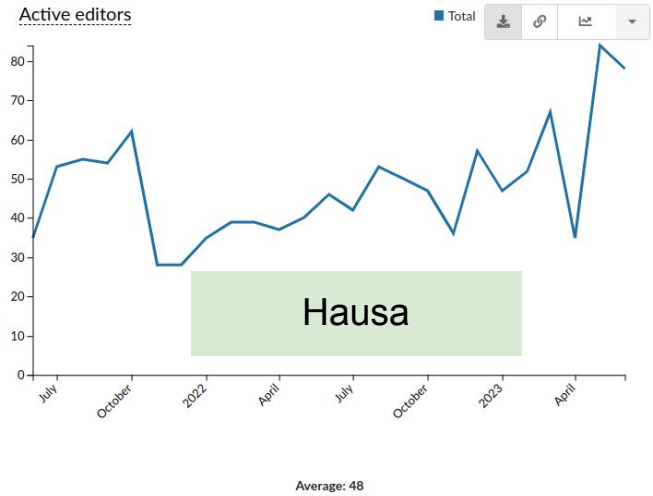

Hausa

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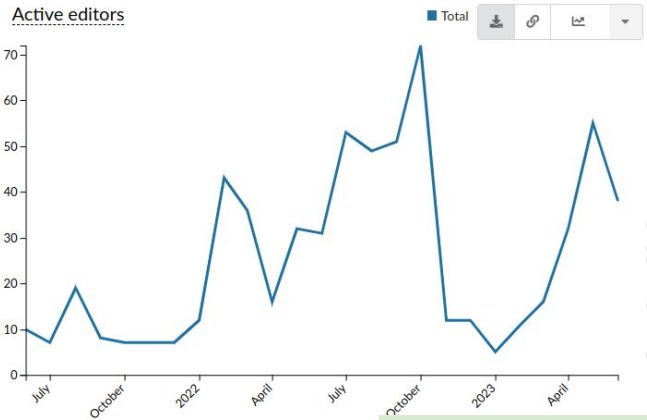

Igbo

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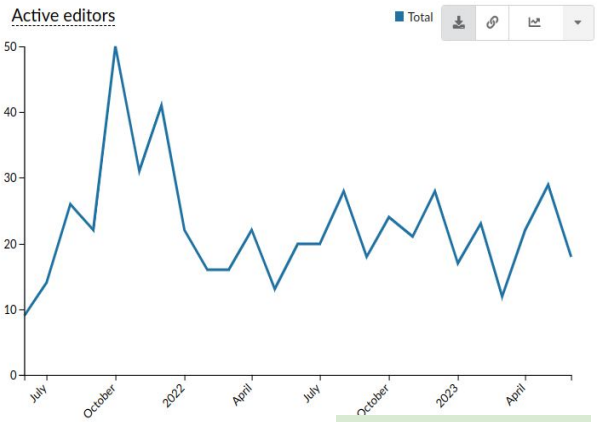

Dagbani

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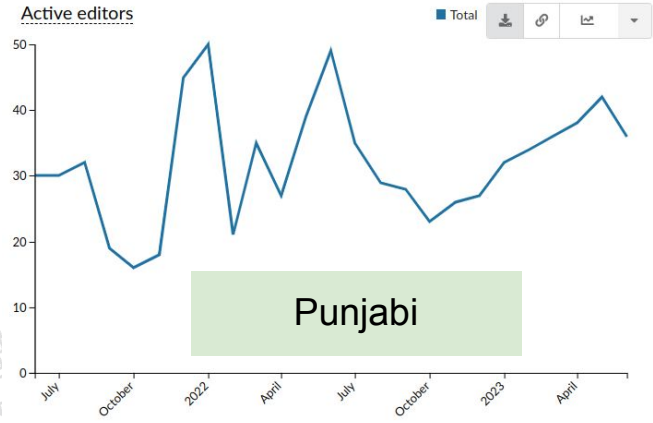

Punjabi

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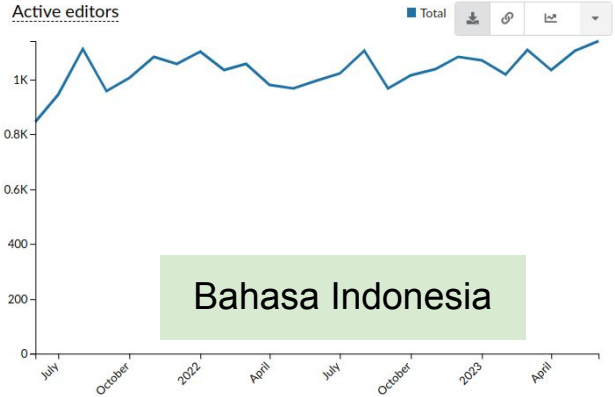

Bahasa Indonesia

Average: 1K

Make your own at:

https://stats.wikimedia.org

How can we attract (more) volunteers?

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Where do volunteers come from?

Where did you come from? What motivates you?

Some volunteer motivations

- Help my language community access information
- Using my knowledge to benefit others
- Practicing my knowledge/skills through writing
- SAVING THE WORLD: providing information about topics important for future of mankind (wars, inter-human relations, preservation of nature, energy consumption etc.)
- Being invited to contribute

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Some volunteer motivations

- Language pride
  - "How could it be that we don't have this in our language?!"
  - "How come we have fewer articles than X language?"
- Language preservation
- Inspired by others' work
- Campaigns

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Some volunteer motivations

- Obsession: "I CAN'T STAND THE RED LINKS!"
- "someone is wrong on the Internet!"
- Sense of responsibility/ownership
- Encouraged by others' building on my own work
- Joy in working competently
- Force of habit
- Sense of pioneering, groundbreaking work

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Okay, but how do we find these people?

Accumulating volunteers

1. Volunteers are **coming to us all the time**! We just need to **drive fewer of them away**. (the good-faith ones)
2. **Outreach**: proactively proposing volunteering (ideally, multi-session and/or specific-audience)
3. Defend against **burnout**: *lose fewer* volunteers.

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1. Retaining new volunteers

Getting newbies to stay

- **Distinguish** between good-faith and bad-faith newbies. Usually, we do OK rejecting bad-faith newbies, but can **improve reception** of good-faith ones.
  - Remember: not **every** person can be motivated to Wikimedia work. The model *doesn't* work for everyone.
- Different motivations require **different onboarding** (see also [[m:101]])
- Help promising newbies **deal with setbacks**

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Getting newbies to stay

- **appreciation ==> motivation**
  - Identify promising newbies and appreciate them! (e.g. using **Quarry** queries such as this one)
  - Also appreciate "oldies", "techies", ...
  - Off-wiki appreciation (treats, merchandise, ...)

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On-wiki appreciation [1/2]

- The **thank** button
  - Statistics show thanked people are more active
  - Thank someone everyday!

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Pop quiz:

Who are the **top 10 thankers** on your Wikipedia in the last 90 days?

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Sample query:
https://quarry.wmcloud.org/query/74957

Pop quiz:

Who are the **top 10 most thanked** on your Wikipedia in the last 90 days?

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Sample query:
https://quarry.wmcloud.org/query/74958

On-wiki appreciation [2/2]

- **Barnstars, medals, etc.**
  - Their value is proportional to your respect for the person who awarded you the barnstar
- **Appreciation projects**
  - Wiki-zhushchyvky! (off-wiki, for on-wiki contribs)
  - Other examples?
- **On-wiki appreciation is a zero-cost high-value way to motivate volunteers!**

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Engaging newbies off-wiki

- Try to have **low-barrier, recurring activities**
  - e.g. a photo walk, taking pictures and uploading them to Commons, while discussing Freedom of Panorama
  - Recurring/regular -- meetups, WikiThursday
- Lets you engage immediately at the moment when interest is generated (e.g. "our next photowalk is in seven days!" (rather than in seven months)

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Off-wiki volunteers and allies

- Given diverse volunteer profiles (interests, capacities, motivations), not everyone can or wants to write articles (or patrol, or proofread…)
- Keep an open mind on how to harness good-will
  - But don't compromise on principles
- **Non-editors can help** a lot in organizing off-wiki activities; it's desirable as long as **active editors** are **also** involved; negative results likely otherwise.
- Local **professionals** (lawyers, accountants, media experts) can help without editing

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My psychic powers tell me...

All this talk about matching volunteer interests is frustrating, because...

I need volunteers for X!

- **Describe** on-wiki what you need; describe **why** X is the thing to do. But:
- **Accept** that not everyone may share the interest in X
- If you can't find enough volunteers, you may need to **change** your plan. Go with the **energy**!
- In time, **build** more volunteer interest with your original plan.

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Summary of principles for retaining newbies

- We're open to everyone, but:
  - not everyone will be *interested*; not everyone interested will *manage to adapt* to our norms; **and that's okay**.
  - Spend time cultivating *promising* people, not *fighting* to keep people who are *refusing to accept our norms*
- Try to match *skills and motivation* to *roles and tasks*.
- **Keeping** the newbies who come *anyway* **is easier** than **actively attracting** people who weren't already interested.

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2. Recruiting Volunteers through Outreach

Outreach

- Outreach is better understood, and better documented, so not the subject of this session. But quick tips:
  - Each of the *motivating factors* from the survey can lead to **its own strategy** for outreach.
  - Single-session general-audience **doesn't work**.
  - **Sparking interest** is easy. **Supporting** the newbie through the full **integration** process is hard.
  - **Experiment**! Innovate. Adapt.
  - Outreach-recruited newbies like the same stuff (appreciation etc.)
- Soon (Dec 2023): online core training modules on **WikiLearn**

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3. Reducing burnout

What demotivates volunteers? What burns them out?

What demotivates you? What burned you out?

These things demotivate 1

- Endless, circular discussions.
- Indifference and lack of collaboration, e.g. board proposes X and are the only people doing it.
- Feeling unappreciated, taken for granted. Lack of feedback.
- Being criticized by people who aren't helping / working themselves.

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These things demotivate 2

- Bureaucracy in "real life", paperwork, accounting…
- Lack of consensus on core policies (e.g. copyright)
- Conflict resolution on controversial topics or high-conflict users (emotional labor)
- Feeling unheard, lacking a voice, lacking influence.

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These things demotivate 3

- Having to work with unmotivated people, e.g. students just wanting a grade
- Repetitive labor
- Not daring to delegate
- Patrolling burnout: using more time to patrol than to create new articles; spam overload.

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Reducing burnout

Each of the demotivating factors can be taken as a problem to work on, as a community. You can do something about each of them!

Identify the ones most common among your community, and act.

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Reducing burnout - tips 1

- Have we mentioned **appreciation**?
  - Not just on-wiki; not just in-person; e.g. tweets, press releases, interviews
- the **delegation trap** leads to burnout. Ask for help.
- **Face** issues, don't repress them. Ask if help is needed.

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Reducing burnout - tips 2

- Try to match skills to roles; but *also* be flexible and let people switch and experiment.
- What if we just don't *have* some skills so we can't delegate?

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Building team skills

- not everyone is a born speaker, teacher, report-writer, etc., BUT **anyone can be taught** at least some competence in e.g. public speaking, partnership building, conflict resolution
- providing **training for volunteers** is important and valuable; **WMF supports** such activities; external training can be invited or even purchased.
- **Mentorship**: Bring a volunteer colleague with you to observe you (and learn from you); learn from others.

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Easier said than done...

- I know... :)
- These aren't guaranteed recipes. Avoiding burnout takes *attention, empathy,* and *patience*.
- If a challenge seems impossible, cut it up into more manageable goals.
    - E.g. we don't have enough volunteers to run an education program! But can we get a regular meetup going? Can we gradually train volunteers for next year?

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Mismatched volunteers

- Sometimes the person and the role are not a good fit
- **Discuss it.** Gently look for ways to improve it. **And if you can't**, find a way to re-assign roles.
  - "Founder Syndrome" is an extreme case of this
  - The fact X is the only person who volunteered to do Y still doesn't mean X will do a good job.
- **Staff/volunteer** roles and tension

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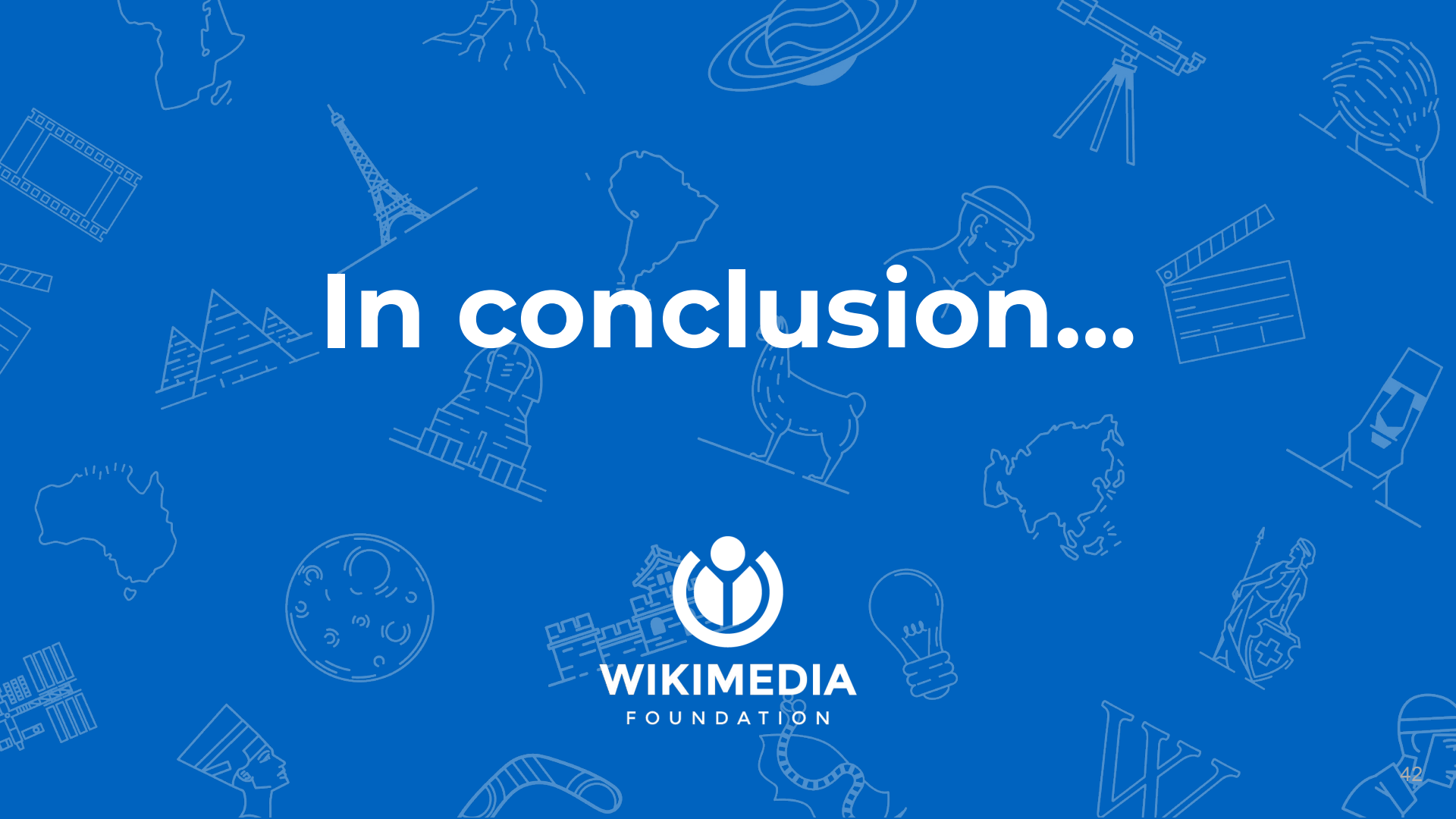
In conclusion...



Outreach is the standard approach to gaining volunteers...

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But much improvement is possible in retaining "organic" newbies,

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And in reducing the number and frequency of people burning out.

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Discussion & Questions

THANK YOU

Keep in touch!

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