



# Wikimedia and Democracy –

The impact of Wikimedia UK's information  
literacy work on citizen engagement

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**D**emocracies rely on informed citizens to function effectively. Over recent years, new digital technologies have fundamentally altered the creation and consumption of media content, and introduced new challenges (as well as opportunities) to democratic participation. The increased volume of news, the politicisation of social media, misinformation, disinformation, and the distracting of the public through fake news, along with the rise of polarised and radicalised groups whose own ideology is reinforced by ‘filter bubbles’, all combine to create untrustworthiness, bias and misrepresentation. These issues undermine democracy and its reliance on well-informed citizens.



# FAKE NEWS?

## Believing ALTERNATIVE FACTS



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At its heart, information literacy empowers citizens to access, create, consume and critically evaluate information. It builds understanding of the ethical and political issues associated with the use of information, including privacy, data protection, freedom of information, open access/open data and intellectual property. Information literacy is empowering, contributing to democratic, inclusive, participatory societies (UNESCO, 2016). Further, as interpreted by UNESCO, it is also a universal human right. Access to unbiased, reliable and verified information is a fundamental requirement for creating trust and ensuring that citizens can meaningfully engage with content. It is a core element of facilitating engagement (although not the only one).

Wikipedia is one of the biggest sources of accurate, factual and independent information in the world. According to Eurostat, the percentage of individuals using Wikipedia to learn about any subject is growing steadily in the UK, rising from 41% in 2011 to 54% in 2015<sup>1</sup>, showing the increasingly central role Wikipedia plays in today's information environment.

As one of the world's largest open knowledge platforms, Wikipedia provides anyone who has internet access with the ability to consume as well as create and add to the sum of all knowledge, thereby making the production and distribution of information more democratic. Representation on Wikipedia matters, as Wikipedia's content gets reflected elsewhere on the internet, and in the media. Wikipedia offers a platform where communities can capture and share information that is important to them, without commercial influences – something that's increasingly rare.

Wikimedia UK is the national charity for the global Wikimedia movement. We believe that open access to knowledge is a fundamental right, and a driver for social and economic development. A registered charity, we work with Wikimedia projects such as Wikipedia to enable people and organisations to contribute to a shared understanding of the world through the democratic creation, distribution and consumption of knowledge. Wikimedia UK, through its programme delivery, helps strengthen civil society and democratic processes in the UK by:



1 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tin00128/default/table?lang=en>



- **Providing open and free access to accurate information** – Wikimedia UK facilitates the recording and provision of factual and accurate historical and cultural memory (redressing the imbalance of representation for marginalised groups), thereby challenging media manipulation
- **Improving information literacy skills** – Wikimedia UK’s programmes promote information literacy by providing access to open knowledge, and facilitating its consumption and creation. Its content development programmes help fight mis- and disinformation, misrepresentation, systemic bias and inequality, thus building more tolerance and cultural understanding
- **Encouraging volunteering** – Working with Wikimedia UK provides opportunities for marginalised groups to self-organise, self-represent, learn useful skills and become active members of a democratic society
- **Providing accessible collaborative infrastructure** – Wikimedia UK’s programmes are delivered within the Wikimedia projects ecosystem, using its collaborative tools and drawing on its consensus-based community decision-making processes. Programme participants thereby gain direct experience of navigating community decision processes, self-representation and participation, achieving skills for civic engagement in public life outside of Wikimedia

FAKE

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# 800

*Wikimedia UK works with about 800 new volunteer editors a year*

# 500

*Wikimedia UK works with about 500 community leaders a year*



Every year, Wikimedia UK holds events which educate about 8,500 people in the UK about referencing and verifying information sources and the importance of open knowledge. It also reaches about 50,000 people a year on social media. The Wikipedia articles edited within our programmes are seen over 120 million times a year. The provision by Wikimedia projects of open access to factual knowledge can increase information literacy levels and promote critical thinking in individuals.

Wikipedia also encourages people to actively contribute to knowledge by becoming wiki editors, which teaches them how to assess content, reference and credit sources. This process transforms passive consumers into active creators of knowledge, giving them the opportunity to contribute something very important to society.

Wikimedia UK works with about 800 new volunteer editors and 500 community leaders a year, who contribute to Wikimedia UK's programmes by organising events – including 'editathons', 'hackathons' and content uploads – supporting external partnerships, and advocating for open knowledge. Wikimedia UK focuses on supporting underrepresented communities in these activities.

Our experience shows that groups organised around a shared interest, value or cause, and equipped with digital, information and collaboration skills, are more likely to engage in civic participation in public matters relevant for them. Moreover, learning about the culture of democratic participation and processes of engagement empowers individuals, equipping them with transferable skills.

Wikimedia UK's programmes help provide citizens with skills and competencies that are needed for the critical evaluation of information in the following ways:

- Understanding content (e.g. ideas, opinions, concepts, relationships between facts) and where it comes from (evaluating the trustworthiness of information before making a decision on an issue), applying strategies for verifying information (finding the original content source, verifying the source, checking other information, reading fact-checking articles, and turning to trusted places), and reflecting on the impact of false and misleading information in political, social and public arenas
- Applying critical thinking skills (e.g. analysing, detecting bias, evaluating, inferring, interpreting, revising, refining, reviewing, reflecting, forming conclusions, synthesising)
- Using collaborative and group learning skills (e.g. communication skills, questioning, active listening, problem solving, teamwork)
- Encouraging civic disposition (e.g. disposition to respect diversity of opinion, and assume the personal responsibilities of a citizen – including reflecting on online responsibility)

Freedom of expression and access to reliable information through Wikimedia projects increase intercultural dialogue and decrease the social isolation of minority groups. Wikipedia serves as a platform that can assist displaced or minoritised communities to maintain cultural identity<sup>2</sup>. Every year Wikimedia UK delivers over 300 editathons, workshops and residency programmes in collaboration with communities or organisations in the UK, with 50% of these programmes dedicated to documenting and sharing the cultural and historical memory of marginalised groups. In essence, Wikimedia UK contributes to building a more informed, democratic and equitable society by increasing the information literacy level of individuals and communities, and facilitating their accurate self-representation and civic engagement in public life and policymaking.

<sup>2</sup> As an example – <https://icom.museum/en/news/wiki-icom-protect-afghanistan-cultural-heritage/>

## Ignore Media Propoganda

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Wikimedia UK's programmes can significantly increase citizen engagement in democratic processes through our work in information literacy. To ensure the highest possible impact of this work, we recommend that:

1. Working definitions of information literacy at national and institutional levels promote the importance of information literacy for democratic participation. Wikimedia UK acknowledges the important relationships between individuals' information literacy and civic and political engagement. In particular, Wikimedia UK promotes the importance of having the skills to locate reliable information online in the fight against fake news, misrepresentation and prejudice.
2. The culture of democratic participation is better embedded in formal education curricula, as well as in informal and adult education, potentially using Wikimedia projects as a way of demonstrating the process of civic engagement.
3. Information literacy resources from Wikimedia are harnessed in formal, informal and adult education programmes. Wikipedia, aside from being one of the biggest sources of accurate, factual and independent information in the world, has also accumulated extensive resources on information literacy itself – e.g. on referencing, citations, types of sources, reliability, and verifiability of information.



Wikimedia UK delivers its information literacy programmes in partnership with external organisations and community groups. We recommend that any organisations wanting to partner with us on literacy programmes:

4. Organise programmes to volunteer with Wikimedia UK as a way to promote civic engagement, activism and community involvement. Wikimedia UK believes that even online programmes facilitate civic engagement offline.
5. Support marginalised groups to harness the skills gained through contributing to Wikimedia projects. Through participating in Wikimedia activities, communities can learn to share their cultural heritage, self-organise, self-represent, and develop other life and work skills that help them become active members of a democratic society.
6. Support citizens to tackle systemic biases on Wikipedia, thus facilitating access to reliable and balanced information for all. Engaging with and representing marginalised people and subjects can effect change by increasing the amount of available information that more accurately reflects our society.



# RESIST

*“The rise of populism has been linked to a decline in interest in public affairs and we thought that, being less politically and socially active, people may be less capable of interpreting political phenomena and understanding the complexity of the management of public affairs.”<sup>3</sup>*

We are faced with a global trend towards a shrinking civil society space. There are fewer spaces where citizens can develop and practise key civic skills such as collaboration, self-representation, and working within a context of diversity and difference of opinion. This is much needed in any context, including the UK. Civic skills are broad in character and can be developed in a variety of contexts – they don’t have to start off in person and can take advantage of opportunities online. Wikipedia has the benefit of being a well known online space, meaning it has the recognition within a big audience that could then be engaged in civic activities. We can engage with people where they already are rather than needing to bring them to a new, unknown space.

Many participants of Wikimedia UK activities (e.g. editing events) started out as individual editors, who then decided to bring wiki projects into their communities. In a recent survey of our community leaders, we asked if individuals’ participation in Wikimedia UK activities, such as running wiki events, encouraged them to take part in other non-wiki activities (e.g. community organising, campaigning, other kinds of volunteering, etc.).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272721002140?via%3Dihub>



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One volunteer reports:

*“Yes. In speaking to a volunteer for our charity, I became aware of the [community heritage project centring on a particular 19th century industrial action]. I created the Wikipedia page for[...], a leading figure in the strike whose mentions elsewhere assured her notability, and through this spoke to the originators of [community heritage project]. I am now actively involved with the group, including as part of their education and community engagement sub-group. It's likely that Wikipedia work will feature in this at some stage, as they were overjoyed with the [...] page and very much convinced of the usefulness of more (and more accurate) Wikipedia representation.”*

*Community leader response in a 2021–22 Wikimedia UK volunteer survey<sup>4</sup>*

Working on Wikimedia UK projects can facilitate this spirit of working towards a common good (free knowledge for all), cooperation with others and activism, which in the long run encourages an empowered civil society. This we believe can go a long way towards realising Wikimedia UK’s vision of a more informed, democratic and equitable society.

<sup>4</sup> [https://wikimedia.org.uk/wiki/File:Wikimedia\\_UK\\_Community\\_Leaders\\_Survey\\_2021-2.pdf](https://wikimedia.org.uk/wiki/File:Wikimedia_UK_Community_Leaders_Survey_2021-2.pdf)

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