



January 8, 2018

Commissioner Mariya Gabriel  
Digital Economy and Society  
European Commission  
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200  
1049 Brussels

### **The Wikimedia approach to tackling illegal content online**

The Wikimedia Foundation greatly appreciates the invitation to participate in a high-level meeting on issues related to the fight against illegal content online. We regret not being able to participate in person. However we recognize the importance of this conversation and submit these written comments on the Wikimedia approach to fighting illegal content on our platforms.

The Wikimedia Foundation is the nonprofit organization that hosts and supports the Wikimedia Projects, which are free, collaboratively created, and updated by contributors from a global community of thousands of volunteers. The most prominent of these projects that give anyone access to free educational content is [Wikipedia](#), the world's largest encyclopedia. Through a collaborative process, Wikipedia has grown to include over 45 million articles in approximately 291 languages, and is viewed more than 15 billion times each month. Many Wikimedia contributors are in Europe, and Europeans use Wikipedia and its sister websites on a daily basis.

We [work towards](#) a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge. In accordance with this vision, we believe that everyone should have access to factual and accurate information as well as the ability to document the world they live in. We strongly believe in the fundamental right to freedom of expression and information and the right to education, which are enshrined in international law, including in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. These rights empower volunteers to contribute to and improve Wikipedia, for everyone to enjoy. At the same time, we recognize that certain types of expression online hurt internet users' ability to safely participate in knowledge and culture online and can have devastating negative effects for society. We take the fight against hate speech and the sharing of unlawful content very seriously. Therefore, we want to take this opportunity to explain our vision of public policy that allows for collaborative projects like Wikipedia, hosted by a small non-profit organization, to flourish and be free for anyone to engage with in good faith.

Policies and regulations that aim to curb illegal content must leave room for open, collaborative online projects to exist and grow, especially as the internet becomes an increasingly commercialized space. The Wikimedia Foundation is dedicated and committed to making the internet a safe and productive space. However, the ability of citizens to collaboratively build a website and assess the quality and validity of information that is added, should not be restricted by laws that impose burdensome obligations on small organizations to police user-generated content. Rather, platforms need room to experiment and implement solutions that work in a particular context. Below we outline this context for Wikipedia and discuss how overly strict policies to fight illegal content would affect the website.

It is important to note that, while Wikipedia is built by users, like many social media websites today, it is first and foremost an encyclopedia. Wikipedia is not a place where people regularly share personal opinions or things from their lives. Wikipedia and its sister projects are dedicated to a clear goal: to collect the world's knowledge and give everyone access to it. Volunteers who contribute to this goal have jointly developed [content](#) and [conduct](#) policies for the websites on which they collaborate. They enforce these policies diligently and remove Wikipedia entries that violate the rules swiftly. Hate speech, like incitement to violence, for instance, contradicts the website's goal and violates several of its rules. Therefore, it will be removed by one of the many editors who write Wikipedia and monitor its growth and development.

Wikipedians are very interested in making sure that the information that is uploaded to Wikipedia, the website for which they feel a sense of ownership and agency, complies with national laws. This includes copyright law. Volunteers monitor the articles and uploaded media closely for copyright violations and remove files and text that should not be on Wikipedia. They do this so effectively, that the Wikimedia Foundation receives [less than thirty notices of copyright violations](#) via the processes foreseen in the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act per year.

Since thousands of edits are made on Wikipedia and the other Wikimedia websites each day, it can be hard for volunteers to make sure none of those changes violate their rules. Therefore, volunteers themselves are building small programs, called bots, that run on the websites and aid the volunteers in detecting violations and in identifying information that should be removed. One example of such programs are filters for copyright violations that have been implemented on Wikimedia Commons and that detect frequently uploaded files that are not free to share. Similarly, the duplication detector helps volunteers recognize when text is duplicated from a different page on Wikipedia. These programs aid volunteers in their fight against copyright violations and plagiarism, and free up volunteer time to write better articles and collect more free knowledge.

Anybody is free to build these bots, as long as they comply with certain criteria. In addition to bots that aim to keep copyright violations at a minimum, there are others that target vandalism within Wikipedia articles. In its efforts to support the volunteers in their work to expand

knowledge, the Wikimedia Foundation builds more sophisticated tools that aid users to detect and remove disruptive content and conduct. For instance, [a tool to document communication between two users](#) has recently been implemented to better assess harassment. Another example is the implementation of [machine learning technologies to detect disruptive edits](#) on Wikipedia, flagging bad faith edits for volunteers to review. Such tools, that will increasingly include artificial intelligence, are important means for volunteer communities to effectively fight harmful activity on open platforms. Since Wikipedia depends on contributions by a healthy, vibrant, and diverse group of contributors, it is essential, however, that any tools that are implemented aid the volunteers in their tasks of monitoring Wikimedia projects for disruptive or harmful content. On Wikipedia, these tools should not replace human review for several reasons: firstly, the discussions over the validity, quality, and legality of information on Wikipedia is at the very core of collaboration among Wikipedians; any tool that replaces these decision-making processes would seriously interfere with the collaborative nature of Wikipedia and threaten its future growth. Secondly, current technologies of artificial intelligence are not good at accommodating for local and national exceptions for copyright or at detecting context in which certain statements are made and which would make them valid use cases, for instance for documentation purposes or critique.

The Wikimedia Foundation agrees that, as a society, we need to find effective ways to remove harmful behavior swiftly and to make sure that the internet is not used to share illicit information. Yet, requiring all platforms to implement mandatory automatic detection technologies is not smart policy. The cost of implementing such technologies would also be too burdensome for small organizations that operate large—or emerging and growing—open platforms of considerable social impact. We absolutely support the European Commission’s goal of ensuring the “effective removal of illegal content, increased transparency and the protection of fundamental rights online”, as laid out in its [Communication on Tackling Illegal Content Online](#). However, we urge the Commission to make guarantees that the process towards this goal will leave room for different methods of achieving the desired outcome. Any new regulation needs to allow for effective mechanisms of online communities to continue to function. Wikipedia is a beloved source of knowledge for people around the world that is not generally used to share hate speech or other illegal content. Public policy should not force the Wikimedia Foundation, or anyone, to interfere with volunteers’ effective work of building and cultivating the largest encyclopedia that ever existed.

Thank you for considering this submission. We are at your disposition to further discuss our views and the way we can collaborate towards our shared goals.

Best regards,

Jan Gerlach  
Public Policy Manager, Wikimedia Foundation