Learning to trust the internet again
Wikipedia can serve as a model to combat Disinformation and Distrust Online.

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Every single day, we must navigate what is real and what is fake online. The internet is integral to our daily lives, yet it is constantly inundated with inaccuracies, misinformation, and viral "fake news".

The spread of false information can be deadly. It can stop a family member from choosing to get a life-saving vaccine. It can undermine elections and inspire hateful reactions. Echo chambers have divided local communities across ideological spectrums that sometimes seem irreconcilable. At our dinner tables, we often cannot agree on what a "fact" even is anymore.

Wikipedia was created in 2001

Twenty years ago, the internet was a very different place. The early days of the web were a time of great experimentation and curiosity. The first pioneers of the internet were rooted in the values of open-source and free knowledge, designing a new frontier for communicating information. This made our world feel smaller and bigger all at once, as we were more connected than ever before.

When I created Wikipedia in 2001, I was inspired by this vision of digital collaboration. Wikipedia is founded on the idea that spreading knowledge could happen through collaborative effort instead of top-down authority. Thanks to the work and generosity of volunteers around the world, Wikipedia has become a living, breathing and ever-evolving record of all human knowledge, accessible online and offline. As the go-to source for facts on any topic from around the globe, Wikipedia was, and still is, the cornerstone of the free web.

Wikipedia is also the last remaining relic of the ideals of the early internet. And as we worry about a future without reliable information that we can all agree upon, Wikipedia is not just an exception. It is the blueprint for restoring public trust in the web again.

This year, as Wikipedia celebrates its 20th birthday, it remains a standout example of how collaboration and collective action can be used to promote facts instead of amplifying misinformation. I believe that there are three main lessons we can learn from Wikipedia's success to create the internet of the future that we want.

First, we must acknowledge our individual responsibility to the truth. As we discover more about how influential a dozen people can be in spreading disinformation far and wide, Wikipedia highlights the role we each can play in providing good information. Anyone can edit Wikipedia, and that means that hundreds of thousands of people are also involved in the integrity of protecting the knowledge that we find on it.

When the COVID-19 pandemic changed life as we know it, volunteer editors on Wikipedia acted in real-time to combat disinformation and ensure the world had access to science-based health resources, across 188 languages and every continent. Through an open, decentralised model, Wikipedians created unparalleled amounts of accurate, life-saving content.

Wikipedia shows us that rebuilding trust in the internet requires our active participation as users of the internet, as fact-checkers and critical consumers of the information we read.

Once we recognise our role as users in building the future of the internet, the second lesson is that purveyors of news and information, including large technology companies, must create a common agreement about the need for information to be factual, reliable, and up to date. The content you read on Wikipedia is guided by community-created policies that outline common values of neutrality, verifiability, and transparency, policies built by and for volunteer editors.

No matter their political leanings or backgrounds, all of our editors must follow the same standard for fact-checking. Shared norms and policies developed by users can be a powerful tool to combat misinformation and rebuild trust in internet institutions. Social media platforms can learn from this model and can follow suit by adopting more democratic processes.

In recent years, I've been encouraged to see several platforms introduce new user-developed policies for combating misinformation, but we can do more. Our users have opinions on how they engage on these platforms and how to effectively build common standards of truth and accuracy. It is time to listen.

Finally, rebuilding trust in the internet depends on transparency. On Wikipedia, I can see every edit to an article; all contributions and discussions about content are part of the public record for anyone to read. This commitment to transparency is a core part of the reason why Wikipedia remains one of the most trusted sites on the internet.

Other platforms can benefit from an increasingly open approach, such as allowing users to see their review processes for flagged content and inviting feedback on proposed policy changes before they are enforced. Social media can incentivise sharing quality information over the number of likes and shares that an individual post receives. Transparency in online spaces will empower internet users to have open, civil debates where we can embrace our differences and be clear about our own personal biases. This creates more productive conversations and will build communities instead of promoting conflict.

This month, Wikipedians around the world came together for the first-ever all-virtual celebration of their work, Wikimania 2021. As thousands of volunteer editors connected across time zones and languages, these moments of collaboration show us how we can use the power of the internet for good. We will achieve this, not as individuals, but as a collaborative movement of knowledge seekers. Together, we can rebuild trust in the internet, and by extension, in each other.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.

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