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# Wikipedia as a trusted information assessment method during the Covid-19 crisis

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## Abstract

This chapter describes the coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic on Wikipedia and attempts to examine it in light of the broader media crisis. The analysis of the content, references and discussion pages of the articles appears to indicate that a strict observance of the encyclopaedia's rules regarding information quality allowed a precise and robust description of the events. The chapter also investigates the media and community discourse around this coverage. It illustrates how this crisis reinforced the framing of Wikipedia as a trusted method to deal with information, and a method which presents a strong potential for the development of information literacies.

## Introduction

Wikipedia is known as the largest online encyclopaedia, it is omnipresent in Google search results, and all-knowing even within the most specific domains. Yet, the encyclopaedia is only one side of something larger, the outcome of a complex method regulating the work of millions of persons around the world. Initially, this process, a subject of pride in the community of contributors and an epistemic curiosity for academics, was however quite unknown for a large majority of readers. When evaluating the quality of the encyclopaedia, only the outcome, the accuracy of the articles, was taken into account and compared to authoritative information sources. But as the information landscape evolved and the prestige of these institutions declined, it became clear that information quality could no longer be reduced to authority. Attention thus turned to the methods used to produce and assess information.

Like every large-scale crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic is also an information crisis: new questions, new information, new uncertainties, new rumours and new lies have been appearing all at once and have been travelling at a fast pace in a globalized information ecosystem. This chapter investigates the role played by Wikipedia in helping people make sense of such a situation. After revisiting the norms and principles that governed the development of the encyclopaedia, it will describe how the Wikipedia community managed to document the pandemic in a reliable way. The scope and preciseness of this coverage is studied in relation to the observance of the encyclopaedia's rules and the use of specific tools. The chapter will then demonstrate how this activity was made visible to the public, and contributed to a broader framing of Wikipedia as a trusted method to deal with information.

# The Wikipedia ecosystem

A cornerstone of the Web, Wikipedia turned twenty in 2021. During this time-frame, it adopted and developed uncommon positions in terms of community organization, economic model and epistemological frame. Yet its goals, principles and method remain quite relevant to the challenges of today's information landscape.

## A giant and free encyclopaedia

Jimmy Wales created Wikipedia in January 2001, during experimentations on Nupedia, an online encyclopaedia written by chosen groups of experts (Cardon 2015). One year later, as Nupedia sank in the complexity of this process, the more open Wikipedia endured and prospered. Thanks to the wiki software it relies on, the free encyclopaedia could be edited, improved, and extended by anyone, anytime, instantaneously. This allowed a quick growth of its coverage: 10,000 articles in September 2001, 45,000 in September 2002, and 100,000 in January 2003. This success in the English language was soon extended to other languages: several distinct editions were created in the first half of 2001 (in German, Catalan, French or Swedish for instance), and at the time of writing this chapter, there are 312 editions. To this day, more than 54 million articles have been written by more than 42 million registered users (and there are many more unregistered users) all over the world<sup>1</sup>. Among these authors (predominantly young males with advanced diplomas), some only made a few contributions while other stayed for years, engaging in durable carriers in what soon became a complex community (Arazy et al. 2015; Joubert 2021).

Over the years, this community has developed a dozen “sister projects” around the encyclopaedia, including a multilingual dictionary (Wiktionary), a media library (Wikimedia Commons), a biology database (Wikispecies), and a travel guide (Wikitravel). All of these projects share several key properties: collaborative content production that relies on open participation, donation-based funding that enables free access for everyone (without advertisements), or free/open licences (such as Creative Commons By-Sa) that allow the copying and re-utilization of content with few legal constraints. At odds with the pervasive knowledge economy, such properties rather connect these projects to the “participatory culture”, defined as “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement” (Jenkins, Ito and Boyd 2015). This large “Wikimedia Movement” is supported (financially, technically and legally) by the Wikimedia Foundation, created in 2003 to “empower and engage people around the world to collect and develop educational content under a free license or in the public domain, and to disseminate it effectively and globally”<sup>2</sup>. At a more operational level, local chapters (39 to this date, which are mostly national associations) contribute to the mobilisation of the community, usually through the organization of events (conferences, training sessions, and competitions).

For many years now, Wikipedia has been ranked among the most viewed websites (Alexa, n.d.). Its articles often appear among the first suggestions of most search engines, and some snippets are directly integrated into the result pages of Google. The content of articles is also widely copied on other websites and integrated into other services, either legally (thanks to the accommodating terms

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1 Data from the page “Size of Wikipedia” on Wikipedia’s website: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Size\\_of\\_Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Size_of_Wikipedia)

2 As described on the “About” page on the Wikimedia Foundation’s website: <https://wikimediafoundation.org/about/>

of the Creative Commons By-Sa licence) or not (through many cases of plagiarism, from student homework to academic articles (Laurent 2020)). Therefore, what is written in the encyclopaedia has a significant impact on the information that may be found, both online and offline. For example, in the domain of medical information, Wikipedia has been identified as the most viewed resource online, probably overtaking the offline resources too (Heilman and West 2015). This of course raises crucial issues in terms of information quality.

## The architecture of trustworthiness

A few million authors scattered around the world cannot expect to build an encyclopaedia without some kind of structure or method to help them gather and combine their contributions. In Wikipedia, this method is formalised into a set of principles, policies and guidelines. The first principles (the “five pillars”) were defined in 2002 (Cardon 2015): “Wikipedia is an encyclopaedia”, “Wikipedia is written from a neutral point of view”, “Wikipedia is free content that anyone can use, edit, and distribute”, “Wikipedia's editors should treat each other with respect and civility”, “Wikipedia has no firm rules”. From this point, policies and guidelines have been continuously developed, improved and adapted through discussions in the community<sup>3</sup>. Several of these rules specifically address the trustworthiness of the content of the articles.

While traditional encyclopaedias built their authority on the status of the article's authors, who are often experts in their field, this cannot be said for Wikipedia's wide community of (frequently anonymous) contributors (Doutreix 2020). The validity of their statements is based on references to external sources, which hence transfers part of their authority to the article content (Sahut 2016). In the first years of the encyclopaedia, references were scarce: only some articles contained a bibliography section, which was often quite short. The current citation system (using footnotes) was developed in 2005 and, from this point, several campaigns and tools (such as the iconic “citation needed” tag) were launched to promote it, leading to its progressive generalisation (Langlais 2015). The use of this system is precisely defined in the “Reliable sources” policy, underlining that references are especially required for “material that is challenged or likely to be challenged” and for “statements about living persons”.

The enforcement of these policies is mainly handled by the community itself. Since anybody can edit the encyclopaedia, anybody can rectify or “revert” (cancel) a contribution that infringes a rule. Wikipedia thus exemplifies the “wisdom of the crowd” principle (Surowiecki 2004): the large number of users dedicated to following and enforcing the encyclopaedia's rules maintain a state of “participative vigilance” that supports the quality of the articles (Cardon and Levrel 2009). To limit the risk of conflicting contributions (known as “edit wars”), the users are encouraged to first debate on the article's “talk page”. To help with conflictual situations, some elected members of the community receive functional roles, such as Administrator or Patrol, coupled with access privileges: blocking IPs, protecting pages, or validating contributions to protected pages (Arazy et al. 2015). Studies have long shown the effectiveness of this architecture of trustworthiness: a few years after its creation, Wikipedia's articles had roughly the same degree of accuracy as that of traditional encyclopaedias (Giles 2005; Casebourne et al. 2012) while covering a far larger number of topics.

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<sup>3</sup> A complete list can be found on the page “List of policies and guidelines” on Wikipedia's website: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List\\_of\\_policies\\_and\\_guidelines](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_policies_and_guidelines)

But as the broader context evolved, maintaining this level of accuracy has become more and more challenging.

## **Knowledge in the post-truth era**

In 2016, following the election of Donald Trump in the US and the Brexit referendum in the UK, the Oxford Dictionary proposed “post-truth” as their “word of the year”, to describe “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). From this point, terms such as “post-truth” and “fake news” have been widely used by both politicians and journalists, while receiving critical attention by the academic community. In fact, such expressions tend to hide the diversity of the phenomenon, which does not make any distinction between accidental misinformation and intentional disinformation (Marwick 2018), ignores the different types of problematic contents that can be shared (Wardle 2017), and masks the mix of ideological, economic and playful motivations of their authors (Frau-Meigs 2019). Yet, new forms of complex biases and manipulation attempts have indeed been identified, threatening the quality of information online.

Wikipedia, because of its open contribution system, has always been the target of some forms of disinformation. Simple forms of vandalism (or “silly vandalism”, according to Wikipedia’s policy), often through the deletion of (part of the) articles or the addition of obscenities, are the most common. They seem to be mainly caused by young peoples, since their prevalence drops during holiday periods, and their targets (beside articles related to sexuality) include frequent homework topics (such as art or historical events) (Casilli 2015). However, as it gained prominence in the information landscape, Wikipedia has attracted more subtle operations of manipulation, from politicians polishing their biography before elections (Göbel and Munzert 2018), to communication agencies specialized in discrete article edition (Joshi et al. 2020).

Several policies have been adopted to prevent conflicts of interests among the authors, including a mandatory disclosure of remunerated edits, limitations on the use of multiple accounts (designated as “sock-puppetry”) and clear rules regarding the reliability of sources. Wikipedia authors must also follow the encyclopaedia's specific position on the “neutral point of view”, embracing pluralism and multi-perpectivity (Sant 2021), yet trying to reflect the relative importance of each viewpoint in the sources. Specific WikiProjects, such as Patrols and the Counter-Vandalism Unit, gather users dedicated to the surveillance of articles and the development of methods (including bots) in order to fight vandalism and problematic edits. Some general characteristics of Wikipedia, such as the choice not to rely on advertisement revenues, the central place of human actors in most decisions, and the absence of algorithmic recommendation systems, may also limit its vulnerability to disinformation campaigns (Keegan 2019; McDowell and Vetter 2020).

## **Wikipedia and the pandemic**

As a participative encyclopaedia with a worldwide audience, Wikipedia was not unaffected by the Covid-19 pandemic that struck at the beginning of 2020. While not completely fitting the encyclopaedia's principles, the coverage of this event was intense, especially in the first months of the pandemic. The resulting articles were found to be quite robust, relying strongly on some of Wikipedia’s tools and policies to ensure information quality.

## Crisis events in Wikipedia

Several rules of Wikipedia state precisely that current events are not ideal topics for articles. In a section entitled “Wikipedia is not a newspaper”, the encyclopaedia’s guidelines explain that “While news coverage can be useful source material for encyclopaedic topics, most newsworthy events do not qualify for inclusion”<sup>4</sup>. Criteria to determine the “notability” of an event include its temporal and geographical scales and the depth and diversity of its media coverage, while “routine” events such as accidents or crimes are usually considered less notable<sup>5</sup>. Most of these limitations stem from more general rules: the coverage of ongoing events usually relies on the testimony of direct witnesses (forbidden by the “No original research” principle) or precarious sources (while the most robust ones required by the “Verifiability” principle, such as academic articles, are usually published long after). For example, the first versions of the article on the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, written as the disaster unfolded, were mostly based on press releases published by the plant’s owner, and media articles largely inspired by these releases (Moats 2019). This “recentism” (the term used in the guidelines to describe “an inflated or imbalanced focus on recent events”) is also associated with long, overloaded articles, which are prone to controversies and edit wars and do not really fit Wikipedia’s standards. Such contributions better suit the goal of the sister-project Wikinews, developed to “report on a wide variety of current news events”<sup>6</sup>.

However, there is a gap between these rules and the way the community operates: when contributors face catastrophic events, little can be done to prevent them from documenting it on the encyclopaedia (Ferron and Massa 2011). As a matter of fact, the articles that gather the most contributors at a given time are usually related to ongoing events (Keegan, Gergle and Contractor 2013). Wikipedia’s readership shows similar trends, with a large part of the monthly most-viewed articles being linked to current events, either recurring (holidays, sports) or exceptional (Doutreix 2020). Such patterns suggest that the encyclopaedia is used in ways similar to a news media, to find (and publish) information about an event as it unfolds. This generates a tension between Wikipedia’s original encyclopaedic ambitions and these pressing journalistic tendencies (Doutreix 2020).

The result is a relative tolerance toward the inclusion of current events in the encyclopaedia, combined with efforts to limit (or, at least, to quickly fix) the effects of recentism. For example, even if such articles still mainly rely on press sources, contributors often discuss the reliability of these sources on the Talk page, sometimes even choosing to wait for confirmations before modifying the article (Bubendorff and Rizza 2020). The resulting representation of the event may still be unstable and disorganized in the first days, but it then tends to return to the encyclopaedia’s standards (Ferron and Massa 2011). Such articles often display a specific message box, `Template:Current`, warning the readers that “information may change rapidly as the event progresses, and initial news reports may be unreliable”. The creation of `Portal:Current events`, which gathers all articles related to ongoing events, and is easily accessible through a link in Wikipedia’s main menu, is another indication of the lasting entanglement of Wikipedia and Wikinews’s goals.

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4 As stated in the “What wikipedia is not” policy on Wikipedia’s website: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:What\\_Wikipedia\\_is\\_not](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:What_Wikipedia_is_not)

5 More details in the “Notability” guideline on Wikipedia’s website: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability\\_\(events\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability_(events))

6 As described on the homepage of Wikinews’s website: <https://en.wikinews.org>

## The coverage of the pandemic

In 2020 and 2021, as the Covid-19 pandemic developed and lingered, the activity on Wikipedia confirmed its central role in the information landscape. As the crisis sowed uncertainty and confusion across the world, people turned to all the information sources available. Thereby, in the year 2020, Covid-19-related articles were among the most-viewed pages of all the large Wikipedia editions<sup>7</sup>. Studies have however shown that this online information-seeking activity was mostly driven by the media coverage of the crisis (rather than the virus incidence itself) and decreased after some time (even when media attention and virus incidence remained high) (Gozzi et al. 2020). As an example, the “COVID-19 pandemic” article peaked at 1.4 million views per day in March 2020, when the World Health Organisation declared Covid-19 a pandemic, but this rate quickly dropped to around 50,000 views per day in the second part of the year<sup>8</sup>.

This influx of readership on Wikipedia came with an increase of the editing activity. In the spring of 2020, the encyclopaedia received more edits than usually, with also a higher number of newly registered editors. Such growth can be explained by the effect of lock-downs on users' activity, but also by the large amount of new information to deal with (Ruprecht et al. 2021). As of October 2021, the term “covid” was found in the titles of more than one thousand articles on the English-language wiki, plus 470 in the Spanish one, 320 in the French one, and 300 in the German one. These articles cover a wide range of topics, from the biological effects of the disease, to the protests against the political responses to the pandemic. Many articles give a local or specific scope on topics that are also covered in more general articles, for instance: “COVID-19 pandemic in London”, “Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in the Republic of Ireland”, “COVID-19 vaccination in Angola”, or “Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the performing arts”. While many of these articles are short, some of the general ones developed in quite an extensive way, with four of them listed among the 50 longest articles of the encyclopaedia (“COVID-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic”, “Statistics of the COVID-19 pandemic in Chile”, “Timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020”, “COVID-19 pandemic in the State of Palestine”). In October 2021, the central “COVID-19 pandemic” article, created in January 2020, was 17,000 words in length, and the result of 24,500 edits.

This reading and editing activity was supported by the long-standing structures of the encyclopaedia such as Portals, reader-oriented collections of articles related to a single topic, and Projects, which are editor-centric coordination areas. The Portal “COVID-19” was created on March 18th 2020, gathering more than 2000 articles on the virus, the pandemic and their impact. Similar portals have been created in several other languages such as French, Spanish or German. The WikiProject “COVID-19” appeared on March 15th 2020 (and labelled as an “offshoot” of the pre-existing Medicine, Viruses and Disaster management WikiProjects), with more than 2000 articles within its scope. It includes task forces dedicated to case counts (updated epidemiological data), equipment (documenting the needs and shortages of masks, respirators, hospital beds), or translations (assessing and improving the availability of information in all editions of the encyclopaedia). While

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7 For example, the list of the most viewed pages in 2020 on the English Wikipedia, calculated by the PageViews tool: <https://pageviews.toolforge.org/topviews/?project=en.wikipedia.org&platform=all-access&date=2020>

8 As shown in the PageView figures for the article “COVID-19 pandemic” on the English Wikipedia: [https://pageviews.toolforge.org/?project=en.wikipedia.org&redirects=1&start=2020-01-01&end=2020-12-31&pages=COVID-19\\_pandemic](https://pageviews.toolforge.org/?project=en.wikipedia.org&redirects=1&start=2020-01-01&end=2020-12-31&pages=COVID-19_pandemic)

it may be difficult to count the editors actually involved, the project's page received more than a thousand visits per day in March 2020<sup>9</sup>, and 214 registered users still displayed the project's badge on their profile in October 2021<sup>10</sup>.

## Dealing with uncertainty and complexity

The coverage of these complicated and unstable topics by such a large number of editors required a high level of caution and discipline. Despite the proliferation of publications on the topic and the urgency of the large readership, the encyclopaedia's rules regarding references were observed quite dutifully. While the share of academic sources among the references was indeed lower than before the pandemic (Benjakob, Aviram and Sobel 2021), the scientific references used were found to be quite complete and robust, taken from reputable journals and avoiding preprints, in accordance with the standards of WikiProject Medicine (Colavizza 2020). When relying on media sources, the editors mainly quoted “legacy media outlets, like the New York Times and the BBC, alongside widely syndicated news agencies like Reuters and the Associated Press, and official sources like WHO.org” (Benjakob, Aviram and Sobel 2021).

Many of the encyclopaedia's tools and norms have been exploited to deal with the quality of information during this crisis. Most Covid-19-related articles have displayed (at least for a certain amount of time) warning messages such as Wikipedia:Medical disclaimer (“Wikipedia does not give medical advice”) and Template:Current (“This article documents a current event”). A specific template “Current COVID-19” was occasionally used from April 2020 to October 2020, when the community decided to transform it into a simple redirection to Template:Current<sup>11</sup>. When integrating epidemiological statistics, the editors also included precise explanations regarding the provenance of data, how to read it, and what biases might alter its accuracy (Segault 2020). This extensive use of warnings, along with frequent page protections (by which administrators can suspend contributions to an article, or limit it to specific categories of users) can be seen as an attempt to slow down the evolution of the articles and facilitate their stabilisation (Rizza and Bubendorff 2021). Reduced rates of “reverts” (when an edit is cancelled by another editor, often because of a clear violation of the rules) may be seen as another indicator of the quality of the contributions, but could also be the result of the administrators' overwork due to the increase of activity (Ruprecht et al. 2021).

Beside this writing process focused on the quality and verifiability of information, editors also paid close attention to the misleading or unproven statements that spread during the crisis. Several articles have been created to list and decipher these theories, such as: “COVID-19 misinformation”, “COVID-19 misinformation by China”, “List of unproven methods against COVID-19”, or “COVID-19 vaccine misinformation and hesitancy”. The coverage of some of these topics has proven to be controversial even within the Wikipedia community. For example, in the French wiki,

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9 Data gathered by Enwebb and published on Wikimedia Commons under the GNU General Public Licence: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wikiproject\\_viewership\\_march\\_2020.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wikiproject_viewership_march_2020.png)

10 According to the statistics of Template:User WikiProject COVID-19 on Wikipedia's website: [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:WhatLinksHere/Template:User\\_WikiProject\\_COVID-19&limit=500](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:WhatLinksHere/Template:User_WikiProject_COVID-19&limit=500)

11 Discussions on Template:Current COVID-19, in the forum Templates for discussion, on Wikipedia's website: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Templates\\_for\\_discussion/Log/2020\\_October\\_14#Template:Current\\_COVID-19](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Templates_for_discussion/Log/2020_October_14#Template:Current_COVID-19)

the heated discussions around the conspiracy movie “Hold-up” led to the departure of a long-time editor. This shows that, while sharing the same principles and following the same rules, the community is not entirely cut off from the debates that arise in such situations (Rizza and Bubendorff 2021).

## Discourses on the method

This intensive coverage of the pandemic on Wikipedia attracted considerable attention and many reactions, both within and outside the Wikimedia community. In this crisis situation, much of the commentary focused on the method that supported the good overall quality of the encyclopaedia’s articles. This can be linked to a broader evolution of the discourse on Wikipedia over the last years, which stems from the ongoing media crisis and the specificities of the encyclopaedia’s epistemology.

## Spotlight on the backstage

During the first month of the pandemic, many of the world’s largest media outlets published articles about the coverage of Covid-19 on Wikipedia. Most of these articles share a focus on misinformation and how the editors have been dealing with it: “How Wikipedia Prevents the Spread of Coronavirus Misinformation” (Wired, US, 15 March 2020), “The Coronavirus Is Stress-Testing Wikipedia’s Policies” (Slate, US, 19 March 2020), “Meet the Wikipedia editors fighting to keep coronavirus pages accurate” (DailyDot, US, 24 March 2020), “How Indians Are Making A Difference In Wikipedia's Fight On Coronavirus Misinformation” (India Times, 29 March 2020), “*Sur Wikipédia, le défi du travail d’information sur le coronavirus*” (“Wikipedia: the challenge of the information campaign of the coronavirus”, *Le Parisien*, France, 6 April 2020). These articles are often long and detailed, and include interviews of contributors and descriptions of the encyclopaedia’s processes and norms (such as references or neutrality), sometimes with a local perspective. Surprisingly, several highly laudatory titles appeared after only a few weeks: “Why Wikipedia is winning against the coronavirus ‘infodemic’” (The Telegraph, UK, 3 April 2020), “Why Wikipedia Is Immune to Coronavirus” (Haaretz, Israel, 8 April 2020). Published long before any academic studies had assessed the quality of Covid-19 on Wikipedia, these articles still present Wikipedia’s method as the answer to misinformation.

This positive media attention has, in turn, circulated inside the Wikimedia community: twenty of these articles have been included in a list of press coverage maintained by editors (Wikipedia:Press coverage 2020), and some were directly mentioned on the page of the WikiProject COVID-19. On the French encyclopaedia, message boxes were added on top of the talk pages of several articles (“*Maladie à coronavirus 2019*”, “*Pandémie de Covid-19*”) with links to the press coverage of these articles. Several pieces have also been written by members of the community itself and published on its own information channels, such as the Signpost online newspaper. For example, a “special report” entitled “Wikipedia on COVID-19: what we publish and why it matters” describes in positive ways the range and precision already reached by Wikipedia’s Covid-19-related articles<sup>12</sup>. In

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12 “Special report” published on the 29 March 2020, in the SignPost section of Wikipedia’s website: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedia\\_Signpost/2020-03-29/Special\\_report](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedia_Signpost/2020-03-29/Special_report)

the English Wikipedia, a very self-reflexive article, “Wikipedia coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic”, was created in April 2020 to document the community’s efforts in several countries.

The community and its representatives also developed specific out-reach activities about Covid-19. At the end of March 2020, the wiki displayed a message from Katherine Maher, at this time the Wikimedia Foundation’s executive director, who explained that Wikipedia will “keep working around the clock to bring you reliable and neutral information”<sup>13</sup>. A new “Responding to COVID-19” section appeared on the Foundation’s website, providing information, links and data regarding the coverage of the crisis on Wikipedia. The Foundation also published on Medium a long interview with four women who were contributing to Covid-19 articles<sup>14</sup>. In October 2020, the World Health Organization announced a collaboration with the Wikimedia Foundation to “expand access to trusted information about COVID-19”<sup>15</sup>, which mainly consisted in the publication of infographics on Wikimedia Commons. At a more local level, the Wikimedia New York City chapter organized a symposium in May 2020 to “answer questions the public may have about Wikipedia's coverage of the pandemic”<sup>16</sup>.

## Becoming a trusted actor

This almost unanimous framing of Wikipedia as a reliable information source can actually be traced back to a few years before the Covid-19 pandemic. As the encyclopaedia evolved and the media crisis unfolded, the press coverage of the encyclopaedia went through different phases, from scepticism to acceptance, and even trust (Benjakob and Harrison 2019). At a time when traditional media outlets proved vulnerable to misinformation (due to time pressure and cost cuts), sensationalism (through audience races), and manipulation (by political discourses or economical agreements) the specificities of Wikimedia were recognized as strengths. The most complimentary articles, with titles such as “Wikipedia, the Last Bastion of Shared Reality” (The Atlantic, US, 2018), mainly focused on the edition process of the encyclopaedia: “It’s easy to imagine that the tools they developed for settling disputes about Star Wars won’t be up to the challenge of saving some informational common-weal, but then again, what does modern politics resemble more than a vicious fandom at war with itself?” (The Atlantic). According to these articles, Wikipedia should be trusted because its epistemology seems efficient to counter disinformation, but not much is said about the role that its economic model and open licences play in this success.

Such an evolution of the discourse on Wikipedia was also found in the educational system. During its first years of existence, the encyclopaedia was not well received in classrooms, and many teachers strongly discouraged their pupils to use it, which left a long-lasting impression. To this day, first-year university students, who have a rather positive perception of Wikipedia’s reliability, still pretend not to use it because they think it would not be well received by their teachers (Sémel

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13 A screenshot of that message was published on Wikimedia Commons under the CC-BY-SA licence: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WMF\\_coronavirus\\_pandemic\\_message\\_2.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WMF_coronavirus_pandemic_message_2.png)

14 Article “Meet some of the women sharing reliable COVID-19 information with the world on Wikipedia” published by Wikimedia on the 3 April 2020: <https://medium.com/freely-sharing-the-sum-of-all-knowledge/women-reliable-covid19-information-wikipedia-f1f9255c3672>

15 More details on the news release published by the WHO on its website: <https://www.who.int/news/item/22-10-2020-the-world-health-organization-and-wikimedia-foundation-expand-access-to-trusted-information-about-covid-19-on-wikipedia>

16 According to the page of the symposium on Wikipedia’s website: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Meetup/NYC/Symposium\\_on\\_Wikipedia\\_and\\_COVID-19](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Meetup/NYC/Symposium_on_Wikipedia_and_COVID-19)

2021). In the last decade, numerous pedagogic projects have however been deployed, from middle schools to universities, often engaging students in contributing to articles (Denel 2021). Through such experiences, children and young adults get a concrete opportunity to discover and apply the norms that regulate the activity of contributors. The benefit of these projects are not limited to Wikipedia: studies have shown that editing the encyclopaedia also contributes to the development of the students' information literacies, such as assessing the reliability of information sources (Dawe and Robinson 2017; McDowell and Vetter 2020). The norms of Wikipedia are thus valuable not only as a tool to build a (relatively) trustworthy encyclopaedia, but also as a method to navigate a (relatively) confusing information landscape.

In many ways, the Wikimedia Foundation appears to have embraced the new centrality of its projects, through actions both within and outside the community. In 2018, the Community Advocacy committee of the Foundation was renamed Trust and Safety, and now includes a Disinformation team focused on “supporting communities in identifying and countering disinformation campaigns on Wikimedia Foundation platforms”<sup>17</sup>. This team led investigations on large-scale disinformation issues in the Croatian Wikipedia, or during Joe Biden's presidential campaign. Since 2019, the Outreach Wiki (another wiki managed by the community for outreach initiatives) includes a Wikimedia Education Program, offering a large variety of resources such as a database of pedagogic activities around the Wikimedia projects, or an incubator for new projects in education. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this program created the EduWiki Challenges, a series of online activities for the students in lock-down, including questions related to disinformation. More recently, it launched the project Reading Wikipedia in the Classroom, to support the integration of Wikipedia-related literacies in education systems around the world.

## Conclusions

This chapter was an attempt to describe and contextualise the coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic on Wikipedia. The self-organized community of editors who write the encyclopaedia's articles has developed a complex set of rules to assess and improve information quality. While some of these rules discourage the coverage of ongoing events, such coverage has become frequent in the past few years and the quality of the resulting articles remains quite high. During the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, a large number of articles were written on a wide range of topics. The analysis of the content, references and discussion pages of these articles demonstrates that the strict observance of the encyclopaedia's method guaranteed a precise and reliable description of the events. The abundant media and community discourse around the coverage of this crisis sheds light on Wikipedia's editing process and its epistemic virtues. As such, the pandemic reinforced a pre-existing framing of this encyclopaedia as a trusted method to deal with information in times of uncertainty.

The large praise of Wikipedia bears its own peril: from trusted method to authoritative source, the step is small but not without consequences. Wikipedia's strength is that it allows anyone to have a clear understanding of how a piece of information came to be included in the encyclopaedia, and therefore directly assess its reliability. The risk is that, eventually, what is a concrete feature of the

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<sup>17</sup> As described in the page of the Trust and Safety committee on Meta Wikipedia's website: [https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Trust\\_and\\_Safety](https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Trust_and_Safety)

encyclopaedia might become an argument from authority. That is, people might start trusting information because it was published on Wikipedia, and not because they checked its production process. Within the current media crisis, this could well turn into a missed opportunity in terms of information literacies. For this reason, beyond the successful coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic, the pedagogic effort of the Wikimedia Foundation seems to be the most important lesson to be learned from the recent sequence of events.

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