

The following is a conversation with Jimmy Wales, co-founder of Wikipedia, one of, if not the most impactful websites ever, expanding the collective knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom of human civilization. And now, a quick few second mention of each sponsor. Check them out in the description.

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Is there anything better than the meditative process of making a steak late at night when you haven't eaten all day? You fasted for 22, 23 hours. You're taking the smell and the sizzling sounds of deliciousness. And I just think how grateful I am to have shelter, to have food, to have all this amazing things that I can use that other brilliant people have created.

It's awesome, this human civilization we have built up, where we do a thing that we're good at and we, with that thing, help other people and form this cohesive network of goodness. It's a beautiful thing, really. Anyway, the thing that you also kind of notice is that it's really well engineered. The non-stick works beautifully. It looks badass. It's the whole thing. It looks amazing. Go to hexclad.com and use code LEX to get 10% off your entire order. That's hexclad.com and use code LEX for 10% off your entire order. This episode is also brought to you by 8Sleep and it's new Pod 3 mattress. The technological revolution that brings the power of naps into the 21st century digital world. It does all kinds of tracking for you with a huge number of sensors. That's super nice. There's an app. You can track information. Great. But you can also control the temperature of the thing. It goes lowest 55 degrees or as hot as 110 degrees on each side of the bed separately.

This is engineering at its best. I love bringing the temperature down with a warm blanket in the Texas heat. It's just heaven. Whether we're talking about a 20-minute nap or a full eight-hour sleep, it's the place I go to to escape the complex world outside.

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This show is also brought to you by House of Macadamias. They make delicious macadamia nut-based snacks. I've gotten a lot of them and I've given it to guests. I've given it to friends and I've brought joy not only into my life but into theirs. They got bars. They got nuts. They got chocolate-covered nuts. I mean the sexual innuendo that is laid in in this very description of this particular snack makes me want to go into all kinds of directions here.

But I'm not going to because I'm a classy gentleman and this is not the kind of show we're running here. So if you would like to put those nuts in your mouth, you know where to go friends.

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Namibian sea salted macadamia nuts plus 20% off your entire order. I don't know why but it's really fun to say. That's HouseOfMacadamias.com slash LEX. This is Lex Friedman podcast. To support it, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now, dear friends, here's Jimmy Wales.

Let's start at the beginning. What is the origin story of Wikipedia?

The origin story of Wikipedia. Well, so I was watching the growth of the free software movement, open-source software, and seeing programmers coming together to collaborate in new ways, sharing code, doing that under a free license, which is really interesting because it empowers an ability to work together. That's really hard to do if the code is still proprietary because then if I chip in and help, we sort of have to figure out how I'm going to be rewarded and what that is. But the idea that everyone can copy it and it just is part of the commons really empowered a huge wave of creative software production. And I realized that that kind of collaboration could extend beyond just software to all kinds of cultural works. And the first thing that I thought of was an encyclopedia. I thought, oh, that seems obvious that an encyclopedia, you can collaborate on it. There's a few reasons why. We all pretty much know what an encyclopedia entry on, say, the Eiffel Tower should be like. You should see a picture, a few pictures maybe, history, location, something about the architect, etc., etc.

So we have a shared understanding of what it is we're trying to do and then we can collaborate and different people can chip in and find sources and so on and so forth. So set up first, Newpedia, which was about two years before Wikipedia. And with Newpedia, we had this idea that in order to be respected, we had to be even more academic than a traditional encyclopedia. Because a bunch of volunteers on the internet getting out of the right at an encyclopedia, you could be made fun of if it's just every random person. So we had implemented this seven-stage review process to get anything published. And two things came of that. So one thing, one of the earliest entries that we published after this rigorous process, a few days later, we had to pull it because as soon as it hit the web and the broader community took a look at it, people noticed plagiarism and realized that it wasn't actually that good, even though it had been reviewed by academics and so on. So we had to pull it. So it's like, oh, okay, well, so much for a seven-stage review process. But also, I decided that I wanted to try. I was frustrated. Why is this taking so long? Why is it so hard? So I thought, okay, I saw that Robert Merton had won Nobel Prize in Economics for his work on Option Pricing Theory. And when I was in academia, that's what I worked on was Option Pricing Theory,

had a published paper. So I'd worked through all of his academic papers and I knew his work quite well. I thought, oh, I'll just, I'll write a short biography of Merton. And when I started to do it, I'd been out of academia, had been a grad student for a few years then. I felt this huge intimidation because they were going to take my draft and send it to the most prestigious finance professors that we could find to give me feedback for revisions. And it felt like being back in grad school. You know, it's like this really oppressive sort of like, you're going to submit it for a review and you're going to get critiques. A little bit of the bad part of grad. Yeah, yeah, the bad part of grad school, right? And so I was like, oh, this isn't intellectually fun. This is like the bad part of grad school. It's intimidating. And there's a lot of, you know, potential embarrassment if I screw something up and so forth. And so that was when I realized, okay, look, this is never going to work. This is not something that people are really going to want to do. So Jeremy Rosenfeld, one of my employees had brought and showed me the Wiki concept in December. And then Larry

Sanger

brought in the same, said, we're not this wiki idea. And so in January, we decided to launch Wikipedia, but we weren't sure. So the original project was called Newpedia. And even though it wasn't successful, we did have quite a group of academics and like really serious people. And we were concerned that, oh, maybe these academics are going to really hate this idea. And we shouldn't just convert the project immediately. We should launch this as a side project. The idea of, here's a wiki where we can start playing around. But actually, we got more work done in two weeks than we had in almost two years, because people were able to just jump on and start doing stuff. And it was actually a very exciting time. You know, you could, back then, you could be the first person who typed Africa as a continent and hit save, you know, which isn't much of an encyclopedia entry, but it's true. And it's a start and it's kind of fun. Like, you know, you put your name down. Actually, a funny story was several years later, I just happened to be online and I saw when his name is Robert Allman won the Nobel Prize in Economics. And we didn't have an entry on him at all, which was surprising, but it wasn't that surprising. This was still early days, you know. And so I got to be the first person to type, Robert Allman won the Nobel Prize in Economics and hit save, which again, wasn't a very good article. But then I came back two days later and people had improved it and so forth. So that, that second half of the experience where with Robert Merton, I never succeeded because it was just too intimidating. It was like, oh, no, I was able to chip in and help other people jumped in. Everybody was interested in the topic because it's all in the news at the moment. And so it's just a completely different model, which worked much, much better. What is it that made that so accessible, so fun, so, so natural to just add something? Well, I think it's, you know, especially in the early days, and this, by the way, has gotten much harder because there are fewer topics that are just green field, you know, available. But, you know, you could say, oh, well, you know, I know a little bit about this and I can, I can get it started. But then it is fun to come back then and see other people have added and improved and so on and so forth. And that idea of collaborating, you know, where people can, much like open source software, you know, you put your code out and then people suggest revisions and they change it and it, and it modifies and it grows beyond the original creator. It's just a kind of a fun, wonderful, quite geeky hobby, but people enjoy it. How much debate was there over the interface, over the details on how to make that seamless and frictionless? Yeah, I mean, not as much as there probably should have been in a way. During that two years of the failure of new pedia where very little work got done, what was actually productive was there was a huge long discussion, email discussion, very clever people talking about things like neutrality, talking about what is an encyclopedia, but also talking about more technical ideas, you know, things back then XML was kind of all the rage and thinking about, ah, could we, you know, shouldn't you have certain data that might be in multiple articles that gets updated automatically? So for example, you know, the population of New York City, every 10 years there's a new official census, couldn't you just update that bit of data in one place and it would update across all loads? That is a reality today, but back then it was just like, hmm, how do we do that? How do we think about that? So that is a reality today where there's some universal variables, wiki data. Yeah, wiki data, you can link from a Wikipedia entry, you can link to that piece of data

in wiki data. I mean, it's a pretty advanced thing, but there are advanced users who are doing that. And then when that gets updated, it updates in all the languages where you've done that. I mean, that's really interesting. There was this chain of emails in the early days of discussing the details of what is, so there's the interface, there's the, Yeah, so the interface. So an example, there was some software called use mod wiki, which we started with. It's quite amusing, actually, because the main reason we launched with use mod wiki is that it was a single Perl script. So it was really easy for me to install it on the server and just get running. But it was, you know, some guy's hobby project, it was cool, but it was just a hobby project. And all the data was stored in flat text files. So there was no real database behind it. So to search the site, you basically used grep, which is just like basic Unix utility to like look through all the files. So that clearly was never going to scale. But also, in the early days, it didn't have real logins. So you could set your username, but there were no passwords. So, you know, I might say Bob Smith, and then someone else comes along and says, Oh, I'm Bob Smith, and they both had it. Now, that never really happened. We didn't have a problem with it, but it was kind of obvious, like, you can't grow a big website where everybody can pretend to be everybody. That's, that's not going to be good for trust and reputation and so forth. So quickly, I had to write a little, you know, login, you know, store people's passwords and things like that. So you can have unique identities. And then another example of something, you know, quite, you would have never thought would have been a good idea. And it turned out to not be a problem. But to make a link in Wikipedia, in the early days, you would make a link to a page that may or may not exist by just using camel case, meaning it's like upper case, lower case, and you smash the words together. So maybe New York City, you might type in EW, no space, capital Y, York City. And that would make a link. But that was ugly. That was clearly not right. And so I was like, okay, well, that that's just not going to look nice. Let's just use square brackets to square brackets makes a link that may have been an option in the software. I'm not sure I thought up square brackets. But anyway, we just did that, which worked really well. It makes nice links. And you know, you can see in its red links or blue links, depending on if the page exists or not. But the thing that didn't occur to me even think about is that, for example, on the German language standard keyboard, there is no square bracket. So for German Wikipedia to succeed, people had to learn to do some alt codes to get the square bracket, or they a lot of users cut and paste a square bracket where they could find one and they would just cut and paste one in. And yet German Wikipedia has been a massive success. So somehow that didn't slow people down. How is that that the German keyboards don't have a square bracket? How do you do programming? How do you live life to its fullest without square brackets? Very good question. I'm not really sure. I mean, maybe it does now because keyboard standards have, you know, drifted over time and becomes useful to have a certain character. I mean, it's same thing like there's not really a W character in Italian. And it wasn't on keyboards or I think it is now. But in general, W is not a letter in Italian language, but it appears in enough international words that it's crept into Italian. And all of these things are probably Wikipedia articles in themselves. The discussion is square brackets on both the English and the German Wikipedia. And the difference between those two

might be very interesting. So wiki data is fascinating, but even the broader discussion of what is an encyclopedia? Can you go to that sort of philosophical question of what is an encyclopedia?

So the way I would put it is an encyclopedia or what our goal is is the sum of all human knowledge, but some meaning summary. So and this was an early debate. I mean, somebody started uploading the full text of Hamlet, for example. And we said, wait, hold on a second. That's not an encyclopedia article, but why not? So hence was born wiki source, which is where you put original texts and things like that out of copyright texts. Because he said, no, an encyclopedia article about Hamlet, that's a perfectly valid thing. But the actual text of the play is not an encyclopedia article. So most of it's fairly obvious. But there are some interesting quirks and differences. So for example, as I understand it, in French language encyclopedias, traditionally, it would be quite common to have recipes, which in English language, that would be unusual. You wouldn't find a recipe for chocolate cake in Britannica. And so I actually don't know the current state. I haven't thought about that in many, many years now.

State of cake recipes in Wikipedia, in English Wikipedia?

I wouldn't say there's chocolate cake recipes. I mean, you might find a sample recipe somewhere. I'm not saying there are none, but in general, no, like we wouldn't have recipes.

I told myself, I would not get outraged in this conversation, but now I'm outraged.

I'm deeply upset.

It's actually very complicated. I love to cook. I'm actually quite a good cook.

What's interesting is it's very hard to have a neutral recipe.

A canonical recipe is kind of difficult to come by because there's so many variants and it's all debatable and interesting. For something like chocolate cake, you could probably say, here's one of the earliest recipes or here's one of the most common recipes. But for many, many things, the variants are as interesting as somebody said to me recently, 10 Spaniards, 12 Paella recipes. So these are all matters of open discussion.

Well, just to throw some numbers, as of May 27th, 2023, there are 6 million, 6.66 million articles in the English Wikipedia containing over 4.3 billion words, including articles, the total number of pages is 58 million. Does that blow your mind?

I mean, yes, it does. I mean, it doesn't because I know those numbers and see them from time to time. But in another sense, a deeper sense, yeah, it does. I mean, it's really remarkable. I remember when English Wikipedia passed 100,000 articles and when German Wikipedia

passed 100,000 because I happened to be in Germany with a bunch of Wikipedians that night. Then it seemed quite big. I mean, we knew at that time that it was nowhere near complete.

I remember at Wikimania in Harvard, when we did our annual conference there in Boston, and someone who had come to the conference from Poland had brought along with him a small encyclopedia, a single volume encyclopedia of biographies. So short biographies, normally a paragraph or so, about famous people in Poland. And there were some 22,000 entries.

And he pointed out that even then, 2006, Wikipedia felt quite big. And he said, in English Wikipedia, there's only a handful of these, less than 10%, I think he said.

And so then you realized, yeah, actually, who was the mayor of Warsaw in 1873? Don't know, probably not in English Wikipedia, but it probably might be today. But there's so much out there. And of course, what we get into when we're talking about how many entries there are

and how many could there be, is this very deep philosophical issue of notability, which is the question of, well, how do you draw the limit? How do you draw what is there? So sometimes people say, oh, there should be no limit. But I think that doesn't stand up to much scrutiny if you really pause and think about it. So I see in your hand there, you've got a big pen, pretty standard. Everybody's seen billions of those in life.

Classic, though. It's a classic, clear, big pen. So could we have an entry about that big pen?

Well, I bet we do, that type of big pen, because it's classic, everybody knows it,

and it's got a history. And actually, there's something interesting about the big company.

They make pens, they also make kayaks. And there's something else they're famous for. Basically, they're sort of a definition by non-essentials company. Anything that's long and plastic, that's what they make. So if you want to find the common ground.

The platonic form of a big.

But could we have an article about that very big pen in your hand? So Lex Friedman's big pen as of this week. Oh, the very specific instance. And the answer is no, there's not much known about it. I daresay, unless it's very special to you and your great grandmother gave it to you or something, you probably know very little about it. It's a pen. It's just here in the office.

And so that's just to show there's a, there's, there is a limit. I mean, in German Wikipedia,

they used to talk about the rear nut of the wheel of Uli Fuchs, bicycle Uli Fuchs,

the well-known Wikipedia of the time, to sort of illustrate that you can't have an

article about literally everything. And so then it raises the question, what can you have an

article about what can't you? And that can vary depending on the subject matter. One of the areas

where we try to be much more careful would be biographies. The reason is a biography of a

living person, if you get it wrong, it can actually be quite hurtful, quite damaging. And so if someone

is a private person and somebody tries to create a Wikipedia, there's no way to update it. There's

not much known. So for example, an encyclopedia article about my mother, my mother, school teacher,

later a pharmacist, wonderful woman, but never been in the news. I mean, other than me talking about why there shouldn't be a Wikipedia entry that's probably made it in somewhere,

standard example, but there's not enough known. And you could sort of imagine a database of genealogy, having date of birth, date of death, and certain elements like that of

private people, but you couldn't really write a biography. And one of the areas this comes up

quite often is what we call BLP1E. We've got lots of acronyms. Biography of a living person

who's notable for only one event is a real sort of danger zone. And the type of example would be

a victim of a crime. So someone who's a victim of a famous serial killer, but about whom like

really not much is known. They weren't a public person, they're just a victim of a crime. We

really shouldn't have an article about that person. They'll be mentioned, of course. And maybe

the specific crime might have an article. But for that person, no, not really. That's not really

something that makes any sense, because how can you write a biography about someone you don't

know much about? And this is, you know, it varies from field to field. So for example, for many

academics, we will have an entry that we might not have in a different context, because for an

academic, it's important to have sort of their career, you know, what papers they've published,

things like that. You may not know anything about their personal life, but that's actually not

encyclopedically relevant in the same way that it is for a member of a royal family,

where it's basically all about the family. So, you know, we're fairly nuanced about

notability and where it comes in. And I've always thought that the term notability, I think, is a little problematic. I mean, we struggled about how to talk about it. The problem with notability is it can feel insulting. So no, you're not noteworthy. My mother's noteworthy. She's a really important person in my life, right? So that's not right. But it's more like verifiability. Is there a way to get information that actually makes an encyclopedia entry? It so happens that there's a Wikipedia page about me, as I've learned recently. And the first thought I had when I saw that was surely I am not notable enough. So I was very surprised and grateful that such a page could exist. And actually just allow me to say thank you to all the incredible people that are part of creating and maintaining Wikipedia. It's my favorite website on the internet. The collection of articles that Wikipedia has created is just incredible. We'll talk about the various details of that. But the love and care that goes into creating pages for individuals for a big pen for all this kind of stuff is just really incredible. So I just felt the love when I saw that page. But I also felt just because I do this podcast and I just through this podcast gotten to know a few individuals that are quite controversial. I've gotten to be on the receiving end of something quite, to me as a person who loves other human beings, I've gone to be at the receiving end of some kind of attacks through the Wikipedia form. Like you said, when you look at living individuals, it can be quite hurtful. There are little details of information. And because I've become friends with Elon Musk and I've interviewed him, but I've also interviewed people on the left, far left, people on the right, some people would say far right. And so now you take a step, you put your toe into the cold pool of politics and the shark emerges from the depths and pulls you right in. I guess it's hot. And so I got to experience some of that. I think what you also realize is there has to be for Wikipedia kind of credible sources, verifiable sources. And there's a dance there because some of the sources are pieces of journalism. And of course, journalism operates under its own complicated incentives such that people can write articles that are not factual or are cherry picking all the flaws they can have in a journalistic article. And those can be used as sources. It's like they dance hand in hand. And so for me, sadly enough, there was a really kind of concerted attack to say that I was never at MIT. I never did anything at MIT. Just to clarify, I am a research scientist at MIT. I have been there since 2015. I'm there today. I'm at a prestigious amazing laboratory called LIDS. And I hope to be there for a long time. I work on AI, robotics, machine learning. There's a lot of incredible people there. And by the way, MIT has been very kind to defend me. Unlike what Wikipedia says, it is not an unpaid position. There was no controversy. It was all very calm and happy and almost boring research that I've been doing there. And the other thing, because I am half Ukrainian, half Russian, and I've traveled to Ukraine and I will travel to Ukraine again. And I will travel to Russia for some very difficult conversations. My heart has been broken by this war. I have family in both places. It's been a really difficult time. But the little battle about the biography there also starts becoming important for the first time for me. I also want to clarify, sort of personally, I use this opportunity of some inaccuracies there. My father was not born in Chukausk, Russia. He was born in Kiev, Ukraine. I was born in Chukausk, which is a town not in Russia. There is a town called that in Russia, but there's another town in Tajikistan, which is a former Republic of the Soviet Union. It is that town is not called B-U-S-T-O-N, Buston, which is funny because we're now in Austin and also in Boston. It seems like my whole life is surrounded by these kinds of towns. So I was born in Tajikistan. And the rest

of the biography is interesting, but my family is very evenly distributed between their origins and where they grew up, between Ukraine and Russia, which adds a whole beautiful complexity to this whole thing. So I want to just correct that. It's like the fascinating thing about Wikipedia is in some sense, those little details don't matter. But in another sense, what I felt when I saw a Wikipedia page about me or anybody I know is there's this beautiful kind of saving that this person existed, like a community that notices you. It says like a little, you see like a butterfly that floats and you're like, huh, that it's not just any butterfly, it's that one. I like that one. Or you see a puppy or something, or it's this big pen. This one, I remember this one as the scratch and you get noticed in that way. And I don't know, it's a beautiful thing and it's, I mean, maybe it's very silly of me and naive, but I feel like Wikipedia, in terms of individuals, is an opportunity to celebrate people, to celebrate ideas and not a battleground of attacks, of the kind of stuff we might see on Twitter, like the mockery, the derision, this kind of stuff. And of course, you don't want to cherry pick, all of us have flaws and so on, but it just feels like to highlight a controversy of some sort, when that doesn't at all represent the entirety of the human in most cases, is sad. So there's a few things to unpack and all that. So first, one of the things I find really, always find very interesting is your status with MIT. Okay, that's upsetting and it's an argument and can be sorted out. But then what's interesting is you gave as much time to that, which is actually important and relevant to your career and so on, to also where your father was born, which most people would hardly notice, but is really meaningful to you. And I find that a lot when I talk to people who have a biography in Wikipedia is they're often as annoyed by a tiny error that no one's going to notice, like this town in Tajikistan has got a new name and so on, like nobody even knows what that means or whatever, but it can be super important. And so that's one of the reasons, for biographies, we say like human dignity really matters. And so some of the things have to do with, and this is a common debate that goes on in Wikipedia is what we call undue weight. So I'll give an example. There was an article I stumbled across many years ago about the mayor, or no, he wasn't a mayor. He was a city council member of, I think it was Peoria, Illinois, but some small town in the Midwest. And the entry, you know, he's been on the city council for 30 years or whatever. He's pretty, I mean, frankly, pretty boring guy and seems like a good local city politician. But in this very short biography, there was a whole paragraph, a long paragraph about his son being arrested for DUI. And it was clearly undue weight. It's like, what does this got to do with this guy? If it even deserves a mention, it wasn't even clear, had he done anything hypocritical, had he done himself anything wrong, even was his son, his son got a DUI, that's never great, but it happens to people and it doesn't seem like a massive scandal for your dad. So of course, I just took that out immediately. This is a long, long time ago. And that's the sort of thing where, you know, we have to really think about in a biography and about controversies to say, is this a real controversy? So in general, like one of the things we tend to say is like, any section, so if there's a biography, and there's a section called controversies, that's actually poor practice. Because it just invites people to say, oh, I want to work on this entry, see there's seven sections, oh, this one's quite short, can I add something? Go out and find some more controversies. Now, that's nonsense, right? And in general, putting it separate from everything else kind of makes it seem worse, and also doesn't put it in the right context. Whereas if it's sort of a life-flowing, there is a controversy, there's always potential controversy for anyone. It should just be sort

of worked into the overall article, because then it doesn't become a temptation, you can contextualize appropriately and so forth. So that's, you know, that's, you know, part of the whole process. But I think for me, one of the most important things is what I call community health. So yeah, are we going to get it wrong sometimes? Yeah, of course, we're humans and doing good quality, you know, sort of reference material is hard. The real question is, how do people react, you know, to a criticism or a complaint or a concern? And if the reaction is defensiveness or combativeness back, or if someone's really sort of in there being aggressive and in the wrong, like, no, no, no, hold on, we've got to do this the right way. You got to say, okay, hold on, you know, are there good sources? Is this contextualized appropriately? Is it even important enough to mention? What does it mean? You know, and sometimes one of the areas where I do think there is a very complicated flaw, and you've alluded to it a little bit, but it's like, we know the media is deeply flawed. We know that journalism can go wrong. And I would say, particularly in the last whatever 15 years, we've seen a real decimation of local media and local newspapers. We've seen a real rise in clickbait headlines and sort of eager focus on anything that might be controversial. We've always had that with us, of course, there's always been tabloid newspapers. But that makes it a little bit more challenging to say, okay, how do we how do we sort things out? When we have a pretty good sense that that not every source is valid. So as an example, a few years ago, it's been quite a while now, we deprecated the mail online as a source. And the mail online, you know, the digital arm of the Daily Mail, it's a tabloid. It's not completely, you know, it's not fake news. But it does tend to run very hyped up stories. They really love to attack people and go on the attack for political reasons and so on. And it just isn't great. And so by saying deprecated, and I think some people say, oh, you banned the Daily Mail. No, we didn't ban it as a source. We just said, look, it's probably not a great source, right? You should probably look for a better source. So certainly, you know, if the Daily Mail runs a headline saying, new cure for cancer, it's like, you know, probably there's more serious sources than a tabloid newspaper. So, you know, in an article about lung cancer, you probably wouldn't cite the Daily Mail. Like that's kind of ridiculous. But also for celebrities and so forth to sort of know, oh, they do cover celebrity gossip a lot, but they also tend to have vendettas and so forth. And you really have to step back and go, is this really encyclopedic or is this just the Daily Mail going on a rant? And some of that requires a great community health. It requires massive community health. Even for me, for stuff I've seen that's kind of iffy about people I know, things I know about myself, I still feel like a love for knowledge emanating from the article. Like I feel the community health. So I will take all slight inaccuracies. I would, I love it because that means there's people from the most part I feel of respect and love in a search for knowledge. Like sometimes, because I also love Stack Overflow, Stack Exchange for programming related things. And they can get a little cranky sometimes to a degree where it's like, it's not as like, you can see, you can feel the dynamics of the health of the particular community and sub-communities too, like a particularly C sharp or Java or Python or whatever. Like there's little communities that emerge. You can feel the levels of toxicity because a little bit of strictness is good, but a little too much is bad because of the defensiveness. Because when somebody writes an answer and then somebody else kind of says, well, modify and get defensive and there's this

tension that's not conducive to improving towards a more truthful depiction of that topic. Yeah. A great example that I really loved this morning that I saw, someone left a note on my user talk page in English Wikipedia saying, it was quite a dramatic headline thing, racist hook on front page. So we have on the front page of Wikipedia, we have a little section called, Did You Know? And it's just little tidbits and facts, just things people find interesting. And there's a whole process for how things get there. And the one that somebody was raising a question about was, it was comparing a very well-known US football player, Black. There was a quote from another famous sport person comparing him to a Lamborghini, clearly a compliment. And so somebody said, actually, here's a study, here's some interesting information about how Black sports people are far more often compared to inanimate objects and given that kind of analogy. And I think it's demeaning to compare a person to a car, et cetera, et cetera. But they said, I'm not pulling, I'm not deleting it, I'm not removing it, I just want to raise the question. And then there's this really interesting conversation that goes on where I think the general consensus was, you know what, this isn't like the alarming headline, racist thing on the front page of Wikipedia, that sounds holy moly, that sounds bad. But it's sort of like, actually, yeah, this probably isn't the sort of analogy that we think is great. And so we should probably think about how to improve our language and not compare sports people to inanimate objects and particularly be aware of certain racial sensitivities that there might be around that sort of thing. If there is a disparity in the media of how people are called, I just thought, you know what, nothing for me to weigh in on here, this is a good conversation.

Like, nobody's saying, you know, people should be banned if they refer to, what was his name? The fridge, refrigerator Perry, you know, very famous comparison to an inanimate object of a Chicago Bears player many years ago. But they're just saying, hey, let's be careful about analogies that we just pick up from the media. I said, yeah, you know, that's good. On the sort of deprecation of news sources is really interesting, because I think what you're saying is ultimately, you want to make a article by article decision, kind of use your own judgment. And it's such a subtle thing, because there's just a lot of hit pieces written about individuals like myself, for example, that masquerade as kind of an objective, thorough exploration of a human being. It's fascinating to watch, because controversy and hit pieces just get more clicks. I guess as a Wikipedia contributor, you start to deeply become aware of that, and start to have a sense, like a radar of clickbait versus truth, like to pick out the truth from the clickbait type language. Oh, yeah. I mean, it's really important. And, you know, we talk a lot about weasel words, you know, and, you know, actually, I'm sure we'll end up talking about AI and chat GPT, but just to quickly mention, in this area, I think one of the potentially powerful tools, because it is quite good at this, I've played around with and practiced it quite a lot. But chat GPT four is really quite able to take a passage and point out potentially biased terms to rewrite it to be more neutral. Now, it is a bit anodyne, and it's a bit, you know, cliched. So sometimes it just takes the spirit out of something that's actually not bad. It's just like, you know, poetic language, and you're like, okay, that's not actually helping. But in many cases, I think that sort of thing is quite interesting. And I'm also interested in, you know, can you imagine where you feed in a Wikipedia entry and all the sources, and you say, help me find anything in the article that is not accurately reflecting what's in the sources. And that doesn't have to be perfect. It only has to be good enough to be useful

to a community. So if it scans an article and all the sources, and you say, oh, it came back with 10 suggestions, and seven of them were decent, and three of them it just didn't understand. Well, actually, that's probably worth my time to do. And it can help us, you know, really more quickly get good people to sort of review obscure entries and things like that. So just as a small aside on that, and we'll probably talk about language models a little bit, or a lot more. But one of the articles, one of the hit pieces about me, the journalist actually was very straightforward and honest about having used GPT to write part of the article. And then finding that it made an error, and apologize for the error the GPT4 generated, which has this kind of interesting loop, which the articles are used to write Wikipedia pages, GPT is trained on Wikipedia. And there's like this interesting loop where the weasel words and the nuances can get lost or can propagate even though they're not grounded in reality. Somehow, in the generation of the language model, new truths can be created and kind of linger. Yeah, there's a famous webcomic that's titled Cytogenesis, which is about how something, an error is in Wikipedia, and there's no source for it. But then a lazy journalist reads it and writes the source, and then some helpful Wikipedia spots that it has no source, finds the source and adds it to Wikipedia. And voila, magic. This happened to me once. It well, it nearly happened. There was this, it was really brief, I went back in research and I'm like, this is really odd. So Biography Magazine, which is a magazine published by the Biography TV channel, had a poster profile of me and it said, in his spare time, I'm not quoting exactly, I've been many years, but in his spare time, he enjoys playing chess with friends. I thought, wow, that sounds great. Like, I would like to be that guy, but actually, I mean, I play chess with my kids sometimes, but no, it's not a hobby of mine. And I was like, where did they get that? And I contacted the magazine and said, where did that come from? They said, oh, it was in Wikipedia.

I looked in the history, there had been vandalism of Wikipedia, which was not, you know, it's not damaging, it's just false. So, and it had already been removed. But then I thought, oh, gosh, well, I better mention this to people, because otherwise, it's somebody's going to read that and they're going to add it at the entry and it's going to take on a life of its own. And then sometimes I wonder if it has, because I've been, I was invited a few years ago to do the ceremonial first move in the world chess championship. And I thought, I wonder if they think I'm a really big chess enthusiast because they read this biography magazine article. But that problem, when we think about large language models and the ability to quickly generate very plausible, but not true content, I think is something that there's going to be a lot of shakeout, a lot of implications of that. What would be hilarious is because of the social pressure of Wikipedia and the momentum, you would actually start playing a lot more chess. Not only the articles are written based on Wikipedia, but your own life trajectory changes because of the Wikipedia, just to make it more convenient. Yeah. Aspire to. Aspire to, aspirational. If we could just talk about that before we jump back to some other interesting topics on Wikipedia, let's talk about GPT-4 and large language models. So they are in part trained on Wikipedia content. Yeah.

What are the pros and cons of these language models? What are your thoughts?

Yeah. So, I mean, there's a lot of stuff going on. Obviously, the technologies move very quickly in the last six months and it looks poised to do so for some time to come. So first things first, I mean, part of our philosophy is the open licensing, the free licensing, the idea that

this is what we're here for. We are a volunteer community and we write this encyclopedia. We give it to the world to do what you like with. You can modify it, redistribute it, redistribute modified versions, commercially, non-commercially. This is the licensing. So in that sense, of course, it's completely fine. Now, we do worry a bit about attribution because it is a Creative Commons attribution, share alike license. So attribution is important not just because of our licensing model and things like that, but it's just proper attribution is just good intellectual practice. And that's a really hard, complicated question. If I were to write something about my visit here, I might say in a blog post, I was in Austin, which is a city in Texas. I'm not going to put a source for Austin as a city in Texas. That's just general knowledge. I learned it somewhere. I can't tell you where. So you don't have to cite and reference every single thing. But if I actually did research and I used something very heavily, it's just morally proper to give your sources. So we would like to see that. And obviously, they call it grounding. So particularly people at Google are really keen on figuring out grounding. That's such a cool term. So any text that's generated trying to ground it to the Wikipedia quality source, I mean, the same kind of standard of what a source means that Wikipedia uses the same kind of source to be generated. Yeah, the same kind of thing. And of course, one of the biggest flaws in chat GPT right now is that it just literally will make things up just to be amiable. I think it's programmed to be very hopeful and amiable and doesn't really know or care about the truth. You can get bullied into it. It can kind of be convinced. Well, but like this morning, the story I was telling earlier about comparing a football player to a Lamborghini, and I thought, is that really racial? I don't know. But I'm just mulling it over. And I thought, I'm going to go to chat GPT. So I sent to chat GPT 4. I said, this happened in Wikipedia. Can you think of examples where a white athlete has been compared to a fast car inanimate object? And it comes back with a very plausible essay where it tells why these analogies are common in sport mobile. I said, no, no, I really, could you give me some specific examples? So it gives me three specific examples, very plausible, correct names of athletes and contemporaries and all of that could have been true. Googled every single quote and none of them existed. And so I'm like, well, that's really not good. Like I wanted to explore a thought process I was in. I thought, I thought, first I thought, how do I Google? And it's like, well, it's kind of a hard thing to Google because unless somebody has written about this specific topic, it's, you know, it's a language model. It's processed all this data. It can probably piece that together for me, but it just can't yet. So I think I hope that chat GPT 5, 6, 7, 3 to 5 years, I'm hoping we'll see a much higher level of accuracy where when you ask a question like that, I think instead of being quite so eager to please by giving you a plausible sounding answer, it's just like, I don't know. Or maybe display the how much bullshit might be in this generated text. Like I really would like to make you happy right now, but I'm really stretched in with this generation. Well, it's one of the things I've said for a long time. So in Wikipedia, one of the great things we do may not be great for our reputation, except in a deeper sense for the long term, I think it is. But, you know, we'll all be a notice that says the neutrality of this section has been disputed, or the following section doesn't cite any sources. And I always joke, you know, sometimes I wish The New York Times would run a banner saying the neutrality of this has been disputed. They could give us a, we had a big fight in the newsroom as to whether to run this or not. But we thought it's important enough to bring it to you, but just be aware that not all the journalists are on board with it. Oh, that's actually interesting. And that's fine. I would

trust them more for that level of transparency. So yeah, similarly, Chajapiti should say, yeah, 87% bullshit. Well, the neutrality one is really interesting because that's basically a summary of the discussions that are going on underneath. It would be amazing if I should be honest, I don't look at the talk page often. I don't, it would be nice somehow if there was a kind of a summary in this banner way of like, this lots of wars have been fought on this here land for this here paragraph. It's really interesting. Yeah, I hadn't thought of that because we wanted things I do spend a lot of time thinking about these days. And, you know, people have found it, we're moving slowly, but, you know, we are moving thinking about, okay, these tools exist. Are there ways that this stuff can be useful to our community? Because a part of it is we do approach things in a non-commercial way in a really deep sense. It's like, it's been great that Wikipedia has become very popular, but really, we're just, we're a community whose hobby is writing and encyclopedia. That's first. And if it's popular, great. If it's not, okay, we might have trouble paying for more servers, but it'll be fine. And so how do we help the community

use these tools? What are the ways that these tools can support people? And one example I never thought about, I'm going to start playing with it is, you know, feed in the article and feed in the talk page and say, can you suggest some warnings in the article based on the conversations in the talk page? I think it might be good at that. It might get it wrong sometimes. But again, if it's reasonably successful at doing that, and you can say, oh, actually, yeah, it does suggest, you know, the neutrality of this has been disputed on a section that has a seven-page discussion in the back, that might be useful. I don't know. We're playing with.

I mean, some more color to the not neutrality, but also the amount of emotion laden in the exploration

of this particular part of the topic. It might actually help you look at more controversial pages, like a page on the war in Ukraine or a page on Israel and Palestine. There could be parts that everyone agrees on, and there's parts that are just like tough, tough. The hard parts, yeah. It would be nice to, when looking at those beautiful long articles, to know like, all right, let me just take in some stuff where everybody agrees on. I can give an example that I haven't looked at in a long time, but I was really pleased with what I saw at the time. So the discussion was that they're building something in Israel. And for their own political reasons, one side calls it a wall, hearkening back to Berlin Wall apartheid. The other calls it a security fence. So we can understand quite quickly, if we give it a moment's thought, like, okay, I understand why people would have this, this grappling over the language, like, okay, you want to highlight the negative aspects of this, and you want to highlight the positive aspects. So you're going to try and choose a different name. And so there was this really fantastic Wikipedia discussion on the talk page. How do we word that paragraph to talk about the different naming? It's called this by Israelis, called this by Palestinians. And that how you explain that to people could be quite charged, right? You could easily explain, oh, there's this difference. And it's because this side's good and this side's bad. And that's why there's a difference. Or you could say, actually, let's just let's try and really stay as neutral as we can and try to explain the reason. So you may come away from it with with a concept. Oh, okay, I understand what this debate is about now.

And just the term Israel-Palestine conflict is still the title of a page of Wikipedia. But the word conflict is something that is a charged word. Because from the Palestinian side or from

certain sides, the word conflict doesn't accurately describe the situation. Because if you see it as a genocide, one way genocide, it's not a conflict. Because to people that discuss that challenge the word conflict, they see, you know, conflict is when there's two equally powerful sides fighting. Yeah, yeah. No, it's, it's hard. And, you know, in a number of cases, so this actually speaks to a slightly broader phenomenon, which is there are a number of cases where there is no one word that can get consensus. And in the body of an article, that's usually okay, because we can explain the whole thing. You can come away with an understanding of why each side wants to use a certain word. But there are some aspects like the pages have a title. So, you know, there's that same thing with certain things like photos, you know, it's like, well, there's different photos, which one's best, a lot of different views on that. But at the end of the day, you need the lead photo because there's one slot for a lead photo. Categories is another one. So at one point, I have no idea if it's in there today, but I don't think so. I was listed in, you know, American entrepreneurs find American atheists. And I said, hmm, that doesn't feel right to me. Like just personally, it's true. I mean, I wouldn't, wouldn't disagree with the objective fact of it. But when you click the category and you see sort of a lot of people who are, you might say, American atheist activists, because that's their big issue. So Madeline Murray O'Hare or various famous people who Richard Dawkins who make it a big part of their public argument and persona. But that's not true of me. It's just like my private personal belief, it doesn't really, it's not something I campaign about. So it felt weird to put me in the category, but what category would you put, you know, and, and do you need that? In this case, I was, I argued, it doesn't need that kind of like, that's not, I don't speak about it publicly, except incidentally from time to time. I don't campaign about it. So it's weird to put me with this group of people and that argument carried the day. I hope not just because it was me, but, but categories can be like that where, you know, you're either in the category or you're not. And sometimes it's a lot more complicated than that. And is it, again, we go back to, is it undue weight? You know, if someone who is now prominent in public life and generally considered to be a good person was convicted of something, let's say DUI when they were young, we normally in normal sort of discourse, we don't think, oh, this person should be in the category of American criminals. Because you think criminal, technically speaking, it's against the law to drive under the influence of alcohol and you were arrested and you spent a month in prison or whatever. But it's odd to say that's a criminal. So just as an example in this area is Mark Wahlberg, Marky Mark, that's what I always think of him as, because that was his first sort of famous name, who I wouldn't think should be listed as, in the category, American criminal, even though he did, he was convicted of quite a bad crime when he was a young person, but we don't think of him as a criminal. Should the entry talk about that? Yeah, it's actually, that's actually an important part of his life story, you know, that he had a very rough youth and he could have gone down a really dark path and he turned his life around, that's actually interesting. So categories are tricky. Especially with people, because we like to assign labels to people into ideas somehow and those labels stick. And there's certain words that have a lot of power like criminal, like political left, right, center, anarchist, objectivist, what other philosophies are there? Marxist, communist, social democrat, democratic socialist, socialist. And like, if you add that as a category, all of a sudden it's like, oh boy, you're that guy now. And I don't know if you want to be that guy. Well, there's definitely some really charged ones. Like, alt-right, I think is quite complicated and

tough. I mean, it's not a completely meaningless label. But boy, I think you really have to pause before you actually put that label on someone. Partly because now you're putting them in a group of people, some of them are quite, you wouldn't want to be grouped with. So it's, yeah. Let's go into some, you mentioned the hot water of the pool that we're both tipping a toe in. Do you think Wikipedia has a left-leaning political bias, which is something it is sometimes accused of? Yeah. So I don't think so, not broadly. And I think you can always point to specific entries and talk about specific biases, but that's part of the process of Wikipedia. Anyone can come and challenge and to go on about that. But I see fairly often on Twitter some quite extreme accusations of bias. And I think, actually, I just, I don't see it. I don't buy that. And if you ask people for an example, they normally struggle and depending on who they are and what it's about. So it's certainly true that some people who have quite fringe viewpoints and who knows, the full rush of history in 500 years, they might be considered to be path-breaking geniuses, but at the moment, quite fringe views. And they're just unhappy that Wikipedia doesn't report on their fringe views as being mainstream. And that, by the way, goes across all kinds of fields. I mean, I was once accosted on the street outside the TED conference in Vancouver by a guy who's a homeopath who was very upset that Wikipedia's entry on homeopathy basically says it's pseudoscience. And he felt that was biased. And I said, oh, I can't really help you because it cites, we cite good quality sources to talk about the scientific status and it's not very good. So it depends. And I think it's something that we should always be vigilant about. But in general, I think we're pretty good. And I think any time you go to any serious political controversy, we should have a pretty balanced perspective on who's saying what the views are and so forth. I would actually argue that the areas where we are more likely to have bias that persist for a long period of time are actually fairly obscure things or maybe fairly non-political things. It's kind of a humorous example, but it's meaningful. If you read our entries about Japanese anime, they tend to be very, very positive and very favorable because almost no one knows about Japanese anime except for fans. And so the people who come and spend their days writing Japanese anime articles, they love it. They kind of have an inherent love for the whole area. Now, of course, being human beings, they have their internal debates and disputes about what's better or not. But in general, they're quite positive because nobody actually cares. On anything that people are quite passionate about, then hopefully there's quite a lot of interesting stuff. So I'll give an example, a contemporary example, where I think we've done a good job as of my most recent sort of look at it. And that is the question about the efficacy of masks during the COVID pandemic. And that's an area where I would say the public authorities really kind of jerked us all around a bit. And the very first days, they said, whatever you do, don't rush on and buy masks. And their concern was shortages in hospitals. Okay, fair enough. Later, it's like, no, everybody's got to wear a mask everywhere. It really works really well. And then now, I think the evidence is mixed. Masks seem to help. In my personal view, masks seem to help. They're no huge burden. You might as well wear a mask in any environment where you're with a giant crowd of people and so forth. But it's very politicized, that one. And it's very politicized, where certainly in the US, much more so, I mean, I live in the UK, I live in London, I've never seen kind of on the streets sort of the kind of thing that there's a lot of reports of people actively angry because someone else is wearing a mask, that sort of thing in public. And so because it became very politicized,

then clearly if Wikipedia, no, so anyway, if you go to Wikipedia and you research this topic, I think you'll find more or less what I've just said, like, actually, after it's all, you know, to this point in history, it's mixed evidence, like mass seem to help, but maybe not as much as some of the authorities said, and here we are. And that's kind of an example where I think, okay, we've done a good job, but I suspect there are people on both sides of that very emotional debate who think this is ridiculous. Hopefully, we've got quality sources. So then hopefully, those people who read this can say, oh, actually, you know, it is complicated.

If you can get to the point of saying, okay, this is I have my view, but I understand other views, and I do think it's a complicated question.

Great, now we're a little bit more mature as a society.

Well, that one is an interesting one because I feel like I hope that that article also contains the meta conversation about the politicization of that topic. To me, it's almost more interesting than whether masks work or not, at least at this point, is like why it became, masks became a symbol of the oppression of a centralized government if you wear them. You're a sheep that follows the mass control, the mass hysteria of an authoritarian regime. And if you don't wear a mask, then you're a science denier, anti-vaxxer, an alt-right, probably a Nazi.

Exactly. And that whole politicization of society is just so damaging.

And I don't know in the broader world, how do we start to fix that? That's a really hard question. At every moment, because you mentioned mainstream and fringe, there seems to be attention here, and I wonder what your philosophy is on it, because there's mainstream ideas and there's fringe ideas. You look at lab leak theory for this virus, there could be other things we can discuss where there's a mainstream narrative. Well, if you just look at the percent of the population or the population with platforms, what they say, and then what is a small percentage in opposition to that? And what is Wikipedia's responsibility to accurately represent both the mainstream and the fringe, do you think? Well, I mean, I think we have to try to do our best to recognize both, but also to appropriately contextualize. And so this can be quite hard, particularly when emotions are high. That's just the fact about human beings. I'll give a simpler example, because there's not a lot of emotion around it. Our entry on the moon doesn't say, some say the moon's made of rocks, some say cheese. Who knows? That kind of false neutrality is not what we want to get to. That doesn't make any sense. But that one's easy. We all understand, I think there is a Wikipedia entry called something like the moon is made of cheese, where it talks about this is a common joke or thing that children say, or that people tell to children or whatever. It's just a thing. Everybody's heard moons made of cheese. But nobody thinks, wow, Wikipedia is so one-sided, it doesn't even acknowledge the cheese theory. I'd say the same thing about Flat Earth, again.

That's exactly what I'm looking up right now.

Very little controversy. We will have an entry about Flat Earth theorizing Flat Earth people. My personal view is most of the people who claim to be Flat Earthers are just having a laugh, trolling, and more power to them, have some fun. But let's not be ridiculous.

Of course, for most of human history, people believe that the Earth is flat. So the article I'm looking at is actually kind of focusing on this history. Flat Earth is an archaic and scientifically disproven conception of the Earth's shape as a plane or disk. Many ancient cultures subscribe to Flat Earth, cosmography, with pretty cool pictures of what Flat Earth would look like. Is that dragon or angels on the edge? There's a lot of controversy about that.

What is on the edge? Is it the wall? Is it angels, dragons? Is there a dome?
And how can you fly from South Africa to Perth? Because on a Flat Earth view, that's really too far for any plane to make it. It's all spread out.
What I want to know is what's on the other side, Jimmy? What's on the other side? That's what all of us want to know. I presume there's probably a small section about the conspiracy theory of Flat Earth, because I think there's a sizable percent of the population who at least will say they believe in a Flat Earth. I think it is a movement that just says that the mainstream narrative, to have distrust and skepticism about the mainstream narrative, which to a very small degree is probably a very productive thing to do. It's part of the scientific process, but you can get a little silly and ridiculous with it. Yeah. I mean, yeah, it's exactly right.
And so I think I find on many, many cases, and of course, I, like anybody else, might quibble about this or that in any Wikipedia article. But in general, I think there is a pretty good sort of willingness and indeed eagerness to say, oh, let's fairly represent all of the meaningfully important sides. So there's still a lot to unpack in that, right? So meaningfully important. So people who are raising questions about the efficacy of masks, okay, that's actually a reasonable thing to have a discussion about. And hopefully we should treat that as a fair conversation to have and actually address which authorities have said what and so on and so forth. And then there are other cases where it's not meaningful opposition, like you just wouldn't say. I mean, I doubt if the main article, Moon, it may mention, geez, probably not even because it's not credible and it's not even meant to be serious by anyone. Or the article on the earth certainly won't have a paragraph that says, well, most scientists think it's round, but certain people think flat, like that's just a silly thing to put in that article. You would want to sort of address, you know, that's an interesting cultural phenomenon. You want to put it somewhere. So this, you know, this goes into all kinds of things about politics. You want to be really careful, really thoughtful about not getting caught up in the anger of our times and really recognize. You know what I always thought? I remember being really kind of proud of the US at the time when it was McCain was running against Obama, because I thought, oh, I've got plenty of disagreements with both of them. But they both seem like thoughtful and interesting people who I would have different disagreements with. But I always felt like, yeah, like that's good. Now we can have a debate. Now we can have an interesting debate. And it isn't just sort of people slamming each other personal attacks and so forth. And you're saying Wikipedia also represented that? I hope so. Yeah. And I think so in the main. Obviously, you can always find a debate that went horribly wrong, because there's humans involved. But speaking of those humans, I would venture to guess, I don't know the data, maybe you can let me know. But the personal political leaning of the group of people who edit Wikipedia probably leans left. I would guess. So to me, the question there is, I mean, the same is true for Silicon Valley. The task for Silicon Valley is to create platforms that are not politically biased, even though there is a bias for the engineers who create it. And I think I believe it's possible to do that. There's kind of conspiracy theories that it somehow is impossible. And there's this whole conspiracy where the left is controlling and so on. I think engineers for the most part went to create platforms that are open and unbiased that create all kinds of perspective, because that's super exciting to have all kinds of perspectives battle it out. But still, is there a degree to which the personal political bias

of the editors might seep in, in silly ways and in big ways? Silly ways could be, I think, hopefully I'm correct in saying this, but the right will call it the Democrat Party, and the left will call it the Democratic Party. It always hits my ear weird, like, are we children here? We're literally taking words and just jabbing at each other. I could capitalize a thing in a certain way, or I can just take a word and mess with them. That's a small way of how you use words. But you can also have a bigger way about beliefs, about various perspectives on political events, on Hunter Biden's laptop, on how big of a story that is or not, how big the censorship of that story is or not. And then there's these camps that take very strong points and they construct big narratives around that. I mean, it's a very sizable percent of the population believes the two narratives that compete with each other. It's really interesting, and it feels, it's hard to judge the sweep of history within your own lifetime, but it feels like it's gotten much worse, that this idea of two parallel universes, where people can agree on certain basic facts, feels worse than it used to be. And I'm not sure if that's true or if it just feels that way, but I also, I'm not sure what the causes are. I think I would lay a lot of the blame in recent years on social media algorithms, which reward clickbait headlines, which reward tweets that go viral, and they go viral because they're cute and clever. I mean, my most successful tweet ever by a fairly wide margin, some reporter tweeted at Elon Musk, because he was complaining about Wikipedia or something, you should buy Wikipedia, and I just wrote not for sale. And, you know, 90 zillion retweets and people liked it, and it was all very good. But I'm like, you know what, it's cute line, right? And it's a good, like, mic drop and all that. And I was pleased with myself. Like, it's not really discourse, right? It's not really sort of what I like to do. But it's what social media really rewards, which is kind of a, lets you and him have a fight, right? And that's more interesting. I mean, it's funny because at the time I was, I was texting with Elon, who's very pleasant to me and all of that. He might have been a little bit shitty, the reporter might have been a little bit shitty, but you fed into the shitty with snarky funny response, not for sale. And like, where do you, like what, so that's a funny little exchange. And you could probably after that laugh it off and fun. Well, like that kind of mechanism that rewards the snark, you can go into viciousness. Yeah, yeah. Well, and we certainly see it online, you know, like a series of tweets, you know, sort of a tweet thread of 15 tweets that assesses the quality of the evidence for masks, pros and cons and sort of wear this. That's not going to go viral, you know, but, you know, a smackdown for a famous politician who is famously in favor of masks who also went to a dinner and didn't wear a mask. That's going to go viral. And, you know, that, that's partly human nature. You know, people love to call out hypocrisy and all of that. But it's partly what these systems elevate automatically. I talk about this with respect to Facebook, for example. So I think Facebook has done a pretty good job, although it's taken longer than it should in some cases. But, you know, if you have a very large following and you're really spouting hatred or misinformation, disinformation, they've kicked people off, they've done, you know, some reasonable things there. But actually, the deeper issue is of this, this, the anger we're talking about, of the contentiousness of everything, I make of a family example with two great stereotypes. So one, the, the, the crackpot racist uncle and one, the sweet grandma. And I always want to point out about all of my uncles and my family were wonderful people. So I didn't have a crackpot

racist, but everybody knows the stereotype. Well, so grandma, she just posts like sweet comments on the kids' pictures and congratulates people on their wedding anniversary and crackpot uncles posting his nonsense. And normally, it's sort of at Christmas dinner, everybody rolls their eyes, oh yeah, Uncle Frank's here, he's probably going to say some racist comment and we're going to tell him to shut up or, you know, maybe let's not invite him this year, normal human drama. He's got his three mates down at the pub who listen to him and all of that. But now, grandma's got, you know, 54 followers on Facebook, which is the intimate family and racist uncle has 714. He's not a massive influencer or whatever, but how did that happen? It's because the algorithm notices, oh, when, when she posts nothing happens, he posts and then everybody jumps in to go, god, shut up Uncle Frank, you know, like that's outrageous. And it's like, oh, there's engagement, there's page views, there's ads, right? And, and those algorithms, I think they're working to improve that, but it's really hard for them. It's hard to improve that if that actually is working. If the people who are saying things that get engagement, if it's not too awful, but it's just, you know, like, maybe it's not a racist uncle, but maybe it's an uncle who posts a lot about what an idiot Biden is, right, which isn't necessarily an offensive or blockable or banable thing, and it shouldn't be. But if that's the discourse that gets elevated, because it gets a rise out of people, then suddenly in a society, it's like, oh, this is, we get more of what we reward. So I think that's a piece of what's gone on. Well, if we could just take that tangent, I'm having a conversation with Mark Zuckerberg second time. Is there something you can comment on how to decrease toxicity on that particular platform of Facebook? You also have worked on creating a social network that is less toxic yourself. So can we just talk about the different ideas that these already big social networks can do and what you have been trying to do? So a piece of it is, it's hard. So I don't, the problem with making a recommendation to Facebook is that I actually believe their business model makes it really hard for them. And I'm not anti-capitalism. I'm not, great, somebody's got business, they're making money. That's not where I come from. But certain business models mean you are going to prioritize things that maybe aren't that long-term helpful. And so that's a big piece of it. So certainly for Facebook, you could say, with vast resources, start to prioritize content that's higher quality, that's healing, that's kind. Try not to prioritize content that seems to be just getting a rise out of people. Now, those are vague human descriptions, right? But I do believe good machine learning algorithms, you can optimize in slightly different ways. But to do that, you may have to say, actually, we're not necessarily going to increase pay views to the maximum extent right now. And I've said this to people at Facebook. It's like, if your actions are convincing people that you're breaking Western civilization, that's really bad for business in the long run. Certainly these days, I'll say Twitter is the thing that's on people's minds as being more upsetting at the moment. But I think it's true. And so one of the things that's really interesting about Facebook, compared to a lot of companies, is that Mark has a pretty unprecedented amount of power. His ability to name members of the board, his control of the company is pretty hard to break. Even if financial results aren't as good as they could be, because he's taken a step back from the perfect optimization to say, actually, for the long-term health in the next 50 years of this organization, we need to

rein in some of the things that are working for us and making money because they're actually giving us a bad reputation. So one of the recommendations I would say is, and this is not to do with the algorithms and all that, but how about just a moratorium on all political advertising? I don't think it's their most profitable segment, but it's given rise to a lot of deep hard questions about dark money, about ads that are run by questionable people that push false narratives, or the classic kind of thing is you run, I saw a study about Brexit in the UK where people were talking about there were ads run to animal rights activists saying, finally, when we're out from under Europe, the UK can pass proper animal rights legislation. We're not constrained by the European process. Similarly, for people who are advocates of fox hunting to say, finally, when we're out of Europe, we can re-implement. So you're telling people what they want to hear, and in some cases, it's really hard for journalists to see that. So it used to be that for political advertising, you really needed to find some kind of mainstream narrative, and this is still true to an extent, mainstream narrative that 60% of people can say, oh, I can buy into that, which meant it pushed you to the center, it pushed you to sort of try and find some nuanced balance. But if your main method of recruiting people is a tiny little one-on-one conversation with them because you're able to target using targeted advertising, suddenly you don't need consistent, you just need a really good targeting operation, really good Cambridge analytic style machine learning algorithm data to convince people. And that just feels really problematic. So I mean, until they can think about how to solve that problem, I would just say, you know what, it's going to cost a sex amount, but it's going to be worth it to kind of say, you know what, we actually think our political advertising policy hasn't really helped contribute to discourse and dialogue and finding reasoned, you know, middle ground and compromise solution. So let's just not do that for a while until we figure that out. So that's maybe a piece of advice.

And coupled with, as you were saying, recommender systems for the news feed and in other contexts that don't always optimize engagement, but optimize the long-term mental well-being and balance and growth of a human being.

Yeah.

But it's a very difficult problem.

It's a difficult problem. Yeah. And, you know, so in, with WT Social, Wichita Green Social, we're launching in a few months time a completely new system, new domain, new, new lots of things. But the idea is to say, let's, let's focus on trust.

People can rate each other as trustworthy, rate content as trustworthy. You have to start from somewhere. So we'll start with a core base of our tiny community who I think are sensible, thoughtful people, want to recruit more. But to say, you know what, actually, let's have that as a pretty strong element to say, let's not optimize based on what gets the most page views in this session. Let's optimize on what sort of the feedback from people is. This is meaningfully enhancing my life. And so part of that is, and it's probably not a good business model, but part of that is say, okay, we're not going to pursue an advertising business model, but a, you know, membership model where, you know, you can, you don't have to be a member, but you can pay to be a

member. You maybe get some benefit from that. But in general, to say, actually, the problem with and actually the division I would say is, and the analogy I would give is broadcast television funded by advertising gives you a different result than paying for

HBO, paying for Netflix, paying for whatever. And the reason is, you know, if you think about it, what is your incentive as a TV producer, you're going to make a comedy for ABC network in the US, you basically say, I want something that almost everybody will like and listen to. So it tends to be a little blander, you know, family friendly, whatever. Whereas if you say, oh, actually, I'm going to use the HBO example and an old example. You say, you know what, Sopranos isn't for everybody. Sex in the city isn't for everybody. But between the two shows, we've got something for everybody that they're willing to pay for. So you can get edgier, higher quality in my view content rather than saying it's got to not offend anybody in the world. It's got to be for everybody, which is really hard. So same thing, you know, here in a social network, if your business model is advertising, it's going to drive you in one direction. If your business model is membership, I think it drives you in a different direction. I actually, and I've said this to Elon about Twitter blue, which I think wasn't rolled out well and so forth. But it's like, the piece of that that I like is to say, look, actually, if there's a model where your revenue is coming from people who are willing to pay for the service, even if it's only part of your revenue, if it's a substantial part, that does change your broader incentives to say, actually, are people going to be willing to pay for something that's actually just toxicity in their lives? Now, I'm not sure it's been rolled out well. I'm not sure how it's going. And maybe I'm wrong about that as a plausible business model. But I do think it's interesting to think about just in broad terms, business model drives outcomes in sometimes surprising ways unless you really pause to think about it. So if we can just link on Twitter and Elon before I I would love to talk to you about the underlying business model Wikipedia, which is this brilliant bold move at the very beginning. But since you mentioned Twitter, what do you think works? What do you think is broken about Twitter? It's a long conversation. But to start with, one of the things that I always say is, it's a really hard problem. So I can see that right up front. I said this about the old ownership of Twitter and the new ownership of Twitter. Because unlike Wikipedia, and this is true actually for all social media, there's a box and the box basically says, what do you think? What's on your mind? You can write whatever the hell you want, right? That's just true, by the way, even for YouTube. I mean, the box is to upload a video, but again, it's just like an open-ended invitation to express yourself. And what makes that hard is some people have really toxic, really bad. Some people are very aggressive. They're actually stalking. They're actually abusive. And suddenly you deal with a lot of problems. Whereas at Wikipedia, there is no box that says, what's on your mind? There's a box that says, this is an entry about the moon. Please be neutral. Please set your facts. Then there's a talk page, which is not coming rant about Donald Trump. If you go on the talk page of the Donald Trump entry and you just start ranting about Donald Trump, people would say, what are you doing? Stop doing that. We're not here to discuss. There's a whole world of the internet out there for you to go and rant about Donald Trump. It's just not fun to do on Wikipedia. It's somehow fun on Twitter. Well, also, on Wikipedia, people are going to say, stop. And actually, are you here to tell us how can we improve the article? Or are you just here to rant about Trump? Because that's not actually interesting. So because the goal is different. So that's just admitting and saying up front, this is a hard problem. Certainly, I'm writing a book on trust. So the idea is, in the last 20 years, we've lost trust in all kinds of institutions and politics. The Edelman Trust Barometer Survey has been done for a long time. And trust in politicians,

trust in journalism, it's come declined substantially. And I think in many cases, deservedly. So how do we restore trust? And how do we think about that? And does that also include trust in the idea of truth? Trust in the idea of truth. Even the concept of facts and truth is really, really important. And the idea of uncomfortable truth is really important. So when we look at Twitter, and we say, we can see, okay, this is really hard. So here's my story about Twitter. It's a two-part story. And it's all pre-Elon Musk ownership. So many years back, somebody accused me of horrible crimes on Twitter. And like anybody would, I was like, I'm in the public eye. People say bad things. I don't really, I brush it off, whatever. But I'm like, this is actually really bad. Accusing me of pedophilia. That's just not okay. So I thought, I'm going to report this. So I click report, and I report the tweet. And there's five others. And I go through the process. And then I get an email that says, you know, whatever, a couple hours later saying, thank you for your report, we're looking into this. Okay, good. Then several hours further, I get an email back saying, sorry, we don't see anything here to violate our terms of use. And I'm like, okay, so I email Jack. And I say, Jack, come on, like, this is ridiculous. And he emails back roughly saying, um, yeah, sorry, Jimmy, don't worry, we'll sort this out. And I just thought to myself, you know what? That's not the point, right? I'm Jimmy Wales. I know Jack Dorsey. I can email Jack Dorsey. He'll listen to me because he's got an email from me and sorts it out for me. What about the teenager who's being bullied, uh, and is getting abuse, right? And getting accusations that aren't true. Are they getting the same kind of like really poor result in that case? So fast forward a few years. Same thing happens. Um, the exact quote goes, um, please help me. I'm only 10 years old and Jimmy Wales raped me last week. So I come off fuck off like that's ridiculous. So I report and I'm like, this time I'm reporting, but I'm thinking, well, we'll see what happens. This one gets even worse because then I get a same result email back saying, sorry, we don't see any problems. So I raise it with other members of the board who I know and Jack and like, this is really ridiculous. Like this is outrageous. And some of the board members, friends of mine, sympathetic and so good for them, but actually got an email back then from the general counsel head of trust and safety saying, actually there's nothing in this tweet that violates our terms of service. We don't regard, uh, and then gave reference to the Me Too movement. If we didn't allow accusations, the Me Too movement, it's an important thing. And I was like, you know what? Actually, if someone says I'm 10 years old and someone raped me last week, I think the advice should be, here's the phone number of the police. Like you need to get the police involved. Twitter is not the place for that accusation. So even back then, by the way, they did delete those tweets, but I mean, the rationale that gave spammy behavior, right? So completely separate from abusing me. It was just like, Oh, well, they were retweeting too often. Okay, whatever. So like that's just broken. Like that's a system that it's not working for people in the public eye. I'm sure it's not working for private people who get abuse. Really horrible abuse can happen. So how is that today? Well, it hasn't happened to me since Elon took over, but I don't see why it couldn't. And I suspect now if I send a report and email someone, there's no one there to email me back because he's gotten rid of a lot of the trust and safety staff. So I suspect that problem is still really hard. Just content moderation at huge scales. At huge scales is really something. And I don't know the full answer to this. I mean, a piece of it could be to say actually making specific allegations of crimes.

This isn't the place to do that. We've got a huge database. If you've got an accusation of crime, here's who you should call, the police, the FBI, whatever it is. It's not to be done in public. And then you do face really complicated questions about Me Too movement and people coming forward in public and all of that. But it's again, it's like, probably you should talk to a journalist, right? Probably there are better avenues than just tweeting from an account that was created 10 days ago, obviously set up to abuse someone. So I think they could do a lot better. But I also admit it's a hard problem. And there's also ways to indirectly or more humorously or more mocking way to make the same kinds of accusations. In fact, the accusations you mentioned, if I were to guess, don't go that viral because they're not funny enough or cutting enough. But if you make it witty and cutting and meme it somehow, sometimes actually indirectly make an accusation versus directly make an accusation that can go viral and they can destroy reputations and you get to watch yourself. Just all kinds of narratives take hold. Yeah. No, I mean, I remember another case that didn't bother me because it wasn't of that nature. But somebody was saying, I'm sure you're making millions off of Wikipedia. And I'm like, no, actually, I don't even work there. I have no salary. And they're like, you're lying. I'm going to check your 990 form, which is the US form for tax reporting for charities. Yeah, I'm knocking. Here's the link. Go read it and you'll see. I'm listed as a board member and my salary is listed as zero. So you know, things like that. It's like, okay, that one, that feels like you're wrong, but I can take that and we can have that debate quite quickly. And again, it didn't go viral because it was kind of silly. And if anything would have gone viral, it was me responding. But that's one where it's like, actually, I'm happy to respond because a lot of people don't know that I don't work there and that I don't make millions. And I'm not a billionaire. Well, they must know that because it's in most news media about me. But the other one I didn't respond to publicly because it's like Barbara Streisand effect, you know, it's like sometimes calling attention to someone who's abusing you who basically has no followers and so on. It's just a waste. And everything you're describing now is just something that all of us have to kind of learn. Because everybody's in the public eye. I think when you have just two followers and you get bullied by one of the followers, it hurts just as much as when you have a large number. So your situation I think is echoed in the situations of millions of other, especially teenagers and kids and so on. Yeah. I mean, it's actually an example. So we don't generally use my picture in the banners anymore on Wikipedia, but we did. And then we did an experiment one year where we tried other people's pictures. So one of our developers and, you know, one guy, lovely, very sweet guy, and he doesn't look like your immediate thought of a nerdy Silicon Valley developer. He looks like a heavy metal dude because he's cool. And so suddenly here he is with long hair and tattoos. And there's his sort of say, here's what your money goes for. Here's my letter asking for support. And he got massive abuse from Wikipedia, like calling him creepy and really massive. And this was being shown to 80 million people a day. His picture, not the abuse, right? The abuse was elsewhere on the internet. And he was bothered by it. And I thought, you know what, there is a difference. I actually am in the public eye. I get huge benefits from being in the public eye. I go around and make public speeches. If any random thing I think of, I can write and get it published in the New York Times and, you know, have this interesting life. He's not a public figure. And so actually,

he wasn't mad at us. He wasn't mad. It was just like, yeah, actually suddenly being thrust in the public eye and you get suddenly lots of abuse, which normally, you know, if you're a teenager and somebody in your class is abusing you, it's not going to go viral. So it's going to be hurtful because it's local and it's your classmates or whatever. But when sort of ordinary people go viral in some abusive way, it's really, really quite tragic. I don't know. Even at a small scale, it feels viral when five people at your school and there's a rumor and there's this feeling like you're surrounded and nobody and the feeling of loneliness, I think, which you're speaking to, when you don't have a platform, when you at least feel like you don't have a platform to defend yourself and then this powerlessness that I think a lot of teenagers definitely feel and a lot of people. I think you're right. And that, I think even when just like two people make up stuff about you or lie about you or say mean things about you or bully you, that can feel like a crowd. Yeah. That's it. And it's a, I mean, whatever that is in our genetics and our biology and the way our brain works, it just can be a terrifying experience and somehow to correct that. I mean, I think because everybody feels the pain of that, everybody suffers the pain of that, I think we'll be forced to fix that as a society to figure out a way around that. I think it's really hard to fix because I don't think that problem isn't necessarily new. You know, someone in high school who writes graffiti that says Becky has a slot and spreads a rumor about what Becky did last weekend, that's always been damaging, it's always been hurtful and it's really hard. Those kinds of attacks are his oldest time itself. They precede the internet. Now, what do you think about this technology that feels Wikipedia like, which is community notes on Twitter? Do you like it with pros and cons? Do you think it's scalable? I do like it. I don't know enough about specifically how it's implemented to really have a very deep view, but I do think it's quite, it's the uses I've seen of it, I've found quite good. And in some cases, changed my mind. You know, it's like I see something and of course, you know, the sort of human tendency is to retweet something that you hope is true or that you are afraid is true or, you know, it's like that kind of quick mental action. And then, you know, I saw something that I liked and agreed with and then a community note under it that made me think, oh, actually, this is a more nuanced issue. So I like that. I think that's really important. Now, how is it specifically implemented? Is it scalable? I don't really know how they've done it. So I can't really comment on that. But in general, I do think it's, you know, when you're only mechanisms on Twitter, and you're a big Twitter user, you know, we know the platform and you've got plenty of followers and all of that. The only mechanisms are retweeting, replying, blocking. It's a pretty limited scope. And it's kind of good if there's a way to elevate a specific thoughtful response. And it kind of goes to, again, like, does the algorithm just pick the retweet? I mean, retweeting, it's not even the algorithm that makes it viral. Like, you know, if Paolo Quella, very famous author, I think he's got like, I don't know, I haven't looked lately. He used to have 8 million Twitter followers. I think I looked and he's got 16 million now or whatever. Well, if he retweets something, it's going to get seen a lot. Or Elon Musk, if he retweets something, it's going to get seen a lot. That's not the algorithm. That's just the way the platform works. So it is kind of nice if you have something else and how that something else is designed. That's obviously a complicated question. Well, there's this interesting thing that I think Twitter is doing, but I know Facebook is doing for sure, which is really interesting. So you have, what are the signals that a human can provide at scale? Like in Twitter, it's retweet.

In Facebook, I think you can share. I figure out, but there's basic interactions. You can have comment and so on. But there's also in Facebook, and YouTube has this too, is would you like to see more of this or would you like to see less of this? They post that sometimes. And the thing that the neural net that's learning from that has to figure out is the intent behind you saying, I want to see less of this. Did you see too much of this content already? You like it, but you don't want to see so much of it. You already figured it out. Great. Or does this content not make you feel good? There's so many interpretations that I'd like to see less of this. But if you get that kind of signal, that's actually can create a really powerfully curated list of content that is fed to you every day. That doesn't create an echo chamber or a silo. That actually just makes you feel good in the good way, which is like it challenges you, but it doesn't exhaust you and make you kind of this weird animal. I've been saying for a long time, if I went on Facebook one morning and they said, oh, we're testing a new option. Rather than showing you things we think you're going to like, we want to show you some things that we think you will disagree with, but which we have some signals that suggests it's of quality. I'm like, well, that sounds interesting. Yeah, that sounds really interesting. I want to see something where like, oh, I don't agree with so Larry Lessig is a good friend of mine, founder of Creative Commons, and he's moved on to doing stuff about corruption and politics and so on. And I don't always agree with Larry, but I always grapple with Larry because he's so interesting and he's so thoughtful that even when we don't agree, I'm like, actually, I want to hear him out, right? Because I'm going to learn from it. And that doesn't mean I always come around to agree with him, but I'm going to understand a perspective on it. And that's really a great feeling. Yeah, there's this interesting thing on social media where people kind of accuse others of saying, well, you don't want to hear opinions that you disagree with or ideas you disagree with. I think this is something that's thrown at me all the time. The reality is there's literally almost nothing I enjoy more. I think the Q2F because you have quite a wide range of long conversations with a very diverse bunch of people. But there is a very, there is like a very harsh drop off because what I like is high quality disagreement that really makes me think. And at a certain point, there's a threshold, it's a kind of a gray area when the quality of the disagreement, it just sounds like mocking and you're not really interested in a deep understanding of the topic or you yourself don't seem to carry deep understanding of the topic. Like there's something called intelligence-squared debates. The main one is the British version with the British action and everything always sounds better. And the Brits seem to argue more intensely, like they're invigorated, they're energized by the debate. Those people, I often disagree with basically everybody involved and it's so fun. I learned something, that's high quality. If we could do that, if there's some way for me to click a button that says filter out lower quality just today, just sometimes show it to me because I want to be able to, but today I'm just not in the mood for the mockery. Just high quality stuff. Even flat earth, I want to get high quality arguments for the flat earth. It would make me feel good because I would see, oh, that's really interesting. I never really thought in my mind to challenge the mainstream narrative of general relativity, of a perception of physics. Maybe all of reality, maybe all of space-time is an illusion. That's really interesting. I never really thought about, let me consider that fully. Okay, what's the evidence? How do you test that? What are the alternatives? How would you be able to have such consistent perception of a physical reality if it's all of it is an illusion? All of us seem to share the same kind of perception

of reality. That's the kind of stuff I love, but not like the mockery of it, that it seems that social media can inspire. I talk sometimes about how people assume that the big debates in Wikipedia or the arguments are between the party of the left and the party of the right. And I say, no, it's actually the party of the kind and thoughtful and the party of the jerks is really it. Left and right, bring me somebody I disagree with politically. As long as they're thoughtful, kind, we're going to have a real discussion. I give an example of our article on abortion. So if you can bring together a kind and thoughtful Catholic priest and a kind and thoughtful Planned Parenthood activist, and they're going to work together on the article on abortion, that can be a really great thing if they're both kind and thoughtful. That's the important part. They're never going to agree on the topic, but they will understand, okay, like Wikipedia is not going to take a side, but Wikipedia is going to explain what the debate is about. And we're going to try to characterize it fairly. And it turns out like you're kind and thoughtful people, even if they're quite ideological, like a Catholic priest is generally going to be quite ideological on the subject of abortion, but they can grapple with ideas and they can discuss. And they may feel very proud of the entry at the end of the day, not because they suppress the other sides views, but because they think the case has been stated very well that other people can come to understand it. And if you're highly ideological, you assume, I think naturally, if people understood as much about this as I do, they'll probably agree with me. You may be wrong about that, but that's often the case. So that's where, you know, that's what I think we need to encourage more of in society generally is grappling with ideas in a really, you know, thoughtful way. So is it possible if the majority of volunteers editors of Wikipedia really dislike Donald Trump? Are they still able to write an article that empathizes with the perspective of, for a time at least, a very large percentage of the United States that were supporters of Donald Trump and to have a full broad representation of him as a human being, him as a political leader, as a set of policies, promised and implemented all that kind of stuff? Yeah, I think so. And I think if you read the article, it's pretty good. And I think a piece of that is within our community, if people have the self-awareness to understand, so I personally wouldn't go and edit the entry on Donald Trump, I get emotional about it, and I'm like, I'm not good at this. And if I tried to do it, I would fail. I wouldn't be a good Wikipedia. So it's better if I just step back and let people who are more dispassionate on this topic edit it. Whereas there are other topics that are incredibly emotional to some people, where I can actually do quite well. Like I'm going to be okay. Maybe we were discussing earlier the efficacy of masks. I'm like, oh, I think that's an interesting problem. And I don't know the answer, but I can help kind of catalog what's the best evidence and so on. I'm not going to get upset. I'm not going to get angry. I'm able to be a good Wikipedia. So I think that's important. And I do think, though, in a related framework, that the composition of the community is really important, not because Wikipedia is or should be a battleground, but because blind spots. Like maybe I don't even realize what's biased. If I'm particularly of a certain point of view, and I've never thought much about it. So one of the things we focus on a lot, the Wikipedia volunteers are, we don't know the exact number, but let's say 80% plus male. And there are a certain demographic, they tend to be college educated, heavier on tech geeks than not, you know, et cetera, et cetera. So there is a demographic to the community. And that's pretty

much global. I mean, somebody said to me once, why is it only white men who edit Wikipedia? And I said, we've obviously not met the Japanese Wikipedia community. It's kind of a joke because the broader principle still stands who edits Japanese Wikipedia, a bunch of geeky men, right? And women as well. So we do have women in the community. And that's very important. But we do think, okay, you know what, that does lead to some problems. It leads to some content issues, simply because people write more about what they know and what they're interested in. They'll tend to be dismissive of things as being unimportant if it's not something that they personally have an interest in. I, you know, I like the example as a parent, I would say our entries on early childhood development probably aren't as good as they should be. Because a lot of the Wikipedia volunteers, actually, we're getting older, the Wikipedians. So that demographic has changed a bit. But you know, it's like, if you've got a bunch of 25 year old tech geek dudes who don't have kids, they're just not going to be interested in early childhood development. And if they tried to write about it, they probably wouldn't do a good job because they don't know anything about it. And somebody did a look at our entries on novelists who've won a major literary prize. And they looked at the male novelist versus the female. And the male novelist had longer and higher quality entries. And why is that? Well, it's not because, because I know hundreds of Wikipedians, it's not because these are a bunch of biased sexist men who are like books by women are not important. It's like, no, actually, there is a gender kind of breakdown of readership. There are books, like hard science fiction is a classic example, hard science fiction, mostly read by men, other types of novels, more read by women. And if we don't have women in the community, then these award winning, clearly important novelists may have less coverage. And not because anybody consciously thinks, oh, we don't like what a book by Maya Angelou, like who cares, she's a poet, like that's not interesting. No, but just because people write what they know, they write what they're interested in. So we do think diversity in the community is really important. And that's one area where I do think it's really clear. But I can also say, you know what, actually, that also applies in the political sphere, like to say, actually, we do want kind and thoughtful Catholic priests, kind and thoughtful conservatives, kind and thoughtful libertarians, kind and thoughtful Marxists, to come in. But the key is the kind and thoughtful piece. So when people sometimes come to Wikipedia, outraged by some dramatic things that happened on Twitter, they come to Wikipedia with a chip on their shoulder ready to do battle. And it just doesn't work out very well. And there's tribes in general, where I think there's a responsibility on the larger group to be even kinder and more welcoming to the smaller group. Yeah, we think that's really important. And so, you know, oftentimes, people come in and, you know, there's a lot, when I talk about community health, one of the aspects of that that we do think about a lot that I think about a lot is not about politics. It's just like, how are we treating newcomers to the community? And so, I can tell you what our ideals are, what our philosophy is. But do we live up to that? So, you know, the ideal is you come to Wikipedia, you know, we have rules, like one of our fundamental rules is ignore all rules, which is partly written that way, because it piques people's attention, like, what the hell kind of rule is that, you know? But basically says, look, don't get nervous and depressed about a bunch of, you know, what's the formatting of your footnote, right? So, you shouldn't come to Wikipedia,

add a link and then get banned or yelled at because it's not the right format.

Instead, somebody should go, oh, hey, yeah, thanks for helping. But, you know, here's the link to how to format, you know, if you want to keep going, you might want to learn how to format a footnote and to be friendly and to be open and to say, oh, right, oh, you're new and you clearly don't know everything about Wikipedia. And, you know, sometimes in any community, that can be quite hard. So, people come in and they've got a great big idea and they're going to propose this to the Wikipedia community and they have no idea. That's basically a perennial discussion we've had 7,000 times before. And so, then ideally, you would say to the person, oh, yeah, great, thanks. A lot of people have, and here's where we got to and here's the nuanced conversation we've had about that in the past that I think you'll find interesting. And sometimes people are just like, oh, God, another one, you know, who's come in with this idea which doesn't work and they don't understand why. You can lose patience, but you shouldn't. And that's kind of human, you know. But I think it just does require really thinking, you know, in a self-aware manner of like, oh, I was once a newbie. Actually, we do have, we have a great, I just did an interview with Emily Temple Woods, who she was Wikipedia in the year. She's just like a great, well-known Wikipedia. And I interviewed her for my book and she told me something I never knew. Apparently, it's not a secret. Like, she didn't reveal it to me, but is that when she started at Wikipedia, she was a vandal. She came in and vandalized Wikipedia. And then basically what happened was she'd done some sort of vandalized a couple of articles. And then somebody popped up

on her talk page and said, hey, like, why are you doing this? Like, we're trying to make an encyclopedia here. And this wasn't very kind. And she felt so bad. She's like, oh, right, I didn't really think of it that way. She just was coming in as she was like 13 years old, combative and, you know, like having fun and trolling a bit. And then she's like, oh, actually, oh, I see your point and became a great Wikipedia. And so that's the ideal really, is that you don't just go throw a block, fuck off. You go, hey, you know, like what, what goes, you know, which is, I think the way we tend to treat things in real life, you know, if you've got somebody who's doing something obnoxious in your friend group, you probably go, hey, like, really, I don't know if you've noticed, but I think this person is actually quite hurt that you keep making that joke about them. And then they usually go, oh, you know what, I didn't, I thought that was okay. I didn't, and then they stop or they keep it up and then everybody goes, well, you're the asshole. Well, yeah, I mean, that's just an example that gives me faith in humanity that they were all capable and wanting to be kind to each other. And in general, this, the fact that there's a small group of volunteers, they're able to contribute so much to the organization,

the collection, the discussion of all of human knowledge, it's so, it makes me so grateful to be part of this whole human project. That's one of the reasons that I love Wikipedia, it gives me faith in humanity. Yeah. No, I once was at Wikimani as our annual conference, and people come from all around the world, like really active volunteers. I was at the dinner, we were in Egypt at Wikimani in Alexandria at the sort of closing dinner or whatever. And a friend of mine came inside at the table and she's sort of been in the movement more broadly, Creative Commons, she's not really a Wikipedian, she'd come to the conference because she's into Creative Commons and all that. So we have dinner and it just turned out I sat down at the table with most of the members of the English language arbitration committee. And they're a bunch of very

sweet Geeky Wikipedians. And as we left the table, I said to her, it's really like, I still find this kind of sense of amazement. We just had dinner with some of the most powerful people in English language media, because they're the people who are like the final court of appeal in English Wikipedia. And thank goodness, they're not media moguls, they're just a bunch of geeks who are just like well liked in the community because they're kind and they're thoughtful and they really sort of think about things. I was like, that's great. Love Wikipedia.

To the degree that geeks run the best aspect of human civilization brings me joy in all aspects. And this is true in programming, like Linux programmers, people that kind of specialize in a thing and they don't really get caught up into the mess of the bickering of society.

They just kind of do their thing and they value the craftsmanship of it, the competence of it.

But if you've never heard of this or looked into it, you'll enjoy it. I read something recently that I didn't even know about, but like the fundamental time zones and they change from time to time. Sometimes a country will pass daylight savings or move it by a week, whatever.

There's a file that's on all sort of UNIX based computers and basically all computers end up using this file. It's the official time zone file, but why is it official? It's just this one guy. It's like this guy and a group, a community around him. And basically something weird happened and it broke something because he was on vacation. And I'm just like, isn't that wild,

right? That you would think, I mean, first of all, most people never even think about like, how do computers know about time zones? Well, they know because they just use this file, which tells all the time zones and which dates they change and all of that. But there's just one guy and he doesn't get paid for it. It's just he's like, you know, with all the billions of people on the planet, he sort of put his hand up and goes, yo, I'll take care of the time zones.

And there's a lot, a lot, a lot of programmers listening to this right now with PTSD about time zones. And then there, I mean, there's on top of this one guy, there's other libraries, the different programming languages that help manage the time zones for you. But still, there's just within those, there's, it's amazing just the packages, the libraries, how few people build them out of their own love for building, for creating, for community and all of that. It's, I almost like don't want to interfere with the natural habitat of the geek.

Like when you spot him in the wild, you just want to be a little careful. That thing treasured.

I met a guy many years ago. Lovely, really sweet guy. And he was running a bot on English Wikipedia

that I thought, wow, that's actually super clever. And what he had done is his bot was like spell checking. But rather than simple spell checking, what he had done is created database of words that are commonly mistaken for other words. They're spelled wrong. So I can't even give an example. And so the word is people often spell it wrong, but no spell checker catches it because it is another word. And so what he did is he wrote a bot that looks for these words and then checks the sentence around it for certain keywords. So in some context, this isn't correct, but buoy and boy. People sometimes type B-O-Y when they mean B-O-U-Y. So if he sees the word boy, B-O-Y, in an article, he would look in the context and see, is this a nautical reference?

And if it was, he didn't auto correct, he just would flag it up to himself to go, oh, check this one out. And that's not a great example, but he had thousands of examples.

I was like, that's amazing. Like I would have never thought to do that. And I'm glad that somebody did. And that's also part of the openness of the system. And also, I think being a charity,

being this idea of like, actually, this is a gift to the world that makes someone go, oh, well, I'll put my hand up. I see a little piece of things that I can make better because I'm a good programmer and I can write this script to do this thing. And I'll find it fun. Amazing.

Well, I got to ask about this big, bold decision at the very beginning to not do advertisements on the website. And just in general, the philosophy of the business model Wikipedia went behind that. Yeah. So I think most people know this, but we're a charity. So in the U.S., you know, registered as a charity. And we don't have any ads on the site. And the vast majority of the money is from donations, but the vast majority from small donors, so people giving 25 bucks or whatever. If you're listening to this, go donate.

Go donate. Donate now. I've donated so many times.

And we have, you know, millions of donors every year, but it's like a small percentage of people. I would say in the early days, a big part of it was aesthetic almost, as much as anything else.

It was just like, I just think I don't really want ads on Wikipedia. Like, I just think it would be, there's a lot of reasons why it might not be good. And even back then,

I didn't think as much as I have since about a business model can tend to drive you in a certain place. And really thinking that through in advance is really important because you might say, yeah, we're really, really keen on community control and neutrality. But if we had an advertising-based business model, probably that would begin to erode. Even if I believe in it very strongly, organizations tend to follow the money in the DNA in the long run. And so, things like, I mean, it's easy to think about some of the immediate problems. So, like, if you go to read about, I don't know, Nissan car company, and if you saw an ad for the new Nissan at the top of the page, you might be like, did they pay for this? Or like, do the advertisers have influence over the content? Because you kind of wonder about that for all kinds of media.

And that undermines trust.

Undermines trust, right? But also, things like, you know, we don't have clickbait headlines on Wikipedia. You've never seen, you know, Wikipedia entries with all this kind of listicles, you know, sort of the 10 funniest cat pictures, number seven, make you cry, you know, none of that kind of stuff. Because there's no incentive, no reason to do that.

Also, you know, there's no reason to have an algorithm to say, actually, we're going to use our algorithm to drive you to stay on the website longer. We're going to use the algorithm to drive you to, you know, it's like, oh, you're reading about Queen Victoria. There's nothing to sell you when you're reading about Queen Victoria. Let's move you on to Las Vegas, because actually, the ad revenue around hotels in Las Vegas is quite good. So, we don't have that sort of, there's no incentive for the organization to go, oh, let's move people around to things that have better ad revenue. Instead, it's just like, oh, well, what's most interesting to the community and just to make those links. So, that decision just seemed obvious to me. But as I say, it was less of a business decision and more of an aesthetic. It's like, oh, this is how I like Wikipedia. It doesn't have ads. I don't really want, you know, in these early days, like a lot of the ads, that was well before the era of really quality ad targeting and all that. So, you get a lot of banners, banners, punch the monkey ads and all that kind of nonsense. And so, you know, but there was no guarantee. There was no, it was not really clear. How could we fund this? You know, like it was pretty cheap as it still is quite cheap compared to, you know, most, you know, we don't have 100,000 employees and all of that. But would we be able to raise

money through donations? And so, I remember the first time that we did, like really did a donation campaign was on a Christmas day in 2003, I think it was. There was, we had three servers, database servers and two front-end servers, and they were all the same size or whatever. And two of them crashed. They broke. Like, I don't even know, remember now, like the hard drive. It was like, it's Christmas day. So, I scrambled on Christmas day to sort of go onto the database server, which fortunately survived and have it become a front-end server as well. And the site was really slow and it wasn't working very well. And I was like, okay, it's time. We need to do a fundraiser. And so, I was hoping to raise \$20,000 in a month's time, but we raised nearly \$30,000 within two, three weeks time. So, that was the first proof point of like, oh, like, we put a banner up and people will donate. Like, we just explain we need the money and people are like, already, we were very small back then. And people are like, oh, yeah. Like, I love this. I want to contribute. Then over the years, we've become more sophisticated about the fundraising campaigns. And we've tested a lot of different messaging and so forth. What we used to think, you know, I remember one year we really went, went heavy with, we have great ambitions to, you know, the idea of Wikipedia is a free encyclopedia for every single person on the planet. So, what about the languages of Sub-Saharan Africa? So, I thought, okay, we're trying to raise money. We need to talk about that because it's really important and near and dear to my heart. And just instinctively knowing nothing about charity fundraising, you see it all around. It's like, oh, charities always mention like the poor people they're helping. So, let's talk about that. Didn't really work as well. The pitch that, like, this is very vague and very sort of broad, but the pitch that works better than any other in general is a fairness pitch of like, you use it all the time, you should probably chip in. And most people are like, yeah, you know what? My life would suck without Wikipedia. I use it constantly. And whatever, I should chip in. Like, it just seems like the right thing to do. And that, and there's many variants on that, obviously. And that's really, it works. And like, people are like, oh, yeah, like Wikipedia. I love Wikipedia. And, you know, I shouldn't. And so sometimes people say, you know, why are you always begging for money on the website? And, you know, it's not that often. It's not that much, but it does happen. They're like, why don't you just get Google and Facebook and Microsoft? Why don't they pay for it? And I'm like, I don't think that's really the right answer. Influence starts to creep in. Influence starts to creep in. And questions start to creep in. Like, the best funding for Wikipedia is the small donors. We also have major donors, right? We have high net worth people who donate. But we always are very careful about that sort of thing to say, wow, that's really great and really important. But we can't let that become influence. Because that would just be really quite, yeah, not good for Wikipedia. I would love to know how many times I've visited Wikipedia, how much time I've spent on it. Because I have a general sense that it's the most useful site I've ever used competing maybe with Google search, which ultimately lands on Wikipedia. But if I were just reminded of like, hey, remember all those times your life wasn't made better because of the site? I think I would be much more like, yeah, why did I waste money on site XYZ when I could be like, I should be giving a lot here. Well, you know, the Guardian newspaper has a similar model, which is they have ads, but they also there's no pay wall, but they just encourage people to donate. And they do that. Like, I've sometimes seen a banner saying, oh, this is your 134th article you've read this year.

Would you like to donate? And I think that's, I think it's effective. I mean, they're testing. But also I wonder just for some people, if they just don't feel like guilty and then think, well, I shouldn't bother them so much. I don't know. It's a good question. I don't know the answer. I guess that's the thing I could also turn on because that'll make me I feel like legitimately there's some sites and speaks to our social media discussion. Wikipedia unquestionably makes me feel better about myself if I spend time on it. There's some websites where I'm like, if I spend time on Twitter, sometimes I'm like, I regret. I think Elon talks about this, minimize the number of regretted minutes. My number of regretted minutes on Wikipedia is like zero. I don't remember a time. I've just discovered this, I started following on Instagram a page, Depth of Wikipedia. Yeah. There's like crazy Wikipedia page. There's no Wikipedia page that I gave her media contributor of the year award this year because she's so great. Depth of Wikipedia is so fun.

So yeah, so that's the kind of interesting point that I don't even know if there's a competitor. There may be the sort of programming stack overflow type of websites, but everything else, there's always a trade-off. It's probably because of the ad-driven model, because there's an incentive to pull you into clickbait and Wikipedia has no clickbait.

It's all about the quality of the knowledge and the wisdom and so on.

No, that's right. And I also like Stack Overflow, although I wonder, I wonder what you think of this. So I only program for fun as a hobby and I don't have enough time to do it, but I do, and I'm not very good at it. So therefore, I end up on Stack Overflow quite a lot, trying to figure out what's gone wrong. And I have really transitioned to using ChatGBT, much more for that, because I can often find the answer clearly explained, and it just works better than sifting through threads. And I kind of feel bad about that, because I do love Stack Overflow and their community. I mean, I'm assuming, I haven't read anything in the news about it. I'm assuming they are keenly aware of this, and they're thinking about how can we use this chunk of knowledge that we've got here and provide a new type of interface where you can query it with a question and actually get an answer that's based on the answers that we've had. I don't know.

And I think Stack Overflow currently has policies against using GPT. There's a contentious kind of tension, but they're trying to figure that out.

And so we are similar in that regard. Obviously, all the things we've talked about, like ChatGBT makes stuff up and it makes up references. So our community has already put into place some policies about it. But roughly speaking, there's always more nuance, but roughly speaking, it's sort of like you, the human are responsible for what you put into Wikipedia. So if you use ChatGBT, you better check it. There's a lot of great use cases of, you know, like, oh, well, I'm not a native speaker of German, but I kind of am pretty good. I'm not talking about myself with hypothetical meat. It's pretty good. And I kind of just want to run my edit through ChatGBT in German to go make sure my grammar is okay. That's actually cool. Does it make you sad that people might use, increasingly use ChatGBT for something where they would previously use Wikipedia? So basically, use it to answer basic questions about the Eiffel Tower and where the answer really comes at the source of it from Wikipedia, but they're using this as an interface. Yeah, no, no, that's completely fine. I mean, part of it is our ethos has always been, here's our gift to the world, make something. So if the knowledge is more accessible to people,

even if they're not coming through us, that's fine. Now, obviously, we do have certain business model concerns, right? Like if, and we've talked, where we've had more conversation about this, this whole GPT thing is new, things like if you ask Alexa, you know, what is the Eiffel Tower, and she reads you the first two sentences from Wikipedia and doesn't say it's from Wikipedia, and they've recently started citing Wikipedia, then we worry like, oh, if people don't know they're getting the knowledge from us, are they going to donate money or are they just thinking, oh, what's Wikipedia for? I can just ask Alexa. It's like, well, Alexa only knows anything because she read Wikipedia. So we do think about that, but it doesn't bother me in the sense

of like, oh, I want people to always come to Wikipedia first. But we're also, you know, had a great demo, like literally just hacked together over a weekend by our head of machine learning, where he did this little thing to say, you could ask any question, and he was just knocking it together. So he used the OpenAI's API just to make a demo, asking a question, why did ducks fly south for winter? Which is the kind of thing you think, oh, I might just Google for that, I might start looking in Wikipedia, I don't know. And so what he does, he asks, what are some Wikipedia entries that might answer this? Then he grabbed those Wikipedia entries, said, here's some Wikipedia entries, answer this question based only on the information in this. And he had pretty good results. And it kind of prevented the making stuff up. It's just a, he hacked together a weekend. But what it made me think about was, oh, okay, so now we've got this

huge body of knowledge that in many cases, you're like, oh, I'm really, I want to know about Queen Victoria, I'm just going to go read the Wikipedia entry, and it's going to take me through her life and so forth. But other times you've got a specific question, and maybe we could have a better search experience where you can come to Wikipedia, ask your specific question, get your specific answer that's from Wikipedia, including links to the articles you might want to read next. And that's just a step forward, like that's just using a new type of technology to make the extraction of information from this body of text into my brain faster and easier. So I think that's kind of cool. I would love to see a chat GPT grounding into websites like Wikipedia. And the other comparable website to me will be like Wolfram Alpha for more mathematical knowledge, that kind of stuff. So grounding, like taking you to a page that is really crafted, as opposed to the moment you started actually taking you to like journalist websites, like news websites, starts getting a little iffy. You're now in a land that has a wrong incentive.

And you need somebody to have filtered through that and sort of tried to knock off the rough edges. No, it's very, I think that's exactly right. And I think that kind of grounding is, I think they're working really hard on it. I think that's really important. And that actually, so if you ask me to step back and be like very business-like about our business model, and where's it going to go for us? And are we going to lose half our donations because everybody's just going to stop coming to Wikipedia and go to chat GPT? I think grounding will help a lot because frankly, most questions people have, if they provide proper links, we're going to be at the top of that just like we are in Google. So we're still going to get tons of recognition and tons of traffic just from, even if it's just the moral properness of saying, here's my source. So I think we're going to be all right in that. Yeah. And the close partnership of if the model is fine-tuned is constantly retrained that Wikipedia is one of the primary places where if you want to change what the model knows, one of the things you should do is contribute to

Wikipedia or clarifying Wikipedia or elaborate, expand all that kind of stuff.

You mentioned all of us have controversies, I have to ask. Do you find the controversy of whether you are the sole founder or the co-founder of Wikipedia? Ironic, absurd, interesting, important. What are your comments? I would say unimportant, not that interesting. I mean, one of the things that people are sometimes surprised to hear me say is, I actually think Larry Sanger doesn't get enough credit for his early work in Wikipedia, even though I think co-founder is not the right title for that. So he had a lot of impact and a lot of great work, and I disagree with him about a lot of things since and all that, and that's fine. So yeah, no, to me, that's like, it's one of these things that the media love a falling out story. So they want to make a big deal out of it. And I'm just like, yeah, no. So there's a lot of interesting engineering contributions in the early days, like you were saying, there's debates about how to structure it, what the heck is this thing that we're doing, and there's important people that contributed to that. Yeah, definitely. So he also, you said you've had some disagreements. Larry Sanger said that nobody should trust Wikipedia, and that Wikipedia seems to assume that there's only one legitimate defensible version of the truth on any controversial question. That's not how Wikipedia used to be. I presume you disagree with that. Yeah, I mean, just straight up my disagree, like go and read any Wikipedia entry on a controversial topic. And what you'll see is a really diligent effort to explain all the relevant sides. So yeah, just disagree.

So on controversial questions, do you think perspectives are generally represented?

It has to do with the kind of the tension between the mainstream and the non mainstream that we're talking about. Yeah, no, I mean, for sure. Like to take this area of discussion seriously is to say, yeah, you know what, actually, that is a big part of what Wikipedians spend their time grappling with is to say, you know, how do we figure out whether a less popular view is pseudoscience? Is it just a less popular view that's gaining acceptance in the mainstream? Is it fringe versus crackpot, etc., etc. And that debate is what you've got to do. There's no choice about having that debate of grappling with something and I think we do. And I think that's really important. And I think if anybody said to the Wikipedia community, gee, you should stop, you know, sort of covering minority viewpoints on this issue. I think they would say, I don't even understand why you would say that like we have to sort of grapple with minority viewpoints in science and politics and so on. But it's and like this is one of the reasons why, you know, there is no magic, simple answer to all these things. It's really contextual. It's case by case. It's like, you know, you've got to really say, okay, what is the context here? How do you do it? And you've always got to be open to correction and to change and to sort of challenge and always be sort of serious about that.

I think what happens again with social media is when there is that grappling process in Wikipedia and a decision is made to remove a paragraph or to remove a thing or to say a thing, you're going to notice the one one direction of the oscillation of the grappling and not the correction. And you're going to highlight that and say, how come this person, I don't know, I want maybe legitimacy of elections. That's the thing that comes up. Donald Trump may be I can give a really good example, which is there was this sort of dust up about the definition of recession in Wikipedia. So the accusation was an accusation was often quite ridiculous and extreme, which is under pressure from the Biden administration. Wikipedia changed the definition of recession to make Biden look good. Or we did it not under pressure, but because we're a bunch of lunatic leftists and so on. And then, you know, when I see something

like that in the press, I'm like, Oh, dear, like, what's happened here? How do we do that? Because I always just accept things for five seconds first. And then I go on a look and I'm like, you know what, that's literally completely not what happened. What happened was one editor thought the article needed restructuring. So the article is always said so that the traditional kind of loose definition of recession is two quarters of negative growth. But there's always been within economics, within important agencies and different countries around the world, a lot of nuance around that. And there's other like factors that go into it and so forth. And it's just an interesting complicated topic. And so the article has always had the definition of two quarters. The only thing that really changed was moving that from the lead from the top paragraph to further down. And then news stories appeared saying wikipedia has changed the definition of recession. And then we got a huge rush of trolls coming in. So the article was temporarily protected, I think only semi protected. And people were told go to the talk page to discuss. So it was a dust up that was, you know, when you look at it as a wikipedia, and you're like, Oh, like this is a really routine kind of editorial debate. Another example, which unfortunately our friend Elon fell for, I would say is the Twitter files. So there was an article called the Twitter files, which is about these files that were released once Elon took control of Twitter and he released internal documents. And what happened was somebody nominated it for deletion. But even the nomination said, this is actually, this is mainly about the Hunter Biden laptop controversy. Shouldn't this information be there instead? So anyone can, like it takes exactly one human being anywhere on the planet to propose something for deletion. And that triggers a process where people discuss it, which within a few hours, it was what we call snowball closed, i.e. this doesn't have a snowball chance on hell of passing. So an admin goes, yeah, wrong. And close the debate. And that was it. That was the whole thing that happened. And so nobody proposed suppressing the information. Nobody supposed it wasn't important. It was just like editorially boring internal question. And, you know, so sometimes people read stuff like that and they're like, oh, you see, look at these leftists, they're trying to suppress the truth again. It's like, well, slow down a second and come and look like literally it's not what happened. Yeah. So I think the right is more sensitive to censorship. And so they will more likely highlight, there's more virality to highlighting something that looks like censorship in any walks of life. And this moving a paragraph from one place to another of removing it and so on as part of the regular grappling Wikipedia can make a hell of a good article or a YouTube video. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It sounds really enticing and intriguing and surprising to most people because they're like, I'm reading Wikipedia. It doesn't seem like a crackpot left its website. It seems pretty kind of dull really in its own geeky way. Well, that's how that makes a good story. It's like, oh, am I being misled because there's a shadowy cabal of Jimmy Wales. You know, I generally, I read political stuff. I mentioned to you that I'm traveling to have some very difficult conversation with high profile figures both in the war in Ukraine and in Israel and Palestine. And, you know, I read the Wikipedia articles around that. And I also read books on the conflict and the history of the different regions. And I find the Wikipedia articles to be very balanced and there's many perspectives being represented. But then I ask myself, well, am I one of them leftist crackpots? They can't see the truth. I mean, it's something I ask myself all the time, forget the leftist, just crackpot.

Am I just being a sheep and accepting it? And I think that's an important question to always ask, but not too much. Yeah, a little bit, but not too much. No, I think we always have to challenge ourselves of like, what do I potentially have wrong? What you mentioned, pressure from government. You've criticized Twitter for allowing, giving in to Turkey's government censorship. There's also conspiracy theories or accusations of Wikipedia being open to pressure from government or government organizations, FBI, and all this kind of stuff. What is the philosophy about pressure from government and censorship?

So we're super hardcore on this. We've never bowed down to government pressure anywhere in the world and we never will. And we understand that we're hardcore. And actually, there is a bit of nuance about how different companies respond to this, but our response has always been just to say no. And if they threaten to block, well, knock yourself out, you're going to lose Wikipedia.

And that's been very successful for us as a strategy because governments know they can't just casually threaten to block Wikipedia or block us for two days and we're going to cave in immediately to get back into the market. And that's what a lot of companies have done. And I don't think that's good. We can go one level deeper and say, I'm actually quite sympathetic. Like, if you have staff members in a certain country and they are at physical risk,

you've got to put that into your equation. So I understand that. Like if Elon said, actually, I've got 100 staff members on the ground in such and such a country. And if we don't comply, somebody's going to get arrested and it could be quite serious. Okay, that's a tough one, right?

That's actually really hard. But yeah, no. And then the FBI, one, no, no, we like the criticism I saw. I kind of prepared for this because I saw people responding to your request for questions and I was like, somebody's like, oh, well, don't you think it was really bad that you,

I actually reached out to staff like, can you just make sure I've got my facts right?

And the answer is we received zero requests of any kind from the FBI or any of the other government agencies for any changes to content in Wikipedia. And had we received those requests at the level of the Wikimedia Foundation, we would have said, it's not our, like, we can't do anything because Wikipedia is written by the community. And so the Wikimedia Foundation

can't change the content of Wikipedia without causing, I mean, God, that would be a massive controversy you can't even imagine. What we did do, and this is what I've done, I've been to China and met with the Minister of Propaganda. We've had discussions with governments all around

the world, not because we want to do their bidding, but because we don't want to do their bidding, but we also don't want to be blocked. And we think actually having these conversations are really important. Now, there's no threat of being blocked in the US. Like, that's just never going to happen. There is the First Amendment. But in other countries around the world, it's like, okay, what are you upset about? Let's have the conversation. Like, let's understand, and let's have a dialogue about it so that you can understand where we come from and what we're doing, and why. And then, you know, sometimes it's like, gee, like, if somebody complains that something's bad in Wikipedia, whoever they are, don't care who they are, could be you, could be the government, could be the Pope, I don't care who they are. It's like, oh, okay, well, our responsibility as Wikipedia is to go, oh, hold on, let's check, right? Is that right or wrong? Is there something that we've got wrong in Wikipedia? Not because you're threatening to block us, but because we want Wikipedia to be correct. So we do have these dialogues with people.

And, you know, a big part of, like, what was going on with, you might call it pressure on social media companies or dialogue with, depending on, you know, as we talked earlier, grapple with the language, depending on what your view is. In our case, it was really just about, oh, okay, right, they want to have a dialogue about COVID information, misinformation. We're this enormous source of information, which the world depends on, we're going to have that conversation, right? We're happy to say, here's, you know, if they say, how do you know that Wikipedia is not going to be pushing some crazy anti-vax narrative? First, I mean, I think it's somewhat inappropriate for a government to be asking pointed questions in a way that implies possible penalties. I'm not sure that ever happened, because we would just go, I don't know, the Chinese blocked us and so it goes, right? We're not going to cave into any kind of government pressure, but whatever the appropriateness of what they were doing, I think there is a rule for government in just saying, let's understand the information ecosystem, let's think about the problem of misinformation, disinformation in society, particularly around election security, all these kinds of things. So, you know, I think it would be irresponsible of us to get a call from a government agency and say, yeah, why don't you just fuck off, you're the government. But it would also be irresponsible to go, oh dear, government agency, it's not happy, let's fix Wikipedia so the FBI loves us. So when you say you want to have discussions with the Chinese government or with organizations like CDC and WHO, it's to thoroughly understand what the mainstream narrative is so that it can be properly represented but not drive what the articles are. Well, it's actually important to say, like whatever the Wikimedia Foundation thinks has no impact on what's in Wikipedia. So it's more about saying to them, right, we understand you're the World Health Organization or you're whoever and part of your job is to sort of public health is about communications, you want to understand the world. So it's more about, oh, well, let's explain how Wikipedia works. So it's more about explaining how Wikipedia works and like, hey, it's the volunteers. It's a battle of ideas and here's how the sources are used, what are the legitimate sources and what not are legitimate sources. Yeah, exactly. I mean, I suppose there's some battle about what is a legitimate source. There could be statements made that CDC, I mean, like there's government organizations in general have sold themselves to be the place where you go for expertise. And some of that has been to small degree raised in question over the response to the pandemic. Well, I think in many cases, and this goes back to my topic of trust. So there were definitely cases of public officials, public organizations, where I felt like they lost the trust of the public because they didn't trust the public. And so the idea is like, we really need people to take this seriously and take actions. Therefore, we're going to put out some overblown claims because it's going to scare people into behaving correctly. You know what, that might work for a little while, but it doesn't work in the long run because suddenly people go from a default stance of like the Center for Disease Control, very well respected scientific organization, sort of, I don't know, they've got fault in Atlanta with the last file of smallpox or whatever it is that people think about them. And to go, oh, right, these are scientists we should actually take seriously and listen to and they're not politicized. And they're, you know, it's like, okay. And if you put out statements, I don't know if the CDC did, but health organization, whoever, that are provably false.

And also provably, you kind of knew they were false, but you did it to scare people because you wanted them to do the right thing. It's like, no, you know what, that's not going to work in the long run. Like you're going to lose people. And now you've got a bigger problem, which is a lack of trust in science, a lack of trust in authorities who are, you know, by and large, they're like quite boring government bureaucrat scientists who just are trying to help the world. Well, I've been criticized and I've been torn on this. I've been criticized for criticizing Anthony Fauci too hard. The degree to which I criticized him is because he's a leader and I'm just observing the effect in the loss of trust in the institutions like the NIH, that where I personally know, there's a lot of incredible scientists doing incredible work. And I have to blame the leaders for the effects on the distrust and the scientific work that they're doing because of what I perceive as basic human flaws of communication, of arrogance, of ego, of politics, all those kinds of things. Now you could say you're being too harsh, possible, but I think that's the whole point of free speeches. You can criticize the people who lead. Leaders, unfortunately, are fortunately responsible for the effects on society. To me, Anthony Fauci or whoever in the scientific position around the pandemic had an opportunity to have a FDR moment or to get everybody together, inspire about the power of science to rapidly develop a vaccine that saves us from this pandemic and future pandemic that can threaten the well-being of human civilization. This was epic and awesome and sexy. And to me, when I'm talking to people about science, it's anything but sexy in terms of the virology and biology development because it's been politicized, it's icky, and people just don't want to talk to me about the vaccine. I understand, I understand. I got vaccinated. Let's switch topics quick. Yeah. Well, it's interesting because as I say, I live in the UK and I think all these things are a little less politicized there. And I haven't paid close enough attention to Fauci to have a really strong view. I'm sure I would disagree with some things. I remember hearing at the beginning of the pandemic as I'm unwrapping my Amazon package with the masks I bought because I heard there's a pandemic and I just was like, I want some N95 mask, please. And they were saying, don't buy masks. And the motivation was because they didn't want there to be shortages in hospitals. Fine. But they were also statements of masks won't, they're not effective and they won't help you. And then the complete about face to you're ridiculous if you're not wearing them. It's just like, no, that about face just lost people from day one. The distress and the intelligence of the public to deal with nuance, to deal with the uncertainty. Yeah. This is exactly what, I think this is where the Wikipedia neutral point of view is and should be an ideal. And obviously every article and everything, you know me now and you know how I am about these things. But ideally it's to say, look, we're happy to show you all the perspectives. This is Planned Parenthood's view and this is Catholic Church view. And we're going to explain that and we're going to try to be thoughtful and put in the best arguments from all sides. Because I trust you. You read that and you're going to be more educated and you're going to begin to make a decision. I mean, I can just talk in the UK, the government, when we found out in the UK that very high level government officials were not following the rules they had put on everyone else, I moved from, I had just become a UK citizen just a little while before the pandemic. And you know, it's kind of emotional. Like you get a passport in a new country and you feel quite good and I did my oath to the Queen and then they dragged the poor old lady out to tell

us all to be good. And I was like, we're British and we're going to do the right things. And you know, it's going to be tough, but we're going to, you know, so you have that kind of Dunkirk spirit moment. And you're like following the rules to a tee. And then suddenly it's like, well, they're not following the rules. And so suddenly I shifted personally from, I'm going to follow the rules, even if I don't completely agree with them, but I'll still follow because I think we've got all chipping together to like, you know what, I'm going to make wise and thoughtful decisions for myself and my family. And that generally is going to mean following the rules, but it's basically, you know, when they're, you know, at certain moments in time, like you're not allowed to be in an outside space unless you're exercising. I'm like, I think I can sit in a part and read a book. Like it's going to be fine. Like that's irrational rule, which I would have been following just personally of like, I'm just going to do the right thing. Yeah. And the loss of trust, I think at scale was probably harmful to science. And to me, the scientific method and the scientific communities is one of the biggest hopes at least to me for the survival and the thriving of human civilization. Absolutely. And I, you know, I think you see some of the ramifications of this. There's always been like pretty anti science, anti vax people. Okay, that's always been a thing, but I feel like it's bigger now simply because of that lowering of trust. So a lot of people, yeah, maybe it's like you say, a lot of people are like, yeah, I got vaccinated and I really don't want to talk about this because it's so toxic, you know, and that's unfortunate because I think people should say, what, what an amazing thing. And, you know, there's also a whole range of discourse around if this were a disease that were primarily, that was primarily killing babies, I think people's emotions about it would have been very different, right or wrong. Then the fact that when you really looked at the, the sort of death rate of getting COVID, wow, it's really dramatically different. If you're, if you're late in life, this was really dangerous. And if you're 23 years old, yeah, well, it's not great, like, and long COVID's a thing and all of that. But, and I think some of the public communications, again, we're failing to properly contextualize it, not all of it, you know, it's a complicated matter, but yeah. Let me read you a Reddit comment that received two likes. Two whole people liked it. Yeah, two people liked it. And I don't know, maybe you can comment on whether there's truth to it, but I just found it interesting because I've been doing a lot of research on World War II recently. So this is about Hitler. Here's, it's a long, it's a long statement. I was there when a big push was made to fight bias at Wikipedia. Our target became getting the Hitler article to be Wiki's featured article. The idea was that the voting body only wanted articles that were good PR and especially articles about socially liberal topics. So the Hitler article had to be two to three times better and more academically researched to beat the competition. This bias seems to hold today. For example, the current list of political featured articles at a glance seems to have only two books, one on anarchism and one on Karl Marx. Surely we're not going to say they have only ever been two articles about political non-biography books worth being featured, especially compared to 200 plus video games. That's the only topics with good books or socialism and anarchy. Do you have any interesting comments on this kind of featured, how the featured are selected? Maybe Hitler because he's a special, he's a special figure. I love the comparison to how many video games and that definitely speaks to my earlier as like, if you've got a lot of young geeky men who really like video games, that doesn't necessarily

get you the right place in every respect. Certainly, yeah, so here's a funny story.

I woke up one morning to a bunch of journalists in Germany trying to get in touch with me because German language Wikipedia chose to have as the featured article of the day, swastika.

And people were going crazy about it and some people were saying it's illegal. Has German Wikipedia been taken over by Nazi sympathizers and so on? And it turned out it's not illegal, discussing the swastika, using the swastika as a political campaign and using it in certain ways is illegal in Germany in a way that it wouldn't be in the US because of First Amendment.

But in this case, it was like, actually, part of the point is the swastika symbol

is from other cultures as well. And they just thought it was interesting. And I did joke to the community, I'm like, please don't put the swastika on the front page without warning me because I'm going to get a lot of, now it wouldn't be me, it's the foundation. I'm not that much on the front lines. And so I would say that to put Hitler on the front page of Wikipedia,

it is a special topic and you would want to say, yeah, let's be really careful that it's really, really good before we do that because if we put it on the front page and it's not good enough, that could be a problem. There's no inherent reason. Clearly, World War II is a very popular topic in Wikipedia. It's like on the history channel. It's a fascinating period of history that people are very interested in. And then on the other piece, anarchism and Karl Marx? Yeah. I mean, that's interesting. I'm surprised to hear that not more political books or topics have made it to the front page. Now we're taking this read a comment.

I mean, as it's completely... Yeah, but I'm trusting. So I think that's probably is right.

They probably did have the list up. No, I think it's... I think that piece, the piece about how many of those featured articles have been video games and if it's disproportionate, I think we should... The community should go, actually, what's gone... That doesn't seem quite right. I mean, you can imagine that because you're looking for an article to be on the front page of Wikipedia. You want to have a bit of diversity in it. You want it to be not always something that's really popular that week. So like, I don't know, the last couple of weeks, maybe succession, a big finale of succession might lead you to think, oh, let's put succession on the front page. That's going to be popular. In other cases, you kind of want pick something super obscure and quirky because people also find that interesting and fun. So yeah, I don't know, but you don't want it to be video games most of the time.

That sounds quite bad. Well, let me ask you just for... As somebody who's seen the whole thing, the development of the millions of articles, big and possible question, what's your favorite article? My favorite article. Well, I've got an amusing answer, which is possibly also true.

There's an article in Wikipedia called Inherently Funny Words. One of the reasons I love it is when it was created early in the history of Wikipedia, it kind of became like a dumping ground. People would just come by and write in any word that they thought sounded funny. And then it was nominated for deletion because somebody's like, this is just a dumping ground, like people are putting all kinds of nonsense in. And in that deletion debate, somebody came forward and said, essentially, wait a second, hold on, this is actually a legitimate concept in the theory of humor and comedy. And a lot of famous comedians and humorists have written about it. And it's actually a legitimate topic. So then they went through and they meticulously referenced every word that was in there and threw out a bunch that weren't. And so it becomes this really interesting. Now, my biggest disappointment, and it's the right decision to make because there was no source, but it was a picture of a cow. But there was a rope around its head

tying on some horns onto the cow. So it was kind of a funny looking picture. It looked like a bull with horns, but it's just like a normal milk cow. And below it, the caption said, according to some, cow is an inherently funny word, which is just hilarious to me, partly because the, according to some, sounds a lot like Wikipedia, but there was no source. So it went away and I feel very sad about that. But I've always liked that. And I actually, the reason depth of Wikipedia amuses me so greatly is because it does highlight really interesting obscure stuff. And you're like, wow, I can't believe somebody wrote about that in Wikipedia. It's quite amusing. And sometimes there's a bit of rye humor in Wikipedia. There's always a struggle. You're not trying to be funny, but occasionally a little inside humor can be quite healthy.

And apparently words with the letter K are funny. There's a lot of really well researched stuff on this page. It's actually exciting. And I should mention for depth of Wikipedia, it's run by Annie Rowarda. That's right, Annie.

And let me just read off some of the pages. Octopolis and Octolantis are two separate non-human underwater settlements built by the gloomy octopuses in Jarvis Bay, East Australia. The first settlement named Octopolis by biologists was founded in 2009. The individual structures in Octopolis consist of borrows around a piece of human detritus believed to be scrap metal. And it goes on in this way.

Satiric misspelling, least concerned species. Humans were formally assessed as a species of least concern in 2008. I think Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy would slightly disagree.

And last one, let me just say, friendship paradox is the phenomena first observed by the sociologist Scott Feld in 1991 that on average, an individual's friends have more friends than that individual.

Oh, that's very interesting.

That's the kind of thing that makes you want to, like it sounds implausible at first because shouldn't everybody have on average about the same number of friends as all their friends? So you really want to dig into the math of that and really think, oh, why would that be true? And it's one way to feel more lonely in a mathematically rigorous way.

Somebody also on Reddit asks, I would love to hear some war stories from behind the scenes. Is there something that we haven't mentioned that was particularly difficult in this entire journey you're on with Wikipedia?

I mean, it's hard to say. I mean, so part of what I always say about myself is that I'm a pathological optimist. So I always think everything is fine.

And so things that other people might find a struggle, I'm just like, oh, well, this is the thing we're doing today. So that's kind of about me.

And it's actually, I'm aware of this about myself.

So I do like to have a few pessimistic people around me to keep me a bit on balance.

Yeah, I mean, I would say some of the hard things, I mean, there were hard moments like when two out of three servers crashed on Christmas day, and then we needed to do a fundraiser and no idea what was going to happen.

I would say as well, in that early period of time, the growth of the website and the traffic to the website was phenomenal and great. The growth of the community, and in fact, the healthy growth of the community was fine. And then the Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit I set up to own and operate Wikimedia, as a small organization, it had a lot of growing pains. And that was the piece that's just like

many companies or many organizations that are in a fast growth. It's like, you've hired the wrong people or there's this conflict that's arisen and nobody's got experience to do this and all that. So no specific stories to tell, but I would say growing the organization was harder than growing the community and growing the website, which is interesting. Well, yeah, it's kind of miraculous and inspiring that a community can emerge and be stable and that has so much kind of productive positive output. It kind of makes you think. It's one of those things you don't want to analyze too much because you don't want to mess with a beautiful thing, but it gives me faith in communities that they can spring up in other domains as well. Yeah, I think that's exactly right. And at Fandom, my for-profit week company, where it's like all these communities about pop culture, mainly entertainment, gaming, and so on, there's a lot of small communities. And so I went last year to our Community Connect conference and just met some of these people and like, here's one of the leaders of the Star Wars Wiki, which is called Wikipedia, which I think is great. And he's telling me about his community and all that. And I'm like, oh, right. Yeah, I love this. So it's not the same purpose as Wikipedia of a neutral, high quality encyclopedia, but a lot of the same values are there of like, oh, people should be nice to each other. It's like, when people get upset, it's like, just remember, we're working on Star Wars Wiki together. Like, there's no reason to get too outraged and just kind people, just like geeky people with a hobby. Where do you see Wikipedia in 10 years, 100 years, and 1000 years? Right. So 10 years, I would say pretty much the same. Like, we're not going to have, we're not going to become TikTok, you know, with entertainment, do scroll by video, humor, and blah, blah, blah. An encyclopedia. I think in 10 years, we probably will have a lot more AI supporting tools like I've talked about. And probably your search experience will be, you can ask a question and get the answer rather than, you know, from our body of work. So search and discovery, a little bit improved. Yeah, all that. I always say one of the things that people, most people won't notice, because already they don't notice it, is the growth of Wikipedia in the languages of the developing world. So you probably don't speak Swahili. So you're probably not checking out that Swahili Wikipedia is doing very well. And it is doing very well. And I think that kind of growth is actually super important. It's super interesting. But most people won't notice that. If we can just look on that, if we could, do you think there's so much incredible translation work is being done with AI, with language models? Do you think that can accelerate Wikipedia? So you start with the basic draft of the translation of articles and then build on that. So what I used to say is like machine translation for many years wasn't much used to the community, because it just wasn't good enough. As it's gotten better, it's tended to be a lot better in what we might call economically important languages. That's because the corpus that they train on and all of that. So to translate from English to Spanish, if you've tried Google translate recently, Spanish to English is what I would do. It's pretty good. Like it's actually not bad. It used to be half a joke. And then for a while it was kind of like, well, you can get the gist of something. And now it's like, actually, it's pretty good. However, we've got a huge Spanish community who write in native Spanish. So they're able to use it and they find it useful, but they're writing. But if you tried to do English to Zulu, where there's not that much investment, like there's loads of reasons to invest in English to

Spanish because they're both huge economically important languages, Zulu, not so much. So for those smaller languages, it was just still terrible. My understanding is it's improved dramatically and also because the new methods of training don't necessarily involve identical corpuses to try to match things up, but rather reading and understanding with tokens and large language models and then reading and understanding and then you get a much richer. Anyway, apparently it's quite improved. So I think that now it is quite possible that these smaller language communities are going to say, oh, well, finally, I can put something in an English and I can get out Zulu that I feel comfortable sharing with my community because it's actually good enough or I can edit it a bit here and there. So I think that's huge. So I do think that's going to happen a lot and that's going to accelerate, again, what will remain to most people in an invisible trend, but that's the growth in all these other languages. So then move on to 100 years.

Starting to get scary. Well, the only thing I say about 100 years is like we've built the Wikimedia Foundation and we run it in a quite cautious and financially conservative and careful way. So every year, we build our reserves. Every year, we put aside a little bit of more money. We also have the Endowment Fund, which we just passed 100 million. That's a completely separate fund with a separate board so that it's not just like a big fat backing account for some future profligate CEO to blow through. The Foundation will have to get the approval of a second order board to be able to access that money and that board can make other grants through the community and things like that.

So the point of all that is I hope and believe that we're building in a financially stable way that we can weather various storms along the way so that hopefully we're not taking the kind of risks.

And by the way, we're not taking too few risks either. That's always hard.

I think the Wikimedia Foundation and Wikimedia will exist in 100 years.

If anybody exists in 100 years, we'll be there.

You think the internet just looks unpredictably different to just the web?

I do. I think right now, this enormous step forward we've seen and has become public in the last year of the large language models really is something else. It's really interesting.

And you and I have both talked today about the flaws and the limitations, but still, as someone who's been around technology for a long time, it's sort of that feeling of the first time I saw a web browser, the first time I saw the iPhone, the first time the internet was really usable on a phone, and it's like, wow, that's a step change difference. There's a few other... Maybe a Google search. I remember the first search.

Because I remember AltaVista was kind of cool for a while, then it just got more and more useless because the algorithm wasn't good. And it's like, oh, Google search, now the internet works again. And so large language model, it feels like that to me. Like, oh, wow, this is something new and really pretty remarkable. And it's going to have some downsides. The negative use case, people in the area who are experts, they're giving a lot of warnings. And I don't know enough to... I'm not that worried, but I'm a pathological optimist.

But I do see some really low hanging fruit bad things that can happen. So my example is, how about some highly customized spam where the email that you receive isn't just like misspelled words and trying to get through filters, but actually is a targeted email to you that knows something about you by reading your LinkedIn profile and writes a plausible email

that will get through the filters. And it's like, suddenly, oh, that's a new problem. That's going to be interesting. Is there, just on the Wikipedia editing side, does it make the job of the volunteer of the editor more difficult if in a world where larger and larger percentage of the internet is written by an LLM?

So one of my predictions, and we'll see, you know, ask me again in five years how this panned out, is that in a way, this will strengthen the value and importance of some traditional brands.

So if I see a news story, and it's from the Wall Street Journal, from the New York Times, from Fox News, I know what I'm getting, and I trust it to whatever extent I might have, you know, trust or distrust in any of those. And if I see a brand new website that looks plausible, but I've never heard of it, and it could be machine-generated content that may be full of errors, I think I'll be more cautious. I think I'm more interested. And we can also talk about this around photographic evidence. So obviously, there will be scandals where major media organizations get fooled by fake photo. However, if I see a photo of the recent ones, the Pope wearing an expensive puffer jacket, I'm going to go, yeah, that's amazing that a fake like that could be generated, but my immediate thought is not, oh, so the Pope's dipping into the money, eh? Partly because this particular Pope doesn't seem like he'd be the type.

My favorite is extensive pictures of Joe Biden and Donald Trump hanging out and having fun together. Yeah, yeah, brilliant. So I think people will care about the provenance of a photo. And if you show me a photo and you say, yeah, this photo is from Fox News, even though I don't necessarily think that's the highest, but I'm like, wow, it's a news organization and they're going to have journalists and they're going to make sure the photo is what it purports to be. That's very different from a photo randomly circulating on Twitter, whereas I would say 15 years ago, a photo randomly circulating on Twitter, in most cases, the worst you could do, and this did happen, is misrepresent the battlefield. So like, oh, here's a bunch of injured children. Look what Israel's done, but actually it wasn't Israel, it was another case 10 years ago. That has happened. That has always been around. But now we can have

much more specifically constructed plausible looking photos that if I just see them circulating on Twitter, I'm going to go, just don't know. Not sure. Like, I can make that in five minutes. So I also hope that it's kind of like what you're writing about in your book that we could also have citizen journalists that have a stable, verifiable trust that builds up. So it doesn't have to be New York Times or this organization that you could be an organization of one, as long as it's stable and carries through time and it builds up or builds up.

I agree. But the one thing I've said in the past, and this depends on who that person is and what they're doing, but it's like, I think my credibility, my general credibility in the world should be the equal of a New York Times reporter. So if something happens and I witness it and I write about it, people are going to go, well, Jimmy Wells said it. That's just like if a New York Times reporter said it, like, I'm going to tend to think he didn't just make it up.

Truth is, nothing interesting ever happens around me. I don't go to war zones. I don't go to big press conferences. I don't interview Putin and Zelensky. So just to an extent, yes. Whereas, I do think for other people, those traditional models of credibility are really, really important. And then there is this sort of citizen journalism. I don't know if you think of what you do as journalism. I kind of think it is, but you do interviews. You do long form interviews. And I think people, you know, like if you come and you say, right, here's my tape,

but you wouldn't hand out a tape. Like I just gestured to you as if I'm handing you a cassette tape. But if you put it into your podcast, here's my interview with Zelensky. And people aren't going to go, yeah, how do we know that could be a deep fake? Like you could have faked that. Because people are like, well, no, you're a well-known podcaster and you do interview interesting people. And yeah, you wouldn't think that. So that your brand becomes really important. Whereas, if suddenly, and I've seen this already, I've seen sort of video with subtitles in English, and apparently the Ukrainian was the same, and Zelensky saying something really outrageous. And I'm like, yeah, don't believe that. I don't think he said that in a meeting with whatever. I think that's Russian propaganda or probably just trolls.

Yeah. And then building platforms and mechanisms of how that trust can be verified. You know, if something appears on the Wikipedia page, that means something. If something appears on, like say my Twitter account, that means something. That means I, this particular human, have signed off on it. And then the trust you have in this particular human transfers to the piece of content. And then hopefully there's millions of people with different metrics of trust. And then you could see that there's a certain kind of bias in the set of conversations you're having. So maybe, okay, I trust this person of this kind of bias. And I'll go to this other person of this other kind of bias that I can integrate them in this kind of way, just like you said, with Fox News and what the rest of our times, like they've all got there, like where they sit. So you have built, I would say one of, if not the most impactful website in the history of human civilization. So let me ask for you to give advice to young people how to have impact in this world.

High schoolers, college students wanting to have a big positive impact.

Yeah, great. If you want to be successful, do something you're really passionate about rather than some kind of cold calculation of what can make you the most money. Because if you go and try to do something and you're like, I'm not that interested, but I'm going to make a lot of money doing it, you're probably not going to be that good at it. And so that that is a big piece of it.

I also like, you know, so for startups, I give this advice. So yeah, and this is a career startup, any kind of like young person just starting out is like, you know, be persistent, right? There'll be moments when it's not working out, and you can't just give up too easily. You've got to persist through some hard times, maybe two servers crash on a Sunday, and you've got to sort of scramble to figure it out, but persist through that. And then also be prepared to pivot. That's a newer word, new for me. But when I pivoted from Newpedia to Wikipedia, it's like, this isn't working, I've got to completely change. So be willing to completely change direction when something's not working. Now, the problem with these two wonderful pieces of advice is which situation am I in today?

Right? Is this a moment when I need to just power through and persist because I'm going to find a way to make this work? Or is this a moment where I need to go, actually, this is totally not working, and I need to change direction. But also, I think for me, that always gives me a framework of like, okay, let's okay, here's a problem.

Do we need to change direction? Or do we need to kind of power through it? And just knowing, like, those are the choices, not always the only choices, but those are choices, I think can be helpful to say, okay, am I, am I, am I, am I checking it out? Like, because I'm having a little bump and I'm feeling an emotional, I'm just going to give up too soon?

Okay, ask yourself that question. And also, it's like, am I being pigheaded and trying to do something that actually doesn't make sense? Okay, ask yourself that question too, even though they're contradictory questions. Sometimes it'll be one, sometimes it'll be the other, and you've got to really think it through. I think persisting with the business model behind Wikipedia is such an inspiring story. Because we live in a capitalist world. We live in a, in a scary world, I think, for an internet business. And so, and so like, to do things differently than a lot of websites are doing, like what Wikipedia has lived through the success of explosion of many websites that are basically ad-driven. Google is ad-driven. Facebook, Twitter, all of these websites are ad-driven. And to see them succeed become these like, incredibly rich, powerful companies that if I could just have that money, you would think as somebody running Wikipedia, I could do so much positive stuff, right? And so, to persist through that is, I think is, from my perspective now, Monday night quarterback or whatever, is it, there's the right decision, but boy, is that a tough decision. It seemed easy at the time, so. And then you just kind of stay with it, stick with it. Yeah, just stay with it. It's working. So now when you chose persistent. Yeah. Well, yeah, I mean, I always like to give an example of MySpace, because I just think it's an amusing story. So MySpace was poised, I would say, to be Facebook, right? It was huge. It was viral. It was lots of things kind of foreshadowed a bit of maybe even TikTok, because it was like a lot of entertainment content, casual. And then Rupert Murdoch bought it, and it collapsed within a few years. And part of that, I think, was because they were really, really heavy on ads and less heavy on the customer experience. So I remember to accept a friend request was like three clicks where you saw three ads. And on Facebook, you accept the friend request, you didn't even leave the page. It just, like, that just accepted. But what is interesting, so I used to give this example of like, yeah, well, Rupert Murdoch really screwed that one up. And in a sense, maybe he did, but somebody said, you know what, actually, he bought it for, and I don't remember the numbers, he bought it for \$800 million, and it was very profitable through its decline. He actually made his money back, and more. So it wasn't like, from a financial point of view, it was a bad investment in the sense of you could have been Facebook, but on sort of more mundane metrics, it's like, actually, it worked out okay for it. It all matters how you define success. It does. And that is also advice to young people. One of the things I would say, like, when we have our mental models of success, as an entrepreneur, for example, and your examples in your mind are Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg. So people who, at a very young age, had one really great idea that just went straight to the moon and became one of the richest people in the world, that is really unusual, like, really, really rare. And for most entrepreneurs, that is not a life path you're going to take. You're going to fail, you're going to reboot, you're going to learn from what you failed at, you're going to try something different. And that is really important, because if your standard of success is, well, I feel sad because I'm not as rich as Elon Musk, it's like, well, so should almost everyone, possibly everyone, except Elon Musk is not as rich as Elon Musk. And so that, you know, like, realistically, you can set a standard of success, even in a really now sense, which I don't recommend, of thinking about your financial success. It's like, if you measure your financial success by thinking about billionaires, like, that's heavy, like, that's probably not good. I don't recommend it. Whereas like, I personally, you know, like for me, when people, when journalists say, oh, how does it feel to not be a billionaire? I usually say, I don't know, how does it feel to you? Because they're not. But also, I'm like, I live in London. The number of

bankers that no one's ever heard of, who live in London, who make far more money than I ever will, is quite a large number. And I wouldn't trade my life for theirs at all, right? Because mine is so interesting. Like, oh, right, Jimmy, we need you to go and meet the Chinese propaganda minister. Okay, that's super interesting. Like, yeah, Jimmy, you know, like, here's the situation, like, you can go to this country and while you're there, the president has asked to see you. It's like, God, that's super interesting. Jimmy, you're going to this place, and there's a local Wikipedia who said, do you want to stay with me and my family? And I'm like, yeah, like, that's really cool. Like, I would like to do that. That's really interesting. Don't do that all the time, but I've done it and it's great. So like, for me, that's like, arranging your life so that you have interesting experiences is just great. Well, this is more to the question of what Wikipedia looks like in a thousand years. What do you think is the meaning of this whole thing? Why are we here? Human civilization, what's the meaning of life? Yeah, I don't think there is an external answer to that question. And I should mention that there's a very good Wikipedia page on the different philosophies of the meaning of life. Oh, interesting. I have to read that and see what I think. Hopefully, it's neutral and gives a wide frame. Oh, it's a really good reference to a lot of different philosophies about meaning. The 20th century philosophy in general, from Nietzsche to the existentialist, to some of the Boes, all of them have an idea of meaning. They really struggled systematically, rigorously, and that's what the page. And obviously, a shout out to the H. Hecker's Guide and all that kind of stuff. Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, I think there's no external answer to that. I think it's internal. I think we decide what meaning we will have in our lives and what we're going to do with ourselves. And so when I think, if we're talking about thousand years, millions of years, Uri Milner wrote a book. He's a big internet investor guy. He wrote a book advocating quite strongly for humans exploring the universe and getting off the planet. And he funds projects to send like using lasers to send little cameras and interesting stuff. And he talks a lot in the book about meaning. His view is that the purpose of the human species is to broadly survive and get off the planet. Well, I don't agree with everything he has to say, because I think that's not a meaning that can motivate most people in their own lives. It's like, okay, great. You know, like the distances of space are absolutely enormous. So I don't know what, should we build generationships to start flying places? Well, I can't do that. And I'm not, even if I could, even if I'm Elon Musk and I could devote all my wealth to build it, I'll be dead on the ship on the way. So is that really meaning? But I think it's really interesting to think about and reading his little book, it's quite a short little book reading his book, it made me, it did make me think about, wow, like this is big, like this is not what you think about in your day to day life is like, where is the human species going to be in 10 million years? And it does make you sort of turn back to earth and say, gee, let's not destroy the planet. Like, we kind of, we're stuck here for at least a while. And therefore, we should really think about sustainability. And I mean, one million year sustainability. And we don't have all the answers, we have nothing close to the answers. I'm actually excited about AI in this regard, while also bracketing. Yeah, I understand there's also risks and people are terrified of AI. But I actually think it is quite interesting, this moment in time that we may have in the next 50 years, to really, really solve some really long term human problems, for example, in health, like the progress that's being made in cancer treatment, because we are able to at scale, you know, model molecules and genetics and things like this, it gets huge, it's really exciting.

You know, so if, you know, if we can hang on for a little while, and, you know, certain problems that seem completely intractable today, like climate change may end up being actually not that hard. And we might just might be able to alleviate the full diversity of human suffering. For sure. Yeah. And in so doing, help increase the chance that we can propagate the flame of human consciousness out into towards the stars. And I think another important one, if we fail to do that, for me, is propagating and maintaining the full diversity and richness and complexity and expansiveness of human knowledge. So if we destroy ourselves, it would, it would make me feel a little bit okay. Yeah, you just, if the human knowledge just triggered me to say something really interesting, which is, when we talked to earlier about translating, and using machines to translate, we mostly talked about small languages and translating into English. But I always like to tell this story of something inconsequential really. But there's, I was in Norway, in Bergen, Norway, where every year they've got this annual festival called Buékor, which is young groups drumming and they have a drumming competition. It's the 17 sectors of the city. And they've been doing it for a couple hundred years or whatever. They wrote about it in the three languages of Norway. And then from there, it was translated into English and to German, et cetera, et cetera. And so what, what I love about that story is what it reminds me is like this machine translation goes both ways. And like when you talk about the richness and broadness of human culture, we're already seeing some really great pieces of this. So like Korean soap operas, really popular, not with me, but with people. And the ability to, you know, imagine taking a very famous, very popular, very well known Korean drama. And now, I mean, and I literally mean now, we're just about there technologically, where we use a machine to redub it in English in an automated way, including digitally editing the faces so it doesn't look dubbed. And so suddenly you say, oh, wow, like here's, here's a piece of, you know, it's, it's the Korean equivalent of maybe it's friends as a comedy or maybe it's succession just to be very contemporary. It's something that really impacted a lot of people and they really loved it. And we have literally no idea what it's about. And suddenly it's like, wow, you know, like music, street music from wherever in the world can suddenly become accessible to us all in new ways. It's so cool. It's really exciting to get access to the richness of culture in China, in the many different subcultures of Africa, South America. One of my unsuccessful arguments with the Chinese government is by blocking Wikipedia, right? You aren't just stopping people in China from reading Chinese Wikipedia and other language versions of Wikipedia. You're also preventing the Chinese people from telling their story. So is there a small festival in a small town in China like Guhe Corp? I don't know. But by the way, the people who live in that village, that small town of 50,000, they can't put that in Wikipedia and get it translated into other places. They can't share their culture and their knowledge. And I think for China, this should be a somewhat influential argument because China does feel misunderstood in the world. It's like, okay, well, there's one way, if you want to help people understand, put it in Wikipedia. That's what people go to when they want to understand. And give the amazing, incredible people of China voice. Exactly. Jimmy, thank you so much. I'm such a huge fan of everything you've done. Oh, thank you. That's really great. I'm deeply, deeply, deeply, deeply grateful for Wikipedia. I love it. It brings me joy. I donate all the time. You should donate too. It's a huge honor to finally talk with you, and this is amazing. Thank you so much for today.

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