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Wikipedia

Technology eats the truth

The paradox is that veracity has never been easier to unearth or disseminate: life is on the record

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When I finished journalism school, more than a few years ago, I was given a certificate entitled “Training for Truth”. There has long been a strongly held — but, to many, overblown — belief that the media is the fourth estate. Its purpose is to speak truth to power.

We could endlessly debate how well the media has performed that function. It might take us even longer to agree a satisfactory definition of truth. But for most of the postwar era, the mainstream media in the Anglo-American world has helped shape the political debate by creating a common national narrative.

Now, we are told, the atomisation of traditional media and the spread of social networks has meant we all live in our own “[filter bubbles \(http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/309214/the-filter-bubble-by-eli-pariser/9780143121237/\)](http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/309214/the-filter-bubble-by-eli-pariser/9780143121237/)”. Technology has eaten the truth. We live in a post-truth world in which we can ignore the facts we do not like and tap into any personalised narrative that we desire.

Yet if there is no agreed basis of truth then it is hard to arrive at democratically settled conclusions. As we have seen during the debate on Brexit and in the US presidential campaign, much political argument consists of simply talking past your opponent to appeal to your own data-determined electoral demographic. Experts are dismissed as frauds. Demonstrable lies have no impact or consequence.

Yet the strange paradox of our times is that the truth — however defined — has never been easier to unearth or disseminate. Data are ubiquitous. Life is on the record. Claims and counterclaims can instantly be checked. Technology should at least hold part of the solution.

Exhibit A supporting the hope that technology can help societies recreate an accepted truth is [Wikipedia \(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia), the online encyclopedia. Its mission is to give everyone on the planet free access to the sum of human knowledge in their own language.

Wikipedia has become such a routine part of our online lives that it is hard to believe it was founded only 15 years ago. Its growth has been remarkable. The non-profit-making collective of tens of thousands of active Wikipedians has created more than 40m articles in 250 languages. With 500m unique users a month, it is one of the top five most visited websites in the world.

Its volunteer contributors stick to a neutral point of view and agree among themselves what constitute reliable sources. Academic studies have found that Wikipedia is generally as accurate as professionally edited encyclopedias and has massively more articles.

Check out the entries on [Donald Trump \(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Trump\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Trump) and [Hillary Clinton \(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillary_Clinton\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillary_Clinton) and you will find them to be studiously neutral with more than 1,200 footnoted references between them.

Wikipedia does, though, possess some glaring flaws. Its contributor base is 85 per cent male, leading to some skewed subject selection and other biases. Entries on male authors tend to be longer than those on female authors, for example.

Those devious enough to do so can game the system by poisoning the sources on which Wikipedia relies. The constant re-editing of some entries also means that they can forever

remain a work in progress: US President George W Bush's entry has been edited more than 45,000 times. Truth on Wikipedia is always a malleable commodity.

At a recent FT125 Forum event, Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia's founder, said that one of the "super fascinating" aspects of the community was how it tended to bring people together when there were serious disagreements rather than forcing them apart.

For instance, Ukrainian and Russian Wikipedians, who have written radically different interpretations of the conflict between their two nations, recently met in Kiev to understand their respective views. "It will take some time before they come to a consensus view but we are trying," he said.

Mr Wales said the site was relatively impartial because it had shunned advertising. Wikipedians wrote entries according to the subject's interest rather than from any impulse to chase clicks. "We all know that the DNA of any organisation tends to follow the money."

Wikipedia's model has enabled it to create a "temple of the mind", says its founder but it has resulted in a "terrible, terrible business", dependent on voluntary contributions. Can others invent more robust platforms?

It is said that there are only two forms of innovation: unbundling an industry and rebundling it. The mainstream media has been unbundled but Wikipedia has shown a different way to rebundle our collective intelligence.

The truth is out there. The bigger question is: do we want to hear it?

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