



Select Committee on Communications and Digital

Corrected oral evidence: Freedom of expression online

Tuesday 9 February 2021

3 pm

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Members present: Viscount Colville of Culross (Acting Chair); Baroness Bull; Baroness Buscombe; Baroness Featherstone; Lord Gilbert of Panteg; Baroness Grender; Lord Griffiths of Burry Port; Lord McInnes of Kilwinning; Baroness Rebuck; Lord Stevenson of Balmacara; Lord Vaizey of Didcot; The Lord Bishop of Worcester.

Evidence Session No. 9

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 79 - 87

Witness

[I:](#) Jimmy Wales, Founder, Wikipedia and WT Social.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witness

Jimmy Wales.

Q79 **The Chair:** Good afternoon. In our first evidence session today, we are joined by Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, which needs no introduction. In 2019, he founded WikiTribune Social, a microblogging social network that does not use ads and relies on donations. We will be drawing on his expertise in campaigning against violations of free speech online through the Jimmy Wales Foundation. This session is being broadcast live online, and a transcript will be taken.

Jimmy, would you like to introduce yourself and tell us a bit more about the organisations you represent? It would be helpful for the committee if you could give us a perspective on the broad themes we need to consider when looking at freedom of speech online. We will then take questions from the committee members.

Jimmy Wales: I am the founder of Wikipedia, as you have mentioned; of Fandom, a more commercial wiki community of fans of TV shows and video games mainly; and of WT Social, a pilot project to create a new type of social network that is more controlled by the users, without the top-down moderation system that is in wide use everywhere else. That draws on all the lessons from the world of wiki.

In the debates and discussions that are being had, there is often a very narrow understanding of what platforms and moderation could be like. They are all the same, in many ways, in that the users are not empowered to control the environment in a democratic or open manner. For example, if you see someone doing something terrible on Twitter, which is quite easy to do, you can basically do three things. First, you can block the person, which helps you and does not help anyone else. Secondly, you can report the person. If you have ever reported anyone on Twitter for some sort of abuse, you may have seen that it is a pretty weak system. They are overwhelmed and they make a lot of, in my opinion, poor decisions. Thirdly, you can yell back at them, which is very popular on Twitter—that is one reason why it is such a toxic place.

When we move to an environment such as Wikipedia or any wiki community, it is a completely different process. If someone is doing something terrible, any other user can step in and delete it. That is a transparent act in itself, and other people can see it. We have administrators, who are transparently elected by the community. They are also community members, and they have additional powers to block people, temporarily lock pages if people are misbehaving and things such as that. Then we have other bodies in the community. We have an elected arbitration committee, which is like the supreme court. And then, traditionally—I always find that people in the UK understand this quite well—we have, particularly in English Wikipedia, a bit of a monarchy, which means that I have certain theoretical powers that I do not dare ever use, such as to disband the arbitration committee and call new elections. This never happens, but it exists as a formality in case we ever see a real problem with, for example, power structures becoming

corrupted or going rogue. At least in theory, I could step forward and say, "No, we are going to do this a different way now".

So it is a very different model, and it has proven over the years to be pretty good. It is not perfect, any more than any criminal justice system, or any social system in society, is perfect. Online community management is not dissimilar from good municipal management, in that you do not want people to be banned just because they disagree with the leaders, but you also want your grandmother to be able to walk down the street without being accosted by hooligans. I can use examples other than grandmothers, because if we go online in many spaces it is not typically grandmothers being abused; it is women, people of colour and a lot of other vulnerable people or those who are subject to prejudices in society, which come out from people in quite a bad way.

Q80 Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: I would like to focus my questions on the platforms' moderation. To what degree do the platforms' policies on moderation take into account freedom of expression?

Jimmy Wales: It is an interesting question. They do take into account freedom of expression, and each platform has a different attitude to that. Many of the platforms have changed over the years. In the very early days of Reddit, it took a very strong position: "We do not delete anything; as long as it is legal, it is going to stay up". As young people starting something, they were quite idealistic. Then, as the community matured, they realised that that is not the best way to guarantee freedom of expression; it guarantees that the worst people in society abuse others, yell at them and make it such an unpleasant experience that it is not actually a safe place for people to have good conversations. They have become much stricter in their moderation.

We have to be very careful not to put into opposition freedom of expression and moderation, as if the more moderation you have, the less expression you have. Going back to the municipal analogy, are we going to let people do anything they like and have fun in Hyde Park, and is that in tension with enforcing certain standards of behaviour? It is not really. People going around and hitting others in the park would not be the best way to maximise free use of the park. We need to think about these things.

I have a lot of criticism of many of the platforms, but we should step back and remember that they have chosen a pretty hard problem. At Wikipedia, our problem is much easier, in a sense. We have always said, "We are not a wide open free-speech zone. We are a project to build an encyclopaedia". We do not have to struggle over the question of how far you can go expressing your obnoxious opinions. You are not really supposed to be expressing any opinions. Obviously, we are human beings, and people have opinions, but, in general, it is a very different thing if you have a little box that says, "Spout off whatever you think", because, as it turns out, some people think terrible things. That is not very pleasant, whereas at Wikipedia it is very easy to get yourself blocked for misbehaviour. The community does it all the time.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: You mentioned blocking. On platforms, how do you feel about the balance between automated moderation and human moderation? To what degree would regulation help manage the processes of moderation within the platforms?

Jimmy Wales: Given the nature and scale of what they are trying to do, and given that they have adopted a fundamental model of top-down moderation rather than one of community control, there is no way for Twitter, for example, to have human beings moderating everything that goes on. The volume is just unbelievable. Even prominent people have problems getting attacked and abused. You can imagine what happens in small groups of teenagers, where nobody even notices. If they complain to Twitter, it has to be low on its priority list compared to a celebrity being abused. Platforms therefore have to resort to some automation. The automation can be helpful but it can make a lot of mistakes, in either direction—either over-moderating or under-moderating. That is problematic.

I tend to be quite sceptical of regulation in this area, simply because I feel that, if we are not super-duper careful, regulation will enshrine certain models of moderation that are fundamentally broken. If a regulation put a burden on, say, the Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit organisation I set up that owns and operates Wikipedia, to engage in more direct moderation, it might push it down a path that is not an improvement on what we are doing now. I want to be careful to preserve avenues for social innovation online, new models of moderation and new systems of community control. Regulation can be quite tricky in that area.

That is not to say that there are no reforms to the law at all that could be undertaken. It is an area where we cannot be too simplistic. We cannot say, "Here is a terrible thing that is happening on Twitter; let's legislate against it", because that may be quite difficult and have a lot of unfortunate side effects.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: Do you feel that the big platforms at the moment could have the flexibility to look at more organic moderation, or is the top-down structure now so embedded that it would be very difficult for them to introduce more community moderation?

Jimmy Wales: That is exactly the right question to ask them. I do not actually know. I hope that they are undertaking efforts to be more organic and reliant on distributed community norms. I am not sure they are able to, and I sometimes question whether their business model pushes them in the right direction on these issues.

Perhaps I may speak for a moment about where I see business models being problematic. Wikipedia is a charity, but that does not mean we do not have to run in a business-like manner. Our only way of getting money is to ask people to donate, and they do. It has been quite a successful model for us. We do not have incentives to keep you clicking for as long as possible. We do not have incentives via clickbait headlines for outrage or anger to get increased engagement. We just want you, when you see the little notice at the end of the year, to say, "I love

Wikipedia. It is the greatest thing on the internet. I should chip in a few quid and help out”.

If you are Twitter, you might have a very loud, obnoxious politician who insults people and behaves very badly, which creates headlines every single day. It creates a lot of noise and traffic. Being sympathetic to its position, and I am not here to attack it, but I am not sure I quite approve of that business model. You can see how a platform might say, “It is going to be hard to kick this person off, because they are generating so many page views that it is quite a tremendous thing for us”—“bigly” page views, you might say. It is very hard.

Q81 **Baroness Rebuck:** Jimmy, congratulations on your 20th anniversary. My question builds on moderation, and it is about the design of platforms. You have just been talking about platforms’ business models, where we have heard that malign content is often amplified to capture attention. We have also heard how design is developed to take advantage of psychological insights and manipulate user behaviour. A lot of our witnesses have talked about the toxic echo chambers, which we all abhor.

Your model, as you have said, is very different, but you have talked about clickbait and algorithmic addiction. In a sense, those are the enemies of the kinder, less combative, more thoughtful, diverse conversations that we would all like to have online, which I know you advocate. We have heard calls for more transparency from tech companies and for an independent audit of algorithms. Witnesses have also stressed the need to limit the reach of harmful material so that it does not have to be taken down at the other end of the funnel, if you like.

I am interested in your perspective on how the design of platforms can realistically be modified. One suggestion has been for users to control the material they see with third-party algorithms; I do not know how realistic that is. You talk a lot about Twitter. Another witness has said that more friction should be introduced to encourage more considered sharing of information. I would be interested in your perspective on what could be done that would have the most effect on limiting harmful behaviour.

Jimmy Wales: That is a fantastic question. I want to be careful to distinguish between what I might suggest to the platforms as an outside adviser with some experience in this area and thinking about regulation, because those are two different topics. They are related, of course, but they are different.

What would I recommend to them? We have to be realistic. In ways that are consistent with their business model if at all possible, they need, exactly as you talked about, to amplify healthier behaviours and healthier conversations. That does not imply a very simplistic view that they should decide what is true in the world and amplify it. At Wikipedia, we believe that there is a difference between you and I disagreeing on some factual matter and having an engaging, thoughtful, constructive

way to write an encyclopaedia article about it, and you and I having an unproductive, angry, useless exchange. We can recognise as human beings that, if you can minimise the angry, useless exchanges, the abuse and all that, you are not taking sides on an intellectual issue of some import.

That is where things go wrong. Again, I am not talking about regulation; I am talking about my view of the platforms' moral responsibilities. We can think of the stereotypical crazy uncle—I am always careful to emphasise that I have really wonderful uncles; this does not describe any uncle in my family. But we all know the stereotype and that model. It is someone who goes on Facebook and posts their obnoxious, possibly racist, opinions—nothing illegal, but really gross. In my view, that is not Facebook's problem. That is a family problem. It is down at your local pub. It is about human beings. That is not something that Facebook can or should be expected to control.

However, if crazy uncle posts his obnoxious, racist comment, 10 people jump on to say to crazy uncle, "You're wrong and this is a really offensive comment", the algorithm notices that that is getting lots of engagement and boosts that, and the next thing you know crazy uncle has 5,000 followers and is storming the Capitol in Washington, that is a problem. Platforms have some moral culpability there. If you pursue the goal of getting more ad views and more revenue—I am not anti-business; that is not a terrible goal in and of itself—in a way that causes really harmful strands of anger and destructive thought in society, I am going to say that you are responsible for that and you need to rethink your position.

Baroness Rebuck: I agree with you. I have read about certain experiments in which the comments that are better for the world do not get the traction that the more malign comments get. As you said, your mad uncle got 5,000 reactions to his ghastly comments. Given that the business model is based on views and clicks, at the end of the day I do not see how you square that circle. Again, I would agree with you: yes, try to pre-moderate the amplification of unpleasant material. But is there a way of doing that and at the same time keeping up the level of clicks and advertising revenue that the platform depends on?

Jimmy Wales: It is a very tough problem. We can also step back and remember that this is a broader problem than that. It is the modern version of the loud, obnoxious, screaming tabloid headline. It may sell better when you walk by the newsstand and you see something that frightens you, amazes you, is shocking or goes after someone by portraying them in a negative way. We are human beings; we sometimes go for that sort of thing, even though we probably feel worse afterwards. That is a problem in the media more broadly.

That is not to say that it is the same exact problem, but it is a human problem and therefore quite deep. It is not as simple as a rogue company doing bad things. We can probably deal with that pretty well. It is about a company responding to the baser human instincts, and that is unfortunate. We can go into that in a lot of different ways. It is not just

about the abuse and the promotion of controversy. It is also the ego boost of getting lots of likes on your Instagram picture. How does that push people who are vulnerable to portray themselves? Is that a healthy process? Again, that is no different from the past. People lack fundamental self-confidence and want to make themselves look a certain way, to portray themselves so that people will like them. That is humanity; that is not easy. When we see it digitally enhanced and put forward in these new media, it is not a great thing.

Baroness Rebuck: I agree. There will be questions later on what we can do about the human element online.

Q82 **Baroness Buscombe:** My question moves on to another human element. Do you agree that anonymity can undermine freedom of expression? How does anonymity affect Wikipedia's culture and norms? Why does your system, which in so many ways is brilliant, still allow anonymity of those who alter people's profiles, often without regard for accuracy? Is it possible to have a two-tier system, verified and unverified, so that users who can say that they are verified can block unverified users? This is a subject I feel strongly about. Anonymity can make all the difference in undermining people's confidence in using Wikipedia, among others.

Jimmy Wales: There are a few elements here. Let us talk a bit about the benefits of anonymity and cases where it is quite important. I have met in person people who formerly lived in Iran and wrote about issues in Farsi, the language of Iran, that are very sensitive and difficult there. For example, writing about homosexuality, even in a very straightforward, scientific way, could be quite dangerous for them. It has been important for them to be able to access Wikipedia and carry out their work with a certain degree of anonymity.

We find that across the board; in lots of areas, people need anonymity. One very good user, who was well known on the platform as a straightforward, classic Wikipedia geek, also sought permission and used a second account, because he wanted to edit entries about paedophilia to make sure that paedophiles were not altering them to be propaganda. He did not feel comfortable doing that under his main account because it was tied to his real-life identity. He was a professor at a university and was afraid that, if his colleagues saw him editing paedophilia stuff on Wikipedia, they might come to a wrong conclusion. Those are cases where anonymity is very helpful.

It also introduces that two-tier concept that you mentioned. We find that, by and large, people create accounts on Wikipedia. You can edit without logging in, but then you show up as a number and it is obvious to anyone that you are not a known member of the community. You can create an account and have any sort of username you want, but it is a stable identity over time. Even if people do not know who you are in the real world, they know your reputation within the community, whether you do good work, whether you are problematic and so forth.

One of the most esteemed users on the site was the chair of the arbitration committee in English for many years and a full-time partner in a law firm, but he never tied his two identities together. It was not a secret exactly, but he edited under his username and he kept his professional life separate. That was no problem, because everybody knew him. In general within the Wikipedia community, people know one another. They do not usually try to stay completely secretive about who they are.

So we already have that in a soft way, but we do not make it formal, where people have to send in their ID. People do send in their IDs for certain positions of privilege within the community where they can see private information, check IP addresses and things such as that. In general, we find it is not necessary. Yes, it is complicated. When we see somebody editing, particularly, a biography in a manner that is not consistent with our values, we try to react to that as quickly as possible. I feel we could do better at that, but we have a strong passion for doing it well.

Baroness Buscombe: A number of people in public life—and of course we are all in public life—have been at the butt end of this. Profiles are changed. It is extraordinary how the biography of one person can be incredibly positive, almost gushing, and then for others the style is completely different and it misses out an awful lot, not always to the good. You have answered my question about the balance of anonymity, but is there still a question mark over people's trust in the system, because of the community, as you have referenced, being able to influence easily without any comeback?

Jimmy Wales: A few minutes ago, I said I would step back and offer advice to other platforms. If I step back and offer advice to us, we could do better by having a clear method for people who see a problem with an entry about themselves to know what they should do about it, and to have that be acted on in a faster manner. It is quite awkward; you do not want to go in and start editing yourself, because the next thing you know the tabloids are going to hear about it and it is a fiasco. People are often at a loss about what to do. We have guidelines and suggestions, but they should be clearer, and we should be faster to respond to people.

Given the open nature of the system, we have people who complain to us about their entry because, frankly, it is correct. That is the thing that bothers them the most. They wish they could have a PR puff piece and they campaign for that. It is very common for someone who is not on Wikipedia but feels that they should be because they have 10,000 followers on YouTube to ask, "Where is my Wikipedia page?" There is a segment of the community that has become sensitised to people trying to promote themselves. Unfortunately, that means they become desensitised to hearing, in a thoughtful way, someone's legitimate problem. I acknowledge that as a tough issue.

The Chair: It is always good to hear advice to oneself.

Q83 **Lord Vaizey of Didcot:** I have a slightly random question before I ask

my main question. Given that you have one of the five most visited websites in the world, that is generally regarded as one of great integrity, do Facebook and Twitter ever pick up the phone and say, "We are having problems. Do you have any advice"?

Jimmy Wales: No, not really. I should be fairer. On questions around the dissemination of fake news, I have had conversations, which were initiated by them and very welcome, about that problem at Facebook. I am talking not about fake news in the Donald Trump sense of any news he does not like but about actual fake websites disseminating misinformation. They were interested to hear what I thought about that.

Lord Vaizey of Didcot: Maybe we will explore that later on, because obviously what you have just said is very intriguing. Could I go back to your crazy uncle? I have been thinking about digital citizenship and what difference that can make. Most of the time, when we talk about digital citizenship, we tend to think about quite worthy forces in schools and corporations ticking boxes.

There are examples where communities get together to try to—it is a bit of a loaded word—re-educate people. I am thinking about Kick It Out for racism in football. This may or may not change mindsets, as we have seen recently on Twitter, but at least it changes public behaviour and has a big impact. Is there any mileage in this? Could your crazy uncle be educated in an etiquette ecosystem that gradually changes the mindset and behaviour, to stop people unleashing these inner demons when they are on the internet?

Jimmy Wales: I can speak to that only in a human way, with a couple of examples. Probably 10 years ago, I was in Taipei, Taiwan. I went there to give a speech and, while I was there, the local Wikipedia community helped me. There was a young kid who drove me around to go to my press interviews, so I got to know him. I chatted to him. We were talking about mainland China and Taiwan. He said, "I grew up in a very nationalist Taiwanese household. I was raised to believe that all the people in mainland China were simply brainwashed to be against us. Then I started working in Wikipedia". This was in a period when mainland China did not block Wikipedia, so it was open and that community was there. He said, "I started working with people in mainland China, and they are still wrong about a lot of things, but I can see their point on certain things". He started to change his mind from thinking, "They are mindless robots who have been indoctrinated by the state" to thinking, "They are people I disagree with, but they are people". That seemed like a positive impact, in that that community was beginning to have a dialogue with ordinary people.

That was just one person in one circumstance, but that can be a beneficial impact of interactions on the internet. When I was growing up in small-town Alabama, I had very funny ideas about what German people might be like, because I had never met any German people and I had no way of knowing anything. Then I met people online. I thought, "They are people. That is interesting". That healthy behaviour and

emotional, personal growth can come out of positive online interactions in lots of ways.

At the same time, if we think about the online behaviour of, say, Donald Trump, which tended to be about demonising people who disagreed, that can be quite reinforcing and emboldening to people. They can fall into a subset of people who think it is perfectly all right to talk about “woke SJWs” and so on. They are not having a political debate but are beginning to stop listening and thinking about things. That can be on the left or the right. The point is that it is quite a bad phenomenon.

A significant portion of people are basically pretty nice, and there is an opportunity for them to grow and change. Then there are a small number of people who are just jerks. There is not much we can do about that.

Q84 Baroness Bull: Lord Vaizey went back to your crazy uncle. I want to go back to your granny, if I may. You said, quite rightly, that you wanted to make a space where grannies were protected from hooligans. You broadened out your granny to be a representative of more vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. My question is about how these groups, which are typically underrepresented, can be encouraged, supported and to some extent protected to exercise freedom of expression online.

I am thinking in the first instance about women. You will be very well aware of the studies that show there is a greater percentage of male Wikipedia editors. In fact, very few are female, between 9% and 20%. There are findings that this leads to a gender imbalance in the subjects covered. My question is in two parts: what are you doing to address this specific issue of gender, and what do you know about other communities that may be underrepresented within the platform? I have asked about Wikipedia, and I am really interested to hear your thoughts on that, but if you want to broaden out your response to other platforms, we would also be very interested to hear that.

Jimmy Wales: We think of this as one of the biggest challenges and problems. We really need to address it. We are trying to address it in a number of ways. One of the first things that we are doing, have done and will continue to do is to look at the technology. How do you edit Wikipedia? It used to be the case that, when you clicked “edit”, by default you got wiki mark-up language, which is a particular formatting language. I am always very careful here. I do not mean to say that women are not good at computers; I mean that the language was accessible only to real computer geeks, and that tends overwhelmingly to be a young, male demographic. My father would not edit Wikipedia if he clicked and saw wiki mark-up language. He would be afraid, as a nice person, that he might break something. Making sure that the technology is accessible, and you do not need any special computer skills in order to edit, is one thing.

The second thing, probably the hardest but the most important, is the culture in the community, to make sure that we are welcoming, open and very firm about abuse. We have recently passed a new code of

conduct across the whole movement, as we call it. We do a lot of physical meet-ups and events; well, we used to, back when we were allowed to meet up. Now we do a lot of Zoom calls. The idea is that, throughout this entire universe of Wikipedia, everyone should feel welcomed. We all have a positive obligation to help people feel welcome.

Some of the issues that lead to this are quite deeply ingrained in culture. That is not an excuse, but it is something we have to be aware of. We have to take the extra step to overcome it. Some years ago—I remember when we did it—we did some focus-grouping. We asked highly qualified women, “Why do you not edit Wikipedia?” They were far more likely than similarly qualified men to say, “I am not sure I know enough”. I always say this as a joke about men, particularly 27 year-old tech geek men. It is not normal for them to say, “I am not sure I know enough about this”. That is a classic problem with men: we always think we can speak in an authoritative manner, as on Wikipedia. Women are more sensible. I say that in a joking way, but there is some truth to it. There are broader cultural questions around that. That does not mean there is nothing we can do about it; it means we have to be aware that the overconfident person from one demographic probably does not know any more than someone from another demographic who is less willing to come forward in that way. We have to think about that and try to deal with it.

When I think about the issue more broadly, outside Wikipedia and around freedom of expression, this is an area that I feel gets overlooked. In the US, there is a great debate about Section 230, which gives platforms the ability to moderate without making them responsible for everything that happens on them. There is a question about Section 230 and neutrality. In other words, should they still have that ability if they are not neutral? In my view, this is one of the most important techniques for the protection of particular groups. I want to see message boards run by, say, Greenpeace or a women’s group, where they have very strict rules. They say, “We are Greenpeace. We are not here to debate with you about the reality of climate change. If you want to debate climate change, there is a whole internet to do that. We are talking about solutions. We are going to block you if you say climate change is a hoax, and that is the end of that”. That is not neutral at all; that is their view, but that is the space they are creating.

The idea of safe spaces is sometimes overdone and gets mocked, but it is quite important. Your LGBT community or your Bible study group has a particular objective; they are talking to one another about a particular thing, and they need to be able to exclude people who, for whatever reason, are there to disrupt. So moderation, blocking people and preventing certain behaviours, as a way of encouraging the flourishing of free expression, are quite critical.

Baroness Bull: What is the gender balance on the arbitration committees? Do you have any guidelines or rules on that?

Jimmy Wales: We do not have any guidelines or rules, but within our communities we have traditionally seen far more women in positions of

leadership as compared to the rank and file. That would include our board and a lot of community organisations. I am not really sure why that is. In the early days, the first two elected members of the board were women. They were both very powerful figures in their own Wikipedia communities. The feeling was: "There aren't many women involved here, but the ones who are are quite powerful and they hold their own quite well".

Again, it gets into silly stereotypes, but these are things that I find have a certain amount of reality. Two 27 year-old men bickering with each other will often behave themselves better if a 40 year-old woman asks, "What are you guys hollering at each other for?" Behaviour is better when we have a diversity in our community, because it stops some of that silly nonsense.

Q85 Lord Griffiths of Burry Port: Jimmy, I have been very impressed, in all the answers you have given thus far, at your readiness to show an across-the-board response to the various questions and problems we have thrown at you. You have found the advantages and disadvantages in just about everything we have put up for you to talk about. That led into a remark you made along the way: that you were sceptical of regulation when it comes to moderation. I wish I had confidence that, in the great scheme of things, among all the people in your position in the big platforms of this world, there was a similar readiness to look across the board in that particular way.

Let us come back to regulation, this time in the field of how you promote yourselves. Last week's interviewees, both of them based in Cambridge, agreed that the lack of competition in the market was a major problem. My question is about regulation, not moderating discussion this time but perhaps broadening the field of providers. Would stronger regulation to promote competition and pluralism enhance freedom of expression online? I imagine you want to say, "A bit of this and a bit of that". What do you think?

Jimmy Wales: For better or worse, Wikipedia reflects a bit of my personality: "Let us examine both sides and try to describe something neutrally". Yes, competition is crucial: preserving space for new competitors and new innovations. When people are generally unhappy with existing services, which I believe they are, not entirely but in many ways, it is important that we make sure that new competitors can arise and function.

What does that mean in terms of practical regulation? There can be a lot of things. Some would be good ideas and some would be bad. This is going to be me speaking against a bit of regulation. Imposing regulations that are feasible to comply with only if you are already a big player can be a huge problem. We have seen that in a different industry. I have not done my full homework here, but, before Tesla, when was the last time a new automobile company launched? It was many decades ago. Part of the reason is that it is quite hard to comply with all the safety regulations. That is not to say that those safety regulations are necessarily bad, but it is to recognise that a certain degree of regulation

of that industry meant hardening the field and keeping the same competitors for many decades. It took someone who had made a billion elsewhere, who is also Elon Musk, to come in and say, "Let us do something completely radical: make all-electric cars and do it in a completely new way". We do not want to get into a situation where no one can launch something new to compete with Facebook, Twitter and so forth simply because we have passed some regulations that are impossible for small start-ups to comply with.

There might be other elements, such as anti-trust regulation. There are a lot of questions about something I would call the "right to install". You may have noticed in the news that a number of software companies are arguing with Apple about its requirement that, to buy digital goods, you have to buy them inside the app. Apple gets 30% of that, and they find that quite painful. There is a new email service called HEY, which is in a real dispute about this. It wants to sell an email service for, I think, \$100 a year. In order for somebody to have an app, it has to sell the service through the app and Apple gets 30%, which it thinks is an unfair number. It is very difficult to negotiate with Apple about that because it controls the platforms for all iPhones.

There are areas such as that where it becomes very difficult to compete simply because the existing players have a lock on the whole system. That is where I would focus a lot of attention.

Lord Griffiths of Burry Port: I do not know what sort of answer you will give to this. All these huge companies started relatively recently and in a small way. We have a lot of start-ups in the part of London I lived in for a number of years. It is called Silicon Roundabout. Is there still space for those sorts of endeavours and enterprises to take root and flourish now that the space is inhabited by all these big companies?

Jimmy Wales: Yes, I think so. There are still huge opportunities for new things to arise. We have seen this playing out just now. Due to a change in the terms of service of WhatsApp which allowed the WhatsApp app to share more data with Facebook, which owns WhatsApp, there has been this huge surge of people using Signal and Telegram. Signal is a very interesting non-profit organisation that has created a secure messaging app. People are switching. Whether they will continue to switch and those will become successful is not completely clear, but there is the opportunity for change and for things to fall out of favour. In just the last couple of years, we have seen the incredible rise of TikTok, which is a very silly but very popular app. It has changed people's usage habits away from certain other services. There is a possibility of competition. We need to be careful to make sure that consumers have a choice to leave services that are causing damage to society through bad moderation policies.

Q86 **Baroness Grender:** Thank you so much for all the evidence so far. It has been really fascinating. We heard you loud and clear when you said no thanks to regulation, but you said earlier that some reforms to the law can be made. Is there any kind of crazy uncle clause that you would add? In the UK, we are heading for an online harms Bill at the moment. I

know you favour the Section 230 approach, and I completely understand why. At the same time, what laws, legal duties or liabilities could be attached to platforms? You have talked in the past, including in your interview with *The Economist Asks*, about the constant use of algorithms to drive bad traffic. What is the crazy uncle clause you would apply?

Jimmy Wales: It needs to be clearer what responsibility platforms have when appropriately notified of something harmful and how they deal with that. I will give an example of something that works, in my opinion, quite well; some people in the music industry would disagree in certain contexts. In the Digital Millennium Copyright Act in the US is a very clear notice and takedown procedure. This happens fairly often at Wikipedia, although not that often. Our community polices most copyright violations. When somebody notifies us of a copyright violation, we have a choice. We can take it down; we always have that right. We can notify the user who uploaded it and say, "There has been a copyright complaint. Do you want to respond?" If they respond, "No, I do have the right to this", and the other person says, "No, you do not", we put them together and it is up to them to fight it out. They can go to court, or whatever, and we have to respect that outcome.

We do not have the same sort of regime around a lot of abusive behaviour, libel and things such as that. It is not as clear where our responsibilities are, when we should take things down and so forth. At Wikipedia, we just prefer to get rid of anything we think is negative or abusive. We are trying to build an encyclopaedia. Where someone has a complaint and says, "I think this abuses me", is there a process that could be pursued which could end up in a court in a plausible way rather than them asking, "What can I do? In the meantime, is it going to be taken down while we go to court"? That is where I would look. For some of these behaviours, where we see online abuse, the victims often feel that they have no path. With copyright, you are normally talking about players who have some financial ability. An author who sees that their book has been taken down is an author; they make money from that, have a publisher, et cetera. There is a possibility that some financial resources can be put towards it. If I am a gay teenager and someone is being unbelievably abusive to me, what can I do? If your answer is that I can sue them in court, am I going to sue another teenager in court? That is not plausible.

We have to think about what those mechanisms are. It could be in the area of law, although you do not want a situation where platforms take something down as soon as anybody says "boo" about it. That is not conducive to the right answer either. We need more clarity, so people feel there is a process. One of my recommendations to platforms is to ask whether, when people feel wronged, they have a clear path. Do they know and can they easily find out what they are supposed to do about it? Do they feel that, whether or not they prevail in the end, they have been listened to and that a reasonable process has been followed?

Baroness Greender: I am so glad you raised the issue of the gay teenager, because my other question is about the right to privacy. You have already mentioned that the WhatsApp end-to-end encryption

process is changing. We also have more and more of a creep of states being enabled by laws to break that privacy. Where do you stand on that right to privacy for individuals accessing the internet?

Jimmy Wales: I am a big advocate of the right to privacy. It is very important. We can look at the current state of the law across Europe, with the right to be forgotten and GDPR. GDPR, which in general is well intentioned and not a terrible piece of legislation, has some problematic side effects. If you go right now to the website of the *Decatur Daily*—Decatur is a small town near Huntsville, Alabama, near where my mother lives—you cannot visit it from Europe, or indeed from the UK, which is something like Europe, because of GDPR. The owners of that paper, a small-town newspaper, presumably saw that they could be held liable in Europe. They do not do much business in Europe and have very few readers there. They found it easier to say, “We just will not serve Europe”.

At the last count I saw, from a fellow who keeps up with this, there are some 800 newspapers, small-town newspapers for the most part, that you cannot access from Europe. Whenever I mention this online—and I do sometimes because I find it annoying that I have to use a VPN to read a local newspaper—people say, “Well, they should stop abusing our data”. I say, “This is a small-town newspaper in Alabama. They are probably not doing anything with your data. They just do not want to do anything bad”.

If you think that GDPR is preventing Facebook from doing things you do not like with your data, you are probably mistaken. In fact, the abuses people are really worried about still go on, maybe less than they did. Yes, privacy is a really important value. Laws around privacy are really important. But, if we are not careful about how we do it, we may introduce regulation that causes the small players simply to leave the market. It is complicated.

Q87 The Lord Bishop of Worcester: Thank you very much indeed for this afternoon’s session, which has been tremendous. Thank you also for Wikipedia, which seems to me to be a very good thing, as part of the public square. I am grateful for it, as I know are very many people. We are concerned with public policy in the United Kingdom, but I wonder whether you can give us a perspective on what you think the UK can do to promote freedom of expression online across the globe. Clearly, what we do here will have implications elsewhere.

Jimmy Wales: That is a fantastic question. I know for sure that, in jurisdictions where there is very little freedom of expression, they watch very carefully things that go on in the western world. I have been in conversation with the Minister of Propaganda in China, who over dinner insisted to me that Chinese law around the internet was no different from the law in Europe: certain things are illegal, and it is just a local, cultural difference. Yes, what we do has an impact. Preserving the fundamental attributes of the internet, the openness and the ability for people to link or to start new things, is a great demonstration of the possibilities.

I will tell you a story. I was in Moscow once, speaking at a conference. I was at dinner with the editor of a big magazine in Russia. He said to me, "I could make Wikipedia say whatever I wanted. I would just find a few of your editors and give them \$100 each, and they would write whatever I wanted". I said, "That is interesting, because that would be quite difficult. Those editors would have to defend their actions to people who weren't being paid. The community would have a big discussion about 'Why are you doing this strange thing?' You would be very unlikely to succeed, whereas if I want your magazine to say anything I want it to, I just have to bribe you, one person".

That openness is an important and powerful mechanism for defending the good values of freedom of expression. That is where public policy can really be strong in the UK.

The Chair: Jimmy Wales, thank you very much indeed for coming before the committee. You have given us plenty of food for thought, and we will be thinking about all this over the next few weeks. I am very grateful to you.