

D4.1. Community Mapping

January 2025 Summary

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Introduction

The DEM-Debate project is a collaborative initiative involving Wikimedia Europe (WMEU), the University of Amsterdam (UvA), and the Eurecat Technology Centre of Catalonia. It aims to explore how community-governed platforms, specifically Wikipedia, address disinformation during elections. A key component of this project is understanding the current state of Wikimedia communities, their practices, and their capacity to counter disinformation. To this end, a community mapping exercise was undertaken. The mapping aimed to gather insights from various Wikimedia affiliates and volunteers across Europe, focusing on their operational context and activities related to disinformation. This document summarizes the methodology employed in the mapping, the key learnings derived from it, and recommendations for future community engagement, aligning with the project's goal of enhancing the information ecosystem.

The community mapping initiative serves as a crucial step in the DEM-Debate project. It provides a structured approach to understand the diverse landscape of Wikimedia communities. The mapping process involves online interviews, document analysis, and a questionnaire. It aims to collect information on community practices, challenges, and experiences related to disinformation during elections. The insights gained from this mapping are intended to inform the project's subsequent research and engagement activities. These findings will help shape policy recommendations and improve fact-checking efforts within the Wikipedia ecosystem.

By understanding the specific needs and practices of these communities, the project aims to foster more effective collaboration and support their vital role in combating online disinformation.

It is important to note, that Community Mapping documents are living documents, as the process of collecting insights among mostly volunteering-based communities requires time and relationship strengthening to allow and motivate diverse contributions.

Methodology

The community mapping methodology was designed to gather comprehensive insights into the practices and capacities of Wikimedia communities across Europe. It employed a multi-faceted approach, beginning with the establishment of **relationships between a dedicated network management specialist and community members**. This foundational step facilitated open communication and trust, which was essential for subsequent data collection. The methodology included one-hour **online interviews** to understand each member's operational context, followed by the **mapping of key documents** such as reports and strategies. A **questionnaire**, developed in collaboration with project partners, was then administered, though responses were limited.

The data collected included both publicly available information and insights gathered from the communities, as well as more detailed internal information being stored separately for clarity.

This approach allowed the project to gather a wide range of data, although the challenges in engaging with community members during busy periods should be highlighted.

Interviews

The interview process for the DEM-Debate project was designed to gather in-depth information about the experiences and needs of Wikimedia community members. A network management specialist was brought on board to lead this effort and establish connections with various network members. The goal was to create a comfortable environment for open communication, which was essential for collecting reliable data. The interview process was not just about gathering data, but also about **building trust and fostering a collaborative environment**. Initial outreach was done through email, with personalized messages sent to members. These messages introduced the specialist's role and outlined the goals of the interviews. Follow up emails were sent to ensure members got the initial request and to encourage participation. The outreach also included mentioning the DEM-Debate project and its goals.

The core of the interview process consisted of one-hour online interviews. These interviews:

- were structured to allow flexibility, with an agenda that focused on: getting to know each member, learning about their current activities and needs, and understanding how to build a support system;
- included a brief introduction to the DEM-Debate project;

- aimed to understand the specific context and capacity of each network, which was important for tailoring the project's activities and resource allocation;
- were meant to be informal, focusing on open dialogue rather than strict adherence to research questions;
- were designed to provide a more personal and nuanced understanding of each community's situation.

Interviewees were given the opportunity to choose a time that worked for them. Overall 21 interviews were conducted with representatives of 19 organizations (members of WMEU network).

Documents mapping

The key document mapping phase involved a systematic review of materials provided by Wikimedia affiliates. The network management specialist collected a variety of documents from each affiliate. These documents included: reports, strategies, and other publicly available materials.

This process:

- was crucial for understanding each affiliate's strategic priorities, activities, and existing approaches to tackling disinformation;
- provided a baseline understanding of the affiliates' focus areas and whether disinformation and fact-checking were already part of their activities
- allowed initial document review intended to create an efficient method to identify whether these topics were already covered in their work;
- was done to support the initial interviews and to provide context for further conversations;
- aimed to identify key themes, practices, and challenges highlighted in these documents;
- together with interviews, helped to identify key personnel within each affiliate, as well as relevant contacts for disinformation-related topics.

The documents mapping was combined with information gathered from interviews to provide a comprehensive view of each affiliate's landscape. It helped fill in some gaps in information. This step was essential to understand the current state of members' activities and organizational health. The information gathered was used to understand how to best collaborate with the members, and build a trusting relationship that is needed for the project, and for future activities. The public information collected and mapping of documents created, will be shared with the community and made available to be leveraged for future collaborations.

Community insights collection

The core of the input collection process involved distributing a questionnaire to community members. This questionnaire was designed to gather specific insights on how each community tackles disinformation. The questionnaire focused on several key areas including:

- Locally relevant pages and topics
- Practices and experiences in tackling disinformation.
- The impact of laws, the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) on their activities.

Members were encouraged to fill the document collaboratively, and were asked to specify the roles of those who participated. They were also instructed to describe why a question might not be relevant for them if that was the case. While the aim was to gather as much information as possible, it was acknowledged that some communities might have limited capacity.

Despite the effort to reach out to members and the flexibility offered in the process, the response rate was limited. Only three affiliates returned the completed questionnaire. There were a number of reasons for this low rate of return:

- The end-of-year period was a busy time for members with other commitments
- The questions were very specific
- Some language communities have limited engagement.

Despite this low response rate, the questionnaires that were returned provided important information about the communities' practices, challenges and the impact of regulations.

The process also highlighted the need for more informal engagement strategies.

Key Learnings

The community mapping and engagement process provided valuable insights into the structure, capacity, and engagement dynamics of Wikimedia communities across Europe. This process revealed a diverse landscape of organizational structures, varying levels of resources and capacity, and different approaches to community engagement. These key learnings underscore the importance of tailored support and engagement strategies that are sensitive to the unique needs and contexts of each Wikimedia affiliate. The following points summarize the key findings from this activity.

Community structure and capacity

1. Many members operate with a small core staff, often 3-5 individuals, and rely heavily on volunteer contributions.

2. Many members lack the capacity to implement their activities to the extent they would like, including activities related to disinformation.
3. There is a widespread need for more resources, including staff, time, and funding, to fully engage in cross-network activities.
4. There is a need to better manage knowledge transfer between members, as opportunities to learn from others are often underutilized.

Community engagement

1. Members focus on diverse areas, such as GLAM initiatives, cultural heritage, conflict moderation, higher education, and advocacy, which can impact their capacity to participate in other initiatives such as research similar to DEM-Debate projects.
2. The end-of-year period is a challenging time for members, due to other commitments and fundraising activities, which negatively affects their capacity to participate in new projects.
3. Personalized outreach and relationship-building are essential for encouraging member participation, however, some members may still not engage due to bandwidth.
4. Informal conversations and flexible agendas are more effective for engaging members than very specific research-focused questions.

Recommendations

Based on information, experience and relationships build through this mapping activity, our main recommendations for further community engagement include:

1. **Prioritizing relationship building:** Given that personalized outreach and relationship-building are crucial for encouraging participation, future engagement should focus on establishing and nurturing connections with members before launching into specific project requests. This includes making time for introductory conversations, as well as following up to make sure members feel seen and heard. The network management specialist's role is key here, and this role should continue to prioritize one-on-one interaction to build trust.
2. **Leveraging existing community in-person meetings to collect insights and distribute outcomes of the project:** instead of creating entirely new events, the project should strategically integrate data collection and dissemination activities into existing in-person gatherings such as meetups and the General Assembly. This approach maximizes resource efficiency by utilizing pre-planned gatherings, and also increases the likelihood of participation from members who are already committed to attending these events.
3. **Acknowledging limited capacity of Members:** The project needs to acknowledge that most members have limited capacity and cannot contribute to additional activities beyond their core operations. Many Wikimedia chapters operate with small teams and rely heavily on

volunteers. The project should set realistic expectations regarding member participation, and adjust its timeline and project goals accordingly. The mapping project showed that many members lack the capacity to implement their activities to the extent they would like, including activities related to disinformation.

4. **Employing informal and flexible engagement:** The mapping process showed that members respond better to informal conversations and flexible agendas rather than very specific research-focused questions. Engagement activities should prioritize open discussions, allowing for a two-way exchange of ideas and feedback.
5. **Acknowledging and value contributions:** It is essential to acknowledge and value all contributions made by members, regardless of the level of their involvement. This could include thanking them publicly, providing updates on how their input has been used, and highlighting the impact of their participation. This could also mean co-creating communications and dissemination materials that also credit the members who contributed to the project.

January 2025

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