

# Maher-Villa Conversation LibrePlanet 2021

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

organization, wikipedia, people, wikimedia, community, board, world, knowledge, nonprofits, governance, sunlight foundation, building, encyclopedia, culture, mission, question, values, transparency, funders, sunlight

## SPEAKERS

Bob, Luis Villa, Katherine



Bob 00:11

Hello Libre Planet 2021! This talk is titled "The Challenges of Change for Value-Centered Non-Profits" and will be presented by Luis Villa and Katherine Maher. Luis is the co-founder and general counsel at Tidelift, with a deep free software resume that includes work for the Wikimedia Foundation, the Mozilla Foundation, the GNOME Foundation, and the Open Source Initiative. Katherine is the CEO of the Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit organization that operates Wikipedia and Wikimedia projects. And she's a longtime advocate for free software and a free society. In this talk, Luis and Katherine will present their experiences as leaders at values-centered nonprofits that have undergone massive organizational changes, and the lessons they learn. These are the stories of how one organization tried to rebuild after a crisis, and another proactively reimaged its role in the broader free community. And our speakers hope that they will help attendees envision how their own communities can address the past and look towards a more equitable future. Thank you.



Luis Villa 01:26

Hey, you know, I wrote that... I wrote that introduction months ago when we submitted this talk, and it seems perfectly timely now. Right?



Luis Villa 01:37

You know, I wanted to start—today is going to be mostly interview style. Katherine has so much hands on experience with some of these things that I really want to have that conversation with her. But we're going to discuss two things.



Luis Villa 01:50

And I wanted to give a little bit of a preface before we jump in. One of them is deeply sobering, how boards and community leadership can respond to sexual harassment by a member of that same leadership. The other I think, is the flip side of that is deeply exciting, and how can boards and community leadership examine and update their mission in response to change. Because we are working in technology we're inevitably exposed to change, and we can put hands to ears and pretend that's not the case. Or we can jump in and embrace that.



Luis Villa 02:23

Before we start, I want to stress a while we're presenting this at a Free Software Foundation conference, the challenges we'll be discussing today apply to many value center tech nonprofits. In fact, Katherine and I heard just this week about another tech nonprofit facing these kinds of problems, to the point where they've had to shut down a main community forum because of repeated flame wars around some of these issues.



Luis Villa 02:44

There are two main reasons I think why these problems are common in the tech nonprofit world. First of all, as I already mentioned, all institutions operating in tech (for-profit and non-profit) work in a space that changes very quickly. So organizations can be faced with suddenly changing external facts—new technology, new industry, economics, new applications of old technology—that might cause them to question or reassess their mission. Second, many tech nonprofits were founded in a period where tech was at a low point in terms of diversity, with few or no women in leadership, and often built cultures of at best ignorance about women and underrepresented minorities and at worst, callous machismo. So it's not surprising that, again, like many for profits, many value-centered tech nonprofits have found it hard to reconcile the way things have always been done with improved expectations coming from staff coming from donors and coming from

communities. So while we will, of course, be talking about specific nonprofits that Katherine and I have experience with, definitely this is something that applies across the industry.



Luis Villa 03:51

So we're gonna talk primarily today about two organizations that Katherine has deep experience with. The first, of course, is the Wikimedia Foundation, which is what Katherine is best known for, and has been an amazing leader for for five years. And, but also a little less better known is the Sunlight Foundation, which was a nonprofit dedicated to increasing transparency through the use of free and open source software and DC. So tell us a little bit about Sunlight Foundation, and how did you come to be on that board, Katherine?



Katherine 04:21

Yeah, so the Sunlight Foundation, for folks who are a little bit less familiar is, as Luis said, an organization that was really focused on governmental transparency. To the extent that it intersects in this space it did work in policy, but really was known, I think, in the late 2000s, for being an organization that was very focused on open source tools that would allow for people who were interested in good governance to be able to deploy those for a variety of different ways of really sort of interrogating the performance of governance, and primarily focused at the national level, so we're really talking to us federal government. At some point, that organization went through a transition, and then a leadership change. The internal workings were not so visible to the outside, and there was a determination that that organization was going to shut down.



Katherine 05:09

For someone like myself who'd worked for a long time with the Sunlight Foundation and very much valued what they'd given to the transparency and open data open government world, I was one of the number of people who advocated that that the organization's mission hadn't run its course and for my sins ended up on a board that was meant to help the organization reinvent what its future would be. I think I was on the board for probably no more than three months, when an article landed in the Huffington Post that went back 10 years looking at a history of exclusion— I mean that it's the opposite of inclusive culture in the organization. But not just exclusion, a culture of exclusion and harassment, but also assault, credible assaults of sexual assault. And so as a board of an organization that was trying to figure out what the path forward for the organization was, we realized very

quickly that there was no possible path forward without really looking at our past and where we had come from and what that had done in terms of the culture of the institution, but also the culture of the broader open government space.



Luis Villa 06:14

Right. Right. And so that, I mean, that's such an interesting tension, right? These are organizations, you know, as I mentioned, a lot of organizations were founded around certain set of values. And then, you know, it turns out you talk transparency, or you talk freedom and empowerment externally, and then maybe in the in the day to day workings not so much. How did that, you know, the big thing that came out of that was a big report that, I guess, maybe we'll try to link to in chat, but it's pretty findable for those who are following along. How did that like—how did that process go? From a board perspective? You know, what, decide what made you decide that that was the right route to go?



Katherine 07:02

Well, as soon as we saw this in the Huffington Post, I mean, there are some very pragmatic considerations as a board, and I'll start with those. And the fact that I'm starting with these doesn't mean that the values considerations weren't as important.



Katherine 07:14

But the pragmatic considerations are: okay, you've got an organization in which you now have a high profile accusation of sexual assault, someone very well positioned within that organization being accused of sexual assault. And in this case, I think it was a charge of attempted rape. The article detailed a culture of heavy drinking and harassment, intimidation. What does that then mean for an organization that is attempting to do work in sort of a progressive space of open government and transparency? How do you square those values from an institutional mission standpoint? That's one question. Another question is, as an organization that's trying to hire, what does this mean for your employer brand? How can you even be an organization that's competitive in the space if you've got this culture out there on the books? And then the third pragmatic question is we're a nonprofit organization? What does this mean for like our funding, our funders, and the relationships that we have with other partner institutions who may want to use the tools? So those are the really practical considerations, the board had to think about.



Katherine 08:15

The values questions, which I actually believe are just as important, were really what does this mean to be an organization that focuses on transparency in an environment in which we've not been transparent about our past? What does it mean to be an institution that sort of nominally has, if not progressive values in the sense of political progressive values, progressive values in the sense of inclusion, a recognition that participation is critically important, sort of the ways in which we think about openness more broadly—is everyone being able to participate? How can we square that with the institution that are meant to be? And what do we do to think about justice and redress for (primarily the women) who are subjected to this culture, but everyone was subjected to this abusive culture.



Katherine 08:58

And myself and another member of the board, a woman named Zoe Reiter who was very active in the government transparency movement and was at Transparency International for many years, decided that this was a no brainer, we had to do an external investigation. The challenges of doing this, however, for something that was 10 years old, and for whom there were numerous victims, who had really moved on from the organization and sometimes had no interest in even being in contact with us, given the traumatic experiences they had, were pretty, pretty tough. So we launched an investigation, we reached out to everyone who'd been involved with the organization we also put not just as employees but also trying to find people who've been involved in transparency camps and other sorts of initiatives that Sunlight had had run. We put out calls for participation on our blog; we hired a third party legal firm to do investigation to do the investigation to do interviews with people who have been affected. We were very open in the way that we thought about who should be included in that not just employees, but anyone who had something that they wanted to raise and that produced a report that we then published to the general public, really trying to account for some of the things that have been found. I view to this day that is being an incomplete report, just by the nature of some of the challenges we ran into in that process that I mentioned.



Luis Villa 10:15

Yeah. I mean, it's very hard. And I don't think you should beat yourself up over that, right? All of these things are in some way, by nature, incomplete, I think? There's somebody actually asked in chat, I think a great question—do you feel like that board position was almost a glass cliff, in the sense of having been handed, you know, welcome to the board. Here's this problem.



Katherine 10:41

I think in retrospect, it made me understand why the institution had initially attempted to shut itself down. But I think the challenge there, and perhaps the lesson that comes out of it, that is really key to the reason we're having this conversation is, internally, whatever the prior board had made a determination around—whatever the internal culture was of the organization—that was not visible to those of us who were stakeholders in that organization. There was no public accounting for that culture. And so when folks like myself run right off that class cliff, perhaps we did so because we didn't have an understanding of what had been previously grappled with as an institution. And so for me, this is one of the reasons that—it's a hard line to navigate, because there are real claims here that have reliability, we're dealing with liability, institutionally liability for individuals, statutes of limitations in the case of sexual assault, right? These are difficult things to navigate.



Katherine 11:41

But the the need for organizations to reckon in some way publicly with the communities that they serve, particularly nonprofit organizations, which have a public mission and a public duty, in order for us to really think about how we move the sector forward. So when we published this report, part of what we were hoping for was that it could provide not just an accounting, but we also detailed the way we approached this because we wanted other organizations to be able to approach this in similar challenges with a little bit of a blueprint for how one might do it. Particularly small orgs.



Katherine 12:14

There were four of us on the board, you know. Sunlight is a small organization—15 people. The idea that an even smaller organizations don't have the resources to do it was something that we wanted to stand against and say, actually, this is something that every and all organizations should be able to take on regardless of the resources available to them.



Luis Villa 12:32

Yeah, I was gonna ask as my next question—were there parts of the process that—is obviously a painful process, unfortunately, one to have to go through—but are there any parts that you look back on and say, I'm really glad we did that report? And sounds like at least one of them is that you think that there's a playbook there that other organizations can learn from? Right. But are there others?

K

Katherine 12:57

I am really glad we did the report. I worry, and I think Zoe and others who are involved in it worry too, is that the lesson? Is [the lesson] that Sunlight shut down, right? And there is a component piece there where people might not see it as a roadmap, but a cautionary tale. And so I do want to you know, we want to get into that a little bit. But I think that there are a couple things that I'm really glad that we did.

K

Katherine 13:22

I'm glad that we stood up and said this is something that we need to address. And despite the fact that this was 10 years ago, and none of us were on the board at this particular time, there is an accounting that we owe to the people who are part of this community, to the people who are our stakeholders in this work, to the people who use our tools, to the people who advocated, who donated, who went on to have careers who were shaped by this experience. And I don't just mean, folks who were in the space still—I mean, folks who were driven out of the space because of the experiences they had. There was an accountability that we owed. And I think it is important that we grappled with that, even if it was sort of an imperfect outcome.

K

Katherine 13:58

I do think that it offers perhaps one of the few examples in which an institution sided with victims very publicly, in trying to think about what the future was, and tried not to pull punches that also protected the institutional, reputational aspects of the organization itself. You know, we I think were empowered by the fact that we were meant to be an open organization. And so we were able to say we're going to lean into this openness and really stand for what transparency means including scrutinizing ourselves. The downside, as I said, is that as we went through this, we were really hoping that funders would step up and say this is actually something that matters. This is something we want to hold all of our organizations that are fundies accountable to. We want to support you in this work and we didn't see anything like that. We tried to organize panels and conversations in the aftermath of this to actually discuss what it means to have a culture of accountability. Very little support. The woman who first came forward with these allegations, Sarah Schacht, who is I think somebody who needs to be recognized and held up as someone who's incredibly courageous in her work and bringing this to the public attention, was also trying to really think about how to make this part of the broader conversation. And she also struggled to find purchase.



Katherine 15:18

So there's a disappointing lesson there too, which is what do we can as nonprofit organizations, what are the ways in which we've encouraged funders and other sort of supporters and stakeholders to really step forward? And not only support organizations that are going through these types of internal interrogations, but also really looking at how—what's the accountability? And what are the expectations for nonprofits to really create cultures of inclusion and safety for the people who they who they both employ and the people whom they serve?



Luis Villa 15:49

That's such a tough balance for any leadership of any organization. I don't think that's unique to nonprofits. Though, sometimes we of course take it a little harder when we're when we're nonprofits.



Luis Villa 16:03

I was really struck by one quote from the report that said, that people interviewed in the report: "participants indicated that Sunlight has the history, the profile, the expertise, and the staff to generate helpful advances in the areas of civic technology and open government. At the same time, participants indicate participants indicated that for Sunlight to successfully move forward, it must fully acknowledge its history and must embrace a commitment to lead on equity and inclusion."



Luis Villa 16:32

And sounds like there was that tension throughout of wanting to do the right thing. And ultimately, as you alluded to, but I just want to say for those who are not familiar with the history, shortly after the publication of this report, the Sunlight Foundation did choose to shut down. But, you know, when you and I were talking the other day, you told me—and I'd love to hear a little bit more about this—that part of the reason that the organization felt like shutting down was the right thing... obviously, there was a lot of interpersonal issues and things like what you've just been talking about, but also there was a sense that Sunlight had put some ideas out there at the right time. And that some of those ideas were, you know, so broadly seeded, that Sunlight was not needed in the same way as it originally was. Right?



Katherine 17:17

Yeah. And I think that I'm really glad you raised that. Because I do think that the lesson isn't that we shut down because there was a sexual assault allegation, and we investigated it. Absolutely not! The lesson is that we shut down because as we went through this process of interrogating where we were, as an organization, and the culture that was, you know, part of the organization, there was a question of what would be required for us to sort of shift the organization into a more inclusive space? And the answer is a lot of that work had already been done by the staff that were there, as we were going through this process.



Katherine 17:50

But the other piece of it was, does it work? Does the world sort of need a Sunlight right now? And the answer, I think, in large part was not to do the same things that Sunlight had been doing, right? So the civic tech space was quite mature at that point in time. Is quite mature. You have many organizations that are not identified as tech organizations that use the sorts of open tools that Sunlight built to continue their programmatic efforts today around transparency and accountability. The organization spawned an entire community of practitioners that have gone on to do really great work in other spaces. And we felt as though that sort of national-level governmental transparency through tech wasn't necessarily needed in the same way as it had been 15 years prior. And that's okay, that's a good thing.



Katherine 18:45

And so, we realized that in order for us to find a new way to rethink our mission, we would have actually had to really recompose the organization. And maybe that wasn't necessary. Maybe it's okay to say a nonprofit has run its course, it has done the thing that it set out to do, and it is, it's fine for us to say thank you so much. Thanks for all the fish. And we're out. And I think that that's hopefully where we landed, we actually spun off all the teams into other organizations, they were supported, you know, we were able to find people who wanted to bring them on board. And they've all landed, landed really well. They're really talented folks. But it's okay, that the Sunlight Foundation is no longer here.



Luis Villa 19:25

Right. But that's actually I think, a great transitioning point to talk about the more optimistic part of our conversation, which is of course, Wikimedia, and its best known project Wikipedia. On the surface, this is a wildly successful project, right? It's got a huge

volunteer community. It's one of the most widely visited websites on earth and it is really, to the naive outsider it looks like it is really fulfilling its mission and its vision of ... boy, this is so embarrassing! I used to be able to practically have this practically tattooed on my forehead...



Katherine 20:05

"A world in which every single human can freely share in the sum of all knowledge"  
[laughing]



Luis Villa 20:10

Ding ding ding ding! And boy, you know, we're getting there, right? I mean, I still say "we". I haven't been there in five years. And yet I still say we! I gave a talk at LibrePlanet about a year after I left the foundation. And it was not saying "we" in there was just, you know...



Katherine 20:30

I'm gonna say it's always a we because Wikipedia is a thing we do together. And all of us who read it and donate to it and to contribute code to it, and are either employees or volunteers, we are all we. Wikipedia is the thing that belongs to all of us.



Luis Villa 20:44

So how did you bring all those different "all of us"es into this strategy effort? You decided, you know, despite this, the surface level... boy, it looks like it's successful by every metric we can reasonably think of for a nonprofit, right? And yet, you decided under your leadership that there needed to be a big public strategy effort, and you need to bring in all of us—the big everyone, right, so tell us a little bit about that. Why did you do it? How did you bring in so many people?



Katherine 21:14

Oh, man, I did it because I am a naive optimist. So I joined the Wikimedia Foundation in 2014. We turn 15 in 2016, January 2016, I think, and I was struck by the fact that when I joined the Wikimedia Foundation, in 2014, we had been building from a point of our founding, but we were not building toward something. So we were building away from an established sort of identity, an encyclopedia that... a free encyclopedia that anyone can edit, you know, a grounding in what does it mean to be a part of open culture and free

and libre software culture, a understanding that we want to you know, that we were based on this idea of a wiki that is lightweight and flexible, the more sort of identity of the product, as you know, this idea of the unit of the product as being the article page. But I didn't know where we were going.

K

Katherine 22:11

We had gotten really good at building an encyclopedia—imperfect, right? like, there's much more to do—but we knew that we were building an encyclopedia, and yet sort of ... to what end, because "a free world in which every single human being can share in the sum of all knowledge"—there's a lot more than an encyclopedia there. And there's all sorts of questions about what to share mean, and what does the sort of the distribution of knowledge mean? And what does all knowledge mean? And who are all these people every single human being, because, yeah, we've got like a billion and a half devices, visiting our sites every month. But even if we're generous, and say, that's a billion people, that is not the entirety of the world's population. And so what's the sort of the in between? Between a free encyclopedia anyone can edit, and this idea of that, sort of asymptotic vision, that we'll never cross the line, but we're gonna we're gonna keep trying. And, and we didn't know. And we didn't, you know, we didn't know, we were 15 years old.

K

Katherine 23:01

And I was struck by the fact that we needed to know, because we needed to know where we were going, we needed to know what the guidance was going to be for making decisions and investments. We needed to think about, you know, as we're, we're dealing and I with all, all, all of my love to every single person who has made our stack possible for what it is today to support the incredible scale at which it operates. We refer to it as a just in time architecture, right? Like every single thing that we do at Wikimedia is sort of building on a little bit of craft from the day before, in order for it to scale to the way that it in the way that it can in order for it to be sort of incremental and evolutionary.

K

Katherine 23:38

But it's not a roadmap. And so we didn't know where to invest, how to invest, when to set up sort of, you know, new server colos, when to think about new caching centers, how you know, what is the architecture meant to be is everyone's moving towards a more service oriented architecture. And that really wasn't how we were built, everything was super custom and bespoke, and we were running all these [garbled].



Katherine 23:59

And the same is true of the community side. I'm focusing a little bit more on the technical, but it's absolutely the same is true on the community side, community, government, governance, community grant making all of it. And the biases and balances in the Wikimedia community are sort of legendary. It's about 85% male in terms of the number of people the representation of people who participate and contribute to Wikipedia. The majority of our user base is really in western or global north countries, high socioeconomic indice countries. We are underrepresented in many places in the world in which populations are growing, many of the languages—it's not just smaller languages, it's really large languages like Hindi that are underrepresented relative to population.



Katherine 24:39

And so it seems like we needed to have a plan. What we did in 2017, was launch a whole conversation on what does the next 15 years look like? We sort of aimed at 2030, which is a little squishy on 15 years, but we aimed at 2030 with this idea that if we spent... if we looked far enough into the future, we might actually be able to think about sort of what comes between "a free encyclopedia anyone can edit" and where we ultimately are meant to be, and gives ourselves a vision for where we would be at 30 years compared to where we were at 15.



Luis Villa 25:14

That question of the timeline, it's so easy to get stuck in the too-near future gets you very stuck in it, you know, and then the too-far future can be really hypothetical and abstract, right?



Katherine 25:27

Yeah. And that's why I was like, 15 years! But it was really kind of 10 by the time we launched. And the reason for that was, it was for it was for a couple of reasons. One, anyone who's ever done long-range planning knows that it's incredibly hard. And futurists tell you, it's virtually impossible for people to really, truly think on a long range cycle. So I aimed for 10, with the idea that it might give us five, but if you tell people five, they give you two. So the idea is if we say 10, we might get five. But also, if you say 10, all of us who have been contributors to projects for a long time, part of open communities for a long time, there, whether we realize it or not, we have a built in incentive to sort of maintain our prominence, our role and our essentialism within a community, I am an essential contributor to the community, I'm an essential maintainer of a project, because it is part

of, you know, why we joined the project. It's what gives us that intrinsic and extrinsic value of being part of the project.



Katherine 26:22

But if we look 10 years down the line, we can actually liberate ourselves from some of the expectations of what our role might be. I knew I wasn't going to still be at the Wikimedia Foundation in the 10 to 15 years, it was okay for me to say, what would a future structure look like in which I'm not the executive director, you know, and then the same thing is true for our community members, for our employees, for our contributors, they can look 10 years down the line and say "Well, what do I hope for for this project? Perhaps after I'm no longer as inside of it?" The other thing about 10 years is it's pretty easy, as someone said to me, "count babies". Where the future is kind of easy to tell based on where we are today. And so we were able to look and say, you know, 42% of the world's population is going to be African by the year 2100. What is our current distribution in across the African continent? Where were our contributors, including technical contributors, again, for this audience? No, we were nowhere where we needed to be. So what do we need to start investing in in order to start shifting that balance?



Luis Villa 27:18

And boy, so many, we could obviously host a whole day conference. And you have in fact, held many multiday conferences on exactly this topic.



Katherine 27:27

Many, many multiday conferences.



Luis Villa 27:28

And so I actually want to talk to ... somebody in IRC asked about the ideal of open governance. And I think that has been a two edged sword in a lot of, I would say, technolibertarian, and in a good sense of technolibertarian. I was talking to somebody yesterday and I said, technolibertarian, and she said, "Oh, like Rand Paul." I'm like (grimaces).



Luis Villa 27:56

I think there's a good... a hopeful strain of technolibertarianism where often openness in

government meant "anybody who showed up to the chat", right? And you talked, you know... I mean, obviously, the existing Wikimedia and Wikipedia communities were very involved in this.



Luis Villa 28:17

But there were also other pillars that you based this on, right? You went outside the bounds of the existing communities. Tell us a little bit about how you did that. And where you think that succeeded?



Katherine 28:30

I'm a recovering technolibertarian myself. Here's the distinction that I like to make is actually between this idea of openness, like a protocol, which is useful, and a practice and an intentionality. Right? And so we can say, like openness, protocol is something that we always adhere to. Absolutely. Like, that's a foundational thing for us at the Foundation. But what does it actually mean to think about openness practice? What does it mean to think about, it's not just about who shows up, but who we want in the conversation as we move forward? What does it mean, to be really intentional about if this idea of openness means true participation... if it means that we all have the power to raise our voices and determine where we want to go, and yet some people are not in this conversation, are we just simply recapitulating other forums and norms of power? And so for us at the Wikimedia Foundation, like we've done open consultations before. In 2010, we ran one, and it was great. We talked to 1000s of community members, but you know, even 2000 community members or 2000 anecdotes, they're not necessarily telling us what the future means for people who aren't in that 2000 group, that group of 2000.



Katherine 29:33

So we ran four different tracks of conversations. We ran one that was a research track that was looking at where babies are born, right. So that's the demographics I mentioned earlier. One was like, who are our most experienced contributors? And what did they have to say about our projects? What do they know? What's the historic understanding of our intention, our values, the core of who we are, what is it that motivates people to join this project, what makes our culture essential and important in the world.



Katherine 29:57

Then, who are the people who are sort of like our stakeholders who are external? Who

maybe are not contributors in the sense of contributors to the code or contributors to the projects of content, but are the folks in the broader open tech world? Who are folks in the broad open culture world? Who are people who are in the education space? You know, stakeholders like that? "What's the future of free knowledge" is what we basically asked them.

K

Katherine 30:18

And then we went to folks that we had never met before. And we said, "Why don't you use Wikipedia? What do you think of it? Why would it be valuable to you? Oh, you've never even heard of it. That's so interesting. Tell us more about what you think of when you think of knowledge." And we spent a lot of time thinking about what are these—we call them new readers, like, what do new readers need out of a project like Wikipedia, which, frankly, you know, if you if you have no sort of structural construct for an encyclopedia, maybe there's something entirely different that you need out of a project for free knowledge that has nothing to do with a reference—an archaic reference—to bound books on a bookshelf.

K

Katherine 30:50

And we brought all four of these groups together, but all of the research all of this sort of documentation—and of course, there's tons of documentation, it's all available [2030.wikimedia.org](https://2030.wikimedia.org)—and we gave it back to the community, we said, "What do you think of this?" Because if there's one thing Wikimedians are great at, it's going through reams of information, and then synthesizing that back together. And that's how we got to our strategic vision, which is around becoming the essential infrastructure for free knowledge. And anyone who shares our vision can join us, with these two twin pillars of:

K

Katherine 31:20

Knowledge equity, which is really around thinking about who's been excluded and how we bring them in, and what are the structural barriers that enable that exclusion or created that exclusion, rather than just saying "we're open and everyone can join us". And how do we break down those barriers?

K

Katherine 31:34

And knowledge as a service, which is without thinking about, yes, the technical components of what a service oriented architecture is, but how do we make knowledge useful beyond just being a website? Sorry! You clearly got me on my, like, little stump

speech.



Luis Villa 31:47

Actually the next question I was gonna ask was—and this ties back also to this conversation we were having about Sunlight Foundation—Sunlight Foundation decided that it's sort of core mission had been, I don't want to say exhausted, right, but seeded, right? It was out there, that the idea had gotten out there in the world. And there were other organizations that were not just able, but very excited, to carry that torch.



Luis Villa 32:12

And in, in Wikimedia, you know, the strategic vision, I really liked this: you said—not you personally—but the organization says: "We will carry on our message, our mission of developing content, as we have done in the past. And we will go further." Right? It seemed to me, who was mostly outside of this because I was working on Tidelift and didn't really have time to participate, that you were viewing these two new pillars as additive. Right? That knowledge as equity, and knowledge as a service, were things that didn't, didn't change the core values yet didn't detract ... Wikimedia is still very much Wikimedia. But Wikimedia now has some new frameworks to think about the world through. Do you think that's a fair...



Katherine 33:08

Yeah, absolutely. We're gonna keep building that encyclopedia. And if you want to contribute to that encyclopedia, 100%. We're here. And also, we wanted to think about what is the next way of thinking about that broader vision? What does it mean to both be an encyclopedia and to be something else? And to be free knowledge? And so when I think about how you know what the connection is to Sunlight, in some ways, it's also an interrogation of our failings. And some of our failings are the structural failings that look at who's been excluded. And so obviously, women have been excluded from the participation and building of Wikipedia, both in the volunteer community, but also the content that's been created, they've not represented well by that content. What are we going to do to address that? Minority communities, marginalized communities have been excluded from the kind of from the construction of Wikipedia. The global south has been excluded from the construction of Wikipedia, not because they weren't able to be part of Wikipedia, but because we weren't resourcing adequately, we weren't thinking about what the products were that we were building that would enable people to contribute successfully, we didn't have policies in place like a universal code of conduct that ensure

that our projects were welcoming to new contributors. And so it wasn't just about like, if you build it, they will come. It was "we have this really core mission that is incredibly valuable, and we must continue for the world. But if we're going to be successful with it in the fullest form of what it means to be transformative, with free knowledge then we need to think about what are the things that are holding people out and how do we intentionally program for them? Software programming, sure, but also programming in terms of orders or money go, where does our governance priorities go? And how do we build an organization that is accountable to that?"



Luis Villa 34:49

Right, right. I obviously have a soft spot for the Universal Code of Conduct, since some of that work originated out of my old team, but that actually reminds me something that's not in our notes. So I hope you'll forgive me for surprising you. But there's a continuity here, where these ideas of equity and of technology structure didn't come out of nowhere ... like the organization and the movement were working on some of these things. And so some of what you were doing here is very much ...



Luis Villa 35:25

And I wanted to ask in particular because I'm struck here, the theme of the conference here today, and Libre Planet is "empowering users". And that is a much broader conception of empowerment, than I think you'll find in a lot of FSF's sort of written mission statement and strategy stuff. But it's also very true to what the staff has been doing here for years, right? They've been doing a wonderful job of diversifying this conference, trying to think through issues like accessibility, and all that while remaining true to the core mission. And I'm wondering, you know, was there that clear ... that continuity of what the organization was doing without a framework into this new framework? Was there anything that? You know, do you think that continuity helped make people feel more comfortable that it wasn't like a radical change, but still helps you do a lot?



Katherine 36:24

So, since I'm leaving Wikimedia at the end of next month, I think we formalized the reformists is what we did. You know, I talked a lot during the work of this strategic visioning process, about how "the process is the product". And what I meant by that is, I'm thrilled with the strategic direction we came up with, I think it is excellent, I think it is bold, I think it gives us really practical things to focus on. I also think that had it not been so good, it would have been okay, because we would have gone through the process of

creating community through dialogue and debating the things that we cared about, and come to some sort of agreement about what it was that was our priority, and what it was that we didn't care about so much. And that process of discourse with a global community, with a group of people who are here for in it for very different reasons oftentimes. You know, some of us who are we enjoy the contribution because it's sort of like it's a technical challenge. And some of us enjoy the contribution because we're in it for like the big altruistic vision. And sometimes it's a little bit of both. And sometimes it's just the ego, and I really, like, you know, being the most expert in any of these issues. I like being recognized. It's all fine! I like to say Wikipedia marries our most base instincts with our highest altruistic regard. It's okay.

K

Katherine 37:39

That process of bringing all of that together to come to some sort of outcome was the product. And so to your, your question around this idea of like, what did we do? Well, we formalized the reformists. The reformists were the ones who were like "this core thing is really excellent". But they were always on the fringe. And by bringing them into that dialogue, we gave them the opportunity to articulate their case to the broader community in a way that people went "actually that's pretty good, yeah, that makes sense...that doesn't challenge my core values... it doesn't threaten my role in this community... but it actually lets us think more expansively about how we live in to the vision at the highest level." And giving people that platform really empowered them into now you see this deeply owned, throughout the community, we're different communities—this is the other trick about it—we wanted it to be high enough, high level enough that everyone could interpret it for the context in which they operated. So it's gonna be completely different in Ghana than it is in the United Kingdom and it is in Korea, and that's completely okay. That was what we wanted to happen was that people had agency over how they really interpreted the strategic direction. Right?



Luis Villa 38:44

I mean, it seems to me—I love this formalizing the reformist framing, right, because it definitely seems to me, it's not just that the reform was a shift in power here. The discussion really did change hearts and minds, right, that there is that there's a lot of people who were into Wikipedia for other reasons. And they're still into Wikipedia, for those other reasons, but they now understand better... You know, my favorite example of that, and I'm sure you've got 1000 more, but I want to give this example, and then switch gears a little bit, is that, you know, as everybody knows, Wikipedia is very much about "citation needed". But of course, there are entire cultures that aren't, you know, that haven't had the luxury of, you know, a huge written knowledge base, right? Where a lot of

evidence, so-called, is oral; oral traditions, you know, or stuff that's written but not online. And, you know, I think this conversation over the period of many years has opened up a lot of Wikipedian's eyes to that, where instead of just saying, "Oh, well, it's not on the web. I don't trust it. I don't believe it. Therefore, let me slap a big citation needed sign on it." Instead, they're much more open to these ideas of "Oh, Okay, how can we integrate this into Wikipedian values, even though... we're gonna stop confusing 'Wikipedian values' for 'it's on the web'. We're going to think about it in a more nuanced and healthy way."



Luis Villa 40:14

So the question I did want to have to follow up on that is, how are we starting to see this play out in practice? You already mentioned the Universal Code of Conduct. And there's been a couple questions in chat about Wikimedia Enterprise. And you know, how that plays into the questions in chat aren't exactly framing it this way. [Talking over each other] So can you talk a little bit about that, because any time money comes into the equation, you know, it makes some people nervous for not bad reasons. So we'd love to hear a little bit more about how the vision and mission and the practical reality of a paid API works.



Katherine 40:58

Yeah. So I want to start by saying, I actually think knowledge as a service is much bigger than selling data to large reusers, right. It is part of the conversation that we had, from the very getgo, about even having a paid API was like, how do we also ensure that this is accessible to people who don't want to pay for it? How do we ensure that the development of something that is better documented with greater uptime and stability also benefits folks who are free for users of this? How do we ensure that when we offer this we still make, we are still maintaining our dumps so that anyone who doesn't want to use it can still use it? Right? And so how do we create it? We joked, internally, our biggest competitor for this is ourselves. Because we are not forcing anybody to do this.



Katherine 41:39

You know, I think in dialogue with the community—there was some tension around this. And I think it's very healthy, much like there's tension around this idea that our users of Wikipedia content, compromising our values, like citations and the ability to go back to the original source, the transparency of the level of the content and the code, or are they extending our values by getting more knowledge out there to the world. There's a real robust debate within the Wikimedia community around that. And similarly, there's a real robust debate around what we should be doing with this enterprise product. Our goal was

to make sure that this was a non-compulsory thing, but rather something that people could sign up for if they found value in it. And in doing so, a thing that was a priority, at least from my perspective, was that the revenue that would come from it would be something that would flow back to our communities to expand the free knowledge ecosystem. And so when I think about this, I think about the fact that there's already extracted value from free knowledge from the commons. And this is not just true in like the free knowledge base, this is true everywhere we see the commons, extracted value from openness. What do we do to create a greater model of sustainability that ensures openness gets to continue? So you could look at this and say, well, Wikipedia, you know, when we have intermediation of Wikipedia, it means fewer people coming to the site. That means fewer people making edits, that means fewer people donating through small-dollar donor models. Maybe. That's a theory of the case.

K

Katherine 43:08

So what would it mean for us to you know, shore up that intermediation? Another argument for this is the primary utilization of our users is for dominant culture. It's for English speakers, it is for dominant pop culture. Who then creates the funding for under underrepresented communities, communities that don't have a market incentive for developing them out? So communities of smaller languages, communities of ... less developed markets, for example. And so can we use this funding to really think about investing in underrepresented communities in a way that helps advance knowledge equity, and these sort of conversations that we had around like, you know, is there almost like a Robin Hood type approach that we can take here that says, you know, this funding is something would otherwise not be available to us, it's a service that is already... people are already taking this data and reutilizing it for commercial purposes, is there a way to be able to create value that comes back to the commons that enriches it?

K

Katherine 44:10

And my real hope for what we do with this, and again, this will be up to sort of either the future CEO, is that it is something that is not just invested in Wikimedia, but it's something that is invested in the broader idea of open and free knowledge overall. So you know, when we think about what the future of free software is, when we think about the future of how do we maintain some of the core projects, when we think about the future of what does it mean to digitize free now, you know, to your point there, there's knowledge that isn't digitized. It's not just oral knowledge. It's, you know, things that are in archives that are inaccessible... What can we do to help shore up some of this and create the resources that are available for everyone to participate in this in this broader open community?



Luis Villa 44:52

This is all a great example of the kind of thing that I was talking about in the introduction, right? This is not that the encyclopedia has failed—this is that the world is a much broader space than we really realized at first, right? Wikidata, which, you know, many people in the audience will have heard about now, but maybe not five years ago, you know, Wikidata is one of these sort of slow motion, you know, overnight successes. It's an overnight juggernaut that takes 10 years. And I think that's the kind of thing that Wikipedia—we sort of saw the the value of structured knowledge was something that, you know, we sort of knew, right? There have always been structured knowledge geeks in Wikipedia. But at the same time realizing how important and potentially powerful it could be on a global scale... that was a change that the outside world sort of ... I don't want to say forced on us as a movement, right, but it's something that we could have continued to ignore a little bit, or we could have embraced it.



Katherine 46:04

And full disclosure, I see structured knowledge as very much part and parcel of the future, right? So Wikidata has been like obsession of mine since I started in the organization and funding it. And part of the strategic vision was like, how do we go beyond Wikipedia to really recognize Wikimedia Commons, Wikidata, Wikisource, all of these other projects that have tremendous value to the free knowledge ecosystem? So you know, as we think about navigating change, I think that, you know, some of the themes that come out for me are really around, we have these missions as value-oriented nonprofits that had tremendous value when they started, and the world has changed around us. So how do we change in response to the world?



Katherine 46:38

I like to think about Wikipedia as an ecosystem, it is literally built for change, you know, we get to change, the average edit rate for Wikipedia is about 350 times a minute, which means we change Wikipedia 350 times a minute, which means we can change it as much as we want. Whoever is part of that creation and contribution process changes Wikipedia, there is no ideal prior state, it is a constant work in progress. And so our mission should be a constant work in progress too. How do we align against sort of a Northstar of our values of what change we're trying to effect in the world while adapting our tactics, our structures, our governance, to the changing realities of the world? And also continuously auditing ourselves to say, when we started, who, you know, was this serving a certain cohort? Does the the model of serving that cohort still help us advance our vision today? Do we need to structurally change ourselves in order to think about what comes next for

our future? That's an incredibly important thing, and also saying, maybe that thing that we started out doing, maybe there's innovation out there in the world, maybe there are new opportunities that we can embrace, that will enable us to expand the impact that we have on the world, while also being able to stay true to our mission and ourselves. And so that was really sort of the approach here is like, how do we see this—I always think of it as living into our responsibility.



Katherine 47:59

You know, we started as a happy accident. Wikipedia, Wikimedia projects started as a happy accident, whoops. Turns out, there's this thing, there's like this wiki software, it's great. It's better than this other model, that peer review that Jimmy was starting with. And then all of a sudden, it was something that the whole world relied on. And there's a tremendous pressure in that. Also, we saw the gaps between where we had set out to be and like that true sort of inclusion of participants from, you know, all the different areas that I've mentioned previously. So how do we interrogate where we've fallen short, in terms of who we've excluded intentionally or unintentionally, and also live into the responsibility for what we now mean for the world? Because at this point, Wikipedia is a public good. And so there is a responsibility inherent in that that goes far beyond us just having fun at Wikimedia conferences, that actually is around how do we maintain something with it? ... You know, I don't mean to imply that our, you know, engineering teams didn't already see this, but like, how do we maintain something, culturally, values, governance, you know, technically in a way that lives into that understanding of that public good, and then builds from there?



Luis Villa 49:10

You know, I think that leaves us in a great place to ask one final question before we run out of time, which is based on something that our old colleague Eric Mueller asked in the chat. What advice do you have for small nonprofits? You started saying, you know, Sunlight is actually about the same size as FSF. It's around 15 employees, small board, you know, and Eric specifically asked about, how do you prepare your governance structure for stuff that that occurred like that that occurred at Sunlight? How do you include voices not already drawn to take part in the work? I would add— and of course, this could be a whole conference in and of itself, so you don't have to give a perfect answer—but ... I love what you just said about auditing what I would phrase as...



Katherine 50:07

I think closed loop systems, right?



Luis Villa 50:09

Yeah—how do you how do you make sure that you are that you are aligning that part of the loop that is the pragmatic, right—what are you doing in the every day—with the bigger values that you really want to live? Because those can ... it's a rare nonprofit where those don't diverge from time to time, right? How do you think as a small nonprofit about bringing those back together? You know, or medium sized one?



Katherine 50:36

Yeah I think that governance is so important... I think that actually some of the issues that we saw in Sunlight were governance failures ... Not that I'm saying that the previous boards didn't care about the issues, but um, were not empowered necessarily to be able to address them effectively.



Katherine 50:59

And so you have to ask yourself, like, where does power sit on your board? Do you have a regenerative board that turns over so that you don't have the same people there for decades? Do you ensure that funders don't have outsize weight on your board? I really dislike the practice of having funders on the board, I think it can be incredibly harmful, because it tends to perpetuate funder incentives, rather than, you know, mission incentives. Do you think thoughtfully about the balance of power within those boards? And are there clear bylaws that, you know, governance geek here, are there clear bylaws and practices that enable healthy transitions, both in terms of sustaining institutional knowledge—so you want people who are around for a certain period of time, balanced against fresh perspective. What are the ways in which the board draws from the stakeholder community? And you know, in Wikipedia, we do community elections. A big contention over the course, and something I advocated for very strongly during my tenure, is those community elections, which are sort of one person one vote, tend to be incredibly disproportionately representative of white men from the English-speaking communities. And so what are the structural safeguards you put in place to ensure that your board is both representative of your core community, but also the communities you seek to serve?



Katherine 52:16

And then how do you interrogate on I think, a three year cycle? You know, what we did

was we said, okay, we've got like this 15 year vision, which by the time it actually was in place was like, 10, which is fine. 11, maybe? We then chunked it out to like three year plans. So every three years we go through, are meant to go through, a process of saying, you know, what, what have we done in the past three, does this align, and then on an annual basis, saying like, did, how did we do against that three year plan? So if I know in 15 years, we're meant to be the essential infrastructure free knowledge, well what do we need to clean up in our house today to make sure we can actually get there? And some of that stuff can be really basic? Like, do you have a functioning HR system? Do you have employee handbooks that protect your people? ... Do you have a way of auditing your performance with your core audience or core stakeholders so that you know that the work of your institution is actually serving the mission? So I think that it's ... yes, you need to be incredibly ambitious and sort of have like, what is your Northstar? Your vision? What is your 10 year plan? And then it doesn't have to be a plan. It's not really a plan. It's a strategic direction is what we said; it's not a plan, you can't have a plan for 10 years. And then what is your three year? What are you going to do to get to that strategic direction? And every year, then how do you incrementalize that to say this is what we're doing this year? And when you do that on an annual basis, you're checking in with yourself on a three year basis, you're saying this is like the next set of priorities. And it's always in relation to that that higher vision. So I think every nonprofit can do that every single, you know, every size every scale. I don't know if that answers the question that Eric asked. I hope it does that.



53:54

I



Katherine 53:57

I don't know what the audience is interested in. So I want to speak to



Luis Villa 54:01

I think that's actually a perfect note for us to wrap up on with. I will say one other thing from chat, which is, "Wikipedia may not be perfect, but it's constructed by a ton of individuals with a little expertise sometimes as a whole is surpassed any other similar attempt in the history of humankind in terms of the quantity and quality of the accumulated knowledge across time. Congratulations."



Luis Villa 54:22

So yeah, I mean, I think thank you so much for this talk, Katherine and for sharing some of this experience. And, you know, congratulations on an amazing five year run, and I can't wait to see what you do next. So, thank you so much, and thank you to the audience for all your time.



Katherine 54:38

Thanks so much to the audience. Yeah, appreciate it.



Luis Villa 54:45

Michael