**Introduction**

Policy debates about access to knowledge, democratic alternatives to commercial platforms and digital infrastructures use several overlapping terms to describe policy outcomes. In the last year, three such terms have gained prominence: digital public goods, digital commons and digital public infrastructure. While each carries a distinct nuance, all point toward the shared aim of creating resources, services and infrastructures that function for public rather than private interest, and with the common good in mind.

Typically, the term “free knowledge” has been used to describe Wikimedia’s cause. However, this expression is not always clear for decision makers, especially in policy debates where it is not explicitly referenced. In many policy discussions, similar goals and values are instead framed using one of the three emerging terms.

These three concepts also help explain Wikimedia’s mission and operations, offering a theoretical basis for articulating its value. Projects such as Wikipedia, Wikidata, and other Wikimedia platforms are among the most tangible examples of these ideas in practice. As such, these terms offer powerful framing tools for Wikimedians engaged in advocacy work.

This explainer clarifies their meanings and shows how they apply to Wikimedia’s projects. By giving clarity about these concepts, connections can be made between Wikimedia and ongoing policy debates. In this way, policymakers can become aware of the value of Wikimedia - by presenting it as an example of policy visions that they support.

**Digital public goods**

Treated as a resource, Wikimedia projects are **digital public goods**. defined in economic terms as assets that are non-rivalrous—one person’s use doesn’t deplete availability—and non-excludable—virtually impossible to restrict access.

The [Digital Public Goods Alliance (DPGA)](https://www.digitalpublicgoods.net/) expands this definition by insisting on open licensing (compliant with [the Open Definition](https://opendefinition.org/), for example [Creative Commons licenses](https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/cclicenses/)), ethical and privacy safeguards, and demonstrable alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According Global Digital Compact, a United Nations initiative aimed at a responsible and inclusive digital environment, creating digital public goods helps direct digital technologies to serve the needs of societies.

Wikipedia, Wikidata, and their sister platforms meet all these criteria: they are freely accessible worldwide, legally open, bound by “do no harm” design principles, and explicitly serve goals such as education, health, and equity.

**Digital commons**

The concept of **digital commons** is close to that of digital public goods, but places more attention on governance and management, rather than the resource itself. At its most basic, digital commons are resources, systems and solutions that are owned, developed, maintained or controlled by a group rather than a single individual or entity. There is also a more political understanding of the digital commons as any approach that opposes concentrations of power and predatory extraction of value from shared resources.

Wikimedia projects are digital commons, as they are digital resources collectively stewarded by a global volunteer community, with a range of democratic decision-making processes. This is an example of **commoning** - the term is used to describe the various practices related to collective governance and management of the commons. Commoning means that content is co-created, curated, and governed through democratic rules and peer review, rather than corporate control or market logic. This is also called "commons-based peer production", and Wikimedia are a prime example of this approach.

Digital commons are characterized by resilience, transparency and mutual accountability. Commoning turns knowledge into a shared responsibility: a body of public knowledge that also reinforces civic participation and trust. These aspects of Wikimedia can be overlooked when thinking about it just in terms of "free knowledge".

Crucially, digital commons like Wikipedia often emerge to fill infrastructural gaps—situations where governments or markets fail to provide essential services. When public educational systems or reliable knowledge repositories are absent or underfunded, solutions like Wikipedia step in as an inclusive, accessible alternative.

**Digital Public Infrastructure**

Wikimedia is also a form of **Digital Public Infrastructure** (DPI) as its projects fulfill three public roles: offering open access, serving a public purpose (education, research, civic engagement), and functioning as public property, governed collectively rather than owned by any private entity. DPI is a policy term that is gaining momentum around the world and is used to describe various digitization initiatives that enable public benefits at societal scale. Today, it is used to describe state-led initiatives to establish foundations for digital payments, identity and data exchanges. Typically, DPIs allow public institutions to centrally manage a set of open application programming interfaces (APIs) that can be used by both the public and private sectors to develop services.

DPIs can be understood more generally, as infrastructure that supports alternative, public options in face of giant commercial platforms; and that guarantees that a digital public space exists. Wikimedia can therefore be described as digital public infrastructure. As such, it is unique due to its civic character, democratic governance and functioning as a digital commons.

Technologically, Wikipedia epitomizes DPI best practices by embracing openness and interoperability: open software, machine-readable dumps, multilingual APIs, and integration with complementary systems like Wikidata. Economically, high initial costs for servers, moderation, and technical development are shared sustainably through a hybrid model—volunteer labor, widespread small donations, philanthropic grants, and an endowment exceeding $100 million. This model ensures that the infrastructure remains robust, adaptable, and peoples’-focused, offering a powerful alternative to commercial, ad-driven platforms. In doing so, Wikipedia sets a global standard: a blueprint for digital infrastructure that is open, inclusive, civic-minded, and aligned with democratic ideals and sustainable development goals.

**Conclusion**

Each of the three concepts is useful in understanding Wikimedia’s strengths, its contribution to the open internet, and its value as a key online platform. The concept of digital public good is closest to the common description of Wikipedia as a body of free knowledge. The concept of digital commons helps frame the ways, in which Wikimedia projects are collectively governed. And by using the term digital public infrastructure, we can point to the fact that Wikipedia is today a key piece of global knowledge infrastructure.