Wikipedia is celebrating its twentieth birthday. When it was launched, this effort to create an encyclopedia seemed like a joke compared with Microsoft's big-money effort, which was called Encarta. Encarta is long gone but Wikipedia has thrived beyond anyone's expectations. Today, Wikipedia has fifty-five million entries, with 270,000 active editors a month. While imperfect, the accuracy, too, has turned out better than expected.

At around the time Wikipedia started, states and cities were beginning to get serious about climate action. Like Wikipedia, these actions were also dismissed as unserious and unlikely to produce anything of note. Why would cities and states be willing to make genuine investments in reducing emissions, when they would bear the costs of the reductions while the benefits would mostly accrue to others? Major legal scholars, as well as others, dismissed these state and local actions as purely symbolic grandstanding by local officials. Yet, as with Wikipedia, the critics proved wrong. Cities and states around the world have adopted ambitious climate goals and implemented measures to go with them. California is probably the best known example, but it doesn't stand alone. Likewise, with no clear profit motive, major corporations like Apple and Google have taken major steps to reduce their carbon footprints.

Wikipedia is an example of peer production, which relies on volunteers to contribute their efforts to build something major. The classic example, though less familiar outside the tech sphere, is Linux, an open source operating system that is especially favored for use in web servers. Climate policies adopted by states, cities, and companies exhibit some of the same features.

One characteristic of peer production is that the participants receive no direct pecuniary benefits, often simply enjoying the satisfaction of doing the work, but also in terms of reputation. Similarly, jurisdictions may want to gain a reputation for being forward-looking and sustainable, which can help attract business and residents for a post-industrial economy. The leaders of the jurisdictions can raise their reputations and political profiles. There are also benefits to the general population. Energy efficiency measures can reduce power bills, while use of renewables can cut air pollution.

It's also important that efforts are synergistic. As more jurisdictions adopt climate policies, the costs tend to go down, as shown by the rapidly declining price of renewable energy. Moreover, policies are field-tested and can be adopted more confidently by other jurisdictions. Multiple networks of cities, states, and companies provide a way of acknowledging contributions and coordinating actions.

I'm not sure just how far the comparison should be pushed, but there do seem to be some

real similarities between peer production efforts like Wikipedia and bottom-up climate action. In both cases, economists were confounded by the ability of people to undertake major efforts and produce solid results despite the lack of any compulsion or pecuniary compensation. A lot more effort will be needed to reach climate targets, but these voluntary actions all stand tribute to the willingness of people to engage in cooperative activities to achieve public goods. Let’s be glad that the model of purely self-interested actors has its limits.