

Power to the Wikipeople

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If knowledge is power, then Jimmy Wales' online brainchild looks set to empower the world for free

An Internet search for almost anything these days will likely lead you straight to Wikipedia, the worldwide online encyclopedia.

But unlike conventional encyclopedias whose entries are written by acknowledged academics and editors, those in Wikipedia are open to contributions from anyone at all. Even as you read this, you can be sure that Wikipedia's cyberspace font of knowledge and information will be being added to by someone in Paris, Texas, Rochdale in Lancashire, Johannesburg or Kyoto. That's because -- precisely in line with its mission to create a freely licensed encyclopedia for everyone in the world -- Wikipedia relies for its entire content on volunteers all over the world who are keen to contribute to the cause.



Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales during his recent JT interview ERIC PRIDEAUX PHOTOS

To add information to an entry, individuals must follow some basic guidelines, such as being neutral and only including information that is verifiable through cited references. At Wikipedia's heart, a select group of volunteers serve as "administrators" who ensure that such core principles are adhered to. In the event of disputes, these administrators open debate on

discussion pages linked to the entry in question, and try to sort things out from there.

Though it's still only in its sixth year, this grand project has already developed into a major source of easily accessible information, currently with more than 6 million entries in 250 languages. Of these, entries in English make up a third of the total, numbering around 1.67 million, while the 337,000 in Japanese comprise the fifth largest. To enhance the objectivity of its content, Wikipedia carries no advertising, as all its funding currently comes in the form of donations.

By its very nature, though, as Wikipedia is constantly a work-in-process, questions do arise regarding the accuracy of its entries. However, an article in the December 2005 issue of the journal Nature reported that a peer review of comparative science entries in the English-language Wikipedia and Encyclopedia Britannica found that both contained errors -- but the differences between them were not of great significance.

Upset by this finding, Britannica published an advertisement attacking Nature, but the magazine stood its ground.

Run by the St. Petersburg, Florida-based nonprofit Wikimedia Foundation, Wikipedia was launched in 2001 by the now 40-year-old Jimmy Wales, who had previously graduated from futures and options trading to running a search-engine company. Wikipedia stemmed from a 1999 project called Nupedia, for which Wales hired a person with a PhD in philosophy to organize a "freely licensed" (i.e. open-to-all for copying, modifying and distributing) encyclopedia written in different languages by volunteers. The project failed because it was too academic and top-down organized, Wales says.

Learning from this mistake, Wales then incorporated the "wiki" editing concept developed by one Ward Cunningham in 1995, which allows anyone to quickly and easily edit material on the Internet. Finally, Wikipedia was born.

Just now, Wales is making his first visit to Japan, along with his American-Japanese wife and their daughter, in order to meet this country's Wikipedia "community" and to promote his for-profit company Wikia Inc., which is scheduled to launch an open-source search engine to rival Google and Yahoo!

Before arriving in Japan, Wales was in India, where he met members of the Wikipedia community and also visited a squatter

township in New Delhi to see how the foundation's goal of "providing a free encyclopedia for every single person in the world" might resonate there.

Two days after arriving in Japan, Wales talked to The Japan Times at his home for the month in Tokyo, where his wife's family and friends were visiting. As they sat by and listened, Wales, dressed casually in a black turtle neck sweater and black slacks, explained just how the multilingual Wikipedia works, responded to numerous criticisms, and talked about its future in countries such as China, where he will visit later this year.

What attracts people around the world to join this project?

Most of the people working in Wikipedia are doing it because it's fun. There's also the commitment to sharing knowledge and sharing information with all kinds of people everywhere. However, I don't think people would do it if we didn't make the process interesting and enjoyable. So we spend a lot of time making sure that the volunteers have all the tools they need to manage the site by providing software, community support and ensuring that social policies are working well and any disputes are resolved in an appropriate manner.

What do you think is the key strength of Wikipedia?

The main strength is the neutrality. Even on very controversial subjects, Wikipedia tends to be very even-keeled and very neutral and tries to take into account many different points of view.

I also think the timeliness is quite important. You can really see, for example, when the big tsunami happened, if you turned to traditional media, due to space and time constraints, they generally just tell you what's happening now. But a lot of people really needed background information. They needed more understanding about the places where this happened -- the government there, the language, you know, everything about the people.

Wikipedia is really fantastic for this sort of thing, because it tends to get really, really updated when there's something big going on like that.

And finally, I think the unbelievable comprehensiveness is pretty amazing. This particularly applies to the English

Wikipedia, but increasingly to all the really large languages, so that pretty much anything you can think of is somehow covered in Wikipedia.

Some articles are written in different ways depending on the language. What happens then?



From small beginnings six years ago, the Wikipedia online, "open-source" encyclopedia launched by Jimmy Wales now boasts more than 6 million entries in 250 languages.

All the entries in different languages are written independently, and we do expect the articles to converge, and we hope there aren't any really bad cases of bias where you have two completely different views on an event and neither language acknowledges the overall situation.

Of course it's quite natural that people write what they know about. So, if there are cultural biases, then sometimes they are only discovered through this process [of volunteers' comparative analysis] at Wikipedia.

For example, it was brought to our attention a couple of years ago that the English-language Wikipedia said that the Wright Brothers invented the airplane -- and the French Wikipedia said something completely different. Neither side is completely wrong. It just depends on exactly how you define it. It was a very fertile time, and inventions were in many different stages and processes.

Now when you go to see who invented airplanes in Wikipedia, you get this nice view where you understand why different people have different claims about it. And that's really how an encyclopedia should be. We've seen similar types of things in many other languages.

The English-language version continues to be the largest Wikipedia. Do you see a difference in people's ways of sharing information depending on languages?

It's really hard to say, but one thing is that English is the largest

first language of the people on the Internet. But even more importantly, it is by far the largest second language in the world.

As the English Wikipedia is so large, people often think that maybe others translate from English. But it doesn't necessarily work that way. It's really a matter of lots of things getting translated into English.

If you write an article about something in Japan that you think is probably not well known elsewhere, and you think "gosh, it would be great if this was known all around the world" -- well, you wouldn't just leave it in the Japanese Wikipedia. You would think, "maybe I should put it in English, because from there, it can be translated into French and German and Chinese and all the other languages." People think of English that way, as sort of a meeting point.

I don't know if it's true or not, but it is said that in the Japanese Wikipedia, people would go to the discussion page, then discuss and discuss and discuss until they reach a consensus -- and finally someone will go and very cautiously change the entry. Whereas in English, we change the entry and fight about it. I've heard this not just from English speakers but Japanese themselves. I wonder if it might not be some kind of self-humorous image of Japanese that endless discussions for consensus occur before something happens. It could be true, though I don't know. But I'm told that the culture is different. Maybe I'll be able to find out when I hang out with the Wikipedians here.

Some doubt the accuracy of Wikipedia. How do you respond to that?

In general, if you use Wikipedia quite a bit, and follow the references and check up on things, you find that it is generally quite accurate. It's surprisingly accurate. It's pretty good for the most part.

MORE JIMMY WALES

The world of wikipedia

Why do you think the rate of growth has slowed on the Japanese Wikipedia compared to other languages?

I don't really know. That's what I'm here to find out. Maybe it needs more promotion. But it's very difficult to say. Some of it is the Japanese Wikipedia used to be larger than the French, and there were twice as many editors working in the French Wikipedia. So we used to joke that "there's more French but the Japanese work harder."
(Laughs)

But in the end there are a lot more French

On the other hand, it really is a live work-in-process at all times, and you do have to be careful. The main thing for people to remember is that in any source, if you see something that's a little bit outrageous, you should check the sources.

Also, depending on what you are trying to do, you should check the sources. If you are trying to research for a school paper or a magazine article, and you are not just getting broad background information but are really going to use specific facts, you really better check them yourself. That's really not the role of an encyclopedia.

I give the same advice for using Encyclopedia Britannica. There's lots of errors in Britannica. People think of it as somehow perfect, but it's far from perfect. It's useful for broad background

but in the end there are a lot more French speakers in the world, so a lot more people work in the French Wikipedia and eventually they surpassed. Just recently the Polish Wikipedia surpassed the Japanese Wikipedia. I don't know why. That's just interesting that it's really growing in Poland and they've been growing really fast.

What issues tend to be disputed on Wikipedia?

It's really interesting because it's often very hard to predict. Of course there are certain big picture geopolitical issues which are edited quite a bit. But those normally are left open for editing. Normally it's a reasonably civilized discussion. It turns out that sometimes it's fairly obscure things where some very strange person will come in with an axe to grind and really make it difficult to find consensus and where we'll have to temporarily have to lock the article to let people have a cooling off time.

In the English Wikipedia there was a famous incident. There was a huge debate about the names of the river in Poland. It got very nasty because one or two people were very very difficult and really wouldn't cooperate with others and kept try to ramp their way through. In English most of the rivers in Poland are known by their German names for historical reasons. But that's changing slowly, and people fight about it. So, fairly obscure things but it meant a lot to someone.

Did people just start contributing to Wikipedia when it started?

Yeah. We announced things, but nobody cared. We actually got a lot of attention from the free software world, the open-source software world. Web sites like Slashdot gave us a lot of coverage early on and that brought a lot of early adopters. That's especially the reason why in the early days we had a real strength in technology areas and a weakness outside those areas. The first groups of Wikipedians, we were all computer geeks, and so that was what we knew to write about.

Did you start off Wikipedia with the intention of running it as a nonprofit project?

No, not necessarily. In the beginning I didn't really have a whole lot of thought about that one way or the other. After a couple of years there was no investment money available. We didn't have any ads on the site, and it was more of a hobby type of site. But it was growing and I needed to buy more servers and that was when I set up the nonprofit foundation. We've donated everything into the nonprofit so that we could raise money, and I think it's worked out very well.

I always joke that it was either the dumbest thing or the smartest thing I ever did, you know, because it's presumably it's worth billions dollars now but it's a nonprofit, so I don't benefit from that. On the other hand, it's the smartest, because I don't think it couldn't have been successful in any other way.

Do the different communities of Wikipedia and Wikia tell you about their decisions?

No. I mean, I hear stories, but it's all managed out there. One of the things that make the wikis work is that the community self-manages. There's all

knowledge,
essentially.

Where do you see Wikipedia going from here?

It's really hard to predict for the English Wikipedia, because English is the first to run into some types of problems, because it's so much bigger.

But it's pretty easy to say what the Japanese Wikipedia would look like. It will hit 500,000 and 1 million articles in the next few years.

Right now in Wikipedia, less than a third of the total work is in English, but that percentage is steadily dropping because all of the other languages are growing. So what we are going to see in the next five years is really huge growth in a lot of the non-European languages. That's pretty remarkable to think what kind of resources would be available.

The Chinese Wikipedia is one of the larger Wikipedia. But how is your situation in China, where Google had to accept censorship?

We're completely blocked in mainland China. We were briefly

the social customs and the norms that allow people to have a debate in a constructive way, come to a resolution and move forward. I hear about this and that, but I can't keep up with everything.

Different communities do have different rules from time to time. But some of the core principles were imposed by me from the beginning. The neutrality policy and some of the policies and about no personal attacks and that the discussions in Wikipedia are supposed to be constructive about the topic and not just flame wars. Things like that are universal simply because they make obvious sense.

Particularly in a smaller language you don't need all the rules that you need in a bigger language. You just have a group of administrators making comments and decisions and making consultations with each other. Eventually you'll get some troublemaker who sort of forces you to come up with very precise rule. Most people can get by with "don't be a jerk," but some people, you have to actually write down all the different ways they are not allowed to be a jerk. Larger communities like the English-language Wikipedia have layers and layers of policies and rules, but smaller ones tend to have very little.

And there's no reason to impose (a lot of rules). If the first thing you did was to translate thousands of pages of policies from English Wikipedia people would just come to a small wiki and try to start working, and they would just say, "There's so many rules I can't figure out what I'm supposed to do." Pretty much if you behave like a normal person, standard kindergarten ethics, you might call it, will get you pretty far. Basically, be nice to people. If someone objects to something you are doing, stop and talk about it. It's really basic stuff.

Sometimes people get upset with an entry about them and start attacking the concept of Wikipedia. What do you tell those people?

Our neutrality policy is written such that no article in Wikipedia should be a hatchet job or an attack piece. If it is, we really want to make sure that gets corrected. It turns out that even a lot of controversial people are perfectly happy to have their controversies detailed as long as you say who said something that about them and how they responded. And they feel like, well, it's been presented so that someone else can draw their own conclusions. It's really rare that somebody really deletes a whole episode from their life or something. It's an ongoing process basically.

unblocked last October but then reblocked. But the Chinese Wikipedia still grows. It's still a big language with over 100,000 articles and it's constantly growing. We're patient; we're sure they'll unblock us someday.

I think the blocking regime in China is failing, and so lots and lots of people know how to get around it, and it's just completely attainable in the long run. You can't block the Internet and have economic growth, particularly censoring a free educational source.

If you talk to anybody in the IT industry, they'll tell you that they use Wikipedia when it's time to look up important IT concepts to get a quick background. Clearly that's damaging to the IT industry in China. The truth is, I think the Chinese IT industry knows how to get around that block. But it's a little depressing if one of your important industries in the future has to grow by getting around your censorship. So I suspect they'll change their policy at some point.

Wikipedia relies on donations, but will you consider running advertisements in the future?

There's no plans to do so. We never say that we'll absolutely never do it, but we have no plans to do so. The thing we always remind people is that we are a charity, and we do have a charitable mission to give a free encyclopedia to everyone on the planet. The amount of money that we are turning down from advertising is substantial, and it can make a serious impact on that mission, and that raises the question of "well, why don't we turn on the ads?" There are good reasons to turn down ad revenues. But there's also good reasons to accept it, so, it's a decision we have to keep making responsibly, year after year.

With your for-profit company Wikia Inc., you are planning a search-engine project. Could you elaborate on that?

It's an effort to create a completely open-source, freely licensed search engine. We'll publish all the algorithms [software codings] and allow people to copy and modify the software, and have the algorithms available for researchers.

It's also going to include public participation in a Wikipedia-style fashion, where people can come in and basically edit the Web site and make changes to the algorithms and things like

that. That's under development. Right now it's in the early designing stages, but even that early design stuff is being done in public.

We plan to launch some kind of a very basic initial public site in the fourth quarter of this year before the yearend. That will be a place where people will come in and start doing searches and submitting URLs, ranking them and rating them and you know, editing the Web site and building this up.

We expect that when it opens, it's going to be useless and terrible. But of course it may be terrible! It's like Wikipedia was, the first month of operation. If you came and looked for an encyclopedia and found 50 articles, you'd say, "Well, this is nothing."

This is the start of a long-term community project that's going to take several years to really build something that can compete with Google.

Are you dissatisfied with the current search engines?

The quality of search has reached a plateau in the last three or four years. There was definitely a time when there was a marked difference between Google and their competition. But now if you take a look at the search results from Yahoo! or Google or Ask, they are actually very similar.

Good-quality search has become something of a commodity. But I think it can be better. There are still areas where search isn't as good as I think it could be. I don't know the solution, but I do know that the open-source software projects tend to be able to find better solutions than proprietary projects.

The other thing is that it's more of a political statement, with a small "p" -- meaning, I think that search is a really fundamental part of the infrastructure of the Internet and, like other things on the Internet, I think it's important to us as the Internet citizens of the world that we care that it's open, transparent and auditable.

It's a little bit of a cause for some concern that there is so much power in the hands of the search engines, who are not transparent about how they rank things. We just don't know and it's a black box.

I think it's important that there could be an alternative, where

people can understand how things are ranked because all of the algorithms are published.

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