

## Wikipedia Founder on the Web's Evolution

Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales discusses encyclopedias, Microsoft and the next big thing(s) on the Internet.

WEB EXCLUSIVE

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Feb. 1, 2007 - Jimmy Wales describes himself as a pathological optimist. He'd have to be. The 40-year-old former options trader is the founder of **Wikipedia**, the free online encyclopedia that allows anyone to edit any entry—a by-the-people-for-the-people approach that Wales describes as a bid to give everyone free access to the sum of all human knowledge.

The Wikipedia phenom currently has more than 5 million entries in multiple languages and draws an estimated 7 billion page views a month. Now Wales—known to Wikipedians worldwide as the “God King”—is embarking on a new venture: a new wiki-inspired search engine than plans to rely on human intelligence “to do what algorithms cannot.” Wales spoke to NEWSWEEK’s Arlene Getz about his work, his Bono connection, the money he *hasn’t* made from Wikipedia and what Microsoft’s Bill Gates said to him when they met at last week’s annual meeting of the **World Economic Forum in Davos**. Excerpts:

### **NEWSWEEK: How did you come up with Wikipedia?**

**Jimmy Wales:** I had the idea for a freely licensed [online] encyclopedia written by people in various languages in 1999, and I had a philosophy student design it. The problem was that it had a top-down design and was way too slow. Then we discovered the wiki software concept, invented by Ward Cunningham in 1995. It was a place where programmers stored their ideas—and a Web site that anyone can edit. So we started Wikipedia in January 2001.

### **Weren't you worried about what would be put up there?**

Yes, when I first started I would actually wake up at night to go down and check what was being posted.

### **You say that you currently have an estimated 7 billion page views a month, and that they're doubling every three to four months. How much money are you making?**

I'm not making money. We're structured as a nonprofit, and we get donations that are usually in the \$50-\$100 range. I've also managed to get larger donors to offer matching gifts.

### **You've always said that you made enough from your work as a futures and options trader to live comfortably. Still, don't you have any regrets about not cashing in from Wikipedia?**

I've often said that it was either the dumbest thing or the smartest thing I ever did. But I'm proud of what I did. I feel that creating this [Wikipedia] community is something culturally important.

### **Did you expect Wikipedia to get this big?**

I knew it was a big idea, but I didn't think it would get so big so fast.

### **Wikipedia has been criticized because of inaccurate entries, revisionist history and malicious comments. You also came under fire when you started to lock users out of pages.**

The media got some of that wrong. For the entire history of Wikipedia, we've had the power to lock pages temporarily. If things flared up, or entries were persistently vandalized, then we would lock [a page]. But we never liked that. So we came up with a form of semiprotection. Instead of locking it so that no one can edit, we decided only to allow people on if they'd had an account for at least four days. That was actually opening it—not locking it as before.

### **What's so magical about four days?**

I think it was fairly arbitrary. But it's all about slowing down the bad people.

### **How do you decide what's acceptable when it comes to sensitive subjects?**

The [Wikipedia] community decides. On an unmoderated message board, if someone behaves in an irritating way, no one can come in and do anything about it except yell at them. In a wiki, the social customs are very different. If somebody comes in and posts something very mean and hateful, other people will just delete it. Everything is very transparent and accountable so you can always see who deleted what, so if you do something like that you better be prepared to back up why you've deleted it. There's a process of mutually assured destruction [if entries are too partisan].

### **You're assuming that all your users are rational people.**

Most people are, and that's a wonderful thing to discover.

### **What's the next big thing on the Web?**

There's this very overused phrase of Web 2.0, and now people are getting so sick of it that they're starting to talk of Web 3.0, but I don't think they really know what it means. What I think about Web 2.0 is that it's about these kinds of communities and social norms and practices and software that implements. So things like [the photo-sharing Web site] Flickr—the first time I saw Flickr I thought, this is going to be overrun by spam and garbage in no time. And then it wasn't. And craigslist, which has a community that polices the advertising. That trend is really where we're headed.

### **Where does your search project fit in?**

There's an open-directory project called [dmoz.org](http://dmoz.org). This was a project to build a Web index—somewhat successful, but looking at it now it's very antiquated. Very 1.0. When they had a problem with spammers, they responded in the only way they knew—by a very closed and insular community. Now I think there are better ways. You can create mass participation, you can give that community control in various interesting and subtle ways to empower people to index the Web. That's what I'm working on.

### **How will that work in practice?**

In practice it's going to work a lot like Wikipedia, which is that things only get included if they are approved of by the community in some ongoing process. Hopefully, it involves a reasonable amount of dialogue and discussion. Search is very different from an encyclopedia, so there aren't a lot of exact analogies. But one of the things that I definitively learned was that we [initially] basically overdesigned for all sorts of problems that people really didn't have. That's a very common mistake on the Internet.

I think the right answer is not to design [to prevent] the spammer, but to throw it all open. Then if we start to see a problem developing, we can think about ways to narrowly slice out that problem. It's very analogous to what you want in ordinary life and society. You don't want a police state, you want people to be able to speak their minds. Somewhere between a police state and anarchy, you've got good governance. It's always a messy process.

### **You're obviously an optimist.**

Yes, pathologically optimistic.

### **What about user-generated content? Is that going to put journalists out of business?**

It's definitely the way of the future. But I do have limits on my Utopianness. I haven't yet seen citizen journalism come close to what exists [in news publications].

### **You place so much faith in the "community." How do you define the community?**

It's a very overused term on the Internet, but to me it means people who actually know each other, whether in real life or online. That really helps to [encourage] good behavior.

### **Are you a MySpace fan?**

I'm feel I'm too old to get MySpace. It hurts my eyes.

### **Tell me about Bono, Bill Gates and why you came to Davos.**

I've known Bono for awhile; he invited me to come to Davos. I went with him to a party last night, and I talked to

Bill Gates there—the first time I’ve met him. Lately there’ve been reports in the media about Microsoft versus Wikipedia, which we think is really silly because we’re not battling Microsoft. It was a very brief chat—he said he liked Wikipedia.

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