

Wikipedia

By Sarah Roggio

Wikipedia, the free Internet encyclopedia, bills itself as the world's largest online general reference resource (its name is a combination of the words "wiki," a type of collaborative website, and "encyclopedia"). Unlike a traditional encyclopedia, which features expert-reviewed content, Wikipedia's "crowdsourcing" approach means that articles can be written and edited by anyone – a fact that has made it a favorite target of many critics and satirists. Cofounder and Internet entrepreneur Jimmy Wales has described Wikipedia as "an effort to create and distribute a free encyclopedia of the highest possible quality to every single person on the planet in their own language." As of March 2012, Wikipedia had more than 21 million articles in 284 languages, which may seem to prove that this colossal encyclopedia might actually reach Wales' lofty goal – but it's the word "quality" that continues to dog its efforts. Wikipedia had more than 400 million unique visitors every month as of February 2012, but critics of the site's populist approach continue to question whether anyone should consult this encyclopedia at all.

Wikipedia began its quest for global domination in 2001, building on Ward Cunningham's radical 1995 invention of a wiki, a website that could be edited by anyone. This invention, along with the introduction in 1999 of Web 2.0 tools that allowed users to collaborate online, helped Wikipedia cofounders Wales and philosopher Larry Sanger realize their vision. Wikipedia did not start out in its current form, however. Wales, concerned that the Internet had not yet realized the promise of providing free access to high-quality information, hired Sanger in 1999 to create a free online encyclopedia called Nupedia. Unlike today's Wikipedia, Nupedia featured peer-reviewed articles, but the review process was slow, so Sanger suggested creating a companion site using Cunningham's wiki tool that would allow contributors to create articles without editorial review. The Wikipedia site went live in January 2001 and quickly surpassed Nupedia, generating more than 20,000 articles in 18 languages by the end of the year (in 2003, Nupedia was shut down and its articles were added to Wikipedia).

While Wikipedia capitalized on technology, Wales credits the collaborative process that he and Sanger created for Wikipedia's rise. "Wikipedia isn't a technological innovation at all; it's a social innovation," Wales says in the introduction to *The Wikipedia Revolution: How a Bunch of Nobodies Created the World's Greatest Encyclopedia*. "We had the Web already, but we discovered the basic idea of how to organize a community." Today, Wikipedia is the most successful recent example of crowdsourcing – its articles are created by an all-volunteer force of more than 31 million registered users and countless anonymous users around the globe. While Wales might argue that this "open" approach has produced entries reflecting a more universal, populist perspective, critics have pointed to statistics from the nonprofit Wikimedia Foundation (Wikipedia's owner) that show most of the contributors have been white Western men with above average education. To help correct at least some of this imbalance, the foundation's executive director Sue Gardner announced a goal in 2011 of increasing the share of female contributors to 25 percent by 2015. The encyclopedia is also primarily crowd-funded, through donations to the Wikimedia Foundation. Each year, Wales' name and face are splashed across Wikipedia's pages during the foundation's annual appeal for donations. Some critics have questioned whether Wikipedia truly is a nonprofit venture, however, citing the large size of contributions made by such donors as

venture capital firm Elevation Partners, which had donated \$1 million to the foundation as of 2008, and Google, which donated \$2 million to the foundation in 2010.

The questions about Wikipedia's funding, however, pale in comparison to criticisms of its content. Wikipedia places few restrictions on its articles, other than directing contributors to verify information, maintain a neutral point of view, and respect copyright law and the privacy of non-public figures. Wikipedia also requires that contributors supply known information, not original works or research. As part of its "open" editing model, no one owns a particular article – all articles can be edited by anyone however they see fit. Edits show up immediately without prior review, which means that errors, biases, or even nonsense can appear in an article until another editor comes along to fix the problem. When disputes arise over edits, the editors involved discuss the changes and come to an agreement on how the article should read. It is this consensus approach that has drawn not only criticism, but ridicule, from Wikipedia's detractors. Comedian Stephen Colbert, host of the satirical late-night television program *The Colbert Report*, once urged viewers to alter a Wikipedia entry on African elephants to say that the population had tripled in a six-month period. He also coined the term "wikiality," saying, "On Wikipedia, we can create a reality that we all agree on – the reality we just agreed on."

Perhaps cofounder Sanger found himself agreeing in part with the critics – in 2002, amid questions about the legitimacy of Wikipedia's articles, Sanger left to create a competing online encyclopedia called Citizendium, which has more rigorous criteria for contributors (while he has maintained in subsequent statements that Wikipedia does not have an accuracy problem, Sanger has said it has an "anti-elitism" problem and an unwillingness to listen to expert opinions). Wikipedia has also drawn fire for at least two cases of libelous comments being added to entries. In 2005, an entry ran uncorrected for more than 100 days stating that John Seigenthaler Sr., former assistant to Attorney General Robert "Bobby" Kennedy, was thought for a time to have been involved in the assassinations of Bobby and President John F. Kennedy. In 2008, literary agent Barbara Bauer sued Wikipedia over derogatory statements added to her entry about her intelligence and sales abilities. Despite these controversial cases, not everyone agrees that Wikipedia can't be trusted. In 2005, a *Nature* magazine investigation found that Wikipedia's science articles came close to the level of accuracy of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s science articles (which *Britannica* has disputed, however).

To help ensure accuracy and respond to the problem of some contributors not following the rules, Wikipedia created a Wikipedia Arbitration Committee. This panel of volunteer editors (usually experienced Wikipedia editors) resolves disputes among contributing editors and determines which editors can have access to the CheckUser and Oversight tools, which allow editors to check IP addresses of other contributors and to delete content. Wikipedia has also limited the ability to edit some of its more popular articles – including President Barack Obama's page, which has a form to submit feedback instead of an edit button – to fight the criticism that articles are subject to "vandalism," or the intentional addition of erroneous, offensive or biased language. Some Wikipedia editions, including the English-language edition, have decided to limit edits to registered users to help reduce incidents of vandalism. Ironically, it's these types of restrictions that have led critics to accuse Wikipedia of the very elitism and censorship that Wales set out to avoid and to question how "open" Wikipedia really is.

When Wikipedia first emerged, some expressed concerns that this free online encyclopedia might replace more traditional information resources. Others, however, believe this will not be the case. *Wired* magazine Editor-in-Chief Chris Anderson, for example, wrote in *Nature* magazine that Wikipedia's "wisdom of crowds" approach would not replace scientific journals anytime soon, with their rigorous review process. Still, Wikipedia continues to be one of the most-visited sites on the Internet; in 2011, its traffic ranking was sixth among the world's websites. When the English-language site went "black" for 24 hours in January 2012 to protest proposed U.S. anti-piracy laws, *BBC News Magazine* ran a column suggesting other ways that Wikipedia visitors could find their facts that day – a nod to how many people have come to rely on the site for information. Even educators are finding a way to somewhat peacefully coexist with Wikipedia. While many professors do not allow their students to include citations from Wikipedia, some concede that the website can serve as a starting point for more detailed research. Wikipedia cofounder Wales even seems to agree with this assessment. Wales said during a 2006 talk at the University of Pennsylvania that when he receives emails from students complaining that they received failing grades on papers because they cited Wikipedia, he tells them they got what they deserved: "For God sake, you're in college – don't cite the encyclopedia."

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