

Interview: Wikipedia founder bullish on news

September 3 2010, By ALESSANDRA RIZZO and DAN PERRY ,
Associated Press Writer



Jimmy Wales, from the US, co-founder and promoter of Wikipedia, attends the "Intelligence on the World, Europe, and Italy" economic forum, at Villa d'Este, in Cernobbio, on the Como Lake, Italy, Friday, Sept. 3, 2010. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)

(AP) -- Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales believes relief may be in sight for the beleaguered news media industry.

The increasing use of the [mobile Internet](#) and for-pay "apps" that run on [smart phones](#) and other gadgets might give news providers what they've been searching for: a way to charge for [digital content](#), Wales told The Associated Press in an interview Friday. As founder of one of the world's most popular websites, the 44-year-old American is a key Internet entrepreneur.

"The apps model - the [iPad](#) app, the Kindle - does provide new and interesting opportunities for newspapers," he said, speaking on the sidelines of the Ambrosetti Forum, an annual gathering of business and political leaders on the shores of Italy's Lake Como.

"If I just click on my iPad, and it's billed on my normal bill, that micropayment model makes it possible for people to have an impulse purchase," he said.

Newspaper and magazine publishers have been charging on a subscription basis for content on Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle e-readers. Many [publishers](#) are experimenting with a system that lets people download an app, then pay for each new issue.

Some media companies have discussed using a micropayment system instead, where readers pay a few cents every time they click on an article. The charge could be either debited from a prepaid account or folded into the wireless bill for a device such as Apple Inc.'s iPad.

So far, micropayments haven't taken off. Wales believes both models can work, but said he expects subscriptions will remain more popular.

"I'm not going to pull out my credit card out of my wallet," he said. "It's way too much trouble, but if I have a way of just clicking and I get it and I pay a little, it's worth it."

While the Wikipedia founder is optimistic about people's willingness to pay for content through dedicated apps, he said he is skeptical about newspapers charging for content on websites.

The [Wall Street Journal](#), owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., has been the most successful at charging for access, and the media mogul recently extended the model to the Times of London. [News Corp.](#) has

not disclosed details about the impact on traffic and overall revenue for the British news website.

Wales' view is that charging for desktop Web access, where there is no payment system as convenient as the mobile phone bill, would remain a challenge.

Media companies may be focused on digital strategies, but Wales said he expects newsprint and books to survive longer than doomsayers predict.

"Print is a pretty amazing technology, really. It's very cheap, lightweight, disposable, batteries don't go dead," Wales said - adding that he was taking a book to the beach because an e-reader would be destroyed by the sand.

As news organizations look for ways to make money online, Wales is determined that the hugely popular online encyclopedia, a nonprofit, remain open and ad-free - a zone of the Internet that's not even trying to "monetize."

Wikipedia is one of the most popular websites in the world - No. 6 by unique visitors in May, according to The Nielsen Co., behind search leaders Google Inc., Yahoo Inc. and Microsoft Corp., social networking force Facebook and online auctioneer eBay Inc.

The site has more than 3 million entries in English, far more than a traditional encyclopedia, and it is rapidly expanding into other languages, with almost a million entries in French and more in German, Wales said.

Wikipedia lets anyone edit an entry but is policed by an army of "administrators" who remove problem entries - whether purposely false, biased or otherwise unacceptable to the community. Administrators can even block offenders from editing in the future. On occasion, Wales

said, administrators collaborate to come up with neutral language for controversial topics and even decide to close a page for future edits.

Wales' fortune does not approach those of fellow Web visionaries from Google Inc., Amazon.com Inc. or eBay Inc., and he joked about how his relatively modest means has misled people into thinking he's an ideological opponent of commerce. Far from it; his new venture Wikia, which builds online communities around shared interests, is ad-supported.

"I don't think it's right for Wikipedia but I think it's perfectly fine for other contexts," he said. "When you go to [Wikipedia](#) you should be there to learn, reflect, think contribute in a positive way ... We don't need to commercialize it."

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Citation: Interview: Wikipedia founder bullish on news (2010, September 3) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-09-wikipedia-founder-bullish-news.html>

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