

Ten years on, Wikipedia eyes a better world

12 January 2011, by Ron Bousso



Jimmy Wales, co-founder of online collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia. Ten years after its debut as a geeky online encyclopedia, Wikipedia today wants to use its huge, growing popularity and spirit to spread knowledge across the world.

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In the decade since it was born, the free, non-profit encyclopedia that anyone can edit has profoundly changed the way people access information, becoming almost the default source for quick online references.

After a failed attempt to launch a conventional [online encyclopedia](#) called Newpedia, Jimmy Wales founded [Wikipedia](#) on January 15, 2001 with little expectations.

"Wikipedia turned out to be more successful than anybody ever imagined or ever even aspired for it to be. It took on a life of its own and became this hugely popular thing," Wikipedia chief executive officer Sue Gardner said.

Today, Wikipedia is available in more than 250 languages, includes some 26 million entries, is

read by hundreds of millions across the world and edited by millions of "Wikipedians."

And now that it has established itself in rich countries, Wikipedia has set its sights on developing countries, as [Internet access](#) and [literacy](#) gradually improve.

"Our goal is to reach people all around the world with Wikipedia and to make it possible for them to access the encyclopedia," Gardner said in an interview with AFP.

"We know that people are coming online in massive numbers, particularly through mobile phones, and so we have a new strategic effort to focus our energies on these developing countries so, as those people come online, Wikipedia is there for them to use."

Wikipedia is set to open its first office outside the United States in India to increase awareness for the open-source encyclopedia in the rapidly growing economy where the growing middle-class is hungry for information.

It is also expanding and improving its website in Chinese, even though Beijing continues to restrict access to the site.

"When I talk to Chinese Wikipedians I have the impression that what they are hoping to do is build up a good Chinese-language encyclopedia so that come the day that people in China get unfettered access to the Internet, it is waiting for them, good and rich to read," Gardner said.

The community of core Wikipedia editors -- anyone who makes at least five edits a month -- includes almost 100,000 volunteers across the world, some of them anonymous.

Their motives are different.

"Lots of people edit because they want to make the world a better place and they believe that access to

information is a human right."

But they also just find it fun.



Executive Director of the Wikimedia Foundation Sue Gardner takes part in a photo session in New York City. Ten years after its debut as a geeky online encyclopedia, Wikipedia today wants to use its huge, growing popularity and spirit to spread knowledge across the world.

Wikipedia's reliability was sound.

"They use it because it is comprehensive, it is many, many times bigger than any print reference material anywhere in human history," she said.

"The big surprise of Wikipedia was that the benefits of complete openness, the complete transparency and massive collaboration hugely outweigh the benefits of having credential-focused peer-reviewed process."

Financially, the non-profit organization recently reached its \$16 million fundraising goal for 2010, doubling its donations from last year.

Gardner is confident Wikipedia, which employs around 50 people worldwide, is always going to be non-profit.

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"Wikipedians are typically really, really smart. Jimmy (Wales) often calls them smart geeks. And so there is a show off tendency as well, they know a lot of stuff and they are proud of themselves and so in writing an article they are showing the world how smart they are."

Typically, a Wikipedia contributing editor is a male in his mid-20s, usually a science graduate student who is "detail obsessed, very picky about facts and numbers," Gardner said.

Critics accuse the user-edited encyclopedia of being biased and unreliable, as many universities and schools remain loath to use Wikipedia.

But a 2006 study in Nature magazine said that the accuracy of Wikipedia entries was "surprisingly good," with the number of errors not far different than in Encyclopedia Britannica, considered a gold-standard reference.

Gardner recognized the risks in the Wikipedia model, but insisted that with 410 million monthly entries -- making it the fifth most popular website in the world, according to a comScore survey --

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