Life in the global village

Wiki: Weird Name, World-Changing Tech

By Mark Costlow, President

"**Wiki**" is an Hawaiian word meaning "quick." And since Hawaiian words can sometimes be doubled for emphasis, "wiki wiki" means "very quick." When Ward Cunningham first constructed his novel website which encouraged users to edit the site contents themselves in 1995, he drew on the word that fascinated him on his first trip to the islands and called it *WikiWikiWeb*. The idea was that people could share ideas through the site **quickly** and easily from afar through this new kind of website.

In 2010, the concepts of user-contributed media and social networking seem old hat, but back in 1995 they were groundbreaking ideas. Before then (and for many years after), the major flow of information on a website was from the owner to the visitors with no feedback, correction, or improvement coming from the rabble, except for the random, but usually irate, email.

Most of us did not notice the advent of the WikiWikiWeb when it was born. The "wiki" term and concept didn't really leak into our language until the start of the one wiki that most people have heard of and now pretty much embodies the concept and attributes, **Wikipedia** (*en.wikipedia.org/*).

Jimmy Wales ran a free online encyclopedia project called *Nupedia* in the late 1990s. Nupedia had a strict peer-review process and used highly skilled contributors (much like a traditional encyclopedia). But it had a significant problem: it grew too slowly.

So Wales imagined a system where **anybody** could contribute. Rather than waiting for a learned specialist in the field to write an article, and then for equally qualified peers to fact-check and approve it, why not let someone (anyone) who knows enough about the subject write it up? And if someone else comes along and finds an error, they should be able to fix it. Right then and there! No request for changes, no waiting for approval, no information gatekeeper: just change it and move on.

Wales merged his idea of a free online encyclopedia with the crowd-sourcing ideas of the WikiWikiWeb and came up with Wikipedia. It now boasts over *3 million* articles on every conceivable topic involving life on earth: agriculture, manufacturing, education, technology, history, the physical world, mathematics, art, music, and commerce. It has become a de facto reference for the Internet. If you want to know how a piano is constructed, how musical chords are formed, who made the first saxophone, or maybe the birth years of every famous saxophonist in history, Wikipedia has become the first place to check.

For more timely or controversial topics, however, it's best to take the information with a very large grain of salt. Wikipedia's **apparent** free-wheeling attitude toward getting the facts straight has earned it a reputation for being the place to find out anything, as long as you don't mind learning some things that are wrong.
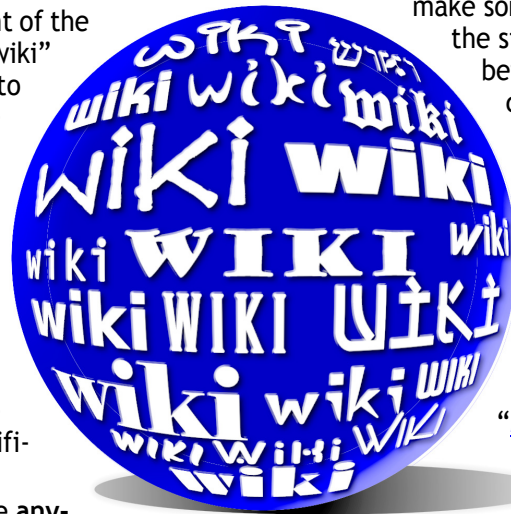
After all, if anyone can edit, what's to stop an idiot (or worse, an evil genius) from making things up?

Wales' argument is that the *collective power of the crowds* keeps Wikipedia honest. If something bogus does get added (and it happens all the time) an army of hyper-vigilant volunteers will notice and fix it. Abusers of the system are banned outright. Wales has had to make some concessions to prevent misuse of the site, such as requiring people to log in before they can edit (no anonymous changes). But it is still largely a space where anybody can contribute, and it works suprisingly well. Most mistakes or slanders are fixed with stunning speed. More subtle errors can take longer. And of course there are huge swaths of human knowledge where there is not yet a known correct viewpoint. But even that problem is addressed. Every page not only has an "*Edit*" link but also a "*Discussion*" link.

Viewing the Discussion page associated with an article is like looking behind the Wizard's curtain in Oz. Here you see the suggestions, arguments, and occasional verbal fist-fights over what should be said, and how, in the associated article.

Can a crowd-sourced collection of Web pages edited by amateurs really rival the traditional professionally written and edited encyclopedia, when it comes to breadth, depth, and accuracy? Breadth and depth are occuring naturally partly because Wikipedia is free and partly because there's no shortage of people who have a

few minutes to spare to make the world a better place. Also Wikipedia can tackle topics considered too frivolous or fast-changing for a dead-tree encyclopedia, such as a synopsis of every episode of *M*A*S*H* or a current event like the July 2005 London bombings.

Amazingly, some studies of accuracy that have compared the prestigious for-profit *Encyclopedia Britannica* (*www.britannica.com*)to Wikipedia have disovered that the error rate in Wikipedia is **lower** than in Britannica.

Clearly the potential for real left-field gaffs is higher in Wikipedia, but the speed at which all mistakes can be corrected keeps Wikipedia tilting toward perfection.

The wide world of wikis

The wiki concept quickly caught on. Wikipedia is now online in almost 50 different languages and lists wikis in 223 more (including Anglo-Saxon, Esperanto, Latin, and even Pennsylvania German!) while sponsoring a large number of similar online projects as well.

There are now specialized wikis for *everything*. SWCP has a Tech Support Wiki for our customers accessible from our home page. They have become a serious academic subject, too. Two economists, Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams, coined the term "**wikinomics**" for a book of the same name in 2006 that outlines the real-life impact of wikis. Based on the simple insight that collaboration is getting ever cheaper and easier with the Web, they show how the concept enables large groups of people who've never met to work together effectively, supercharging innovation through the wisdom of crowds.

The authors note that there are victims of wikinomics, too — chiefly the newspaper and music industries. Why buy the paper when you can get it free on the Web? Why get the CD when you can see the video on YouTube?

Other industries are being transformed also. Major universities such as MIT are putting all their courses online, and the rest of academia is following. Custom cars using designers to compete and microfactories to produce may one day remake the automotive industry.

Governments are also getting involved. In Estonia, for example, volunteers used GPS units and wikinomics to locate and clean up over 10,000 illegal dumps.

Wikis have also helped track atrocities in Kenya, Palestinians map violence in Gaza, Haitians plot the impact of the recent earthquake, and even aided East Coast residents struggling with "snowmageddon" last winter.

Wikis are not for just "serious" subjects like genetics or government secrets (i.e., Wikileaks) either. All kinds of enthusiasms now have their own dedicated wikis — games, classic TV shows like *LOST*, shopping, entire fictional universes such as Harry Potter's, even vegetarian recipes and geneology. At least one, it seems, for every interest group imaginable, with more coming every day.

In Part 2 of this article, we'll look at other uses of the wiki concept and software, including how you can use it on your *own* SWCP website, or internally for your organization, company, or family.

New features for RoundCube

SWCP's latest online email interface, **RoundCube**, just got a major upgrade, including some bugfixes and a few helpfully convenient new features:

- **Address book** supports groups and is available from the **Compose** window.
- A handy **Select All on this Page** button.
- There's now a button to turn the **Preview-Pane** on or off in the main **Message View** screen.
- **UI Help** — Help button at the bottom of the screen that describes the user interface.
- With **Message Highlights** under **Settings**, you can distinguish incoming mail as you like. Make all messages from your boss appear in red, for instance, those to one of your aliases appear in blue, etc.

Remember, RoundCube or our other webmail programs are where to go to check what's been caught in your Spam Filter. So log in and check the new, improved Roundcube out at *https://roundcube.swcp.com/*

Net Notes

Always remember what your Mom said

Stuxnet, the most highly sophisticated piece of malware *ever*, has cybersecurity experts in awe. It is designed to infect specific industrial software, possibly to destroy certain factories. But it's still not clear what its real purpose is or who made it. It's far too advanced for a basement hacker; a state, most likely Israel, is believed to be responsible. Stuxnet might be one of the first weapons deployed in some secret global cyberwar.

There may already have been others, however. Two years ago, there was a worm that infected US military computers, and before that was Conficker. But how could they even get in? Most "secure" systems are not connected online to avoid chances of infection.

These and other malware exploits were likely all spread the same way at first — apparently through **USB thumb drives** that were deliberately left lying around in sensitive areas or even dropped in parking lots.

Flash drives have become so small, common, portable, and convenient as to be nearly invisible. But just as early viruses could be carried by infected floppy disks, these highly dangerous programs can spread through the simple curiosity of naive office workers.

As soon as the drive is inserted into the computer, **Windows AutoRun** instantly and automatically installs the malware. But Stuxnet can infect computers even if the AutoRun feature is turned off. All it takes is a mere peek in the directory to set the worm loose.

The *only* way to completely avoid this, experts say, is *do not* trade USB sticks, *don't* stick an unknown one in your machine, and *definitely don't* pick up a stray one and plug it in just to see what may be on it.

In other words, remember what your mother told you about candy found in the street — *Don't touch it!*

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