

Free Culture and the Developing World: Driving Technology Adoption

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1. Introduction

To be presented are some history of Wikipedia and Wikia, the role of Wikipedia in the developing world, and Wikia and the future of search. With reference to Charles van Doren in 1962, the ideal encyclopedia should be radical. It should stop being safe. Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That is what we are doing at Wikipedia.

2. History of Wikipedia

2.1 What are Wikipedia, Free Access, and the Software?

Wikipedia is a freely licensed encyclopedia written by thousands of volunteers in many languages.

Free Access is free in the sense of GNU, in the sense outlined by Richard Stallman, and the 4 freedoms of free software. It includes freedom to copy, freedom to modify, freedom to redistribute, and freedom to redistribute modified versions, commercially or non-commercially.

For the Software, Mediawiki is our wiki engine. It was written by our developers primarily for use at Wikipedia. It is becoming very broadly adopted in enterprise wiki

settings. It is highly scalable. It is easy to install on one server, but also runs one of the most popular websites in the world. Every piece of software that we use at Wikipedia is free software. We consider this integral to our mission, i.e. a free encyclopedia requires free software and free file formats.

2.2 What is “the Sum” of All Human Knowledge?

Wikipedia is an encyclopedia, and not a data dump. It is not an archive, not a library, and not a textbook. It is an encyclopedia that offers an essentialized summary of human knowledge, with the depth of the material depending on the context.

We have mentioned that every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all known knowledge. The Wikipedia project is inherently global with more than 2,000,000 articles in English but this is less than 1/3 of our work. There are 14 more languages, each with at least 100,000 articles, 74 languages, each with at least 10,000 articles, and 144 languages, each with at least 1,000 articles.

2.3 How Good is Wikipedia and What It is Best at?

An article in Nature made a comparison. It said that all articles in Wikipedia are of a

similar length and that they are on Scientific and technical topics. Britannica had an average of around 3 errors per article while Wikipedia had an average of around 4 errors per article. This is not good enough to suit us. We are always focused on the highest possible quality.

Neutrality and moderation is the great strength of Wikipedia. Contrary to very confused media reports, Wikis are much better than virtually any other medium at generating calm, measured discussions and debates. How does this work? In order for writing to survive in an open community process, it must be broadly appealing to a large number of people. This pushes people towards quality and thoughtfulness.

2.4 What is the Wikimedia Foundation?

It is a charitable organization. The Board Chair is Florence Devouard. It is responsible for Wikipedia and its sister projects. It spent around \$1,000,000 last year, and will spend around \$2-3 million this year. It is supported primarily by small donations from people all over the world. It is partnering with select institutions such as Kennisnet, Yahoo! to bring Wikipedia to people faster.

3. Wikipedia in the Developing World

3.1 How popular is Wikipedia?

According to Alexa.com, Wikipedia is now the 8th most popular website on the Internet, the 7th most popular in Germany, the 11th most popular in India, the 9th most popular in Japan, and the 14th most popular in Iran.

3.2 How global is Wikipedia?

There are more than 2,000,000 articles in English; more than 500,000 articles in

German and French; more than 250,000 articles in Polish, Japanese, Dutch, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish; more than 29,077 articles in Thai with 60-65 million speakers; and more than 14,205 articles in Hindi with more than 280mm speakers.

3.3 How Can Thailand Participate in the New Economy?

Censorship is a significant problem in Thailand. Internet censorship in Thailand holds the country back from progress. Strong economic growth requires the free flow of creative ideas. Disruptions to the Internet harm educational projects.

4. Wikia and the Future Search

4.1 What is Wikia?

Wikia is a completely separate organization. Wikia is every other kind of book, work, or community that people might build. Wikia is extending the Wikipedia model beyond just nonprofit educational and research communities. Everything at Wikia is freely licensed, e.g. GPL software, GFDL content, and creative commons contents.

4.2 Wikia's Collaboration Vision

The library started it all. With more than 3,000 topics in 66 languages, and information with enduring value, it includes news and opinion in many topics and a collaborative blog. The number of unique articles is growing rapidly.

4.3 New Open Global Search Engine

An example of search with Google was discussed by searching for the word "muppet" with several million entries found. The first entry is "Muppets.com – The New Official Home of the Muppets!", followed by

“The Muppets – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia”, “The Muppet Show - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia”, “Muppets Home – Muppet Central Fan Site”, “Muppet Wiki – Muppet Wiki – a Wikia wiki”, “The Muppets Personality Test – Which Muppet are you?”, “You Tube – The Muppet Matrix”.

Clicking into “Muppet Wiki”, the welcome message states that it is a database that anyone can edit and that there were over 15,000 articles added since December 5, 2005. Also included were muppets at Ford Motor Company.

The new open global search engine from Wikipedia is based on four organizing principles. The first principle is Transparency - Openness in how the systems and algorithms operate, both in the form of open source licenses and open content + APIs. The second principle is Community - Everyone is able to contribute in some way (as individuals or entire organizations), strong social and community focus. The third principle is Quality - Significantly improve the relevancy and accuracy of search results and the searching experience. The fourth principle is Privacy - Must be protected, do not store or transmit any identifying data.

There are four active areas of focus. The first is Social Labs - sources for URL social reputation, experiments in wiki-style social

ranking. The second is Distributed Lab - projects focused on distributed computing, crawling, and indexing. The third is Semantic Lab- natural language processing, and text categorization. The fourth is Standards Lab- formats and protocols to build interoperable search technologies.

Another example is searching for information about Jimmy Wales. The information that Wikipedia’s Jimmy Wales has his sights set on the Search Business and thereby becoming Google’s worst nightmare is found together with his biography and photographs.

Many other topics can also be search for in Wikipedia.

5. Concluding Remarks

What does the future hold for free culture? Creative commons licenses are becoming hugely popular with the general public. This is providing a base layer of raw cultural materials which are allowing people to come together to create a culture of sharing and creativity which is not based on market exchange but rather on intellectual exchange. People love to talk about decentralization and the power of ordinary people. So let us do it!