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**Newsweek**

The People's Encyclopedia

As Wikipedia grows into a mainstream Internet brand, will it be able to keep its volunteers in line?

By Benjamin Sutherland
Newsweek International

Jan. 9, 2006 issue - Frieda Brioschi makes her living programming computers in Arcore, Italy, but she still finds more than 25 hours a week to help edit the Italian version of Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia, and to speak in schools, encouraging students to contribute. She's one of legions of enthusiasts who write copy and assume such editorial roles as fact checker, rewriter, grammar corrector, subject expert, spell checker or recent-changes patroller (her chosen role). Because Wiki software flags entries that have been changed or written from scratch, Brioschi can quickly locate (and redo) fresh text that she thinks is not up to snuff. Wikipedia, she says, is a "Darwinian" encyclopedia, steadily improving as flawed articles are deleted or rewritten.

Volunteers like Brioschi have helped turn Wikipedia into an information phenomenon. The Web site offers more than 2.6 billion articles in 200 languages, and attracts more than 2 billion page visits a month. This online encyclopedia is composed entirely of contributions by volunteers—anybody who feels moved to contribute. In December, readers added more than 45,000 entries to the English version alone—and that figure swells by 7 percent a month. Wikipedia is one of the fastest-growing Internet outfits around, and one of the best-known brands. Founder Jimmy Wales, 39, is now struggling to balance the need to protect that brand and make Wikipedia a viable enterprise. Although Wikipedia is just the kind of site that advertisers would love to appear on, it doesn't take ads, and Wales is not about to start: "We're concerned about what [ads] would do to our image, our brand," he says.

Recently, the Wiki brand has gotten some hard knocks. In December, a former MTV VJ who helped develop Podcasting admitted he had deleted references to rival innovators, leading to cries of "vanity editing." And there have been some glaring inaccuracies in Wiki posts. In November, a former aide to John F. Kennedy discovered that his Wiki bio stated he was a suspect in his boss's assassination. Wales says the scandals prove that Wiki is taken seriously and points out that some reputable news organizations have had their share of scandals, too. Wikipedia, he says, remains a reliable "bar-bet settler." The rub is that the first bettor to get to a computer can edit in his victory. As the brand goes mainstream, critics argue, the site will inevitably become a target of manipulation. How will Wikipedia protect its brand in the face of rising popularity?

Since its founding in 2001, Wikipedia has become the largest single source of information in history. The English-language version boasts more than 880,000 entries (the Encyclopaedia Britannica offers fewer than 120,000). Although Wikipedia has taken flack for its freewheeling editorial policy former Britannica editor in chief Robert McHenry described it as the "faith-based encyclopedia"—it has lately been winning mainstream adherents, as well as embarrassing, and worrying, competitors. A study published in December in the British journal *Nature* found that Wikipedia is only slightly less accurate than Britannica. The president of Chicago-based Encyclopaedia Britannica, Jorge Cauz, says Wikipedia is a recurrent topic at editorial meetings. Last year German Wikipedians posted a list of all the articles in Brockhaus Enzyklopedie for which wikipedia.de did not have entries. Wikipedia removed the list after the publishers complained.

The essential ingredient in Wikipedia's success is the enthusiasm it engenders among the faithful. Wales,

who built his nest egg trading futures in the 1990s, works as a volunteer for the Wikipedia Foundation Inc., a nonprofit corporation based in St. Petersburg, Florida. His staff consists of only three paid full-time employees—two assistants and a software engineer. Legions of enthusiasts supply all content and even maintain quality. Some Wikipedians create software, known as bots, to help with editing: Pfft Bot flags sentences that might carry double meanings; GrammarGremlin signals suspect syntax; Kakashi Bot will automatically change "Seychelles" to "the Seychelles." Anyone finding flaws in an article can access a list of the writer's other entries, which then receive deeper scrutiny. Reputations are discussed in chat rooms. After the recent inaccuracy flaps, the foundation made registration mandatory for contributors. But anyone can register—and, of course, write what he pleases. "Rather than a gatekeeper model," says Wales, "we use an accountability model."

Although that model worked well in the beginning, Wikipedia's recent problems in ensuring the quality of its entries don't bode well for the future. It doesn't help that the Wikipedia Foundation is expanding rapidly. In addition to the encyclopedia, Wales is embarking on new, far-reaching ventures—all built using the help of readers. Volunteer lexicographers are compiling Wiktionary, a sprawling dictionary with definitions written in many languages. Lovers of great sayings are compiling Wikiquote, a quotations database in more than 30 languages. In the Wikibooks project, anybody can help write school textbooks by, say, augmenting the chapter on Saint Sava in "Serbian History" or the brachytherapy section in "Radiation Oncology." The foundation has also started Wikinews, a free news wire synthesized from reports of news organizations as disparate as Qatar's Al-Jazeera, Britain's BBC and China's Xinhua News Agency. Wales wants to develop a news source that "doesn't have to bow to ratings," but he admits that the journalists, called Wikinewsies, sometimes let their biases show, especially when writing about Israel, the Palestinians or George W. Bush.

To finance these ventures, Wales is looking for ways of bringing in revenue. Last year, readers donated \$1 million. Large companies are also benefactors: in April, for example, Yahoo provided servers and \$250,000, which journalists and bloggers turned into flattering PR for Yahoo. Wales has also established a separate, for-profit company called Wikicities in 2004, which provides a hosting service for themed Web sites on topics ranging from ancient coins to beer. Although Wikicities is also built by volunteers, it does carry advertising. Wales says Wiki purists don't seem to mind because the firm is not part of the Wikipedia Foundation, and its profit motive was made clear from the get-go. Wikicities donates much of its revenue to the Wikipedia Foundation.

It falls to Wales and his three-person staff to police this empire. Despite the magnitude of the task, he has no plans to increase the size of the staff or spend a significant amount of money on monitoring the site. Instead, Wales wants to use the money to give away DVDs of Wiki content in regions of the world with spotty Internet access. His stated life mission is to provide everyone on the planet with a free encyclopedia. If he succeeds, the idea of looking up something in the encyclopedia will engage the new generation of students as it never did their parents.

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