

Testimony of
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of the
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Regarding
“E-Government 2.0: Improving Innovation, Collaboration, and Access”
Before
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And Governmental Affairs
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My name is Jimmy Wales, and I am the founder of Wikipedia as well as the founder the nonprofit charity, the Wikimedia Foundation, which hosts the Wikipedia project and several other related projects. I'm grateful to be here today to testify about the potential for the Wikipedia model of collaboration and information sharing may be helpful to government operations and homeland security.

To introduce this potential, I'd like to talk first about our experience with Wikipedia. The original vision statement for Wikipedia was for all of us to imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we are doing.

Wikipedia currently consists of more than nine million encyclopedia articles in more than 150 languages. While the English project is the largest, with over 2 million articles, this represents less than a fourth of the total work.

Wikipedia is currently increasingly important around the world, with more than half a million articles -- each -- in German and French, and more than 250,000 in several additional European languages, as well as more than 400,000 articles in Japanese.

Despite being blocked in the People's Republic of China for the past two years, the Chinese-language Wikipedia, which is primarily written by Chinese speakers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and around the world, is a healthy community project with more than 150,000 articles and a strong growth rate.

At a time when the the United States has been increasingly criticized around the world, I believe that Wikipedia is an incredible carrier of traditional American values of generosity, hard work, and freedom of speech.

Now, I'd like to talk a bit about how open, collaborative media like wikis enable more efficient gathering and dissemination of useful information. Although it may be counterintuitive that opening up a wiki project leads to a more useful compendium of information, that is what our experience has been with Wikipedia, and I believe that can be the experience for government agencies and operations as well.

The method of production for Wikipedia is highly innovative, and in keeping with the old adage "necessity is the mother of invention", the story of how Wikipedia came to be is, I hope, both instructive and entertaining.

Wikipedia was born of the famous dot-com crash. In the early days of the project, we worked as a community with only a shoestring budget. If the financial climate had been better, then I would likely have turned to hiring employees to fill some critical functions. But because investment money and advertising revenue had completely dried up, we were pushed to find new solutions, solutions of community institutions to manage processes that would have traditionally been handled in a top down nature.

As a result, we pushed the limits of the new Internet medium to create a new kind of community and a new kind of encyclopedia... one controlled by volunteer administrators and editors, working together in a grand global conversation to create something new.

According to firms that measure Internet usage, Wikipedia is now the 8th most popular website in the world. And yet, despite competing in some sense with companies with billions of dollars to invest, Wikipedia survives on an incredibly modest budget. Last year we spent around \$1 million, and although this year we are spending a bit more, our budget is still minuscule compared to that of most other tech enterprises -- even if you limit the

comparison to other top websites.

The First Amendment plays an important role in this project, as do traditional American ideals of individual responsibility. Under US law, everyone writing in Wikipedia takes responsibility for his or her own actions, just as is true everyone speaking in any public forum. The maintainer of this forum, the Wikimedia Foundation, has set down some fundamental codes of conduct, including but not limited to what Constitutional scholars call “time, place, and manner” restrictions, and I have personally imposed policies which strive toward respect for others, quality writing, and the citing of sources.

It is counter-intuitive to some that an open discussion with virtually no top-down command-and-control structures can generate a high quality encyclopedia. Nevertheless, it does.

To illustrate our success improving the quality of Wikipedia, we are currently celebrating a study published in the German weekly newsmagazine Stern. According to this study, Wikipedia scored higher in all but one category than a standard German encyclopedia, Brockhaus. (The one standard we fell a little short on was readability -- I promise, we’re working on that one every day.)

Now, given that Wikipedia is a public enterprise, open to the entire public for collaboration and contribution, you may be wondering how wikis or the Wikimedia model may be useful to government. First of all, I want to note generally that there are other ways in which a wiki can be set up usefully, including setups that don't involve opening the wiki to the general public. You can control access, but a wiki might be useful to an agency that wants to facilitate sharing information up and down the hierarchy (increased vertical sharing). And controlled-access wikis could be used to set up inter-agency information sharing as well (increased horizontal sharing).

The main point here is no requirement of necessity for the tool of a wiki to be open to the general public in order for it to be useful.

The word "wiki" comes from a Hawaiian word "wiki wiki", meaning "quick". The concept of a wiki was originally created by a famous programmer named Ward Cunningham, who lives in Portland, Oregon. The basic idea of a wiki is "quick collaboration". When people need to work

together to produce some document, the only option in the old days would be to email around a text file or word processing document. The wiki represents a crucial innovation allowing for much greater speed.

The most basic idea of a wiki is "a website that can be easily edited by the readers" but modern wikis contain simple yet powerful features that allow for the users to control and improve the quality of the work.

Wikis maintain a history of prior versions of articles. Every version of every article is stored in the database. Wikis also provide a simple means to compare any two versions. These two simple ideas combined mean that users can quickly revert back to a prior version if a new change is not satisfactory, and users can also monitor the work of others by quickly comparing to a recent version. This tends to cause the quality of the work to improve over time, since any bad changes do not live very long.

Additionally, wikis can provide fine-grained control over who is able to access or edit various kinds of information, thus facilitating the possibility of inter-agency information sharing and collaboration.

Wikipedia represents the power of a wiki open to the general public, but I believe the same wiki technology that powers Wikipedia is also being widely adopted inside many enterprises, and I'll note here in passing a couple of examples of this innovative use, one in private enterprise and one in the U.S. government.

First, consider Best Buy. Recently, great companies such as Best Buy have been using wiki technology across the enterprise to foster faster information sharing and collaboration across the enterprise. To give one hypothetical example of how this works, imagine a car stereo installer at a Best Buy store in Florida who discovers a faster or easier way to install a particular brand of stereo. This information can now be shared directly, peer-to-peer to other stereo installers across the entire store network. In the past, this kind of local information discovery was lost or isolated.

One Harvard professor's research (and I've included notes in this written testimony¹ so you can read the article yourself) suggests that one key to

¹ See the following links: <<http://www.socialtext.com/node/77>> and <<http://www.socialtext.com/node/70>>.

successful use of new technologies is adoption. The tools must be easy to use and valuable in the day-to-day life of those using them.

Next, take a look at Intellipedia. I'm not an expert on intelligence gathering, so I'll simply quote a useful resource -- Wikipedia -- regarding Intellipedia:

“The Intellipedia consists of three wikis that run on JWICS, SIPRNet, and Intelink-U. They are used by individuals with appropriate clearances from the 16 agencies of the United States intelligence community and other national-security related organizations, including Combatant Commands, and federal departments. The wikis are not open to the public.

“Intellipedia is a project of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI); DNI CIO Intelligence Community Enterprise Services (ICES) office headquartered in Fort Meade, Maryland. It includes information on the regions, people and issues of interest to those communities. Intellipedia uses MediaWiki, the same software used by the Wikipedia free-content encyclopedia project.[1] ODNI officials say that the project will change the culture of the U.S. intelligence community, widely blamed for failing to ‘connect the dots’ before the attacks of September 11, 2001.”

Tom Fingar of the ODNI has gone on record describing one of Intellipedia's intelligence successes. Fingar told DefenseNews.com that a worldwide group of intelligence collectors and analysts used Intellipedia to describe how Iraqi insurgents are using chlorine in improvised explosive devices (IEDs).² “They developed it in a couple of days interacting in Intellipedia,” Fingar said. “No bureaucracy, no mother-may-I, no convening meetings. They did it and it came out pretty good. That's going to continue to grow.”

As you can see, just as the dotcom crash forced private industry to think about more efficient and effective ways to use digital technology, the attacks on the United States forced our intelligence community to explore innovative ways to share intelligence among agencies.

² See U.S. Intel Agencies Modernize Info Sharing, DefenseNews.com, April 5, 2007, at <<http://defensenews.com/story.php?F=2733832&C=america>>

This brings us back to what might be called The Lesson of Wikipedia -- that an open platform, allowing many stakeholders to participate, can facilitate information sharing in an extremely cost-efficient manner, and it can take advantage of a wider range of knowledgeable people than traditional information-sharing processes do.

Good democratic governments strive to be responsive to the citizen's needs. In order to do so, it is important that governments use technology wisely to communicate with the public, and also to allow the public to communicate with the government.

Electronic communications are rapidly developing, and innovations such as wiki point the way towards the kind of balance between openness and control that can make for successful outcomes.

The core lesson of Wikipedia is that an open platform, which allows stakeholders to easily and quickly participate, can facilitate information sharing in an extremely cost-efficient manner, and can take advantage of the knowledge of a much wider range of people than traditional methods made possible.

It is my belief that the government of the United States should be using wiki technology for both internal and public-facing projects. As with any large enterprise, internal communications problems are the cause of many inefficiencies and failures. Just as top corporations are finding wiki usage exploding, because the tool brings about new efficiencies, government agencies should be exploring these tools as well.

The U.S. Government has always been premised on responsiveness to citizens, and I think we all believe good government comes from broad open public dialog. I therefore also recommend that US agencies consider the use of wikis for public facing projects to gather information from citizens, and to seek new ways of effectively collaborating with the public to generate solutions to the problems that citizens face.

Thank you for inviting me to testify about the potential for applying the Wikipedia model to improve our government's ability to gather and share information for increased security, for increased governmental responsiveness in our open society, and for the preservation of democratic values.