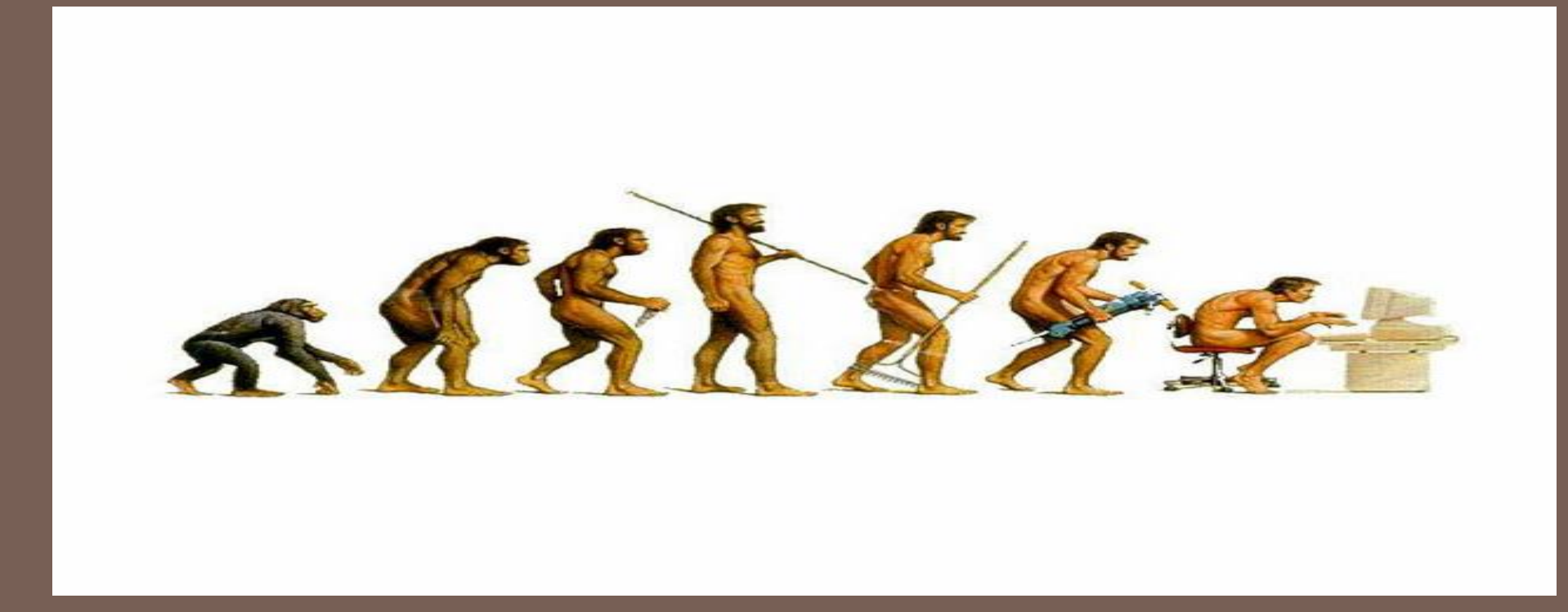
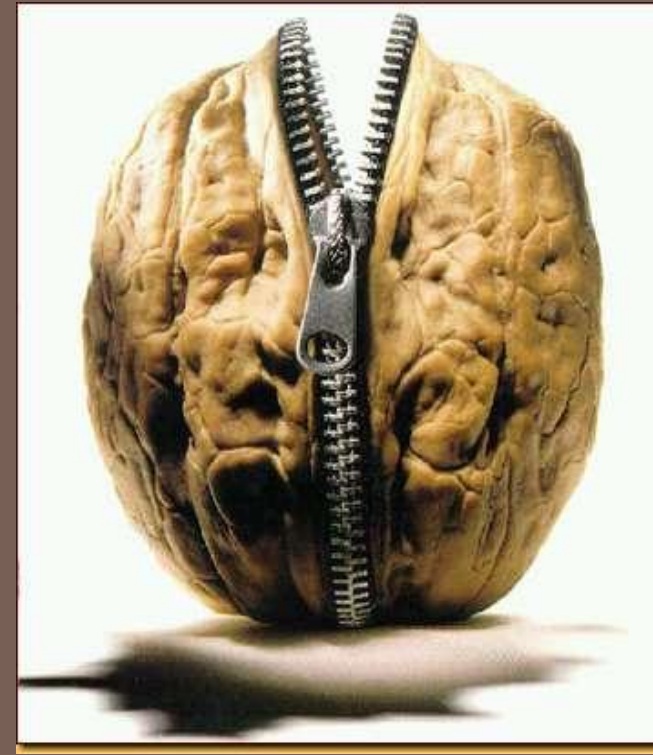


# IT'S FREE, IT'S INTERACTIVE, AND IT'S AVAILABLE TO ALL: EMBRACING WIKIPEDIA AT THE LIBRARY, IN THE CLASSROOM, AND BEYOND



## In the Nutshell, What is Wikipedia?

Wikipedia is a free, web-based encyclopedia that anyone can edit. It is written anonymously by unpaid volunteers collaborating together through the internet. Although some of the volunteers are experts, many are not. Wikipedia articles range from undeveloped pieces, called stubs, to lengthy more finished collaborations that reflect a neutral point of view (NPOV). Because all articles are made available for viewing immediately upon uploading, an understanding of Wikipedia's four-part structure (1) the Article tab or the primary text of the article, (2) the Discussion (Talk) tab or the editor/writers' discussion of the topic, (3) the Edit tab or the editing and formatting place for the article, and (4) the View history portion that logs all the changes made to the article) enables users to utilize the encyclopedia to its fullest extent. Savvy users, young and old, need to utilize Wikipedia's 4-part structure in order to evaluate the power of the debate behind the article and harness the power of the collaboration. Because this 4-part structure reflects the all-important collaboration, one author says that Wikipedia is based on mirrors rather than windows (Reilly, 2010).

Wikipedia's editorial policies are not nitpicky but expansive, and meant to empower the editors. An expansion of pillar 5 (below) encourages editors to "be bold." Wikipedia's editorial policies, available over the website, are called the five pillars (Five Pillars, n.d.)

1. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia.
2. Wikipedia has a neutral point of view (NPOV).
3. Wikipedia is free content that anyone can edit and distribute.
4. Wikipedians should act in a respectful and civil manner.
5. Wikipedia does not have firm rules.

Wikipedia receives its operating expenses from grants and donations and shuns the cacophony of paid advertisements and pop-ups common to the many websites on the internet. These more traditional practices make Wikipedia stand out to many an oasis on the internet. In addition, freely-available Wikipedia has matched or even bested its well known encyclopedia competitors. The Encyclopaedia Britannica began taking suggestions for updates from users in 2010 and Microsoft's Encarta was discontinued in 2009.

Two salient points to remember are Wikipedia's great size and stature. In the summer of 2010, Wikipedia contained over three million articles by 91,000 contributors. Alexa, the web ranking company, ranked Wikipedia seventh behind Google, Facebook, YouTube, Yahoo, Windows Live, and Baidu.com, a Chinese language search engine.

Although many academics in the sciences and computer geeks contributed to Wikipedia from its inception, and some professional organizations encouraged their members to contribute to Wikipedia (Lih 2008, Metz 2009), the encyclopedia is not uniformly strong. Here are its strengths:

1. Non-U.S. and nonwestern viewpoints,
2. Sports coverage for events like World Soccer or the Olympics,
3. World events within days or hours of occurrence,
4. World popular culture,
5. Biography particularly pop biography.

At the bottom-line, Wikipedia excels with topics that interest its contributors, amateur and professional, and enable them to show their love for a particular subject. For example, the Wikipedia entry on "The Simpsons" is a work of art because each episode is endowed with all the details anyone would care to know (Simpsons, n.d.).

Jimmy Wales, the co-founder of Wikipedia (with Larry Sanger, who resigned in 2002), wants users to judge Wikipedia not by its contributors but by the quality of the contributions. As a collective enterprise, Wales says articles have reached an NPOV when people stop changing them. To the question of whether an NPOV is possible in a digital world with infinite collaborating (or colliding) readers, David Weinberger answers "Wikipedia Socratically revels in being corrected (Weinberger, 2007)."

## Introduction...

In its short ten years of its existence, Wikipedia has changed the nature of research by making encyclopedic information freely available worldwide to anyone with a browser and an internet connection. What does this mean for the Washington State University community? By exploring Wikipedia's roots as a reference work and by defining its colossal strengths and notable weaknesses, this research shows how a better understanding of Wikipedia will make it more useful in the years to come.



## Wikipedia Turns 10 in 2011!

One of the World Wide Web's most ambitious projects, Wikipedia came of age during the decade from 2001-11 and a look at Wikipedia's development shows the maturing Web as well. From a thoughtful piece by John Limey to commemorate Wikipedia's ninth birthday, here are nine milestones for each year (Limey, 2010):

- 2001: Wikipedia founded and received enthusiastic mention on SlashDot.com.
- 2002: Larry Sanger resigned.
- 2003: Wikimedia Foundation created.
- 2004: Wikipedia among top 100 WWW sites.
- 2005: Siegenthaler incident (Wales unilaterally announced that anonymous IP users would not be allowed to create articles after a prankster inserted false statements into the Siegenthaler biography) and Nature study titled "Jimmy Wales' Wikipedia comes close to Britannica in terms of the accuracy of its science entries."
- 2006: Death of Wikipedia (article by Nicholas Carr) and Wikipedia's first lawsuit (Skutt Catholic High School vs. Wikipedia).
- 2007: Jimmy Wales's first congressional committee appearance (Lieberman committee on the availability of government information).
- 2008: Wikipedia received \$3 million from the Sloan Foundation.
- 2009: Wikipedia applies an abuse filter after more vandalism of biographical information.
- 2010: British Museum participates in "Wikipedian in Residence" program.

The tenth milestone in advance of Wikipedia's birthday in January 2011 received considerable notice last July at the American Library Association's Annual Conference in Washington, D.C. In June 2010, the *New York Times* reported that the "Venerable British Museum Enlists in the Wikipedia Revolution" by participating in a program called Wikipedian in Residence (Cohen, 2010). Because Wikipedia generally comes to the top of most browser searches, many more people visit the Wikipedia site before an individual museum's website. The Wikipedian in Residence program ensures that a Wikipedia editor associated with a museum's article fully understands the fullness of resources available from a museum in order to intervene and make the Wikipedia article as useful as possible. The fifth paragraph of the *Times* article actually read, "If you can't beat them, join them."



## Pros and Cons of Wikipedia

Wikipedia takes advantage and utilizes all the functionality that modern information technology has to offer. If Stewart Brand said, "Information wants to be free, then David Weinberger added "that it also wants to be miscellaneous (Weinberger, 2007)." The content in Wikipedia is freely available, and, as such, it can be copied, shared, adapted, claimed, used, and misused. All changes in Wikipedia are dynamic thus challenging anybody's definition of up-to-date. Individuals challenging Wikipedia's formidable approach to currency who wish to compete must perform the impossible task of becoming hypervigilant over space and time. In the end, people must understand the unique nature of Wikipedia and evaluate it accordingly.

For people who want the solidarity of collaborating on a common project like the Library at Alexandria or the cathedrals of Europe, Wikipedia offers of the most common modern projects in existence today.

Although Wikipedia is uneven, in terms of both the nature and the scope of the articles included, Wikipedians acknowledge that their most formidable disadvantage is that its contents are prone to vandalism. Aware of this drawback, Jimmy Wales has enacted countermeasures including enforced registration and software to counteract it.

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## Evolutionary and Revolutionary Change

The authors of the *Times* article didn't use the word, revolutionary, lightly. Wikipedia is the product of both evolutionary and revolutionary change. Wikipedia experienced evolutionary change in its software that evolved over time from a wiki originally crafted to edit an encyclopedia called *Nupedia*, Wikipedia's change was evolutionary in that its extraordinary software provided the means for a social movement. Although in its short ten-year history the encyclopedia experienced changes both evolutionary and revolutionary, it was Wikipedia's revolutionary change, a rapid social upheaval caused by the mass-adoption of new technologies (Clay Shirky says "social tools") over the internet, that is the most notable.

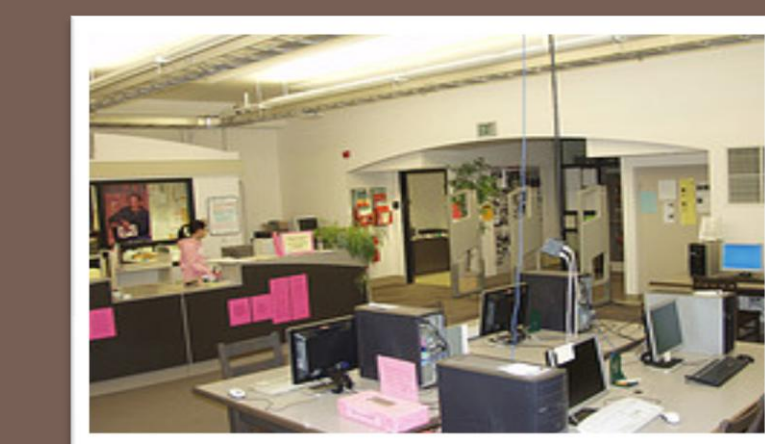
Here are three authors on revolutionary change:

Clay Shirky, in his book *Here Comes Everybody*, believes that social tools challenge the physical organization by eroding their institutional monopoly over large-scale coordination. He adds that in the past, institutions practiced filter-then-publish and the new social tools encourage the opposite, publish-then-filter (Shirky, 2008).

David Weinberger, in his book *Everything is Miscellaneous*, believes that when people get rid of the idea that there is one best way to organize everything, things will change. In the future, experts will no longer be needed and authorities certified by social agencies will not have the same influence as before (Weinberger, 2007).

Chris Anderson's *Free* is dead-eye accurate in proclaiming "Free" Wikipedia's economic dominance over its competitors. However, Anderson's book is different from the two scholarly monographs noted above in that it included an "in-line" citation method that credited sources in the text rather than extensive footnoting. Anderson, who spent 18 months crafting the work mostly in coffee shops, stirred up controversy because scholars, including librarians, were outraged at what they called the author's plagiarism and shoddy scholarship.

After being accused of plagiarism by Waldo Jaquith of the *Virginia Quarterly Review* in June, 2009 (Jaquith, 2009, June 23), Anderson freely admitted that his citation method was flawed in *Free* and that a good bit of the historical background for the book came from Wikipedia. His actions, although shocking to librarians teaching information literacy classes, were not in the slightest bit illegal. Anderson later published what became extensive notes and citations online for readers over his blog, The Long Tail (Anderson, 2009, June 24). The incident showed that scholarship is alive and well (in the world and over the WWW) and readers still want to see the detail in the notes.



## Wikipedia in the Classroom and the Library

In 21<sup>st</sup> century elementary school classrooms, even our youngest students rely heavily on Wikipedia when they do research outside of school because it is a cultural resource that is both trendy and available (Fontichiaro and Harvey II, 2010). Rather than try and stop them, school librarians are becoming enthusiastic about Wikipedia and call it a "jumping off place" for research. Wikipedia's consistent organizational structure with an introduction, a clickable outline, and text boxes of facts that either look complete or suspect enable even the smallest children to make a cursory judgment as to the veracity and usefulness of the information. School librarians also stress the verification of Wikipedia information in other sources because children generally believe as many adults do that if it's on the internet it must be true. As prominent college professors advise: "Wikipedia is a great place to start, but a horrible place to end (Head and Eisenberg, 2010)."

In college classrooms, students learn about Wikipedia's four-part structure and the many conversations that happen behind the articles. Available for everyone upon uploading, this 4-part structure consists of the (1) Article tab or primary text of the piece; the (2) Discussion (Talk) tab or the editor/writers' discussion and debate of the topic; (3) the Edit tab or the editing/formatting place for the article; and the (4) Edit History tab or the log of the edits that have gone into the article. Because this 4-part structure reflects an all-important collaboration, one author says that Wikipedia's 4-part structure consists of mirrors rather than windows (Reilly, 2010).

Many students are learning about the issues surrounding open access and peer review while completing assignments where students are actually learning to edit Wikipedia. A list of schools and classes that are participating may be accessed at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School\\_and\\_university\\_projects](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School_and_university_projects) (Wikipedia, n.d.). Wikipedia is open access at its essence and, although the peers are not academics, Wikipedia's contents are vigorously reviewed. Again, Wikipedia provides a great "jumping off place" to consider such imponderables as the place of experts in our society, the price of information, and whether information really does want to be free.

Many librarians, holed up in their palaces of information, are among the last to come on board and appreciate Wikipedia. For them, Jimmy Wales has urged librarians to become involved with Wikipedia both by using it with patrons and by contributing by editing/writing themselves. To entice librarians with their excellent searching skills, a special page for librarians considering Wikipedia may be accessed at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:FAQ\\_for\\_Librarians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:FAQ_for_Librarians) (Wikimedia Outreach, n.d.). Because Wikipedia is unlike licensed database content that costs libraries plenty, one librarian sees Wikipedia as like an "eight-lane bridge over the digital divide (Donlan, 2010)."

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