What's next for Wikimania?

FRANKFURT GERMANY, AUGUST 8, 2005 – In l995, Ward Cunningham, a pioneering Portland, Oregon-based software engineer, had an epiphany and found a name for it. He had used the web to build a productive community of fellow techies who came up with new ideas through a unique cooperative way of working, one in which contributors could edit, revise and upgrade the work of their peers.

They were encouraged not just to review, comment or criticize the online contributions of others, but also to change them. Cunningham had a hunch, perhaps even a faith, that if people worked together collaboratively, they could create a product that was better than the sum of its inputs. He helped create software with a simple formatting language that anyone with a web browser can learn and then use to edit a page.

He had been trying to come up with a distinctive name for this bottom-up democratic methodology in an industry where the unconventional and idiosyncratic often stuck. Off-the-beaten-track names such as Yahoo or Linux or even Google are now household words. Churchill found what he was looking for when he visited Hawaii and was told he could get where he wanted to go on a Wiki-Wiki Bus.

Wiki! How cool.

Wiki it was.

Wiki may sound wacky, but it works.

In just 10 years, that name has evolved into a phenomenon, spawning a worldwide community that has created a brand potentially worth hundreds of millions of dollars, an impressive not-for-profit online citizen's global encyclopedia available in scores of languages, a website now in the top 50 that gets more traffic than USA Today and The New York Times put together, and with a wide range of spin-offs "in development" at the grass roots.

And it all happened through the efforts of volunteers, without a bureaucratic top-down organization, staff structure or marketing budget. Together, they

have created an international movement led by an international non-profit foundation – the Wikimedia Foundation – to manage the infrastructure, run the servers and pay the hosting and broadband bills, which run about $200,000 a quarter.

Jimmy "Jimbo" Wales, the Wikipedian-in-chief (participants think of themselves as Wikipedians almost as if they are citizens of their own nation), is a former commodities trader with a soft-spoken manner and a pragmatic challenge-the-culture philosophy.

Back in the l960's, activist Abbie Hoffman wrote under the name "Free" and encouraged his readers to steal his books. In the 21st Century, stealing is no longer necessary. All Wikipedia content is available under a free license that also allows readers to copy, distribute, sell and modify the content as long as the author is credited and no one monopolizes it.

As became clear at the first-ever Wikimedia conference, held last weekend in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, the Wikepedians see themselves leading a revolution of content and consciousness that could easily become part of an emerging citizens' journalism movement to transform mainstream media. In fact, there is a now a Wiki news service enhanced with links to background articles offering what most news lacks: context. The alternative and independent media can learn a lot from its success, even though part of its appeal is based on avoiding advocacy and writing with a neutral point of view.

The Wiki conference was not an academic affair or one of those industry confabs held in a fancy hotel. It took place at a youth hostel, with more than 400 participants from 52 countries, representing every continent except Antarctica. It drew a brave editor from China, software executives from Jerusalem and Palo Alto, and a fisheries expert from Mozambique, who now also contributes articles on the history of decolonization. It was a multi-generational global gathering.

The event offered 65 lectures, workshops and tutorials to a crowd that had first met online and knew each other initially only by their user names. Some participants found it hard at first to put down their laptops and actually talk in person, but soon – thanks to the intimacy of the event and all the German beer – it seemed as if people had known each other for years. Most of the "delegates" were men but, increasingly, women are leading the movement.

It was hard not to marvel at Wiki's achievements. The encyclopedia is growing in readership and offerings. The English-language version started

only in 2001 but now includes 672,848 often-changing articles. What's even more exciting is the Wikipedians' hope to encourage the creation of similar encyclopedias in every language in the world. The articles themselves often offer a level of depth and dimension not available anywhere else. An entry on the Tsunami, for example, contained 5,000 edits from 508 authors. You can learn more and see what they do at http://www.wikipedia.org/

Founder Jimbo Wales – whose first attempt at creating an encyclopedia as a for-profit company failed because it lacked the kind of community passion that drives the Wikipedia – has become a voice for a broader culture of freedom that is also free for all.

His 10-point "program" was up to 23 points by the time his keynote session finished, and included calls to:

1. Free the Encyclopedia
2. Free the Dictionary (An "ultimate wictionary" is underway)
3 Free the Curriculum
4. Free the Music
5. Free the Art
6. Free the File Formats
7. Free the Maps
8. Free the Product Identifiers
9. Free the TV Listings

Free the Media may be next, as the Wikimedia community decides what change-oriented goals to direct its energy and formidable intellectual firepower at. Our media company, Globalvision, documented the conference and is considering releasing a film on the movement as a "Wiki-mentary," with multiple versions open to editing by the community.

Knowledge is said to be power and the "Wiki way" of sharing knowledge is very powerful. Perhaps its time for those who would change the world consider adopting the participatory process that the Wikipedians are using to great effect and with a measurable impact.

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