Wikipedia: Jimmy Wales



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GUY RAZ, HOST:

What was the first Wikipedia entry?

JIMMY WALES: The earliest article that anyone has found was an article on the letter Q. And in those early days it was very exciting. You could just be the first person to say Africa is a continent and hit save. And while it's not very good, but it's not wrong. And it's a start.

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RAZ: From NPR, it's HOW I BUILT THIS, a show about innovators, entrepreneurs, idealists and the stories behind the movements they built.

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RAZ: I'm Guy Raz. And on today's show, the story of how Jimmy Wales started an online encyclopedia as a side project and watched it grow into one of the pillars of the Internet.

OK, I'm going to read you the list of the top five most-viewed websites in the world. So number one, of course, is Google. And then comes YouTube and then Facebook and then Baidu, which is China's biggest search engine, and finally, coming in at number five, Wikipedia.

So imagine for a moment that you are the founder of one of these big websites. How much are you worth? Well, Forbes puts out annual lists. And here's what we found. Larry Page, founder of Google, sits on about $50 billion. Mark Zuckerberg edges him out with about 70 billion. Each of the founders of Baidu are worth around 15 billion. And the founders of YouTube walked away with half a billion each when they sold to Google back in 2006. And the founder of Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales, the fifth-most visited website in the world, his personal fortune is estimated to be not much more than $1 million. He is quite possibly the least rich Internet titan in the world.

But unlike a lot of famous founders or entrepreneurs, Jimmy Wales's legacy is likely to live on for centuries because he is in some ways like a modern day Johannes Gutenberg. And just like Gutenberg's press made it possible to spread knowledge beyond a village or a town, Wikipedia made it possible for every single person on Earth with an Internet connection to gain access to probably the biggest collection of knowledge ever assembled.

And like a lot of the entrepreneurs we interview on the show, Jimmy Wales's story starts with influential people and important events that happened pretty early in life. He grew up in Huntsville, Ala., where his uncle owned a shop that sold early personal computers. And his two big hobbies were tinkering with computers and reading - reading just about anything he found interesting.

WALES: I read basically anything I could get my hands on, including - I spent a lot of time reading the encyclopedia. You know, you hear about something, and you wanna learn more. And you go to the encyclopedia and find the article and read that. And, yeah, it was a beloved thing in our house that we had the encyclopedia. And we would all use it.

RAZ: Did you buy it in a store? Or did somebody like come to your house and door-to-door...

WALES: No, no. Somebody came to the house door-to-door when I was a baby, as the family legend goes - that somebody came to the house and sold it to my mother. And every year they would send out an annual update.

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: For example, the article on the moon was updated when someone landed on the moon. And so they - there were all these stickers. And you would take the sticker out, and you would go to look up M, moon, and you would find the old article on the moon. And you would put in the sticker saying there's an update. My mom and I would do that every year when the stickers came in - my first editing an encyclopedia.

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RAZ: Jimmy eventually went to college in his home state of Alabama. And he was really good at complex mathematics - so good in fact that he went on to do a Ph.D. in finance. But around 1992, Jimmy decided that academia really wasn't the place for him. So he left to take a job as an options trader in Chicago.

WALES: What I was doing is really just trading - like, buying and selling, everyday arbitrage. So it was a lot of mathematical modeling to relate the prices of different things to each other to look for opportunities to find imperfections in the market in pricing.

RAZ: So while you were in Chicago in the early '90s, this was also around the time the Internet starts to become something that ordinary people are using. Netscape comes out, and people are like browsing the Internet. Did you get into that?

WALES: Yeah, completely. Yeah, I was really - so even when I was - before I came to Chicago, I was really getting into the Internet. So what I was doing - I had no life. I was - I had just traded in the day, and then I would go home at night. And I was working on my own Web browser.

RAZ: Wait. You were making your own Web browser like on the side like in your apartment?

WALES: Yeah.

RAZ: How did you know how to do that? Did you - were you just like sort of self-taught?

WALES: Yeah, yeah. I mean, in grad school, obviously from doing very quantitative data analysis, things like that, I learned to program. I was a bad programmer, but I - you know, I can code. I just remember very clearly the day that Netscape went public and was worth, as I recall, $4.3 billion on the first day of trading.

RAZ: Wow.

WALES: And I had the - I had been convinced for a few years' time that the Internet was going to be really big, and really important and really kind of fundamentally change the world. And this was the moment when I felt like, OK, look. The market is validating that. Like, other people are seeing it. And people are really investing money here. And so there was a bit of a transition period. But it was really in '90 - I'd say about '98 is when I left Chicago. And I moved to San Diego, and that was when I really decided, you know, I'm just going to - I'm going to focus full time on my Internet ideas and projects.

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RAZ: Once Jimmy settled down in San Diego, he founded a small Internet search company called Bomis. And because this was the late 1990s, during the dot-com boom, companies were paying top rates to advertise on these new things called websites. And so for the next few years, those ad dollars made it possible for Jimmy to hire a small staff of programmers. And they had the money to just kind of experiment.

WALES: So the idea was really at that time - this is pre-Google, remember? The best web directory around was Yahoo. And Yahoo hired - I don't know - hundreds of people to go around and index manually - by hand, index topics and categories on the Web.

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: And then I said, well, look. Maybe the community can do that. Maybe other people can help out. And if you could get thousands of people involved, it could be really bigger than what Yahoo's doing. And that was really the thought. So we allowed people to come in and build an index to any topic that they were interested in. And we called it a Web ring. And I remember one of the first community members came in and built a Web ring about Jupiter. And so they had gathered a bunch of links about the planet Jupiter, and they put it in. And we're like, OK, that's cool. That's great. Now, of course, we dabbled in all kinds of things. We had a few blogs. And I remember my business partner at the time was talking about building what today I would say - his idea sounded a lot like Facebook, but it was really more about people reconnecting with people from their schools and universities. It was a classmates.com kind of idea. But, I mean, keep in mind that this was also where we started Nupedia - the predecessor to Wikipedia.

RAZ: Yes, so tell me about that because while you're at Bomis, this thing Nupedia grows out of it, right? What was it?

WALES: So, you know, as I said, at Bomis, we were always experimenting. We were thinking of new ideas and new possibilities, new things to do. And I was looking at the model of open-source software, seeing that that worked. I was also looking at - you know, at Bomis we had community members who were building indexes to content that they were interested in.

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WALES: So the idea of Nupedia was to basically replicate that - to say, well, let's build an encyclopedia and have volunteers contribute to it. And I just thought, you know, this seems like low-hanging fruit. Actually, I remember. I was in a quite a panic when I had the idea to hurry up and get started because I thought it was so obvious. So when I started Nupedia, I really thought that other competitors were going to be out there. But after two years, there was still no one really competing with us because it maybe wasn't as obvious as I thought.

RAZ: And the idea was basically that just make an online encyclopedia.

WALES: Yeah. But, of course, at the time I didn't really understand wiki, the concept of a website anyone can edit. And also we had, you know, a seven-stage review process to get anything published.

RAZ: So how would it work? You would write an article for Nupedia, and then it went through like seven stages before it was published.

WALES: Seven stages. But, I mean, some of the stages had to do with - first, you had to propose the article. You had to prove your qualifications to write it. We had hired some staff. So Larry Sanger was the editor-in-chief. And he would - there was a whole process whereby you could apply to submit something and so forth. And then there would be copy editing reviewers much like an academic review where you send it out to experts in the field for review. And actually one of the things that was really a lightbulb moment in my mind was one of the first few articles that got through that process and was published - we had it up on the Web for just a few days, I would say - and suddenly it came to our attention - somebody said, hey, this is really plagiarized.

RAZ: Oh.

WALES: And we checked into it. And it's like ouch.

RAZ: Like somebody just copied the encyclopedia.

WALES: No, it wasn't from another encyclopedia. It was from other sources, but it was just - it was not good. And I realized even with all this process we built up to prevent this, there was still plagiarism. And that was a huge problem. And in fact, the only thing that revealed it was more people reading it...

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: ...And people seeing it and saying, hey, this is actually a problem. And there's an old saying in the open-source software world that given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow. And what that means is oftentimes when you're programming, there's some kind of bug in your code, and you just cannot find it. And if you get another set of eyes on it or 10 sets of eyes, it becomes very obvious. Somebody will spot it.

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: And so that concept does actually apply in lots of areas of life - that if you get a lot of people looking at something, people can say, hey, there's actually a problem here that maybe nobody else noticed. And then sometimes after it's been pointed out, you'd say, oh, yeah, that's kind of obvious.

RAZ: So I read that within a year after launching Nupedia, you - the site produced a sum total of 21 articles, which doesn't sound like it was churning and burning.

WALES: No, it was not good. And in fact, as we proceeded through that year - and I was very frustrated with the slow pace of progress - I decided to write an entry myself. I thought I just need to go through this process myself to see what's wrong with it or how can we improve it. And so I decided to write an article about Robert Merton because I'd read all of his promotional work on option pricing theory, which was my specialty back in academia. So I was qualified enough to write a basic biography of him. But I found it very intimidating because I knew that they were going to take my draft and send it out to the most prestigious finance professors they could find to agree to review it. And I was going to get feedback. And it felt really a lot like grad school.

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: And that was really the moment when I said, OK, look. This isn't going to work. Like, this isn't fun. We really have to make this a lot easier and a lot more open. And so that was a really crucial moment - the moment that I tried to get something through the system.

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RAZ: So when you were working on Nupedia and you were, like, sending these draft articles around I guess probably, like, all over the country, how were you collaborating with people?

WALES: Well, I mean, this was the thing - that one of the problems that Nupedia had is that the only real way to collaborate back then was to email around a Word doc. And if you emailed around a Word doc, then the typical case is nobody responds. But the worst case is five people respond, and they've all changed the document in different ways. And now you've got to figure out how to integrate that all.

But, you know, the concept of a wiki, which is a website anyone can edit, was actually invented by a guy called Ward Cunningham, who's this lovely, great programmer. And so the word wiki - it's a Hawaiian word which means quick. And the idea was quick collaboration. And so the idea is that there is a document on the Web, but anybody can come along and edit it and save it and so forth. We were the first to really say, hey, let's use that tool to build an encyclopedia.

RAZ: So the idea was you would - you find out about this wiki software, and you think, yeah, let's democratize this process of writing articles, throw it open to everyone. And then the entire community will kind of cross-reference and check it?

WALES: Well, I mean, it grew a little more organically than that. We had a good-sized community of people who were working on Nupedia. And so these people were all very eager people who loved the concept of a free encyclopedia for everyone in their own language. That was a really exciting concept. And so initially, we thought, well, let's start this as a tool for that community. So it'll still be Nupedia, but we're going to use this wiki as a way for that community to begin to work together a little more efficiently.

And I made the decision to put it up - the domain name wikipedia.com rather than keep it on Nupedia because we weren't really sure, like - we had a lot of academics and a lot of very serious people on the mailing list, and this seemed a bit of a crazy idea. And we thought they might find it offensive. And so we said, OK, let's just set up on a different domain and see what happens. But, of course, the history is that Wikipedia very, very quickly outstripped Nupedia in terms of the content created and the quality and everything else.

RAZ: I should know this, Jimmy, but I don't. What was the first Wikipedia entry?

WALES: Unfortunately, there was no history kept of the very early days. The earliest history was lost. So we don't really know. The earliest article that anyone has found was an article on the letter Q. And I'm sure that was not the first article in Wikipedia. I know the first words in wikipedia. They were, hello world. And I know because I typed them. And then very quickly, we just started doing lists of things, states and things like that.

RAZ: So I guess you launch Wikipedia in January of 2001. Nupedia is still - still exists.

WALES: Yeah.

RAZ: But something like - in, like, two weeks, you had more articles on Wikipedia than Nupedia had generated in the previous two years.

WALES: That's right. Yeah. Yeah. Of course, as you mentioned earlier, that was something like 21, (laughter) so it was a pretty minor achievement in one sense. But it was - it was an eye-opener. It was like, wow, we've got this great community. And people just started writing, making articles on various, random things - and other people editing them. And there's a lot of pent-up excitement about, let's just get started building this. And the change from, really, this huge, very intimidating process that was not very collaborative to being able to say - you know, and in those early days, it was very exciting - you could just be the first person to say Africa is a continent and hit save. And, well, it's not very good, but it's not wrong, and it's a start. And that was very addictive - the idea that you could actually change something.

RAZ: This was all being run out of where? Like, did you have an office in San Diego? Or was it just your apartment or what?

WALES: Yeah, yeah, yeah - small office. This was during the Bomis days, so we had a few programmers and sort of cheap office in a warehouse space. This is the period of time when ad revenue was good. So we were able to just hire some people and get started.

RAZ: So I guess you very quickly realize that Wikipedia is going to be - could potentially be huge. Like, did it seem clear, like, within the first months or year?

WALES: Yeah, it did. It did. I mean, it - you know, I remember looking at a list of the top websites at the time. And there was an encyclopedia reference kind of site at - ranked at No. 50. And I thought, gee, if we do a really good job, we might be No. 100 or maybe even in the top 50. But there was always this idea of, like, this could be a big thing. If we can figure out how to do it, it could have a huge impact.

RAZ: In just a minute, when Jimmy Wales was faced with the question of how Wikipedia was going to make money, he decided that it wasn't. Stay with us. I'm Guy Raz. And you're listening to HOW I BUILT THIS from NPR.

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RAZ: Welcome back to HOW I BUILT THIS from NPR. I'm Guy Raz. So in the early days, Jimmy Wales was able to get Wikipedia up and running. And he was funding it with money from his first Internet startup, Bomis. Bomis was running ads. The dot-com boom was in high gear. But then, of course, came the dot-com crash, and all that ad money - it dried up pretty fast. And Bomis would eventually have to shut down completely. But at the same time, Wikipedia was growing, and Jimmy had to figure out how to keep it growing without a lot of cash.

WALES: There was no money, really, to support Wikipedia, but it didn't cost a lot of money. It was really community-driven. And so, you know, it really was the volunteers. And, in fact, one of the reasons that Wikipedia became a huge success, I would say, ironically, is the lack of funding because if I'd had the money, if I'd gone to Silicon Valley and convinced somebody to give me millions of dollars to start this, then your natural instinct if you have any problem on the site is to say, OK, well, we just need to hire some moderators. And we're going to make decisions, and we're going to have staff members who decide things.

And instead, we - there was no money. We couldn't hire anybody. So as a community working together, we had to find our own solutions. And so we had to say, you know, what are the software solutions we need to be able to control for vandalism? And then imagine we have a really, really tough editorial decision we have to make. How do we make those decisions? All of those things happened because there was no money to hire anyone because it would've been much easier to just hire people.

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: And that would've actually prevented the rise of a more natural set of solutions.

RAZ: And who was managing it? Was it just you and Larry Sanger? It was just the two of you?

WALES: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, pretty - I mean, we had other employees who were helping out in this and that, of course. But, you know, it's basically - we had to think a lot about how to move the community in the right direction. You know, there were a lot of really complicated questions around, OK, when do we ban people? When do we block people from editing? When do we think they've gone too far? And a lot of the editorial policy - you know, you have questions like, to what extent do we allow people to write essays or commentary or put jokes in articles?

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: And we decided no, you know, neutral point of view is, like, our core belief and so on. But all those decisions had to be made, and they were made in discussions with community and so forth.

RAZ: I mean, you must have known, Jimmy, at this point in 2001, 2002 that Wikipedia was growing super fast, and it was going to be - could potentially be huge. You decide, I guess around 2003, to basically create a nonprofit organization...

WALES: Yep.

RAZ: ...To run Wikipedia. What was the thinking behind that? Why'd you do that?

WALES: So there were a few things going on there. So first of all, this was still the depth of the dot-com crash, so there was no obvious business model. The community of volunteers very much wanted it to be in a nonprofit, and I thought that had to be taken into consideration. And then, finally, for me, it just made sense. Like, it was aesthetically - it just seemed like the right thing that Wikipedia - my ambitions for Wikipedia to become a really important moment in history and a really important cultural contribution really made a nonprofit a much more sensible option. And indeed, you know, I think if we had gone in a different route, it would be very different today.

RAZ: You gave an interview to Slashdot - the website Slashdot - and you said, 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're doing. That's an amazing idea. But I wonder why you could not have done that same thing and still put ads on Wikipedia - like, banner ads and stuff.

WALES: Yeah. I mean, so here's the thing. If you think about the DNA of any organization, it's very difficult to stop an organization from following the money. So Wikipedia is a nonprofit, and as a nonprofit, we could run ads - no legal prohibition on a nonprofit running ads as a means of support.

RAZ: Sure.

WALES: Yet because the organization would tend to follow the money, then, suddenly, inside the organization, people would start caring a lot more about our traffic in highly developed advertising markets.

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: We would begin to care more about which pages you're reading because if you're reading about Queen Victoria, there's probably very little to sell to you, and there's probably - the ad rates are very poor. If you're reading about Tesla cars or vacations in Las Vegas or something like that, I mean, we would have an incentive to start creating content that would drive higher ad revenues, which is really not what we want to do. We're an encyclopedia. We don't think about adding features that might drive page views for traffic. We just think about, how do we make the encyclopedia better, and how do we reach more people, particularly in the developing world? That's just, like, fundamental to what this is all about.

RAZ: So when you basically said, all right - this is a nonprofit. We're not going to have any advertising. We're going to - it's going to be user-generated content. How do you even fund that? How are you going to get the money to even fund the - paying the servers...

WALES: Sure. Yeah, well, I mean, so what happened was the main reason that we went ahead and set up the nonprofit was exactly thinking of that for the future. But I had no idea whether it was going to be possible. So we set up the nonprofit in June. And at that time, we were running on two or three servers. And so then we had this disaster. It was Christmas day when two of our three servers crashed. And I had to scramble to get the site running on one server. And it was painfully slow and so forth. And it was clearly obvious because the traffic kept doubling that we were going to have to buy a bunch of servers.

And so that was the first time that I decided to do a fundraising campaign to ask people on the site to give money. And these days, we call it crowdfunding. And it's - you know, everybody knows it. But back then, that was not a normal way of doing things. And I remember very clearly that I had hoped to raise about $20,000 in a month's time. But in about two weeks' time, we had raised nearly $30,000. So the first fundraiser was a huge success. I mean, people really said, hey, this is great. We really want to support this. And so a lot of small donors - and that, of course, today, is the model for Wikipedia that people who believe in Wikipedia, who think it's useful in their lives say, hey, I should chip in.

RAZ: When did you - so Wikipedia really kind of starts to just blow up in the early 2000s. And when did you - when were you first sort of cognizant of that? When did you realize that Wikipedia was becoming really big, like, part of the national conversation?

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WALES: Well, I think there were a few moments. But I think one of the most important ones - there's a guy, John Seigenthaler Jr., who is a very esteemed journalist. And he had called me up to complain about his entry.

RAZ: When was this?

WALES: 2005. And he said, hey, there's a problem because Wikipedia says that I was briefly suspected of having something to do with the Kennedy assassination. Now, this is a man who was one of the pallbearers at Robert Kennedy's funeral - if I remember the story correctly - so a big friend of the Kennedy family. And the story was absolutely untrue. And once he called, it was - took about 10 minutes to get that fixed and changed. And we looked into how it had happened and so forth. And so we thought, OK, problem resolved. But then he wrote this scathing editorial in USA Today about the site. And it got a lot of traction, that story.

So we had this really big thing. And they dragged me on CNN to yell at me and so forth (laughter). And suddenly, we're in all the press everywhere. Our traffic really exploded because of all the news coverage. So that was the upside. But that's not the way you want your traffic to explode. But in the end, that was actually a moment that was important for us.

RAZ: How come? Why?

WALES: Yeah, so this led in the community to a real reflection on quality, on sourcing. This is when we came up with the biography of living persons policy and really started to say, look; if it's a biography of a person, then anything negative in the article really needs to have a good quality source because that's just not acceptable to have negative things about people that aren't true. And so we became quite vigilant about that afterwards. And, of course, there's always the possibility of this happening and so forth. And it does happen. But the community's very, very vigilant about it...

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: ...And really tries hard to keep anything like that out of the site.

RAZ: I mean, it's amazing because Wikipedia - obviously, on a day-to-day basis, everyone uses it. I use it. Everyone uses it. You use it. But I remember that time that John Seigenthaler article just - 2005. You know, at NPR, we were not allowed to use Wikipedia as a source. And it wasn't just NPR. It was all news organizations. Like, Wikipedia was not considered a reliable source. And it just shows you sort of...

WALES: Yeah, well, I mean, I think that should still be your policy.

(LAUGHTER)

WALES: Wikipedia is quite good. It is definitely not perfect. And what I always say is Wikipedia is the place to go to get the questions and not the answers. It's the way to get yourself oriented in the context. And I actually always say, go on the talk page of any article and see what are the Wikipedians (ph) struggling with? If they're saying, gee, you know, this source says this and these sources say that, and there seems to be a conflict - hey, that might be the most interesting question you can ask, is let's get to the bottom of this. There's conflicting information out there. And also, you know, if you want to use Wikipedia as a starting point, then you can always go to the footnotes...

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: ...And go to the actual source. And that's what you should do.

RAZ: So, Jimmy, I just cannot imagine - like, running this volunteer organization with hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of people - today, certainly millions - who are voluntarily editing sites. And did that ever just, like, get you so wound up that you just didn't want to do it anymore?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WALES: (Laughter) No, not really. You know, the interesting thing is I remember in the very early days, I would get up at night and check the site because I was convinced that somebody was going to come in and trash it overnight, which never happened. And then quickly, I realized, like, oh, yes, a vandal did show up at 3 a.m. my time last night. But guess what? Somebody who's a known community member was up in Australia and actually blocked the person and fixed the problem. And so you - I began to understand, like, communities do inherently scale. And I think that is part of what helped me not be overwhelmed by anything.

RAZ: So we're now in this phase in, like, the history of the Internet. People call it fake news. I don't like that term for obvious reasons. But so much information that looks real that's not real. This is not new. I mean, this has happened throughout human history. But now, because there is so much information available, it's sometimes difficult for people to discern what's real and what's not. And I wonder whether one of the challenges with Wikipedia is reasonable people are disagreeing about basic facts. So how do you reconcile that? How does Wikipedia deal with that?

WALES: I mean, a few of the elements - so one - when we think about the quality of sources, that's a really core thing in Wikipedia. And we have a lot of discussions and debates and, I think, a fairly sophisticated approach to thinking about the quality of sources. And I agree with you. I don't like the term fake news.

But the original use of the term was really about clearly completely made-up websites that looked like news sites with no concern for the truth, with outrageous headlines and so on. And those kinds of sites have had almost zero impact at Wikipedia because while, you know, it might do well to share on Facebook something that comes from a publication called The Denver Guardian because, well, it looks like a news site, and Denver - everybody knows Denver's a city in America - and Guardian sounds like a newspaper, so it seems plausible enough.

The Wikipedians would take one look at it and say, I've never heard of that paper. That stuff doesn't really get into Wikipedia. A broader problem that I am concerned about is right now that the trust in media in the U.S. - but also around the world - but in the U.S. is really at an all-time low. You know, but it's a tough problem, and I think it's a societal problem to say, look; we really do need quality information. Most people are very passionate about wanting to be told the truth.

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: You know, the best way to prepare people for authoritarian rule is not to indoctrinate them into an authoritarian philosophy but to make them believe that there's no such thing as truth. And that's a trend that I'm not happy about.

RAZ: How many - do you know how many Wikipedia pages there are today in English, for example?

WALES: There's just over 5 million...

RAZ: In English?

WALES: ...The last I checked in English. Yeah.

RAZ: So total, probably, in all languages, there'd be...

WALES: Forty million.

RAZ: Wow.

WALES: Close to 50. Close to 50, yeah.

RAZ: Do you know - do you even know how many people contribute to Wikipedia around the world?

WALES: It's something around 75,000 people every month who make at least five edits. It's probably 3,000 to 5,000 - is the core community of people who are making a hundred or more edits. And so that's quite a lot of people. But it's not as many people as some might think.

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: Now, of course, making five edits in a month - that's not a huge amount of participation, but you're pretty - you know, you're around.

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: And there'll be a lot more people who just make one edit a year. But in terms of the real community, it's probably that 75,000.

RAZ: Jimmy, what motivates 75,000 people or a few hundred thousand people to donate hundreds of hours of their time every year for free to do this?

WALES: Yeah, I think it's two things. So first, you know, the mission - a free encyclopedia for everyone in the world - is meaningful. I mean, you could spend your hobby time playing "Grand Theft Auto" or doing something else, and the world wouldn't be any better off when you're done. And if you spend a few hours editing Wikipedia, you can go to sleep and think, yeah, it was productive. The world is a little bit better than it was, and someone somewhere will benefit from that. And that's great.

And then also just fun. People - you get to meet people who are interested in the things you're interested in, no matter how obscure. The ethos of the community is to say, look; no personal attacks. We're here to discuss the content. If you go on the discussion page for a controversial topic, you're not there to just debate that topic. You can do that in lots of places on the Internet. What you get at Wikipedia is a debate about how do we improve this article? And that's just a refreshing kind of feeling. And so a lot of people really find it suits their personality.

RAZ: Do you know what the revenue is - like, annual revenue for Wikipedia from donations?

WALES: Yeah, our revenue - I should know the number exactly off the top of my head, but I don't - but I think last year was around $85 million.

RAZ: Wow. Just from donations?

WALES: Just from donations, yeah.

RAZ: Incredible.

WALES: Yeah, primarily from small donors. That's important to understand, that when the community gets together to debate something about what they want to have Wikipedia say or what a policy should be, there's never a question of, well, what will the funders think?

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: And over the years, we've really tried to run the organization in a very financially conservative way. Every year, we try to build our reserves. A lot of our donors - one of the things that they really want from Wikipedia is that Wikipedia be safe. And so that drives us to say, OK, they don't want us to run on a shoestring. They don't want us to run nearly on break even and nearly going broke every year. We need to be stable. And that's been a real value for many years.

RAZ: When you think about this thing that you built and your role in the history of the Internet, how much of the success of Wikipedia do you think is because of your brilliance and your hard work? And how much do you think is simply because of luck?

WALES: A huge amount due to luck. Brilliance and hard work - OK, maybe not so much. I do think a component of the success of Wikipedia is that I'm a very friendly and nice person, and I'm very laid back. And so therefore I was able to work in a community environment where people basically yell at you and you just have to kind of roll with it. And you're in some sense a leader, but you can't tell anyone what to do. They're volunteers, so you have to work with love and reason to kind of move people along in a useful way. So I do think that I'm not irrelevant to the process, but I also think that, you know, the community is amazing, and the luck of the timing of really hitting that moment when it was possible to build Wikipedia.

RAZ: Jimmy, you've seen the estimates that - you know, that if Wikipedia were a for-profit, it could be worth at least $5 billion, maybe more.

WALES: Yeah.

RAZ: Does it mean anything to you?

WALES: Not really. I mean, it's - (laughter) you know, people - they love to write about Jimmy Wales is not a billionaire.

RAZ: I think there's a - actually, there are articles with that headline, Jimmy Wales is not an Internet billionaire.

WALES: (Laughter) Exactly. And for me, that's a little bit odd because, you know, my life is unbelievably interesting. I have the ability to meet almost anyone in the world who I want to meet.

RAZ: Yeah.

WALES: And usually, I introduce myself, oh, I'm Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia. And they go, oh, wow.

RAZ: Right, yeah.

WALES: And if I say, oh, I'm Jimmy Wales; I own the largest chain of car dealers across the southern part of America, people would be like, oh, OK, whatever - like, not that interesting. So (laughter) at least in that regard, I do think that no one will remember me in 500 years. But they'll definitely remember Wikipedia.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WALES: And that's really - I mean, it's really something. I mean, that's something that you can really hardly even get your mind around.

RAZ: There have been comparisons to the Gutenberg press, right?

WALES: (Laughter).

RAZ: This is the biggest sort of dissemination of knowledge in modern world history.

WALES: Well, yeah. But (laughter) I don't know. It's a bit embarrassing to talk about it that way. I'm just trying to have fun.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

RAZ: Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia. By the way, a few years ago, Jimmy got grief for trying to change his own Wikipedia entry, which is a big no-no. His entry showed he was born on August 8, 1966, which is what his birth certificate also says. But it was a mistake because according to his mother, Jimmy was actually born shortly before midnight on August 7. So he made the change only to be confronted by angry Wikipedia editors who demanded documentary evidence, which of course he could not furnish because all he had to go on was his mother's version of when it happened. And please do stick around because in just a moment, we're going to hear from you about the things you're building.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

RAZ: Thanks so much for sticking around because it's time now for How You Built That.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

RAZ: And this story starts almost 20 years ago when Florence Wetterwald was working in fashion, helping to pick the clothes that models wear at photo shoots - which sounds like a pretty cool gig, right?

FLORENCE WETTERWALD: But I was not happy with the work itself. I really was missing the creative part of things and the designing of things.

RAZ: Florence was missing designing things because, well, she's a designer. She grew up in France and then moved to Atlanta, where she did that fashion job. But she wanted to start something for herself.

WETTERWALD: You know, I need to create a company. I need to do something that's going to come from me. I was kind of caught into some kind of a spiral.

RAZ: And Florence was looking around for something to inspire her. And as it happens, her mom was working in Peru at the time. And when her mom invited Florence and a friend to come visit, they went.

WETTERWALD: We had no idea what we were going there for. But we explored what the locals were making and to see if there was some kind of a business that could be done with that.

RAZ: So Florence and her friend, Susan, were exploring the local markets in Peru. And they came across these finger puppets. You probably have seen them - these little cute animals made out of yarn.

WETTERWALD: People had been doing this for many years. And for some reason, they really - like, we just fell in love with them.

RAZ: So Florence and Susan bought a bunch of the puppets, and they started to sell them in Atlanta. And they did pretty well. But Florence kept thinking, you know, I don't really want to sell someone else's work. I want to design my own thing.

WETTERWALD: I was thinking, what is it that children really want? What is it that children like? Like, when I was a kid, what is it that would comfort me in my most vulnerable moment? And so it was really this doll, this little companion. And I thought, I could really turn this thing into a doll.

RAZ: So Florence designed her own doll. And she took those designs back to Peru, where she gave them to artisanal knitters to knit one for her.

WETTERWALD: The first doll was - it was a little too traditional, you know? Like, the neck was narrow and then the arms had a different shape to it. And I really wanted to do something modern.

RAZ: So after three years of working with different knitters in Peru, Florence and Susan finally had a doll they were ready to sell.

WETTERWALD: This really cuddly, squishy creature that's knitted. And so you get a sense that it could have been done by your grandmother. However, the look of it is really modern.

RAZ: The dolls are stitched with these simple and clean lines, and they've got these long arms and legs.

WETTERWALD: It can be a cat, a dog, a frog, bunny...

RAZ: The dolls went on the market in 2003. And Florence decided to name them Blabla dolls.

WETTERWALD: And it's just so playful. And it just really works for a kids' company. And as soon as I said it- you know, I said that's it. That's it.

RAZ: Pretty soon after they launched, boutiques across the U.S. became interested. And Blabla dolls even started to appear on TV shows like "Homeland" and in celebrity magazines. They became so popular they inspired copycats. And while Blabla is still relatively small, Florence and Susan say they are now considering bringing in an outside investor to help scale the brand. And they're in talks about doing a possible TV show.

WETTERWALD: They have a life of their own that we infuse in them. It's a really beautiful story.

RAZ: By the way, totally coincidentally...

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

RAZ: ...During a recent slumber party at the Raz household, several of the boys happened to bring along their favorite stuffed animals, including at least three Blabla dolls. If you want to find out more about Blabla, check out our Facebook page. And of course, if you want to tell us your story, go to build.npr.org. We love hearing about the things you're building. And thanks so much for listening to our show this week. If you want to find out more or hear previous episodes, you can go to howibuiltthis.npr.org. Please also subscribe to our show at Apple podcasts or however you get your podcasts. You can also write us. Our email address is hibt@npr.org. Our Twitter address is @HowIBuiltThis.

Our show is produced this week by Casey Herman. Ramtin Arablouei composed the music. Thanks also to Neva Grant, Sanaz Meshkinpour, Thomas Lu and Jeff Rogers. Our intern is Noor Cuzzi (ph). I'm Guy Raz, and you've been listening to HOW I BUILT THIS from NPR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

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