

## Wikipedia: More is Better

In case you have not yet discovered this collaborative resource via Salon.com or Google, Wikipedia <http://www.wikipedia.org> is an open content, international, multilingual, interactive, and free encyclopedia. Wiki wiki, to rhyme with tiki, is a Hawaiian term meaning super fast. It is rare to find a source quite as dynamic as this encyclopedia. So rapidly is it emerging that I wonder if each sentence of this article will be outdated as soon as I type the period.

Wikipedia is popular; more popular than Playboy.com (Alexia.com's rating). Born in 2001, Wikipedia has grown to a quarter million entries. It is offered in about 75 languages, eleven of which have over 10,000 articles. The primary languages besides English are currently German, Japanese, French, and Polish, with the fastest growing language being Croation. No matter how rare the language, a tutorial can help a country get started. Since Wikipedia is a type of communication system, its value grows as a function of approximately the square of the number of users. The collaborative software package developed exclusively for Wikipedia called *Media Wiki* actually gains more value as more people use it. The critical mass needed to start a Wikipedia in any language seems to be five to ten people actively writing, arguing, and interacting with each other. In the English version, a core group of over 1000 Wikipedians are actively contributing. Since the end of 2003 the number of non-English entries surpassed those in English. This linguistic diversity works two ways. Metadata standards dictate that an English language entry can potentially link to an identical entry in another language. Being not only multilingual, but also international also means that in addition to the U.S. perspective on current events, one gets the latest news from Africa or Asia.

The news section of Wikipedia is one of the most informative news sources on the Abu Ghraib prison scandal for example. Because of the masses of hyperlinks, the reader can effortlessly ascertain who originally scooped the scandal, what the photos depict, who is being accused, what is the Bha'athist regime, and what constitutes humiliation and torture. There are links to foreign press releases, graphic images, and a discussion page, where opinions flow endlessly on this relatively recent topic. To view an archive of past news events, click on *Current Events* and scroll backwards through the calendar. Almost as quickly as the planes hit the World Trade Center, volunteers were quickly uploading the news of 9/11 and Wikipedia's front page exploded with content.

Besides the news, Wikipedia's home page contains daily trivia, anniversaries, and of course the portal to the encyclopedia. One can search on a term, browse the table of contents by topic, or select an item randomly, as if one happened to flip to a page in a book. Spot checks on various entries show not only high quality, but also a freshness that one could only hope for in a vegetable market.

My only criticism was that the table of contents was scant and biased. Under the heading *Food*, I found only entries for *beer, single-malt scotch and tea*. Strangely enough, since letting some Wikipedians read my draft article, not only has the table of contents radically changed for the food section, but Single Malt Scotch has since been featured.

Regardless of what the table of contents look like, I suggest term searching instead. Searching for cous cous gave me an overview, links for every ingredient, instructions for preparation, and transported me to the West African Sahel, where the dish originated. The extent to which each entry is hyperlinked can easily lure the user into what I'd call a *Wiki Lair*.

As the world molds Wikipedia, so does Wikipedia mold the world. Jews around the world were incensed that a Google search on the word "Jew" retrieved as the number one hit, an anti-Semitic site called *Jew Watch*, as reported in the [Jerusalem Post](#) (April 18, 2004). A New York real estate investor launched an online petition attracting nearly 100 thousand signatures in two weeks, but the site was not only heavily vandalized, it was powerless to change Google's algorithm which weights its retrieval set based on how many hyperlinks are directed toward a site. In the end *Google-bombing* solved the problem as people collectively linked their sites to Wikipedia's entry for the term *Jew*.

Wikipedia is well-deserving of the Webby Award\* it won last year in the Community category. Wikipedia brings people together every day, though they may never see each other's faces.

\* (best of the Net).

Next issue: Wikipedia: An Emergent System