

# Biography of Jimmy Wales

## Introduction

Jimmy Donal Wales, also known as Jimbo, was born on the 7th of August, 1996 in Huntsville, Alabama. He is an American Internet entrepreneur and is best known as the co-founder of Wikipedia, the online non-profit encyclopedia. Wales currently holds the “community founder” seat on the Wikimedia Foundation Board of Trustees, the non-profit charitable organization that he helped establish to operate Wikipedia.



## Early Life

As a child, Wales was a keen reader with an acute intellectual curiosity. When he was three, his mother bought a World Book Encyclopedia for the family. As he grew up and learned to read, the book became an object of reverence. He surged through the abundant supply of knowledge complete with maps and illustrations, but soon discovered that it had its shortcomings: no matter how much was in it, there were many more things that were not. The World Book Encyclopedia incorporated a sticker system to update the book, where stickers were sent to owners to paste on pages that needed to be revised. Wales jokes that he “started as a kid revising the encyclopedia by stickering the one my mother bought”.

Wales attended a private school as a child, where he mentions he “spent lots of hours poring over the Britannicas and World Book Encyclopedias”. After eighth grade, he attended Randolph School, a university-preparatory school in Huntsville and graduated at sixteen years old. He then began his university education in Auburn University and received a bachelor’s degree in finance in 1986.

Jimmy then entered the PhD finance program at the University of Alabama before proceeding on with his master’s degree and entering into a PhD finance program at Indiana University. At Alabama, he played internet fantasy games and developed his interest in the web. He taught at both universities during his time there but did not write the doctoral dissertation required for a PhD, something he ascribed as boredom.

## Career

In 1994, Wales initially started off trading options and futures in the trading firm, Chicago Options Associates in Chicago, Illinois. He was inspired by the remarkably successful initial public offering of Netscape in 1995 and after accumulating sufficient capital through “speculating on interest-rate and foreign-currency fluctuations”, he decided to leave the realm of financial trading and delve into internet entrepreneurship.

Wales described himself as having been addicted to computers and the internet from an early age, hence he wrote code and played online multiplayer games during his spare time. During his studies in college, he took part in online virtual role-playing games such as Multi-User Dungeons, where he learned the potential that computer networks held to foster large-scale collaborative projects. This also influenced him to become more interested in rise of the internet.

In 1996, Wales and two partners, Tim Shell and Michael Davis, founded Bomis, a web portal featuring user-generated webrings and, for a brief period, erotic photographs. Wales described the portal as a “guy-oriented search engine” and compared it to markets like Playboy. Later on after the creation of



Wikipedia, Wales was observed to have modified references to Bomis on the website in order to downplay the sexual nature of his product. This may indicate that he wasn't very proud of the nature of the website, however it played a key part in creating Wikipedia. Unfortunately, the Bomis venture did not ultimately turn out to be successful.

Wales dreamed of completing his online encyclopedia project and made this a reality with funding from Bomis. He decided to seek out a credentialed academic to lead the project, in which he chose Larry Sanger, who at the time was a doctoral student in philosophy at Ohio State University, to be its editor-in-chief. Larry Sanger was a friend of Jimmy's whom he met whilst debating Objectivism years before. Nupedia was born. A peer-reviewed, open-content encyclopedia with intent to have

expert-written entries on multiple varieties of topics and also to sell advertising alongside the entries to form profits. Nupedia was designed to rival professional encyclopedias with its high-quality articles and expert peer-review system, but ran into problems early on. Writing articles for the website proved un-fun and intimidating as the academic peer review committees' criticism could prove demotivating and embarrassing. Wales even admitted attempting to write an article on the Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Merton, but failed to submit his first draft to the prestigious finance professors who were to peer review it, as he was too intimidated by them and was not confident enough in his knowledge on the matter. He realised at this moment that the Nupedia model was not going to succeed.

The idea of Wikipedia was born after Sanger was introduced to the concept of a wiki by Ben Kovitz. Kovitz suggested that adopting the wiki model would allow editors to contribute simultaneously and incrementally to the website, thus overcoming the challenges faced by Nupedia. Sanger proposed this idea to Wales and the first Nupedia wiki was created on January 10, 2001. The wiki was initially intended to act as a collaborative project with the public to write articles which were then reviewed for publication by Nupedia's expert volunteers. However, not many of the experts agreed with the wiki idea and feared their

credibility and reputation would be brought down with the mix of professional and amateur content published. Thus the wiki project, dubbed “Wikipedia” by Sanger, went live on a separate domain shortly after its creation.

## Wikipedia

Originally, Wales planned to make Wikipedia a profitable business through advertising. He feared however that the project would be a disaster, due to the public amateur article publications. To the surprise of both him and Sanger, within a few days of launching, the number of articles on Wikipedia had outgrown that of Nupedia and a small collective of editors had formed. These editors shared the broader idea of an open-source, collaborative encyclopedia that would intake contributions from the ordinary public that Jimmy came up with. Many of the contributors sympathized with the open-source movements that Wales was spearheading. Neither of the co-founders knew what to expect of the Wikipedia initiative.

Wales has commented that he was initially so worried about the concept of open editing, that he would frequently wake up at night and monitor what was being added to his project. Nonetheless, the community of early editors helped create a robust, self-regulating community that has proven conducive to the growth of the project. Wales was the first person to contribute an article to Wikipedia which was the page of “Hello World”, the commonly used phrase in computer programme introductory testing.



Wales set up the Wikimedia Foundation in 2003, a non-profit organization headquartered in San Francisco, Florida, and moved all intellectual property right and domain names pertaining to Wikipedia to it. The foundation’s purpose is to establish general policy for the encyclopedia and its sister projects. Wales is currently the “community founder’s seat” and mostly acts as the organization’s spokesperson at international events. He often jokes that donating Wikipedia to the foundation was both the “dumbest and the smartest” thing he has ever done. Giving up a company estimated around 3 billion dollars, but on the other hand he credits the donation to the success of the website and believes it wouldn’t be as big as it is today without it.

## Outro

I chose Jimmy Wales as my software engineer to study as I believe Wikipedia has impacted not just software development but the global population’s knowledge on absolutely everything hugely. His contribution to software development knowledge spread is immense, where Wikipedia, for example, can be used by developers to learn different methods of software engineering, learn a variety of programming languages, learn about the development of other software projects and learn about general software knowledge. His vision and work is admirable and proves global influence can be possible simply through passion and a dream.