



A Quicki Guide to Wiki ***A DLF Executive Summary***

A wiki is a website that any user can edit – right there live on the webpage, in real time – as well as read. In its purest sense this means that any visitor to the site is also an author, with no technical controls on what they add or delete and no gatekeeping editorial process prior to posting; in more limited forms it means any user within a defined group who has access to the wiki – a project team working on collaborative documents, for example.

A website is a read-only medium – you visit it, read it, print it, save it, but you can't alter the content. In order to edit a webpage you need to be its creator, its owner. This is a normal, commonsensical arrangement – who would want anyone on the web coming to their site and making changes? Well, Wiki would.

Listen to this brief August 2003 National Public Radio feature for a clear explication of the shape, form, and surprising success of the wiki.

Wikis are communal efforts, based on social regulation rather than technical safeguards – when vandals attack and make destructive changes, the much larger number of honest users fix the situation (changes are tracked and viewable publicly, so they can therefore be undone quickly). Vandal-users tire of doing bad because their damage is quickly undone by steward-users. Genuine mistakes by one writer can be fixed by another, to everyone's benefit; pieces of helpful knowledge can very easily be added by any visiting expert. Sounds unworkable, but there are some situations in which it is proving to be less fragile than it sounds.

The Wikipedia: this reference work <http://en.wikipedia.org/> is the most famous and effective of the wikis you are likely to find on the open web. It is a 330,000 entry encyclopedia built by 100,000 contributors. Here's its definition of a wiki:

A wiki (pronounced "wicky" or "weeky") is a website ... that gives users the ability to add content, as on an Internet forum, but also allows that content to be edited by other users. The term can also refer to the collaborative software used to create such a website.... Wiki wiki comes from the Hawaiian term for 'quick' or 'super-fast' (available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>).

Does it work? Well – try it for a term that you know something about and see if it is erroneous. A quick lookup on “iPod,” Apple's digital music player, yielded an entry that

was informative and quite deep; less fulsome but still quite good was the entry for the “Peasants’ Revolt” (including a reference to Barrie Dobson’s excellent scholarly book).

The Wiki as Collaboration Tool

While Wikis that are password-protected strain the purist’s definition of the form, they are commonplace as collaboration tools that allow a defined group (a project team, for example) to create, edit, and update documents collaboratively. The DLF makes use of them in this manner in several working groups. There are some real benefits to the wiki as a collaborative tool, and some obvious limitations: one needs to learn the wiki text markup language, for example, in order to create layout instructions (emphasis, lists, tables, links, etc.), and there is nothing to stop multiple people editing the same document at the same time, with the last one to save the page being the one that survives (although the other edits are retained in the “history of changes” list).

Further Reading

Andrea Ciffolilli. “Phantom Authority, Self-Selective Recruitment, and Retention of Members in Virtual Communities: The Case of Wikipedia.” *First Monday*, Vol. 8(12), December 2003. http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue8_12/ciffolilli/

Ward Cunningham. “The Wiki.” *Microsoft Research – Social Computing Symposium 2004*. 3/29/2004. A Web video presentation from Microsoft Research. <http://murl.microsoft.com/LectureDetails.asp?1076>.

Brian Lamb. "Wide Open Spaces: Wikis, Ready or Not." *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 39, no. 5 (September/October 2004): 36-48. <http://www.educause.edu/pub/er/erm04/erm0452.asp>

Dave Mattison. “Quickiwiki, Swiki, Twiki, Zwiki and the Plone Wars. Wiki as a PIM and Collaborative Content Tool.” *Searcher*, vol 11(4), April 2003: <http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/apr03/mattison.shtml>

WEB4LIB: August 2004: The Web4Lib discussion forum has had a series of online discussions about the value that wikis (and the Wikipedia) have to libraries. The archive of these discussions (ordered here by subject) can be found at: <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Web4Lib/archive/0408/subject.html#start>

David Weinberger. “Commentary: Wikis.” *All Things Considered*, July 21, 2003. <http://www.npr.org/features/feature.php?wfId=1344426> (text page leading to an audio file).

DMS 04/08/30