

SOS Children's Village

Anyone can freely download Wikipedia and customize the content according to their specifications to create a comprehensive educational product. This is what SOS Children's Village did with the creation of Wikipedia Selection for Schools, geared towards helping the world's most needy children.

SOS Children's Villages is the world's largest orphan charity, and is dedicated to providing family life for the world's most vulnerable - children orphaned by war, poverty and natural disasters. Currently, the charity is the home to over 60,000 children in 123 countries, and assists millions of impoverished families worldwide.

In 2005, SOS Children's Villages UK began exploring different educational projects that would benefit children both in the UK and abroad. It was during these conversations that Wikipedia Selection for Schools was born. The goal was to create an offline Wikipedia version that was child safe, free from vandalism, and could be easily used by individuals with no internet connection. Additionally, the staff also wanted to customize the content so that it would complement the UK curriculum, which they knew was used by schools worldwide.

"The decision to use Wikipedia was easy. There is no other project that can compete with the overall range and quality of individual contributions. Wikipedia is not just the biggest and the best, there isn't really any competitor worth mentioning in the same sentence," states SOS Children CEO and Wikipedian, Andrew Cates.

To prepare the content, Cates' team devised technical solutions, and took advantage of the numerous volunteers their Cambridge, UK location offered them.

"We took all the "featured" and "good" articles and removed esoteric or material not suitable for children. The community at Wikipedia suggested other articles, which we looked at. There weren't good articles in all subjects we wanted, such as some novels in the English literature curriculum," stated Cates.

By 2006, SOS Children's Villages UK had released their first version, and in 2007, the second followed. The releases were available both online and via CD/DVD. Not surprisingly, the Wikipedia Selection for Schools was received well across the globe, so much so that organizations, such as the Shuttleworth Foundation, began distributing it in South Africa.

"In regards to the CD, most people have responded enthusiastically. They state what a fantastic idea it is. I've been asked for copies from all around the world...Many thousands of people visit the online Schools Wikipedia everyday and we have had thousands of downloads and have handed out hundreds of the disks. We are happy that the work involved was for a good end and is being used," states Cates.

Besides the SOS Children's Villages that are distributing the Wikipedia version in Southern Africa, Pakistan, and the UK, other entities have begun to set up their own download sites as well, such as the State government in Victoria Australia.

As a Wikipedian enthusiast, Cates believes strongly in the potential of Wikipedia and the positive impact it has had on the world. In regards to children, he believes Wikipedia is great at helping children become scholarly in regards to knowledge sources.

"As a Wikipedia editor the thing that I think is underrated is the amount of international understanding which Wikipedia has developed. I see a stream of people from fundamentalist groups, for example, who start off adamant and opinionated but from gentle interaction with other editors, learn about reliability, NPOV, and learn other perspectives on history and the Middle East for example. It is heart warming and educational to see people of all different backgrounds end up working together to complete a project," states Cates.

Currently, SOS Children has plans for future Wikipedia Selection for Schools releases. Cates stresses that now the organization has software and procedures to generate DVDs very easily. This leaves the room to explore many possibilities, including future releases in other languages.

"This year we've been passing copies all over the world. Who know what we will be doing next?," states Cates.



Wikipedia's free content was used to help the world's most needy children.

The Wikipedia Challenge

More than half of the world's languages are in danger of extinction. While Wikipedia is available in 250 languages, there are an estimated 7,000 languages worldwide. Technology like Wikipedia plays an important part of the preservation battle. This means a lot of work ahead for the online encyclopedia.

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, is currently available in 250 languages. Each Wikipedia language version is self-governing and created by native speakers of a particular language. For many communities this had a tremendously positive affect, including bringing underrepresented languages to the digital arena.

"Bengali is ranked 7th in terms of native speakers. However, as a developing nation [Bangladesh], we are far behind many other nations because there is a huge digital divide. Bengali Wikipedia is the largest website in the Bengali language. The project serves as a sustainable information source for millions of poor village kids, who can not afford to buy even a single volume of a printed encyclopedia. It is also great to see my mother tongue in the digital realm", states Belayet Hossain, a contributor to the Bengali Wikipedia.

While Wikipedia's 250 language versions are a huge achievement, this number only represent a small fraction of the world's languages. There are an estimated 7,000 languages worldwide, half of which are dying at an alarming rate.

David Harrison, co-founder of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, is one of the world's leading linguists dedicated to language preservation. He has a challenge for Wikipedia.

"Wikipedia has held up a magnifying glass to one corner of the universe. What they found is interesting, but let's not forget about the rest. My challenge is this - increase the number of Wikipedias to include languages not considered "top tier" languages, and help open doors by bringing smaller language to the unicode system," states Harrison.

For some languages, Harrison states, Wikipedia will play a role in revitalizing them and revising them from extinction. He believes that this is important work considering the amount of human knowledge that is lost every time a language dies.

"There are economies of information packaging of knowledge that you find in languages. Every language tells us some of the secrets of how humans have survived. When we lose a language we lose centuries of knowledge, of cultural ideas," Harrison says.

While there are many reasons languages die, primarily it is because speakers from a smaller language are overwhelmed with the dominant language they encounter in school, TV, etc. The trend has worsened with the introduction of technologies like the internet since they tend to enforce certain "global" languages. This is especially true considering that certain languages have yet to be accepted into the Unicode System.

"Many bilingual native children abandon the language they speak at home because they don't see them compatible with the modern world. This is the case, for example, for a child that speaks Mayan at home, and encounters Spanish the rest of the day. As a result, they think that if only their parents speak X, it must be a lower language, and the language they see in the outside world, the global language, is the future. The way to counteract this is by letting them see their language in a high tech medium, such as Wikipedia," Harrison explains.

Harrison is careful to stress, however, that technology is still the domain of literate languages. This is an obstacle, considering that a large percentage of the world's languages have no written systems. However, it is also true that the lack of written materials make these "oral" languages more susceptible to extinction.

"Writing is not used in all languages, so there is an interesting question of inclusion. It will be interesting to see how Wikipedia tackles this. However, I have high hope that technology like Wikipedia will help open doors for many of smaller languages...Wikipedia has done great things but there is so much more than can be done," Harrison states.



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The ideal Wikipedian

Wikipedians, the people behind Wikipedia, come from all backgrounds, nations, and countries. They thread they share is that have a desire to make the world a better place, and are usually well respected in their communities.

From the outside, Patricio Lorente seems like a typical Argentinian – he loves soccer, good food, and spending time with friends. However, if you take one step closer you will soon discover what makes him a typical Wikipedian – his lifelong passion to help the world, and his amazingly rich life.

Born in Buenos Aires, Patricio Lorente can be described as a Renaissance Man.

"I've always been attracted to learning about diverse fields of study. This made finishing college a bit difficult since I changed my major between fields like literature, philosophy, computers, law, etc. I wanted to learn them all!" jokes Lorente.

Luckily, his curiosity about the world has always brought him to the helms of new adventures. In 1991, Patricio found work that would capture his interest for many years to follow. He began working for an international development agency as a "field rep," where he assisted in giving out microloans, spearheading social aid programs, and helping families secure medical care and food.

"It was important work. I was helping people that were without resources, and that were really going through a hard time...However, it was about me empowering them to help themselves, about giving them tools so that they could build a better future for themselves," Lorente says.

Patricio states that during this time he became deeply aware of the disparity that existed between those that "have and don't have." It was also around this time that he was introduced to Wikipedia.

"In my work experience, what I have learned is that the only way to truly help people, is if they are the protagonists and not passive receivers. Wikipedia makes every human a protagonist. That's what attracted me to the project. It is an encyclopedia that anyone could use, that anyone can participate in, and that it is the biggest collection of information that humanity has ever created," states Lorente.

Patricio's first entry was for his local "futbol" team, however, he soon began editing on more complex topics, and became a regular contributor. His passion for the site would continue to increase as he became more aware of how it was helping the same communities he was serving. Within a few years, Patricio would help establish Wikimedia Argentina, a volunteer group dedicated to cultivating the Wikimedia projects on a local level. The group was officially created this past September.

"Wikimedia Argentina has a very ambitious agenda in front of us. Next week we are getting together with native tribes, hoping to stimulate the creation of Wikipedia in their own languages. There has been a lot of discussion between the tribes on how to write these oral languages. The irony is that we are not only introducing Wikipedia to them, but also introducing the wiki way of consensus decision making, so that they can figure out how to best do this," he says.

According to Patricio, Wikimedia Argentina is also researching ways to help underprivileged students and schools in Argentina: "One of our many ideas is to create Wikireaders, or textbooks created with Wikipedia's free content. There are many schools that don't have resources, not to mention Internet connection."

Today, Patricio is married with two gorgeous children. He has changed jobs, and is currently heading up a University of La Plata department, responsible for allocating scholarships to underprivileged students. He believes Wikipedia and its sister projects can transform the reality of many underprivileged people in his homeland into something positive and hopeful.

"All Wikimedia Argentina needs is time."



Wikimedia Argentina celebrates its launch. The group has many ambitious plans to help underrepresented communities in South America using Wikipedia's free content.