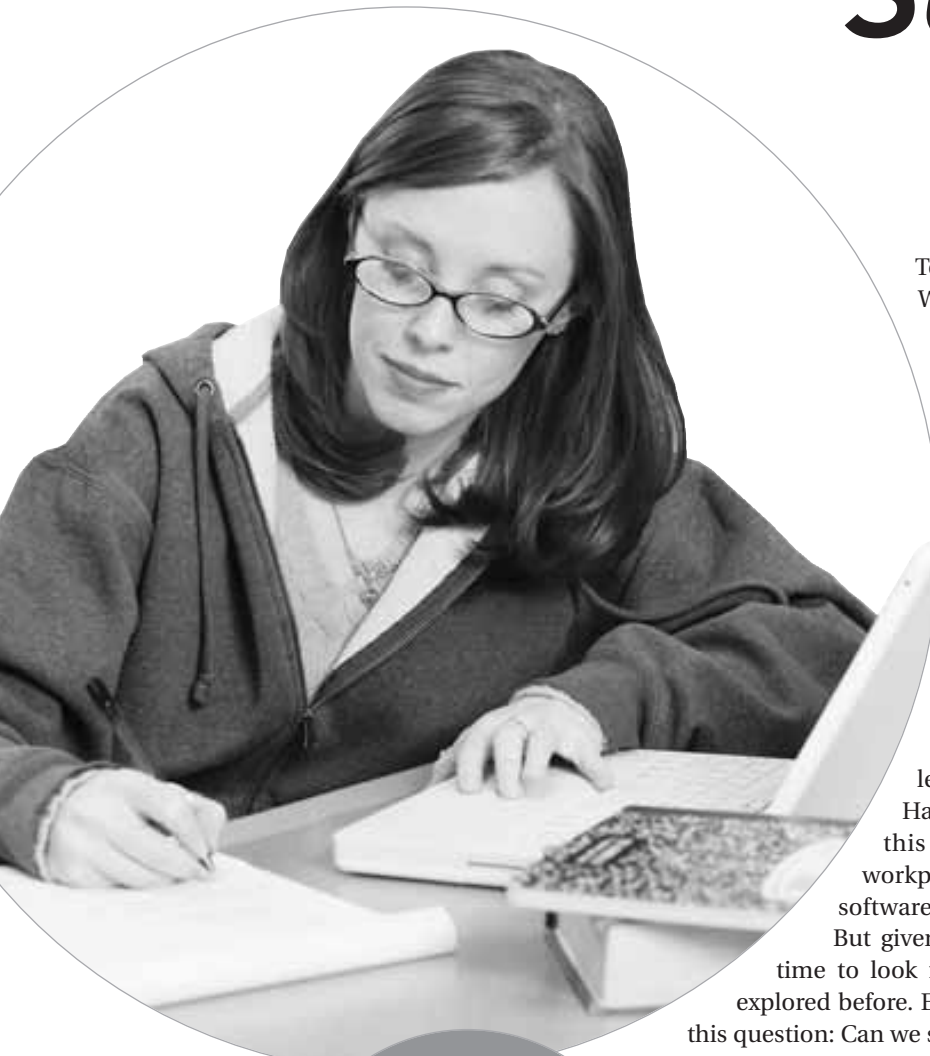


Wikis as *Legitimate Research Sources*



Too many people equate the word “wiki” with Wikipedia and, based on that, view information found in public-facing wikis with suspicion. Others see wikis solely as knowledge-sharing tools employed within an enterprise to encourage team collaboration and enhance project management. A survey by Janus Boye, published in his “Wiki in the Enterprise” report (http://eng.jboye.dk/research/wiki_in_the_enterprise), finds that wikis are now ubiquitous in many organizations. Thus, the wiki format is no longer strange to people, although its utility as an information source can be questionable.

Information professionals know there is much more to wikis than Wikipedia and internal KM projects using wiki technology. Several excellent articles on wikis, by Darlene Fichter, Richard Hammond, and others, have already appeared in this magazine, covering their histories, software, workplace applications, and the general “ethos” of wiki software and use.

But given how quickly things move in the web world, it’s time to look for trends in the use of wikis that haven’t been explored before. Equally intriguing was the idea of trying to answer this question: Can we start to count wikis among our legitimate information sources? This article looks at wikis from a content perspective rather than a purely technological one.

by
**Suzanne
Bell**

AN AFGHAN WIKI

On July 18, 2008, the A-Head article in *The Wall Street Journal* was titled “In Afghanistan, Getting to Know The Neighbors Is Half the Battle: After Gaining Villagers’ Trust, U.S. Troops Face Delicate Task: Handing Over Post to New Unit.” A devoted fan of the A-Head, I was reading along—and buried deep on the second page, there it was: “Wiki-Afghan.” The troops are using a wiki to record and pass along this new kind of vital operational information. If the U.S. Army has embraced wiki software, what other unexpected wikis are out there? And what are they used for?

The reasons for a new article on wikis started to become clear.

The first step in my research process was to get a sense of how much more material, or how many “documented wiki sightings” might turn up in some quick database scans—something that would answer the question, “Are wikis popular?”

WIKI POPULARITY

In libraryland, as represented by the results from H.W. Wilson’s Library Literature searches, wikis are obviously a topic of interest, although not nearly as popular as blogs, as indicated by the following:

Search strategy	Date limit	Number of results
Wikis (Internet) in Subject (includes subheadings such as evaluation)	2006–2008	101
wiki* in Keyword (side note: wiki* NOT wikipedia in Keyword = 127)	2006–2008	183
Weblogs in Subject (includes subheadings such as evaluation, case studies, etc.)	2006–2008	252
blog* or weblog* in Keyword	2006–2008	309

You are probably familiar with this literature and the uses of wikis in the library world. Like other organizations, we use them internally for staff communication and collaboration; externally to provide information to, and invite participation from, our users; and as teaching tools. Some of the wiki articles are reporting on interesting nonlibrary uses, such as sports scores, scientific collaboration, the Muppets, or the possibility of “wikitextbooks.” The next question is how does this compare to the world outside of libraries?

Since it had been an article from *The Wall Street Journal* that initially sparked my inspiration for this article, Factiva immediately occurred to me as the place to search to see if wikis were turning up in the literature outside of libraries. The results were startling, even allowing for the inequities of the comparison (full text versus index, lack of controlled vocabulary for the topic, much larger body of publications). To keep things in perspective, a search on a more typical topic for the database is provided just for comparison’s sake:

Search strategy	Date limit	Number of results
Wikis\$ not wikipedia (side note: letting in all the occurrences of “wikipedia” increases the results to 4,050)	Last 3 months	1,724
China	Last 3 months	368,361
"China" as a region (controlled vocabulary)	Last 3 months	256,464

Obviously, compared to China, wikis barely register in the global news arena—but still! Even allowing for the small

group of false drops (e.g., people whose name is “Wiki”), there were almost 2,000 mentions in just 3 months. Wikis are definitely “out there,” and my hunt was on for the weird, the wild, or the wonderful in wiki applications. As I looked and assessed, I began to see them more in terms of groups, or themes, that looked like emerging trends in who is creating wikis and how they are being used. The following sets of sites are the result, an idiosyncratic collection to inform, help, or just amuse you. By the end, you may join me in concluding that some of the resources created with this Web 2.0 software have joined the ranks of our more established, familiar, and trusted information tools.

FOR YOUR HEALTH

One of the more popular uses of the web is for finding health information. Reputable providers know that one of the most important things their sites need to convey is the trustworthiness of their information. The wiki format, where “anyone can edit,” wouldn’t appear to be the best format to choose for a health-related site. The two commercially created health wikis that are described here dealt with that issue by using the wiki software to present and make their content searchable. But they have solidly locked down who has editing rights, providing the general public with only very limited, circumscribed opportunities to add their thoughts. You might argue that these are not, then, real wikis, but in the PR Newswire announcements of their respective launches, they repeat the word “wiki” several times: They appear to want to be thus identified (and Elsevier’s product goes so far as to identify itself as a wiki in its title).

NutritionPedia.com is, basically, a database of Nutrition Facts Labels, distinguished by its size (more than 72,000 items) and breadth of material. It is a commercial site, very elegant in appearance, without the accustomed wiki “look and feel”; indeed, it’s not clear where outside users can chime in, if at all (there is a blog, but the latest topic was posted by NutritionPedia in February 2008, and there don’t appear to be any comments or discussion). It offers “Gadgets,” “Widgets,” and “Tools” for adding a NutritionPedia search box to your Google homepage or a tip of the day to your Facebook page. Additionally, there’s a daily news item that you can get as an RSS feed. NutritionPedia also offers essays on dieting and wellness topics (the “Learn” section), very much in layman’s language, that are useful to read (the one



NutritionPedia.com, a database of Nutrition Facts Labels, is a commercial site.

on paying attention to calories—as much or more than a product’s fat content—is particularly good). But let’s get back to the core content: the database of Nutrition Facts Labels.

The database includes packaged food and beverage products, restaurant menu items, pet foods, vitamins, and dietary supplements, all pulled together into one, easily searched resource. The restaurant menu items, representing offerings at chains of family and “fast casual” eating places, seems like a particularly value-added resource; it’s hard to say how you would get that information otherwise. In some test searches, a search on **cottage cheese** returns 223 items, a dizzying array of information for specific brands and styles. The results screens are very Google-like in style, but my one gripe is the lack of “paging” at the bottom: You simply get a “Next” (or “Previous” and “Next”) link; there’s no way to jump several pages ahead or to get a clearer sense of how many screens of results there are (the total count is in the blue bar at the top, as it is in Google).

The content of the result is simply a scan of the Nutrition Facts information from the product packaging, nicely enlarged so that you have a prayer of reading it. In some other tests, there were 954 entries for items involving **peanut butter**, 78 hits for **tofu** (six for **extra firm**), and 50 for **celery**—but at this point, it finally really hit me: Every entry in here is something that is *packaged* and thus, already has a Nutrition Facts label. You can’t get calorie counts for fresh, raw, buy-it-by-the-pound (or kilo) fruits or vegetables. So the site’s mission, as stated on the homepage, of providing “nutrition facts and nutrition information for your favorite food items” didn’t quite apply to all my favorite food items, but it’s still a remarkable, free resource. And center cut pork loin roast isn’t very high in calories or fat. Hmmm!

WISER HEADS PREVAIL

Next in this group is a site called WiserWiki (<http://wiserwiki.com>), subtitled Evidence-Based Medical Information and created by Elsevier. Like NutritionPedia, WiserWiki is based on a core of previously published information; in this case, *The Textbook of Primary Care Medicine* (third edition, 2001), “one of Elsevier’s best-selling medical textbooks” as noted by a PR Newswire report of Jan. 29, 2008. Unlike NutritionPedia, here only a select group of “anyones” is allowed to edit the wiki. As explained on the homepage, “WiserWiki can only be edited by board certified doctors to ensure that the information is as trustworthy and reliable as possible. Doctors can also use WiserWiki as a valuable resource to collaborate with each other and to determine best practices by group consensus.”



WiserWiki is based on a core of previously published information from Elsevier’s Textbook of Primary Care Medicine.

This site looks more like a wiki, with links to its sections on the main page and some typical navigation links and a search box on the left side. The concept seems good and the mission laudable, but I’m concerned at seeing only four edits, all on the same day, in the past 30 days. The board certified doctors who are the only ones allowed to edit material in this wiki do not seem to be rushing to do so, but the viewing public seems pretty interested: More than 43,000 people have visited the main page, and the next “most popular” page is the one for “Oral Cavity and Salivary Gland Disease (8,715 views).” The 49th and 50th most popular pages are tied at 1,366 views (Adult Manifestations of Congenital Heart Disease and Nonmalignant White Blood Cell Disorders).

The actual entries are extremely thorough, well-presented (with images, tables, and highlights pulled out into boxes) and, of course, trustworthy. Is it written for the layperson? Since the material is derived from medical textbooks, it is not exactly “friendly,” but it is written in a way that provides even more authority. It will be very interesting to see how WiserWiki develops and if it manages to engender the community of exchange among its targeted editors. One hopes Elsevier gives the project enough time, as the medical community, busy enough with their traditional duties, may be slow to fold in this new activity.

SOME WIKIS NEVER SLEEP

Last in this little group is a more traditional, grass-roots type of wiki on the topic of sleep apnea. The Sleep Apnea Wiki (http://sleepapnea.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page) is described on its homepage as “a place where people with sleep apnea can share and build a database of helpful infor-

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mation.” This wiki is much smaller than the previous two, since it hasn’t had the advantage of being “jump-started” with pre-existing content. Still, since April 30, 2007, 144 articles have been added, and the record of 11 edits in the past month indicates some evidence of recent care and interest, although there appear to be only six registered users.

This wiki again has a familiar look and feel, and it includes a nice, brooding photo of a misty moon in the night sky (indicative of sleeplessness?) on the homepage, and a more cheerful “peacefully sleeping moon” logo in the upper-left corner of each page. While not setting the “view” records of articles in some other wikis, this information is obviously important to its targeted audience members (or the people who live with them). In the list of “Most visited” pages are articles such as Canadian Sleep Labs (3,785 views), Uvulectomy (ugh!) (222 views), Tongue Retaining Device (119 views), Hyoid Advancement (78 views), and Mandibular Repositioning Device (71 views), down to Nasal Pillows (36 views). The Sleep Apnea Wiki seems like a niche item, which may grow—or not—in time.

This wiki is part of the “Wikia” series of wikis, a for-profit organization started by Jimmy Wales of Wikipedia fame. The Sleep Apnea Wiki is a member of the Wikia Health series, and access to other wikis in this series (such as diabetes, autism, and depression) is provided above the Sleep Apnea Wiki logo in the upper-left corner on all pages of the site.

CITY WIKIS

The idea of communities (in the literal, city, sense) creating wikis where residents—definitely the experts here!—can easily share information about their community seems so obvious and appropriate you wonder why you don’t hear more about such efforts. The idea of community wikis appears to have started, unsurprisingly, in California, with the Davis (home of a University of California campus) wiki. The Davis wiki (<http://daviswiki.org>) was the brainchild of Philip Neustrom and was first launched from his laptop. In less than a month it was

moved to “real servers” and has obviously gone from strength to strength since. A glance at the Davis wiki homepage shows lots of links, images, a list of “Today’s Events,” and fun mystery photos, inviting users to identify the pictured location in their community. You don’t need lists of statistics to tell you this wiki is active. From “Cows” to “Bathrooms” to “Lost Pets,” Davis residents are highly engaged in building, using, and enjoying their community wiki.

The Davis wiki was so successful, nearby communities started to pick up on the idea. In February 2007, a friend of Neustrom’s started a wiki for Sacramento (<http://sacwiki.org>), followed quickly by one for West Sacramento, both of which are also thriving. In November 2007, *The Sacramento Bee* reported that the Davis Wiki had “attracted so much attention in the past 3 1/2 years that the creators are establishing a nonprofit, Wiki Spot (<http://Wikispot.org>) that provides all the tools online for others to create their own Wikis.” The Wiki Spot website provides a directory of all communities using wikis hosted by Wiki Spot. The list is still somewhat heavily weighted toward the West Coast, but it is beginning to fill out with Midwest, South, and East Coast states—as well as turning up in other parts of the world! It would be great to see more and more cities bringing their citizens together to celebrate and share in their communities in this fashion.

Based on the Mediawiki software rather than Wiki Spot, another very successful and active site is the Omaha wiki (<http://omahawiki.org>), which is hosted for the community by Creighton University. Started as a class project in January 2007, by March 31, 2008, the Omaha wiki had grown to be the third largest city wiki in the U.S., and sixth in the world (the Davis wiki is second, according to http://omahawiki.org/Omaha_Wiki:Largest_City_Wikis). After wandering around a bit in these lively “city wikis,” it’s an odd feeling to find some that don’t seem to have taken off so well. Particularly surprising is the low usage Seattle wiki (http://seattle.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page) and the Chicago wiki (http://chicago.wikia.com/wiki/Chicago:Community_Portal), both of which are Wikia wikis.

Health and city information are far from being the only areas where the wiki format is being used to transmit valuable—and valid—information. Credibility is important to ascertain when using wikis as information sources, but that isn’t much different from our traditional evaluation measures. There are some points to consider: Is editing restricted or open to anyone? Is the wiki active? Are there new entries? Is editing current? Are the editors experts? And, note that, given the type of wiki, expertise is not synonymous with education.

The next installment of my examination of wikis as legitimate research tools will look at enthusiast, reference, and government wikis.

Oh, and about the Afghan wiki that originally piqued my interest in this topic? It’s restricted—for military use only.



The Davis, Calif., wiki homepage shows lots of links, images, a list of “Today’s Events,” and fun mystery photos, inviting users to identify the pictured location in their community.

Suzanne Bell (sbell@library.rochester.edu) is economics/data librarian, UR research projects coordinator at the University of Rochester. Comments? Email the editor (marydee@xmission.com).



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