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By Martin LaMonica Staff Writer, CNET News.com Can Internet volunteers improve journalism? Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy 'Jimbo' Wales is out to find out. Wikipedia is a very successful online encyclopedia written and edited by thousands of volunteers. Now they are trying the collaborative wiki process on news. The project, called Wikinews, is in its early stages and faces clear challenges, from the difficulty of doing original reporting to delivering news quickly in a peer review model. Then why do it? Wales and others think that the mainstream media have let slip their pledges of objectivity and commitments to high-quality journalism. The goal of Wikinews is to give the straight story, neutral and unbiased. And to get the facts right--an area where mainstream media has lost some credibility. Wikinews is just one of several wiki-related efforts--from an online dictionary to freely available textbooks--being run by the nonprofit Wiki Media Foundation. But Wikinews appears to be the project in development getting the most attention--at least from journalists. Wales spoke to CNET News.com about Wikinews and the "burgeoning culture" around wikis. Q: How did the news project get started, and what are the goals? A: At Wikipedia, we have very, very strong neutral policy. We call it a neutral point of view, and it's really one of the central organizing principles of everything we do, including the news project. Unlike some other grassroots journalism type of projects like Indymedia, which is a very far left type of thing written by activists, we strive to be a neutral, high-quality source of basic information. If the mainstream media can't do good, unbiased journalism, then we'll have to do it for them. One of the reasons we started it is that we noticed that Wikipedia itself, even though it is an encyclopedia, does a very good job of filling in background information on news reports. We thought this type of energy could be applied to news as well. There's an interest in writing more current events type of articles, but they aren't appropriate for an encyclopedia, so we needed a place to put those, to direct that energy. How can you ensure that you are actually neutral? Doesn't each individual contributor have his or her own bias? Even the choice of story reflects some bias. Yes, of course. There's no magic bullet to eliminate bias, and be objective and neutral. But what's interesting about the way the wiki process works, and the openness of it, is that if you write something and you want it to survive the process, you have to write it in such a way that is broadly satisfactory to people of many points of view. That is a natural impetus to push you away from loaded terminology--or having an ax to grind in a story. Look at the amount of implicit editorial that goes in, for example, the news pages of The New York Times. And I choose The New York Times not because it isn't particularly bad but because it is particularly good. A lot of times, I realize when I'm reading news articles from respected sources, "Boy, I wish I could edit this." Because they're overstating the case or sticking in their own opinions instead of sticking to the news. So the wiki process gives us a way of doing that. But it's humans writing it, so it's not necessarily going to be perfect. Where do you see this going? How do you see it cohabitating with or maybe taking over mainstream media? First of all, I don't really see how we could take over the mainstream media. One of the things they can do well that we can't do is send a trusted reporter out to the Ukraine, for example, and get a report back that can be trusted. We're not going to be able to send people places. We can rely on people who are local, but if we don't know who they are, then we can't trust them as sources. Because typically, people who would be attracted to writing original reports would tend to be activists, not necessarily journalists. People who would be attracted to writing original reports would tend to be activists, not necessarily journalists. Instead, what we can do very well is basically be another form of response to--and commentary on, in a certain sense--the mainstream media, just as blogs have become important. A very well-written, good blog is like a very well-written editorial column in a newspaper. Some of the top bloggers could easily be writing a syndicated column for...respected sources. At the same time, bloggers are very often drawn to comment on the media itself. Such as being critical of how a story is being reported or digging into some facts that have been overlooked by the media. Things like that. I think we'll also fit into that type of role but in different ways. The bloggers are the editorial page and response to the editorial pages, and we're the response to the front page. We'll synthesize what's being reported in a variety of sources. Is there a greater need now than in the past for neutrality in media? Looking at the U.S. media, primarily, and looking at the recent presidential election, maybe I'm mistaken. Maybe I just have a rosy view of the past. But it seems to me that in this election, more than any prior, the media pretty much abandoned any pretense of objectivity. And I'm not just talking about Fox News, which quite clearly has an ax to grind and makes no bones about it. Fair and balanced is its slogan, but everyone knows it's said with a wink. You also have the whole Dan Rather memo scandal, and to me, this doesn't pass the very basic test from what I would expect from Dan Rather. Hopefully, what Wikinews can do is bring together these points of view. The New York Times is reporting this, Fox News is doing that--and give people a synthesis of the news that the mainstream news can't do. If the mainstream media can't do good, unbiased journalism, then we'll have to do it for them. Editorial is a very expensive business--sending production crews out or employing reporters and editors. Do you see yourselves doing original reporting or more commentary? Not commentary. We'll steer pretty far clear from editorializing, because that's just not something that the wiki process is good for. And within our community, it's a difficult thing to do because we like to be very, very open to newcomers, and if you're very open to newcomers and allow for personal editorial views, you basically turn it into a free home page site for people to rant on. It's not something we're well equipped to do, given our current processes. If, in six months, we can't get away from writing highly slanted, biased stories, and it's just a disaster, we'll close it. Do we expect original reporting? Some people think so, but--and I'm more skeptical than others--there is an issue. One thing people don't realize about Wikipedia is that there is a strong community--this group of 200 to 300 heavy contributors, especially. We all know each other. And you get to know, within the community, who is respected and who is authoritative. In that sense, I can see the process of certifying people as reporters to go out and report on things locally in an area of importance to them and their community. But that's going to be naturally limited. I live in St. Petersburg, Fla. If something big were to happen here, I could go out and write up a report on it and interview some local people, and it should be as credible as any news report because I'm a known, respected person in the community and beyond the community. But at the same time, I live in St. Petersburg, and nothing ever happens here. It's not the same as if I live in Washington, D.C., and the paper can send me out to cover something. But why are you more trustworthy than, say, a reporter at the St. Petersburg Times? How can wiki participants get credibility? It's basically the process. The process will give rise to the credibility. And really, the proof will be in the results. It's way too early to tell even if this will work. If, in six months, we can't get away from writing highly slanted, biased stories, and it's just a disaster, we'll close it. Because neutrality is our big thing. When Wikipedia first started, nobody noticed or cared. We were nobodies. We had the privilege of getting it wrong for a while and making mistakes and having the front page look stupid. But in this case, as soon as we just started discussing Wikinews in the community, I started getting calls from journalists. Everybody is watching. It appears that people really like to participate in the creation of information. What have you learned from people in all this? It's really uplifting, actually. It's amazing how many people, who even have very strong beliefs of their own, are able to cooperate in a friendly manner to get it right. I've been on the Internet for a long time and participated in mailing lists and Usenet groups. Basically, what tends to happen in that type of environment is a lot of arguing. At some point, I realized that if I did something more productive than arguing with the same people over and over, I could probably have written three or four books by now. I thought, gosh, it'd be nice if software existed to support us to work together. I may disagree with this person, but we have a lot of knowledge, and we may be able to present this issue in a way that will be helpful to others. Digging through our old e-mails is going to be a painful experience at best. It's amazing that it does work, and if you provide the incentive in the software that encourages people to cooperate rather than compete, then people can do amazing things. Is this Wikinews project also a reflection on the state of Internet media? This is sort of an old cliché. But I think that we're now starting to see the Internet mature enough that we're seeing explorations and experimentation to make this a reality. The old broadcast model, in which an elite set of scribes sends out their thoughts to world--I don't think it will ever completely go away, but it's getting challenged by a more interactive model, in which communities come together to do things that fall somewhere in the realm that we traditionally thought the media do. How that will work is a difficult question. But I definitely think that we're already seeing that the media needs to respond to the blogosphere. Because certain stories break online or certain stories are undermined by people online, digging into the facts in a way that the traditional media either won't--because of institutional biases--or, more often, can't--because of the expense of having 50 people pore over all the facts of any individual stories. It's impossible. But the blogs do it. (1) Generically, open source refers to a program in which the source code is available to the general public for use and/or modification from its original design free of charge, i.e., open. Open source code is typically created as a collaborative effort in which programmers improve upon the code and share the changes within the community. Open source sprouted in the technological community as a response to proprietary software owned by corporations. (2) A certification standard issued by the Open Source Initiative (OSI) that indicates that the source code of a computer program is made available free of charge to the general public. The rationale for this movement is that a larger group of programmers not concerned with proprietary ownership or financial gain will produce a more useful and bug -free product for everyone to use. The concept relies on peer review to find and eliminate bugs in the program code, a process which commercially developed and packaged programs do not utilize. Programmers on the Internet read, redistribute and modify the source code, forcing an expedient evolution of the product. The process of eliminating bugs and improving the software happens at a much quicker rate than through the traditional development channels of commercial software as the information is shared throughout the open source community and does not originate and channel through a corporation's research and development cogs. OSI dictates that in order to be considered "OSI Certified" a product must meet the following criteria: The author or holder of the license of the source code cannot collect royalties on the distribution of the program The distributed program must make the source code accessible to the user The author must allow modifications and derivations of the work under the program's original name No person, group or field of endeavor can be denied access to the program The rights attached to the program must not depend on the program's being part of a particular software distribution The licensed software cannot place restrictions on other software that is distributed with it. Learn more about Open Source in Webopedia's "Did You Know...?" section.

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