

Jimmy Wales: digital champion of free speech

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Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia co-founder, looking into the right-to-be-forgotten legislation. Photograph: Observer

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When Wikipedia co-founder [Jimmy Wales](#) married Tony Blair's long serving aide Kate Garvey, they chose a chapel in the heart of London's tech city. The maid of honour, a Croydon schoolfriend of Garvey's, joked in her speech that the bride had succeeded in marrying the only world-famous [internet](#) entrepreneur not to have become a billionaire.

[The event](#) was an unusual mix of digital royalty and British political leaders, with a decorative sprinkling of celebrities. Blair's spin doctor, Alastair Campbell, played the bagpipes, while Tony and Cherie sipped champagne with Lily Cole. David Cameron's former adviser, Steve Hilton, and his wife, Rachel Whetstone, Google's communications chief, shared canapes with Mick Hucknall, and David Miliband turned up with a present wrapped in pink tissue paper.

Not your typical silicon valley nuptials, but then Wales is not your typical silicon valley entrepreneur.

Despite creating the planet's sixth most visited website – the online encyclopedia attracts more traffic than Amazon – Wales receives no salary from Wikipedia. The organisation is not-for-profit, raising \$50m a year in donations to pay for the server farms that host its pages, and a select group of researchers and administrators, but there are no shares to sell on. Wales's 2011 divorce settlement with his second wife put his assets at \$943,000, barely enough for a small flat in central London. But the UK capital is where he has chosen to settle. He and Garvey, who tied the knot in 2012 and now have two daughters, live in Marylebone. London is also the venue for this week's [Wikimania festival](#), the annual gathering of mostly unpaid volunteers who have created Wikipedia's 110m web pages.

More than 1,300 people are expected to descend on the Barbican Centre for the five-day event, where the talks have titles such as "Now that Wikipedia has done everyone's homework, what's left to teach?" A young scientist called Jack Andraka will tell how he invented a test for pancreatic cancer aged 15 using information found on Wikipedia and in a State of the Wiki address, Wales will attempt to answer the following question: "We are growing from a cheerful small town where everyone waves off their front porch to the subway of New York City where everyone rushes by. How do

you preserve the culture that has worked so well?"

Wikipedia has around 35,000 human contributors and a growing number of digital ones: computer programs known as bots that Hoover up content from other sources. One bot, created in Sweden, is responsible for 2.7m articles, many of them cataloguing animal species. The site now has 4.5m entries in the English language and many more in 286 other tongues. The Chechen version has nearly 50,000 entries, while the Nigerian language Igbo has just passed 1,000. There are even 100,000 entries written in Latin.

Sitting atop his tower of babel of knowledge, Wales describes himself as little more than a figurehead. He is a mouthpiece who speaks for a global movement, but has little real power over Wikipedia's army of men and machines. "I'm the constitutional monarch," Wales has said. "Like the Queen. It doesn't mean I have any actual power. I do a lot of waving."

In recent years, he has taken the broader role of defending free speech online. He successfully opposed the snoopers' charter, legislation that would have given British intelligence agencies the ability to track the websites visited by any given citizen, and spoke his mind when Cameron used an emergency vote to push through similar measures this summer.

On 9 September, he will travel to Madrid as a member of a Google-appointed panel, charged with drawing up guidance for search engines on how to handle requests to remove links to web pages under Europe's controversial right to be forgotten legislation. It is an issue close to home – Google is understood to be about to remove its first link to a Wikipedia page. "The legislation is completely insane and needs to be fixed," says Wales.

Open internet campaigner, hedge fund speculator and even internet pornographer – a colourful career has seen Wales take on many roles. As the editing wars that continually revise his Wikipedia biography suggest, even the most informed observers have found it hard to define the real Jimmy Wales. The man even has two birthdays – his mother maintained he was born on 7 August 1966, but his passport states 8 August.

Jimmy Donal Wales, or Jimbo as he is known online, grew up in Huntsville, Alabama, where his father was a retail manager and his mother ran a private school. It was here that Wales and his brother received their early education, in small classes where several year groups shared a teacher.

Memories of his mother's struggles with school inspectors inspired a DIY approach to learning, and the Wales family were among the first in Huntsville to own a computer – a Tandy TRS80. "My mother was always a super gadget freak," recalls Wales.

He received a bachelor's degree in finance from Auburn University in Alabama, and at the tender age of 20 married Pamela Green, whom he had worked with at a grocery store. He began studying for a PhD, but after separating from Pamela and abandoning his dissertation, Wales decided to make his fortune, heading for Chicago to join a hedge fund.

Soon he was married to a steel trader, Christine Rohan (with whom he has a 13-year-old daughter called Kira) and studying coding in his spare time. He was working on his own web browser when the 1995 initial public offering of Netscape saw the company's value rise to \$3bn on its first day of trading. Later he said: "When Netscape went public realised that their web browser was better than what I had been writing in my spare time, but not billions of dollars better."

The next year, with a colleague from Chicago Options Associates and his friend Tim Shell, he set up a search engine called Bomis. It began as an information resource, but things really took off when Bomis started not only linking to adult content, but selling it.

A promotional photograph taken at the time features Wales at the wheel of a yacht, with a glamour model on each arm, in shades and a rather dapper captain's hat. As a father of the modern internet and a fellow of Harvard Law

School, it is an image Wales would probably like Google to forget, but the profits from Bomis funded Wikipedia.

The site went live on 15 January 2001, and on 11 September that year, as clouds of dust drifted over New York, Wikipedia awoke. Entries began to flood in, on the planes, the buildings, and the history of al-Qaida, as America struggled to make sense of the tragedy. Wales had created his legacy.

He makes a living as a well-paid public speaker and from sitting on boards. He is co-chair of the [People's Operator](#), a Shoreditch-based mobile phone service that gives part of its profits to charity and is soon to launch in America. He also has shares in Wikia, which takes advertising and organises user-generated content into themes such as Brickipedia, a database of Lego products.

Wales could be said to have arrived on the international stage in 2007 when he was invited to a meeting at Davos by Bono. The rock star introduced him to world leaders, and Wales credits his wife with extending his social circle even further. Now a director at the public relations firm Freud Communications, Garvey's clients have included Queen Rania of Jordan and the London Olympics. "My wife, you know, knows everyone," he has said.

Wales still has a touching ability to appear starstruck. In July, he and Kira visited Pinewood studios, to watch his friend JJ Abrams filming the latest instalment of the Star Wars saga. "I am so excited. Going to visit JJ on the set of *Star Wars*. Will beg him to kill Jar Jar Binks," he tweeted beforehand.

Wales, who named his second daughter after Ada Lovelace, a British mathematician who wrote what is believed to be the first machine algorithm, would love his daughters to enter the industry. He plays *Minecraft* with Kira and has begun to teach her coding, and is working to remove Wikipedia's gender bias, by welcoming women editors and redesigning the editing interface to make it simpler to contribute. One thing that will never change, says Wales, is the site's not-for-profit status. Its contributors would revolt against commercialisation. The academic and artificial intelligence researcher Nigel Shadbolt, who will talk about machine learning at Wikimania, says Wales is in good company when it comes to being unable to exploit the fruits of his invention. Tim Berners-Lee has suffered the same fate.

"The ethos of open for them trumps everything else," says Shadbolt.

"Power is often in what you deny others. Jimmy has worked hard to make this thing not identical to him. Wikipedia has a structure and a foundation that will persist beyond him."

• This article was amended on 5 August 2014 to correct the chronology around Jimmy Wales's first web browser and the public offering of Netscape; to clarify his invitation to a Davos meeting and to make clear his interest in the potential offered by collaborative online games while at university.

Born 8 August 1966, Huntsville, Alabama. His exact birthdate is hotly debated on Wikipedia. While official papers state 8 August, he insists he was born the day before. His father, Jimmy, managed a grocery shop, his mother, Doris, was a teacher. His mother and grandmother ran a private school, which he attended. He graduated from Auburn University with a degree in finance and began a PhD at the University of Alabama and later Indiana University. During his time at university, he became fascinated by the potential of online games to develop collaborative worlds. He is married to Tony Blair's former diary secretary, Kate Garvey.

Best of times In 2000, he co-founded an online encyclopedia called Nupedia. After a year, it had 21 articles. In 2001, he sent an email to their mailing list – about 2,000 people – asking for more entries. Within a year, there were 20,000. It now has more than 24m and relies on an army of volunteers known as "the community".

Worst of times Wikipedia warns users not to edit their own biography, but in 2005 he was criticised for making 18 changes to his own.

He says "I'm not a billionaire. So?"

They say "He created one of the most successful internet sites in the world, yet he hasn't made any money from it."
Richard Branson.