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Jimmy Wales Is Not an Internet Billionaire

By [AMY CHOZICK](#)

According to Wikipedia, [the Tampa International Airport](#) is a public airport six miles west of downtown Tampa, in Hillsborough County, Florida. It's also where Jimmy Wales flies in and out of a couple times a month, in coach, to visit his 12-year-old daughter, Kira, who is named after the protagonist in Ayn Rand's anti-communist novel, "We the Living." Kira lives with Wales's ex-wife in a ranch-style home not far from the strip mall where Wales, along with a handful of colleagues he generally no longer speaks to, ran Wikipedia a decade ago. The original Florida address for one of the Internet's most life-changing innovations is now a UPS store with a faded red awning. Next door is a Kahwa Café.

That was Wales's old life. In his new one, he lives in London with Kate Garvey, his third wife, whom he often describes as "the most connected woman in London." Garvey doesn't have a Wikipedia page, but if she did, it would probably note that she was Tony Blair's diary secretary at 10 Downing Street and then a director at Freud Communications, the public relations firm run by Matthew Freud, a great-grandson of Sigmund Freud, who is also Rupert Murdoch's son-in-law. And that Blair, in his 2010 memoir, wrote that Garvey ran his schedule "with a grip of iron and was quite prepared to squeeze the balls very hard indeed of anyone who interfered."

Garvey and Wales were married last October before about 200 guests, including the Blairs, the political operative Alistair Campbell, David Cameron's former aide Steve Hilton and Mick Hucknall, the lead singer of Simply Red. Garvey's maid of honor gave a toast teasing her friend for marrying the one world-famous Internet entrepreneur who didn't become a billionaire. But the wedding was still [covered in The Daily Mail](#) and The Sunday Times, much to Wales's excitement. "Front page, above the fold," he told me of the latter. Wales pulled up The Mail's Web site on his MacBook to show me some photographs from the reception. "That was surreal," he said.

Wales has a complicated time balancing his new life with his old one. That was evident one morning this winter as he bounded into the lobby of the West End building where he rented office space and hurriedly signed himself in at the front desk. Wales, his brown Tumi bag slung over his shoulder, was 45 minutes late, disheveled and a little frantic. He had left the keys to his and Garvey's Marylebone apartment at his place

outside Tampa; the nanny, here in London, was stranded with the couple's 2-year-old daughter. "I forgot to drop off the key," he said. Just when Wales thought he might have to run home, his assistant, who is based in Florida, texted that a building manager had let the nanny in. Global child-care crisis averted.

Wales wore a too-tight black turtleneck under a black overcoat with a well-shorn beard, a look that could either read Steve Jobs superhero or Tekserve flasher. Almost any time you see Wales, 46, he looks like a well-groomed version of a person who has been slumped over a computer drinking Yoo-hoo for hours. After he composed himself, he explained that his office was too embarrassingly unkempt for public consumption. ("It's a room with a couch, it's a huge mess.") So he joined me on a cracked sofa in a common lounge area downstairs. With its ratty Oriental carpets and mismatched folding chairs, the space exuded a bohemian chic look that Wales, a savvy purveyor of his own image, seemed to delight in showing off. The building, a condemned former BBC space, had been slated for demolition. Wales would soon be moving. "I'm not the Google guys," he said.

London is often described as Britain's New York, L.A. and Washington all in one — the center for finance, entertainment and politics. But there are conspicuously few traces of Silicon Valley. Wales gladly fills the void. Before he showed me his wedding photos, he talked about his new friend, [the British model Lily Cole](#), who rented office space across the hall. Then he took a call from the Boston Consulting Group, the business-advisory firm, to discuss a speech he would be giving at the World Economic Forum. Wales uses a cheap smartphone made by the Chinese company Huawei that a friend bought him for \$85 in Nairobi. The phone, which he often shows to reporters, is the perfect prop to segue to his current obsession of expanding Wikipedia onto mobile devices in the developing world. It is not, however, the perfect phone for participating in an international conference call with the Boston Consulting Group. Several calls were dropped. Wales suggested conducting the meeting over instant messenger, an idea that was rejected.

Once the call finally got under way, though, Wales seemed distracted. On his MacBook, he was following his Wikipedia "talk" page, where the site's volunteers log their discussions and disagreements over entries. The page had lit up with a raging debate about the banning of some editors on the Turkish version of Wikipedia. Wales watched as the online version of a cafeteria food fight ensued.

[Wikipedia](#) is built as a wiki — a Web site that allows users to collectively create, add and edit content — and more than a million people have edited at least one entry. But the veracity and updating of its more than 24 million encyclopedia entries relies largely on an army of more than 80,000 dedicated volunteers known as "[the community](#)." This global collection of grass-roots volunteers makes for a collectively

brilliant creation, but it can also lead to online hysteria and “edit wars” over minutia like how to categorize hummus. “They love it in Israel, so shouldn’t it be in Category: Israeli cuisine?” one editor wrote on a Wikipedia page called “Lamest Edit Wars.” “Or is it a purely Arab food that Zionists have illegally occupied?”

Though Wales no longer runs the day-to-day operations of Wikipedia – traveling the world giving talks on free speech and Internet freedom – he still spends an inordinate amount of time interacting with, and thinking about, the community. Wales, or “Jimbo” as he is called, is the person the community turns to when disputes are not settled in their online arbitration committees. Wales may not speak Turkish or know much about Turkey, but he is the B.D.F.L., or the Benevolent Dictator for Life.

As B.D.F.L., Wales’s responsibilities are seemingly limitless. Before the Turkish debate, Wales had weighed in on arguments over whether the Wikipedia entry for the military historian Lynette Nusbacher should mention her gender change (he said it should, but the entry was later removed) and whether [the entry on homeopathy](#) should describe the practice as “quackery” (Wales agreed that it could, as long as the word “quackery” was attributed to the American Medical Association). “Argumentum ad Jimbonem” means dutifully following what Wales says, but there are even arguments about that. One Wikipedia editor said, for instance, that Wales was no longer comfortable with the B.D.F.L. description. (There is, among some, a debate over what to call him.) Some users have also disputed the Latinized version of “Jimbo.” (Should it be “Jimboni” or “Jimbini”?) Either way, the Google guys probably wouldn’t put up with this.

Wales doesn’t have much choice. He realized early on that the community would revolt if he were to monetize Wikipedia by selling ads. He may now travel the world giving speeches and even include Bono as a friend, but Wales’s celebrity relies largely on being the guy who made the sum of the world’s information free without making a penny himself. As such, his reputation remains inextricably linked to the noisy, online volunteers who got him there. It’s a tricky balancing act, and it all seemed to work fine until Wales moved to London and began to, or at least tried to, enjoy some of the trappings of his success.

Wikipedia, which is now available in 285 languages, gets more than 20 billion page views and roughly 516 million unique visitors a month. It is the fifth-most-visited Web site in the world behind Google, Yahoo, Microsoft and Facebook; and ahead of Amazon, Apple and eBay. Were Wikipedia to accept banner and video ads, it could, by most estimates, be worth as much as \$5 billion. But that kind of commercial sellout would probably cause the members of the community, who are not paid for their contributions, to revolt. “The paradox,” says Michael J. Wolf, managing director at Activate, a technology-consulting firm in New

York and a member of the Yahoo! board, “is that what makes Wikipedia so valuable for users is what gets in its way of becoming a valuable, for-profit enterprise.”

Wales suffers from the same paradox. Being the most famous traveling spokesman for Internet freedom brings in a decent living, but it’s not Silicon Valley money. It’s barely London money. Wales’s total net worth, by most estimates, is just above \$1 million, including stock from his for-profit company Wikia, a wiki-hosting service. His income is a topic of constant fascination. Type “[Jimmy Wales](#)” into Google and “net worth” is the first pre-emptive search to pop up. “Everyone makes fun of Jimmy for leaving the money on the table,” says Sue Gardner, the executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit that runs Wikipedia.

Wales is well rehearsed in brushing off questions about his income. In 2005, Florida Trend magazine reported that he made enough money in his brief stint as an options-and-futures trader in Chicago, before starting Wikipedia, that he would never have to work again. But that was before he had to pay child support and rent for homes in Florida and London. When I brought up the topic recently, Wales seemed irritated. “It rarely crosses my mind,” he said. “Reporters ask me all the time and expect me to say: ‘I’m heartbroken. Where’s my billion dollars?’ ” On two occasions, he compared himself to an Ohio car salesman. “There are car dealers in Ohio who have far more money than I’ll ever have, and their jobs are much, much less interesting than mine,” he said during one conversation. When his net worth came up again, he brought up Ayn Rand. “Can you imagine Howard Roark saying, ‘I just want to make as much money as possible?’ ” Wales asked rhetorically.

Wales likes to invoke the higher purpose of Wikipedia. He applies his libertarian worldview to the Internet and has taken on institutions like the United States government and Apple for threatening to curb the free exchange of information on the Web. He also packs his schedule with sponsored events that have supported his new life. These days, corporations, universities and foundations typically pay Wales more than \$70,000 to deliver a standard but eloquent speech about Internet rights. Last fall, I watched Wales speak on a panel titled “Champions of Action” at the Clinton Global Initiative, the annual gathering that matches wealthy donors with worthy causes, run by the former president. Onstage in a darkened ballroom of a Sheraton Hotel in New York, he sat alongside Madeleine K. Albright, the former secretary of state; Paul Farmer, the Harvard professor and co-founder of Partners in Health; and Tawakkol Karman, a Yemeni human rights activist and a 2011 Nobel Peace Prize recipient. Wales was there, in part, to promote the site. (Wikipedia uses its donations to keep its servers running and for about 160 paid employees.) But in between discussing health access in Haiti and the uprisings in the Middle East, [the misspelling of Karman’s](#)

[first name on Wikipedia](#) came up. “They write it, all the world, in the wrong way,” she told the crowd. “Maybe I have to show a passport or something.” Wales assured her that he had fixed the entry.

Powerful people like to be around Wales. A common criticism is that Wales likes to be around them, too — and perhaps a little too much. During a visit to Los Angeles in February, [Wales tweeted](#): “Lunch with Felicia. Dinner with Charlize. L.A. is . . . wow,” referring to the actresses Felicia Day and Charlize Theron. He also recently tweeted: “Just got measured for my clothes for Sean Parker’s wedding. This oughta be innerstin’. :-)” But, as I learned at the Clinton Global Initiative, some famous people treat Wales a little bit like their own personal editor. After the Karman incident, the hip-hop artist Will.i.am stopped Wales to complain about an error on his Wikipedia page. “Everyone thinks he’s William James Adams Jr., but it’s not James and it’s not junior,” Wales told me as he opened his MacBook and corrected the entry.

That kind of proximity to famous people doesn’t sit well with some members of the Wikipedia community who assert that Wales’s new life is, in some ways, contradictory to the egalitarian online world he created. Several contributors protested that Wales had used a firsthand, unsourced experience to change Will.i.am’s entry. A user called Fram said Wales had violated Wikipedia protocol, which requires factual information be attributed to published materials. “People are not necessarily trustworthy when it comes to personal information,” Fram wrote after changing Will.i.am’s full name back, referencing two published sources. The same rule applied when Wales tried to get his own birthday changed, from Aug. 8, 1966 (as his passport and driver’s license used to read) to his actual birthday, Aug. 7. “This is unverifiable information, I’m sorry to say,” he wrote on his entry’s talk page. “Maybe I’ll have to upload a signed note from my mom as documentary evidence.”

One of the amazing things about Wikipedia is how it has emboldened anonymous volunteers with the same power as established experts. In many ways, Wales has been similarly emboldened. He grew up in Huntsville, Ala., the son of a teacher and a retail manager, before he left to study finance at Auburn University. (“It’s pretty weird,” Wales said in 2005. “I used to be just a guy. Now I’m Jimmy Wales.”) At 20, he married Pamela Green, whom he met when he worked at an Alabama grocery store. Later, he worked briefly as a trader in Chicago where he met his second wife, Christine Rohan, a steel trader.

In 1996, when Wales still wore a shaggy beard, listened to Insane Clown Posse and quoted “This is Spinal Tap” in meetings, he co-founded [Bomis](#), a search engine that came with a “Bomis Babe Report,” a blog with photos of scantily clad celebrities and porn stars. He and Rohan moved to San Diego to get in on the Internet boom. (In 2005, Wales objected on his Wikipedia page to an entry that said Bomis peddled porn.

“The mature audience [NOT pornography] portion of the business is significantly less than 10 percent of total revenues,” he told the community.) Porn or not, Bomis’s profits financed Wales’s side project, Nupedia, an online encyclopedia with peer-reviewed entries written by experts and academics that served as the predecessor to Wikipedia.

Wales was obsessed with the idea of an online encyclopedia that anyone could edit. He had grown up reading his parents’ collection of World Book encyclopedias with stickers that marked updated entries, and in graduate school he developed an interest in the burgeoning open-source software movement that allowed programmers to collaborate. As Nupedia floundered and his business partners tried to expand Bomis, Wales saw a potentially larger cultural experiment in a free open-sourced encyclopedia and devoted almost all of his attention to it. In January 2001, he registered the domain names www.wikipedia.org and www.wikipedia.com. The project went live on Jan. 15, 2001, henceforth known as Wikipedia Day.

Like many Internet entrepreneurs of the early aughts, Wales aimed to create something cool first and worry about a business model later. And at first, Wikipedia was a hand-to-mouth operation. Wales, who relocated with Rohan to St. Petersburg, Fla., for cheap real estate, would hand deliver a check from Bomis to keep Wikipedia’s Tampa servers running. In those early days, Wales still thought he could turn his free encyclopedia into a billion-dollar idea. “I think Jimmy thought he could get very rich off this,” his friend and partner at Bomis, Terry Foote, told me. Foote, who went to high school with Wales, was the best man in his second wedding. He didn’t attend the third. “Fame tends to change people,” Foote said of their falling out. Wales mostly declined to discuss the status of his friendships from Wikipedia’s early days. “Moving to London has had a big impact on my social circle,” he said. “My wife, you know, knows everyone.”

The Internet bubble had burst before Wales could implement a revenue-generating business model for Wikipedia. After the crash, he was stuck with an oddity — a popular but penniless online encyclopedia run by strong-willed volunteers likely to reject the idea of advertising. But as Wikipedia grew, Wales undertook a shrewd branding transformation. In June 2003, he set up a nonprofit foundation to run the operation. In a 2004 interview with the Web site Slashdot, he publicized the mission statement that would definitively distance his Wikipedia future from his seedier Bomis Babe Report roots. “Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That’s what we’re doing,” he said. Andrew Keen, a technology writer who has clashed with Wales, told me that Wales “was a soft-porn guy who stumbled on to this thing.” But Wales’s lofty goal got him a TED Talk in 2005. Then Bono personally invited him to the World Economic Forum in Davos.

During that trip, people who were close to Wales say he morphed from a schlubby computer guy to an activist with dramatically improved access to information and power. His mantra of an Internet unconstrained by corporate or government interests resonated; Time magazine named him one of its [100 Most Influential People of 2006](#). The following year at Davos, Wales and Garvey were both named “Young Global Leaders.” (Wales, who separated from Rohan in 2008, says he first recalls meeting Garvey in Monaco in 2009. Their romantic relationship began in 2010.) “Jimmy has had an ongoing valedictory lap for having catalyzed one of the greatest creations in the history of human knowledge,” Jonathan L. Zittrain, a Harvard law professor and co-founder of the school’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, said. “It’s hard to begrudge him for that. I think he’s been feeling his way around. It’s not like there’s a lot of precedent for this.”

But some have wondered if Wales, who couldn’t figure out a way to become rich off his innovation, was cynically making a play to cash in on being a great humanitarian. “Did Jimmy have the vision or did he settle into his spontaneous role?” asked Scott Glosserman, a filmmaker who spent a year with Wales filming “[Truth in Numbers?](#)” a 2010 documentary about Wikipedia. Wales had granted Glosserman and the other filmmakers unfettered access for the documentary, which turned out to be critical of Wikipedia, pointing out inaccuracies inherent in trusting a teenager as much as a tenured professor. Wales disliked the film and refused to help promote it. “It was like throwing the magic beans away and the next day seeing a beanstalk,” Glosserman said of Wikipedia’s evolution.

High-minded or not, empowering the masses has made Wales beholden to them. That was an easy enough dynamic when he lived in St. Petersburg, Fla., and drove a 4-year-old dented Hyundai, but being benevolent dictator becomes a bit more complicated when you’re going to parties with the Blairs. Despite the community’s occasional discomfort with his friends in high places, it’s clear that Wales has tried to use those connections to promote issues the community tends to care most about. Last January, the volunteers voted to make Wikipedia go dark to protest two pieces of antipiracy legislation in Washington, a move that contributed to the bills being blocked. Not long after the Stop Online Piracy Act (S.O.P.A.) blackout, Wales worked with The Guardian newspaper to prevent the extradition to the United States of Richard O’Dwyer, the 25-year-old whose search engine, [TVShack.net](#), was suspected of promoting piracy. He also opposed the British government’s proposed Communications Data Bill (also known as the “snoopers’ charter”). Wales called the legislation that would have required the tracking of British citizens’ Internet, text and e-mails “technologically incompetent” and threatened to encrypt Wikipedia pages so they could not easily be monitored. Lawmakers have since shelved the bill.

Wales, however, ensures he is not taken for a radical. He treads carefully when weighing in on more extreme members of the free-culture movement, like Julian Assange — who he has criticized for using the “wiki” name — and online hacking collectives like Anonymous. Wales and I met for lunch the day after the 26-year-old computer programmer and Internet activist Aaron Swartz killed himself. The community had erupted with calls for Wales to weigh in, but he was hesitant. “People have been pushing me to comment, but I didn’t know him,” Wales told me. He has also stayed mostly mum on Edward Snowden, the contractor for the National Security Agency who leaked confidential information about widespread snooping by the United States government.

“Wikipedia expresses the very essence of the Internet,” Craig Newmark, the founder of Craigslist, told me. “Used to be the victors wrote history. Now everyone gets a chance.” Not even Wales is spared. After the site caught on, Wales tried to edit his own entry to call himself the sole founder. The trouble was that in 2000 he hired Larry Sanger, an academic and proselyte of an open-source Internet, to help him start his online encyclopedia. The idea of letting anyone (and not just experts) oversee the encyclopedia entries was Wales’s idea, but Sanger has said he talked a skeptical Wales into using wiki technology and came up with the name Wikipedia. Wales’s attempt to change his entry was a violation of Wikipedia protocol that sent the community into a tizzy. [His page](#) currently calls him the co-founder. An entire “controversy” section explains the Sanger dispute and references a 2001 New York Times article and a 2002 Wikipedia news release that both name Wales and Sanger as co-founders. “That’s funny, isn’t it?” Wales says in a way that makes clear he doesn’t find it funny at all. “It’s the dumbest controversy in the history of the world.” Sanger declined to comment for this article, but on the talk page of Wales’s entry, he wrote that “it was only when Wikipedia emerged into the broader public eye and Jimmy started jetting around the world” that he tried to rewrite history.

After separating from Christine, Wales briefly lived in New York and would travel to London frequently to visit Garvey at her Covent Garden apartment. In 2011, Wales, who didn’t travel outside the United States until he was 37, moved to London, and he and Garvey, who declined to comment for this article, found a rental in Marylebone. Wales seems to have adapted to this new life with ease. He uses Britishisms that make him sound a little like the famous faux-Brits Gwyneth Paltrow or Madonna. He told me he had “a good ol’ time” at the Olympics, where he attended beach volleyball and an equestrian event as Boris Johnson’s guest. Living in Marylebone is nice, he says, because “we have loads of friends and people pop by.” Unlike in the United States, where politicians are remote Wikipedia subjects, in Britain he “literally” (pronounced LIT-ruh-lee) knows them. “My wife,” he said again, “is the most connected woman in London.”

The community, however, would not be left behind. Since expanding his circle in London, Wales has recused himself from weighing in on certain Wikipedia entries, including Tony Blair's page and several members of the House of Lords whom he now knows personally. Even so, the community questioned whether Wales had any part in an allegedly whitewashed entry on the Kazakh government, which Blair has advised. (Wales called the accusation "totally stupid.") Even before he married Garvey, some members argued that he had grown increasingly out of touch. "Jimbo does not own Wikipedia," wrote one volunteer. "He may have co-founded it, but so what? It has always belonged to the community." Wales concedes that this is more or less true. "In theory, I have the authority to do anything and to make policy by fiat," he said. "In practice, if I tried to do that, people would go crazy and revolt."

That collective ownership model won't make anyone rich, but Wales argues that in the long run it makes Wikipedia far more enduring and valuable to society than Facebook or Twitter. It openly bothers Wales that Wikipedia doesn't get more credit for events like the uprisings that led to the Arab Spring. "People like to talk about the Facebook and Twitter revolutions, but I think that's the most superficial endpoint of the whole process," he told me. "It's incredibly important that people are able to self-organize and go demonstrate, but what led them to believe that was even possible?" He pointed to activists reading about the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, revolts in Europe and the early days of democracy in the United States. "It's one thing to go out on the street and demand change," he said. "It's another to say, 'O.K., we won, the bad guy's gone, now what?'"

Wikipedia, he says, can inform those decisions. And that's why Wales's current project is to expand Wikipedia to the developing world. Last year, as part of a "Wikipedia Zero" campaign, the foundation established partnerships with telecommunications companies to provide mobile phones preloaded with Wikipedia in developing countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Serbia and, potentially, South Africa. In speeches, Wales largely focuses on this mission to spread the online encyclopedia to every person in the developing world at no data charge.

One night in New York, Wales took a break from his evangelism to have dinner with friends. He had just finished taping [an appearance on "The Colbert Report"](#) and wore a white dress shirt with an asymmetrical collar and purple trim piping by the British designer Ozwald Boateng. Six years ago, a less media-savvy Wales felt like he struggled on "Colbert." This time he shut himself in the greenroom with a publicist. "Since you were last on, Wikipedia has been ubiquitous," Colbert said. "You must be rolling in the cash, right?" Wales laughed it off, and reminded the audience that Wikipedia still needed their donations. At dinner afterward, he seemed adrenaline-fueled, coyly soaking up compliments on his successful

performance. The next day he would be off to London, then Florida, then Germany, then California to deliver a keynote speech at a cybersecurity firm. The community, of course, would be with him all the way.

A few months later, as I was reading something he had written on the question-and-answer Web site [Quora](#), I thought about Wales sipping wine out of milk glasses and eating oysters after “Colbert.” In response to a question about how to get his help with a start-up idea, Wales advised against using the type of buzzwords that impressed Bono before that first trip to Davos. “‘A world-changing next-generation platform for Gen Z blah blah blah’ – yuck,” he wrote. He advised aspiring Internet entrepreneurs to “treat me like a business person,” including, he noted, offering compensation with stock options – “yay.” Internet ubiquity is great and all, but it would be nice to get paid for it, too.

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