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# Technology Left Behind -- The Wide World of Wikis

Cris Ferguson

*Furman University*, [cferguson13@murraystate.edu](mailto:cferguson13@murraystate.edu)

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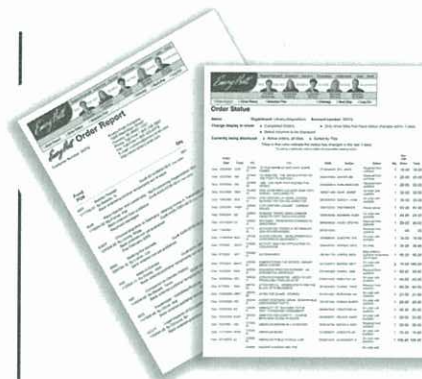


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## Technology Left Behind — The Wide World of Wikis

Column Editor: **Cris Ferguson** (Electronic Resources/Serials Librarian, James B. Duke Library, Furman University, 3300 Pinsett Highway, Greenville, SC 29613; Phone: 864-294-2713) <[cris.ferguson@furman.edu](mailto:cris.ferguson@furman.edu)>

Over the course of the summer I helped draft a proposal justifying the creation of a digital resource center at **Furman University** for use by university faculty and students. More often than not, due to scheduling conflicts one of the six committee members was absent from each of our meetings. To give everyone equal opportunity to contribute to the proposal, one of the committee members suggested placing the draft document into a **wiki**, where we would all be able to view and edit the proposal. As a result, we were able to draft the document in less than half the time it would have taken us in meetings. **Wikis** have significant potential for use on an academic campus and in the library in particular.

### What Exactly is a Wiki?

At its simplest, a **wiki** is a Website to which users can contribute information, similar to a blog. Unlike a blog though, each user also has the ability to view recent changes, revise existing content, and even delete material from the **wiki**.



In addition, the **wiki** creates an archive of all of the changes to each page. Every

single version of each and every page in the **wiki** is saved, so that users can view the history of changes to the document. In addition, if the user desires he can undo changes, rolling the **wiki** back to a previous version of the page.

Most **wikis** allow anyone to contribute and edit the content, but not all **wikis** are completely open to the public. Some **wikis** are moderated; any new content or changes must be approved before they are posted. Others are password authenticated, and only authorized users may edit the **wiki**.

**Wikipedia** (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>), a free, Web-based encyclopedia to which anyone may contribute, is perhaps the most well-known example of a **wiki**. Created by **Jimmy Wales** and **Larry Sanger** in 2001, **Wikipedia** contained almost 350,000 articles in late 2004. (Boxer, 2004) In September 2005, there were over 739,000 articles.

With multiple people contributing to the development of any given **Wikipedia** entry, the entries are more comprehensive than any single person could create. For example, the entry for September 11 ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September\\_11](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11)) lists major events that occurred on September 11th, as well as prominent public figures who were born or died on the date. (Did you know the **Ford Pinto** was first introduced

on September 11, 1970?) From the September 11 entry, you can link to the entry for the September 11, 2001 attacks ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September\\_11%2C\\_2001\\_attacks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11%2C_2001_attacks)), a comprehensive entry covering everything from a timeline of the attacks to a list of the memorials to the victims. Links are provided to external sources with images, video, and audio related to the attacks.

The entry for **Hurricane Katrina** ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane\\_katrina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_katrina)) demonstrates how quickly **Wikipedia** is updated, even though it is maintained on a volunteer basis by the general public. On September 29, 2005, only one month after the hurricane struck the Gulf Coast, there were 11 major headings under the entry, detailing information about the preparations made before landfall, the evacuations, disaster response, political effects, and more.

### How Do Wikis Work?

The first **wiki** application was developed at the **Portland Pattern Repository** in 1995 by **Ward Cunningham**. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ward\\_Cunningham](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ward_Cunningham)) **Cunningham's** name for the original application, **WikiWikiWeb**, was taken from the Hawaiian word 'wiki', which means quick or fast.

Contributing content to a **wiki** is relatively

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straightforward. In most cases it is not necessary to have any knowledge of HTML to edit a **wiki** page, as most **wikis** make use of a simpler mark-up language. Editing a page in **Wikipedia** is as simple as clicking on the 'edit' link to the right of the section to which you want to contribute. The text of the page is opened in a plain text format, and users can type in their additions. Minor formatting of the text, such as making it bold or italicized, can be done using a few buttons at the top of the screen. The procedures and options for editing will vary, depending upon the features of the **wiki** software.

While contributing to and editing a **wiki** can be relatively simple, creating and maintaining one can be more complicated. The **wiki** engine, the software that runs the **wiki**, is typically installed on a server and the content of the **wiki** is usually stored in a relational database system. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki\\_software](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki_software)) A single **wiki** engine can run several **wikis** at a time.

Before selecting a **wiki** engine, it is important to think ahead to how you want to use your **wiki**. Each **wiki** engine will have different features and functionalities, and what you want to do with your **wiki** will affect your final decision. There are a number of open source **wiki** engines, including **Twiki** (<http://twiki.org/>), **MoinMoin Wiki** (<http://moinmoin.wikiwikiweb.de/>), and **MediaWiki** (<http://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/MediaWiki>).

For more information on these and other **wiki** engines, **Wikipedia** includes in its entry for **Wiki Software** a fairly comprehensive table comparing the attributes of various **wiki** engines. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison\\_of\\_wiki\\_software](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_wiki_software))

### Drawbacks

Because of the open nature of application, the accuracy and quality of the content in **wikis** are legitimate concerns. Contributions to **wikis** like **Wikipedia** are anonymous, and there is no way of knowing whether or not what you are reading is correct or if the person wrote it was qualified. It is advisable to maintain a certain amount of skepticism when using **wikis** as reference resources. **Wikipedia** makes a good starting point for research, providing background information, but dates and other facts probably should be double-checked in other resources.

Some of the misinformation in **wikis** is intentional. **Wiki** vandalism is the "deliberate deletion of true statements or the insertion of clearly and obviously false statements, wrong spelling." **Wiki** spam is the insertion of irrelevant links for commercial-purposes. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki\\_vandalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki_vandalism))

### Wikis at Work in the Library

The beauty of a **wiki** lies in the collaborative nature of the application. Regardless of their drawbacks, **wikis** offer libraries a means to make their services more collaborative and interactive for patrons. For example, reference librarians could use a **wiki** to share information about recently taught information fluency ses-

sions. As questions about a particular class or assignment are handled at the reference desk, additional information can be added to the **wiki**, such as answers to particular questions or annotations indicating which of the library's resources are the most useful for the assignment. To personalize reference services for classes, individual pages could be created for each class, and students could be invited to submit their own opinions about which resources they found helpful.

The possible areas of implementation are many, including assisting in collection development, providing reference services, and resource annotation. Below are some examples of institutions and individuals that have put **wikis** to work.

**Oregon State University Libraries** — <http://oregonstate.edu/~reaset/RDM>

The **OSU Libraries** have put a **wiki** to use in providing reference services. The libraries created an open-source database system called Reference Desk Manager which has recently been linked to a **wiki**. "Reference librarians log into the RDM, and are then able to add or edit pages on the RDM **Wiki**, as well as leave comments, blog-like, on existing pages." (Frumkin, 19)

**Butler University Library Wiki** — [http://www.seedwiki.com/wiki/butler\\_wikiref/](http://www.seedwiki.com/wiki/butler_wikiref/)

The **Butler University Library** is using a **wiki** to provide information about reference resources. **Butler** faculty, staff, and students are invited to add comments to the **wiki** about the classes that are using the resources and how useful the resources are for particular assignments.

**UMM CSci Library Wiki** — <http://csci.mrs.umn.edu/UMMCSciWiki/bin/view/Library/WebHome>

The **University of Minnesota, Morris** has set up a **wiki** soliciting suggestions from faculty, staff and students about what books and resources to order for the computer science department. Included in the **wiki** is a table listing each request and the status of the order.


**Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki** — [http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Main\\_Page](http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Main_Page)

Created by **Meredith Farkas**, the Distance Learning Librarian at **Norwich University** in Vermont, this **wiki** is a collaborative space for librarians to share ideas and stories about particularly successful initiatives at their libraries.

**University of Connecticut Libraries' Staff Wiki** — [http://wiki.lib.uconn.edu/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://wiki.lib.uconn.edu/wiki/Main_Page)

Set up and operated by the **UCONN Libraries Information Technology Services Department**, this **wiki** makes available all of the documentation provided by ITS.

**University of Otago Library Staff Wiki** — <http://www.otago.ac.nz/librarytest/pmwiki/pmwiki.php>

This **wiki** acts as an intranet for the **University of Otago Library** staff. It includes links library documents, such as collection development policies, postings of articles that may be of interest to the librarians and staff, lists of new fiction titles, and even information about upcoming social events. 

### Resources

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## I Hear the Train A Comin' — SPARC

Column Editor: **Greg Tananbaum** (President, The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2809 Telegraph Avenue, Suite 202, Berkeley, CA 94705; Phone: 510-665-1200 x.117; Fax: 510-665-1201) [greg@bepress.com](mailto:greg@bepress.com) [www.bepress.com](http://www.bepress.com)

With **Heather Joseph** succeeding **Rick Johnson** this summer as Executive Director of **SPARC (The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition)**, it seems an appropriate time to check in on this **Association of Research Libraries** offshoot. Launched in 1997, **SPARC** is an international alliance of more than 300 academic and research libraries "working to unleash the potential of the Internet

to enhance scholarly communication," according to its mission statement. This work has included convening conferences on alternative models in scholarly communication such as institutional repositories, creating toolkits for libraries and nonprofit journal publishers, and partnering with scholars and institutions to launch Open Access journals and other alterna-

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