

# COME SURF WITH ME

By Richard Drake

The morning of 7 March, my sister's birthday, I rose early. A friendly text to my dear sibling and other matters completed, I went over to my Mac Mini to check overnight messages. Only a few moments needed. I absent-mindedly opened the front page of my personal wiki.

Hold it right there. This article is about today's web, seen as a grab-bag of wikis, blogs and bloglike things. How do phenomena as diverse as Google search, instant messaging, social networks MySpace and Facebook, YouTube, Google Earth, Second Life or the most recent craze, Twitter, fit into that taxonomy? They don't, not really. But one has to start somewhere.

Our purpose is to look deeply at how web, ethics and freedom interrelate, not least in the mind of the surfer. I'm using my own experience to illustrate. A lot of ground to cover. (A tip if you have access to the net. Try googling terms that catch your interest. Quite likely you'll end up on some pages I visited.)

Back to 7 March. Everyone should have a personal wiki. Being a dedicated man I have two. Since discovering TiddlyWiki, inspired open-source creation of UK programmer Jeremy Ruston, standing alone, unconcerned if the rest of the net is there or not. Top-level notes for this article are there. Other places I store stuff about stuff? My del.icio.us bookmarks (almost all public) and Google Notebooks (mostly private) – the latter's beta software improving regularly, even the morning I begin writing.

That Wednesday I surveyed my *other* wiki, private but visible from any browser in the world, a precious resource built up since 1999. Somewhere down the first page I'd hinted that there was something interesting to think about in an old page on Larry Ellison. It was that choice out of so many that I clicked. The adventure began.

Ellison is founder and main owner of database giant Oracle. I remember him as fourth richest man in the world – before Microsoft, SAP, then the web gained ascendancy, and Russian and other oligarchs muscled in on the lists. In June 2006 Ellison went back on a \$115 million pledge to Harvard University. I made some notes a few weeks later, linking to three external pages. Eight months later I was retracing my steps. I've always said that wikis are better than blogs on issues deserving study over time. I was about to prove it.

Ellison's rethink came just a week after

Warren Buffett announced the largest charitable donation in history: \$37 billion to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. On 8 March *Forbes* magazine was to pronounce Buffett second richest man in the world once again, outgunned only by his young friend and contract bridge partner. What such people do with their vast wealth is for me an important ethical issue. I'm impressed so far with the Gates partnership (and thus Buffett) – the serious, non-utopian way they're approaching the problems of the developing world. Almost makes me proud to be a software person. (Melinda is one too, you know.)

The three pages I'd linked to were an interesting illustration of media old and new. The first from Digg, massively popular bloglike site rating news through user contributions. This time the brash youngsters were highlighting an online piece in venerable London daily the *Financial Times*. Ellison's decision was, the *FT* and most media agreed, because Harvard had decided to sack its President, top economist Larry Summers, for asking rather

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too publicly if women have what it takes genetically to make the top flight in science and maths. Ellison liked Summers, so the money was pulled.

Hmm. Lots of ethical angles there. But Digg didn't add much. One feisty libertarian blogger wouldn't be surprised. She scornfully calls such systems 'Digital Maoism'. Though the self-styled 'Girl in Shorts' is quoting from one extremely techie bloke, Jaren Lanier, originator of Second Life.

Second link revisited. A summary of web news from the *Wall Street Journal*, New York rival to the *FT*. It noted coolly that Harvard's endowment now stood at \$26 billion, so Ellison's money was hardly going to be missed. (What power such accumulation



gives, he muses, comparing Buffett's even vaster chunk. Which will do more good? Surely that given to friends to benefit the poorest of the earth, not hoarded or handed to descendants. But do the super-rich ever reach the truly poor? So many in that bracket today seemed such geeks only yesterday.)

Third stop: a true blog, the obscure *Why Homeschool*. The citizen journalist pointed to the *Wall Street Journal* piece and commented:

Last year University President Lawrence Summers dared to suggest something very politically incorrect – that men and women might be fundamentally different. He was driven out of his office. A university is supposed to be looking for the truth ... The backlash against President Summers' comments showed that many people at Harvard weren't interested in the truth. They didn't ask if he had any evidence for his theory. He was attacked because of how his statements made some of the professors at Harvard feel.

Taking a position, not a particularly PC one. Something blogs do very well. Then this intriguing anonymous critique, second of only two. (*Why Homeschool* is about as far from the madding crowds on Digg as you can get; maybe that's why this was so good.) The poster didn't like Summers but seemed to have inside information:

While the media made a big deal of Lawrence Summers' famous speech, Harvard had much stronger and more pragmatic reasons for getting rid of Summers. Harvard lost a lot more than Ellison offered due to problems Summers caused. He alienated many wealthy donors, in part by getting rid of Jack R. Meyer, president of

the Harvard Management Co., who increased Harvard's endowment from \$4.7 billion to \$22 billion.

Typical gold dust of the blogosphere there. Potential enough to provoke right-clicks to google Lawrence Summers, then Jack R. Meyer. (One move in Firefox, having selected the text in the original article.)

Unsurprised to find a Wikipedia article on Summers on top. Learned he went from Harvard to the clever finance guys at D.E. Shaw. Their most famous alumnus these days: Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon. Follow those links. Wonder what Bezos is doing with his own fortune. Apart from investing in wikis. Love the way he made work so much fun, by all the early accounts. Can that still be true, given Amazon's size? Something Wikipedia is never going to tell you. The most interesting stuff. Even so, many thoughts and connections, learned so fast and for free.

Tried the same with Jack Meyer. Wikipedia hadn't heard of him, let alone a fallout with Summers. *Harvard Magazine* said he'd been deputy controller of New York City, then chief investment officer at the Rockefeller Foundation, before taking on the Ivy League fund. That's user-generated content for you: biases and blind spots, in this case most likely of the elite inner group of Wikipedia editors, affects not just the tone but what gets in at all.

Lots of memories of past browsing now, including this dark side of history: Rockefeller Foundation funding of eugenics at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute and across Germany up to 1939, with gassing of the handicapped already begun. One programme given spurious legitimacy by such prestigious support, a study of twins by Otmar von Verschuer and his favoured assistant Josef Mengele, led to some of the worst crimes of the Holocaust. Learned in 2004 at another bloglike site which reviews books. A brilliant summary of a complex tome I knew well led to a closer look at others I'd not heard of. Edwin Black's *War Against the Weak* among them. What a fact of the first decade of our century: the Rockefeller Foundation finally apologises for this decidedly unsung role in the last. Would that belated win for freedom and true history have happened without the web? I doubt it.

Not that technology alone was enough. Instincts of a *New York Times* investigative reporter brought to light evidence not yet indexable by Google. It wasn't hard for Black, whose own family largely perished in the death camps, to see something was up. 'When lawyers and other entities tried to stop me from seeing the records, they even claimed doctor-patient confidentiality for Josef Mengele!'

The contrast between old money and new was raising larger questions. Can a new generation of donors, so many made rich through freedom-enhancing technology I know so well, be as bad as the old?

Interesting to get Shi Tao's perspective on that. If he emerges from torture and re-education during ten long years in prison. Yahoo gained kudos and advertising revenue from his anonymous blog, which revealed China's cynical plans for news management on the fifteenth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 2004. That didn't stop the fêted Silicon Valley entrepreneurs shopping Shi to the authorities the moment the blood-red colour of serious money in the region was made known to them.

## AND WITH SO MANY CONNECTIONS, ONE ORDINARY PERSON WITH A WEB BROWSER CAN PERCEIVE NEW AREAS OF TRUTH AND JUSTICE WORTH FIGHTING FOR, PENETRATING MURKY WORLDS OF MONEYED AND POLITICAL ELITES ACROSS THE GLOBE

I'm starting to make further notes on my wiki page on Larry Ellison. On a whim I divert to the BBC Radio 4 website, eager for some reason to hear what the Beeb's flagship news programme, *Today*, is saying. It's 8.21am. They're dealing with accusations of liberal bias against Wikipedia by some US evangelicals. The spokesman for the Christians made to sound quite sensible by the unusual respect afforded by the British presenter. Strange alliance between old media liberal and hi-tech Bible believer, both facing a great new power to declare consensus truth for all humanity, first we assume of the world's massive and influential wikis. Buoyed no doubt by the week's scandal: Wikipedia admin Ryan Jordan, subject of an admiring article in the *New Yorker*, looked up to as a Professor of Theology with two PhDs during his erudite editing career. Three qualifications too many for the 24-year-old as it turned out. A

humbler Wikipedia editor acquitted himself fairly well in the BBC debate. But 'neutral point of view'? There's evidently more than one on how far that takes you in truly controversial areas.

Talking of which, after Harvard the US Holocaust Memorial Museum asked Lawrence Summers to comment on the idea that radical criticism of Israel in universities was a cover for anti-semitism. A previous podcastee asked if increases in anti-semitism in Europe were due to the growth of the Muslim population. The laws criminalising Holocaust denial in many European countries were, this Jewish thinker felt, not helping. Another massively difficult area of freedom and ethics. I happen to agree.

And we're all forced to take positions, even tentatively, as we browse such matters. It's the speed with which they come at you that has changed. And with so many connections, one ordinary person with a web browser can perceive new areas of truth and justice worth fighting for, penetrating murky worlds of moneyed and political elites across the globe.

It's not all sweetness and light. Death threats and pseudonymous attribution of Multiple Personality Disorder to participants with real-world reputations to ruin seem par for the course when disagreements, even about theoretical physics, go up a gear in the blogosphere. One assistant professor at Harvard, fervent string theory advocate, recently avoided discipline after publicly wishing a rival dead. New forms of bullying of children online have also, quite rightly, become a concern of the mainstream media. Then, late in March, one widely respected software technologist, Kathy Sierra, pointedly gave up her own blog, and at least one high-profile speaking engagement, because of a series of pornographic threats on her life. Underlying that is surely the tacit acceptance of porn itself, little-mentioned but ever-present substrate of the net mindset. Not many of us have completely clean hands in such areas.

But avoiding mental murkiness can mean startling insights. Still mulling over the social impact of entrepreneurs like Gates, and the various bits about Harvard, I came across a *Red Herring* piece on one very unsung hero: economist William H. Meckling, who, more than anyone else, killed the draft in 1973. Without that key decision, Gates would not have casually been dropping out of Harvard two years later to start Microsoft. The rest, as they say, is the world we live in. Happy ethical browsing! ■

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