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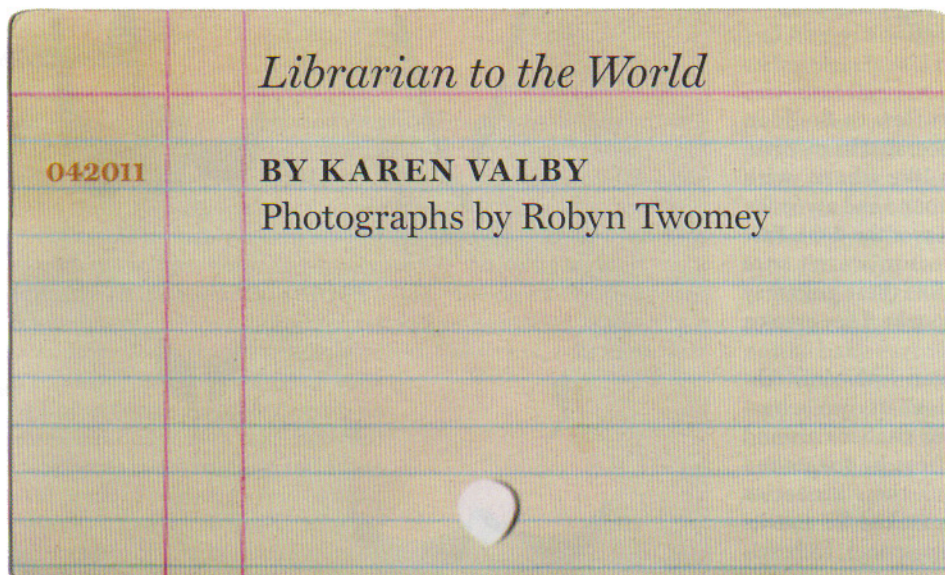
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**WIKIPEDIA DIRECTOR SUE GARDNER HAS TRANSFORMED THE SITE'S
BROKEN BUSINESS INTO A GROWING HUB WITH GLOBAL AMBITIONS. CAN A FAST-TALKING
ICONOCLAST OUTTHINK SILICON VALLEY'S GURUS?**



“I’M DIDEROT... BITCH.”

THAT’S A GEEK JOKE that a table full of Wikipedians came up with late one night while snickering about Mark Zuckerberg’s early business cards. (The Facebook founder’s less-erudite title: “I’m CEO . . . bitch.”) Sue Gardner—the executive director of the not-for-profit Wikimedia Foundation, which operates the massive online encyclopedia anyone in the world can edit—laughed loudest of all. So Gardner had stickers with the phrase made up for her San Francisco-based staff. One now sits at eye level above her computer screen in the cubicle space she shares with her assistant and his dog, a wire fox terrier named Bella who’s been trained to fetch the boss’s Droid.

Millions of Wikipedians are familiar with the charismatic man who founded Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales—it was his twinkling mug that was plastered atop the site during the recent 10th-anniversary fundraising effort, encouraging users to donate money to the “temple of the mind” that they had all built together. But few know Gardner, the 44-year-old former journalist who was brought in four years ago to right the foundation’s worrisomely listing ship.

At the time, the sprawling, collaborative reference site already had a visibility and reach that few sites can match. Yet when Gardner arrived, it was managed by just seven people from a strip-mall office in Florida—and Wikimedia’s finances were under intense pressure.

In short order, Gardner began aggressively raising money, as evidenced by that triumphant anniversary campaign, which raised \$16 million in 50 days late last year. (Before Gardner, the foundation’s efforts at fundraising ran along the lines of, literally, “Let’s buy Brion a laptop.”) She moved Wikimedia to a downtown San Francisco build-

ing and bulked up the full-time staff to 56 employees, with plans to add 40 more positions in the newly created community-outreach and global-development departments. She implemented criminal background checks and expense policies—basics for some businesses, but a level of professionalism Wikimedia had never before embraced.

Three years into the job, Gardner remains one of only two women running a top-10 website. Under her watch, Wikipedia is now bigger and more stable than ever. A recent Pew survey revealed that 53% of adult American Internet users visit Wikipedia regularly. More than 400 million users visit it each month. It would cost \$50,000 to print one copy of the 3.5 million articles housed on English Wikipedia alone. (Forget the 250-plus Wikipedias in languages ranging from Amharic to Tamil.) And that one copy would fill up 1,500 books at 1,500 pages per book.

But Wikipedia also has real challenges to confront: a growing sense of insularity among seasoned editors who can set a punitive, unwelcoming tone for newcomers;

a dearth of women editors (only 13%—unacceptable, according to Gardner); and perhaps most alarming, a shrinking pool of overall regular contributors to English Wikipedia, down by one-third since March 2007.

Still, Gardner’s ambitions are huge. She is opening a Wikimedia office in India this spring, with future plans for offices in Brazil and the Middle East and North Africa. Determined that the site not consist primarily of white people in rich countries pontificating on behalf of the rest of the globe, she wants to focus on growing Wikipedia participation in the developing world. She aims to double the number of Wikipedia users to a billion within five years. “What could be better than people who don’t have access to knowledge getting the ability to find out whatever it is that they want to find out?” she says. “And that’s what I think is so gorgeous about Wikipedia—it’s this limitless space; it can be as big as it needs to be. It can actually contain the sum of everything that we know, right?”

Gardner looks like an anime character sprung to life—her hair all jet-black razored angles, a spider tattoo on her right hand, tight black jeans, knee-length boots. Her idea of a vacation was a recent solo journey to a sanctuary in Kamal, India, for a 10-day silent retreat (though much of what she meditated on was how good a steak would taste once she got out of there). “Her countercultural sensibility coupled with a serious professionalism is what first struck me,” says Wales. “That and her sense of humor.”

Recently, Gardner spoofed Wales’s evangelical zeal by putting a picture of the founder in the employee bathroom above the aspirin and dental-floss basket and typing up a mock plea from Wikipedia’s benevolent founder. “This basket exists for one reason: the free and open sharing of personal-grooming items. For many of us, most of us, this basket has become an indispensable part of our daily lives. Help protect it now. Please make a donation.”

IN DECEMBER, GARDNER traveled to Delhi to interview candidates for the coming India office. The foundation has set aside roughly \$300,000 to open an operation of no more than five employees run out of Bangalore, Mumbai, Pune, or Gurgaon. “Someone told me that Facebook opened an office in the

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LIMITLESS SPACE; IT CAN BE AS BIG AS IT NEEDS TO BE.**

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WIKIMANIAC:
Sue Gardner is working to increase the number of Wikipedia users to a billion in the next five years.

Bangalore region," says Gardner, "and I thought, Oh no! I hope Facebook didn't open an office with, like, several thousand people, right? People are going to think we're doing the same thing, we're going to be a key employer in the region. Because we will not." The bulk of the work there will involve recruiting volunteer editors through partnership programs with universities.

When Gardner considered where she most wanted an international physical presence, India was at the top of her list. "If you look at the number of people who have [Internet] access today or are predicted to have access in the coming two, three, four, five years, India is the fastest growing," she says. It's not a surprise when an Internet company moves to plant its flag in the center of such potential riches. The difference, says Gardner, is that Wikipedia isn't showing up with a commercial focus. "We want more Indian editors in the English Wikipedia so that the world can benefit from the stuff they know, and also because there are 28 regional languages of India that are currently really small on Wikipedia. Our goal is to provide a service that nobody else is going to provide. Nobody else is going to provide a service in Tamil or Malayalam because there's no money there."

She likes to tell the story of the Ganges/Ganga argument playing out now on English Wikipedia. In India, the official name for the country's second-largest river is the Ganga. The British have long called it the Ganges, a term that bears the stench of colonization for many Indians. Since 2007, there has been a spirited back-and-forth between editors about whether a search for the river should redirect to Ganga or Ganges. "There are two Indian guys arguing one side, and then there's a bunch of casual editors from the United States and Europe arguing the other," says Gardner. "And it's interesting because there's this tiny number of Indians who care a lot and are correct and have all kinds of citations and evidence to support their view, and then there's this group who just are rebuffing them because the numbers are on their side. That's why everybody has to be [on Wikipedia], because if they're not there, the system doesn't work." ("That's too much democracy," groans Phil Bronstein, former editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and otherwise a fan of Wikipedia, despite the fact that his own biographical

entry is inaccurate. "Why don't they simply say, 'This is what it's called in India.' Why do you have to try and cut that baby in half?")

BACK IN SAN FRANCISCO, Gardner shares details of her work in India in the bimonthly online chat she has with Wikipedia editors from around the world. She sits at the head of the table, flanked by three staffers who help her focus on the flurry of instant-message questions, in the Pliny the Elder conference room. (Encyclopedia humor, yo.) When Gardner types, she holds her hands up high and punches at her keyboard in loud stabs, a marked contrast to the whispery scabble of coders. "You have a very journalist way of typing," says Steven, a 23-year-old who made 30,000 edits on Wikipedia before joining the staff. Without looking up from her keyboard, Gardner says, "Really, is that bad? It's from all my years of manual typewriters."

Gardner grew up in Port Hope, Ontario, a quaint, historic town of 16,000 people. Her father was an Anglican priest at the oldest church in Ontario, and her mother the principal of the public high school. "Conservative town, principal, preacher," she says with a laugh. "You can imagine!" But her feminist mother was the school's first female principal, and her dad was a social-justice minister who'd been involved in the Freedom Rides and told his children that they could make up their own minds about faith when they turned 16 years old. And so, at 16, Gardner declared herself an atheist with her father's blessing.

That spider tattoo on her hand, which truthfully looks like a large ink splotch from across the table, is a \$12.50 special from an Edmonton tattoo parlor that she got when she was 17 years old. (She also has a Canadian maple leaf on a toe.) "I was pretty self-conscious about what I was doing as a kid," she says. "I knew my dad was a priest, my mom was a principal; I knew that I was an earnest, serious-minded person. . . . I guess I wanted a tattoo that would remind me that I wasn't going to be a fully conventional person." She and the spider eye each other warily, and she starts laughing. "Don't make fun of me about what a goof I was."

"In high school, I was highly awkward and nerdy," says Gardner. "I was at the intersection of a bunch of different flavors of misfits—the punk kids, the heavy-metal kids, the Dungeons & Dragons kids, the

computer-game-playing kids." She was the kid with her head stuck in a poetry book, poring over the plainspoken language of Canadian greats like Al Purdy and Leonard Cohen. Her first job was working as an intern for a social anarchist and anti-authority magazine, *Kick It Over!*

Gardner worked at the CBC, the venerable Canadian media institution, for 17 years. Her last job there was as the website's senior director. Before she moved to the online side of the business, she'd spent a decade producing and reporting CBC radio documentaries on pop culture and social issues, like her five-part series on feminists' changing views on pornography. "I'd worked there my whole adult life," she says. "But it was becoming less important; the work that I was doing less relevant. I was projecting 20 years into the future, and it was only going to become smaller and less important, and that would just be a sad trajectory for me, right?" In the spring of 2007, just before her 40th birthday, Gardner resigned.

Friends assured her that she could easily jump over into a money job in the for-profit sector. "You can go run business development for a mobile company!" was one suggestion, she says. "Well, I would rather die. Seriously. I can't imagine getting up every morning and putting on a little suit and getting into my little car and driving on the highway with my Starbucks and having meetings where I do not care, nothing is at stake; it's about dollars and the bottom line, which is fine, but it's just not motivating to me at all. It's not that I think there's anything wrong with that world, obviously, but it's just not for me and it would be soul destroying."

She'd been sequestered at a conference that April 16th when she first heard about the massacre at Virginia Tech. Hungry for information, she landed on the Wikipedia Talk page about the shootings. "They were having exactly the same kind of conversation that my newsroom was having. It felt like a good, thoughtful, journalistic conversation," she says. "I thought, Who are these people?" Later that day she found herself on the Wikimedia Foundation's website and discovered they were looking to hire a director.

"Wikipedia was having real management problems," says Gardner. "It was this super-important website that a lot of people cared about and was suddenly under massive scrutiny. But it was a little, tiny, broken

organization. There was a heroic band of inexperienced people who, under the circumstances, were doing awesome stuff. But Google is 25,000 people. Wikipedia was seven. It had one media-relations person who was in her twenties. We literally didn't have a full-time accountant. It just needed to get fixed. And I knew I could do that."

When Gardner first came on board, she was given an annual salary of \$150,000. Today, she makes \$200,000. "I work all the time. I don't really have an off switch," she says. "So if I'm going to put 12, 14, 16 hours a day into something, it had better be something that's really, really, really worth it. I could never work for a place where the primary purpose was to make money. The whole Valley culture is all about the monetization of web audience, and I just don't find that very interesting."

There have long been exhortations from within Silicon Valley for Wikipedia to take advantage of the hundreds of millions of dollars in ad revenue waiting for it on the table. In a February TechCrunch blog post, YouTube director of product management Hunter Walk expressed concern for Wikipedia's dependence on fundraising. He pleaded for the site to consider inserting affiliate links into articles.

The question of ads or affiliate links remains a moot one, insists Gardner's deputy director, Erik Moller. "It would be ridiculous for us to say to the community, 'Hey, thanks for all your free labor. Now we're going to just change the business model under your feet. Sorry.' Our nonprofit would have clearly broken its covenant with its contributors. And Sue has never questioned that."

AT A COMMUNITY-OUTREACH meeting in the San Francisco office, the team wrestles over the issue of Wikipedia's shrinking number of editors. "We're taking this decline issue more seriously," says Zack Exley, chief community officer, whose résumé includes stints on John Kerry's presidential campaign and MoveOn.org. There are proposals to implement a mentorship program that would guide new editors through their first edits. The foundation might institute camps where clusters of editors could meet, bond, and talk about the problem of policing. The staff is already expanding its ambassadorship programs at universities where students write

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Whatever Happened to Jimmy Wales?

THE WIKIPEDIA FOUNDER SPENDS HIS DAYS ON THE ROAD, SPREADING THE GOSPEL OF THE OPENLY EDITABLE ENCYCLOPEDIA—SOMETIMES CHARGING TOP DOLLAR.

'M A DREAMER,' says Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales, "and what I do best is tell people about my dreams of what we can accomplish." He's also a draw. Wales makes hundreds of appearances each year, charging up to \$75,000 for speaking engagements, though none of it goes directly to Wikimedia. (He remains on the Wikimedia board but has no day-to-day role.)

"That's my personal income," he says. Recent appearances include the Swiss Economic Forum

in Interlaken and the Ambrosetti Forum in Lake Como, in Italy.

Much of his work is pro bono, traveling, for instance, to India to talk at universities that can only afford to offer him a plane ticket. Wales says he made 30 appearances in the past month and was paid for only one of them. Wikimedia executive director Sue Gardner says that the site derives enormous benefit from his world tour of appearances. "I consider myself and the foundation really lucky that he's willing to evangelize on behalf of the organization," she says.

Wikipedia entries as their final papers. "We need to create a role for people who aren't going to spend six hours a day on Wikipedia," Gardner says, after attentively listening to everyone in the room. She worries that new editors are staying away because of more strident veterans who possessively guard their territory. "I don't know if some of those people are persuadable, if a different narrative would help them understand that they don't need to be so vociferously defensive of the project," she says. Nobody comes up with a silver bullet in part because they just don't yet know who or what is to blame for flagging participation, or if those numbers are even cause for alarm. "We don't know what it all means. We're doing research; we're trying to figure it all out," Exley says.

Gardner remains calmly resolute. "Our job is to protect Wikipedia," she says later that night, on a 20-minute walk from the office to a modest Vietnamese restaurant in the Tenderloin district. "It's our job to ensure there are sufficient editors." When she first relocated to San Francisco, she lived in this historically bleak neighborhood. "People would ask me, 'Well, aren't you terrified?'

No, I was never terrified. The fear wasn't that you're going to get hit or shot—it was that you're going to get sad, relentlessly sad. I had to move because it was too depressing and I couldn't find a way to shake that." She now lives three blocks from the office in an apartment building of neighbors she doesn't know. "It's efficient," she shrugs.

Over dinner, she describes Wikimania, the annual summer conference attended by around 500 of the most hard-core editors, many of them under 30. Volunteers host the event on a different continent each year. (The most recent was in Gdansk, Poland.) She laughs and admits that she unwisely wore a gray suit to her first Wikimania, because that's what managers did in her old career, and she could see how it incited suspicion in her less-conservative audience. "No problem," she says with a laugh. "If a suit isn't what this environment requires, yay!"

When they gather, Wikipedians can't stop talking—about recruiting new editors and the abuse filter and flagged revisions and every other bit of site minutia that turns them on or drives them nuts. "Everybody would stay up all night and then they would

go and stand on this bridge in Gdansk and watch the sun come up," says Gardner, her face flooding with feeling. "When I was that young, I would not have had the scope to think about a place halfway around the world. I would not be contributing to a global endeavor. If I stayed up all night, I would've been getting drunk. These are not ordinary kids; these are extraordinary people who are doing something awesome."

All that hyperstimulation, all that talking, all that togetherness can get exhausting for a woman who describes herself as an introvert who has learned how to behave like an extrovert. So Gardner has developed a self-preservation ritual for herself—her own version of a silent retreat. "After Wikimania I go to a hotel by myself for three days. I watch stupid hotel movies and read feminist blogs and hang out and have a martini." Only then can she go back out into the world and get to work. **FB**

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