

Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales on Hayek, knowledge, and discourse

## The Inaugural Joseph K. McLaughlin Lecture

Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, delivered the first Joseph K. McLaughlin Lecture at the Cato Institute in November. The evening began with a tribute to the late Dr. McLaughlin, a world-renowned cancer epidemiologist and long-time friend and Sponsor of the Cato Institute.

Dr. McLaughlin worked for a number of years at the National Cancer Institute, and co-founded the International Epidemiology Institute in 1994. Cato president Peter Goettler praised his “broad and accomplished intellect,” recalling his library of thousands of books and his wide academic interests—he had an encyclopedic knowledge of everything from economics to genetics to film noir. Dr. McLaughlin’s wife Jeanne Rosenthal, through whose generosity the lecture series is made possible, and their daughter Alison were both present at the event, which was broadcast on C-SPAN.

Wales discussed the history and impact of Wikipedia, focusing especially on the role of decentralized “reasoned discourse” in its organization. He attributes the site’s success to its passionate network of volunteers, who coordinate to write, edit, and debate entries in pursuit of Wikipedia’s lofty mission: to “imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge.”

Wales credited Friedrich Hayek’s famous essay, “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” with influencing his thinking on how to organize his online encyclopedia as a bottom-up, collaborative process, rather than a centrally planned project. Hayek critiqued the idea of a centrally planned economy, arguing that central planners cannot possibly gather all the information they need to make decisions—that knowledge is diffused throughout society, each



Dr. Joseph K. McLaughlin’s wife JEANNE ROSENTHAL, through whose generosity the lecture series is made possible, and daughter ALISON MCLAUGHLIN, attended the inaugural lecture. Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales used this PowerPoint slide (right) when discussing the dangers of lawmakers trying to regulate things they don’t understand.

piece owned by separate individuals—and their voluntary cooperation, based on the knowledge they each have, produces far better results than top-down organization. “By analogy, this is part of the concept of Wikipedia,” said Wales.

Creating an encyclopedia in the traditional way, like *Britannica*, where a small group of experts are supposed to gather and synthesize all the information in the world, is inherently limited by the number of experts and their finite ability to gather information. They are also bound to make errors, and those errors are difficult to correct. “The Wikipedia model pushes all the decision-making out to the end-points. We let people come in, take up whatever interest they have, and work on those entries,” said Wales. “And oftentimes what we find is that expertise is very widely distributed in society, and it’s not necessarily falling along ‘professional’ lines.” There are passionate airplane geeks and hobbyists, for example, who have researched their entries more thoroughly than a select group of scholars would have.

Wikipedia’s success is staggering, with over 40 million articles written in 284 lan-

### Bad laws can damage this work!

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- Or that there is a simple tradeoff between freedom and security
- We ask lawmakers: please consult with us before backing stupid laws

guages, and more than 400 million unique visitors monthly. This has lent them an enormous platform in politics and world affairs—Wales touched on some of these issues, including dealing with censorship in countries like China, and Wikipedia’s fight against the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) in 2012, which would have enabled the American Justice Department to censor the internet. “Far too often lawmakers propose laws, and it’s fairly clear that they do not even have the most rudimentary understanding of how the internet works,” Wales observed.

Ultimately, Wales said, Wikipedia is a platform to combat the voices of “anger and hate,” and the failings of the media, by providing a place where reasoned discourse can enable individuals to sort out their disagreements freely and peacefully, and make valid judgements about the world. “Wikipedia is about building bridges, not walls,” he said. “I think that Wikipedia is a force for knowledge, and knowledge is a force for peace and understanding.” ■

**VIDEO AND AUDIO OF WALES’ REMARKS ARE AVAILABLE AT CATO.ORG.**