

Strengthening and unifying the visual identity of Wikimedia projects: a step towards maturity

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Abstract

In January 2007, the Wikimedian community celebrated the sixth birthday of Wikipedia. Six years of constant evolution have now led to Wikipedia being one of the most visited websites in the world. Other projects developing free content and supported by the Wikimedia Foundation have been expanding rapidly too. The Foundation and its projects are now facing some communication issues due to the difference of scale between the human and financial resources of the Foundation and the success of its projects. In this paper, we identify critical issues in terms of visual identity and marketing. We evaluate the situation and propose several changes, including a redesign of the default website interface.

Introduction

The first Wikipedia project was created in January 2001. In these days, the technical infrastructure was provided by Bomis, a dot-com company. In June 2003, Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia and owner of Bomis, created the Wikimedia Foundation [1] to provide a long-term administrative and technical structure dedicated to free content.

Since these days, both the projects and the Foundation have been evolving. New projects have been created. All have grown at different rates. Some have got more fame than the others. New financial, technical and communication challenges have risen.

In this paper, we will first identify some of these challenges and issues in terms of global visual identity. We will then analyse logos, website layouts, projects names, trademarks so as to provide some hindsight. Last, we will make proposals and suggest ways to bring coherence and consolidation to Wikimedia projects visual identity.

“Projects” will refer to Wikimedia official projects including all languages of this project ; for instance, Wikisource in all languages. “Local project” will refer to a language-specific project, for instance the German Wikisource. “Language family” will refer to all projects in a specific language, for instance all projects in Italian.

1 Context

1.1 Evolution of the interface

A short comparison of the appearance of the English-language Wikipedia has been performed thanks to the Internet archive “Wayback machine”¹ (FIG. 1 to FIG. 6). Beyond the change of logo, we see that the interface was very basic in the early ages of Wikipedia. Its design has been improved in 2004 and as of May 2007 it has been keeping the same appearance since this last change.

Many other layouts (or “skins”) have been written by numerous users of MediaWiki. Some of them are available on Wikimedia websites and can be set by each user through his user preferences. All users can also completely customize their own interface by editing their own CSS style. Though, the default design has not evolved for several years.

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¹Source: http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://en.wikipedia.org. Wikipedia screenshots are released under the GFDL.



Figure 1: Main page of the English-language Wikipedia in November 2002.

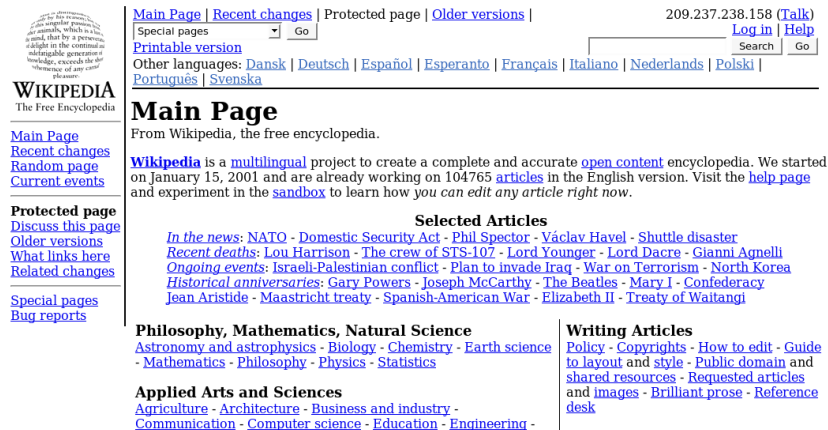


Figure 2: Main page of the English-language Wikipedia in February 2003.

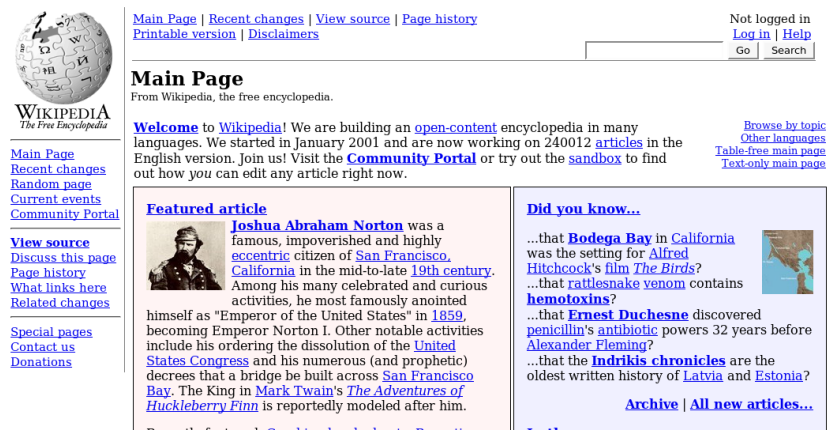


Figure 3: Main page of the English-language Wikipedia in March 2004.



Figure 4: Main page of the English-language Wikipedia in January 2005.



Figure 5: Main page of the English-language Wikipedia in January 2006.

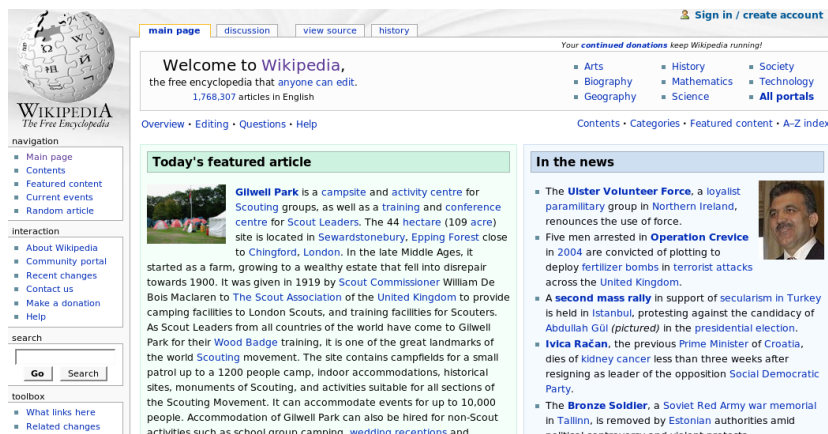


Figure 6: Main page of the English-language Wikipedia in May 2007.

1.2 Promotional material

With Wikimedia projects growing and becoming more and more famous, promotional material has been created to help users advertise the projects. The most famous documents are the *leaflet*, an A4 double-side three-fold brochure presenting Wikipedia, and the *cheatsheet*, a third of A4 summing up the basic you-must-know in wiki syntax². Both of them have been translated in a number of languages.

Other documents have been created for special events but their creation was depending on the good will and graphic skills of particular users. Local communities and local chapters have often asked for up-to-date good-quality documents to help advertise the projects, but there was not any dedicated structure to manage these requests.

In the meanwhile, the Wikimedia Family went bigger and other projects than Wikipedia were created. Each new project had to choose a logo, a name, a motto, which have often been chosen independently from those of other projects. This has sometimes led to unwanted heterogeneity.

1.3 About the Marketing committee

The marketing committee³ has been created in October 2006 as a subcommittee of the Communications Committee (ComCom) [2]. It is aimed at creating good-quality material to promote Wikimedia projects and insure that such material follows quality and visual identity guidelines. It also acts as an advisory committee to the board in terms of logos, visual identity and design.

2 Wikimedia names and brands

Names of Wikimedia projects are a recurring conversation topic between Wikimedians. Some find they lack originality, some they are too different, some they are anglo-centric. Actually, everyone may agree on one point: the way we manage our projects family needs to be changed.

2.1 Fame, names and brands

Recently, a member of the community proposed to take advantage of the fame of Wikipedia to completely rename all its “sister projects” to *Wikipedia <content>* [3]. For example, Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository, would have been renamed to *Wikipedia Commons*. We will come back later to this controversial proposal, but we can already note that it raised interesting debates and counter-proposals. For instance, the will to unite all projects under a common motto has showed up [4].

Two main observations can be drawn from the various answers this proposal has raised. First, there is a part of the Wikimedia community who feels that serious changes need to be done both on the Foundation side and on the wikis side. On the other hand, there is also a conservative wing who feels comfortable with current designs and ways to proceed⁴. Thus, proposed changes will require diplomacy and consulting of the community to have a chance to succeed.

2.2 Translation or not

Wikimedia projects are multilingual, but there is currently no rule about the translation of their *names*. Such translations break the global identity of a project.

Examples The French-language Wikibooks calls itself *Wikilivres*, the Italian-language Wikinews *Wikino-tizie* and the Spanish-language Wiktionary *Wikcionario*. Even if a localised translated name may be used colloquially within local projects, all external-facing usage must use the official name. Moreover, that causes recurring debates about the expediency of translating the Wikimedia projects names within a language family: should the “other projects” box on an article from the French-language Wikipedia say “A textbook about X is available on Wikilivres” or rather “A textbook about X is available on Wikibooks”, or even “on the French-language Wikibooks”?

²Both of them can be found on the meta-wiki, respectively at [[m:Leaflet]] and [[m:Cheatsheet]]

³The marketing committee is based on meta: [[m:Marketing]].

⁴It is somehow funny to realize how our real-life (political) habits and trends tend to interfere in wiki projects. That would make a good subject for a future Wikimania paper.

Copyright This unclear situation poses a copyright problem too. The English official names of projects are the only ones trademarked by the Wikimedia Foundation. What if someone registers the trademark *Wikinotizie*? Another example is <http://www.wikilivres.info>, a site that does not belong to Wikimedia Foundation websites. It is administratively and financially impossible to register trademarks of all localized names everywhere in the world.

Answers and proposals When this issue was raised on the internal mailing list [5], the feedback was that the official name of the project must imperatively be used from outside the local project. When talking about the local project from another wiki, even a project of its language family, the project must be called with its official name.

There has also been a suggestion of redefining some projects names that sound too anglo-centric (such as Wikibooks). The question is then how to find a more universal name about textbooks or quotations.

In our will to unify the projects of a language family, we propose below several solutions to improve this situation. By assigning a dedicated colour to each project, they will become more identifiable. Another proposal is the cross-project navigation bar, which would link them using the type of content rather than the name of the project.

3 Logos and skins

3.1 Choosing good logos

A community process Logos of Wikimedia projects are chosen by community decisions; “community” often means “community of users from the project whose logo is being chosen”, as they feel more concerned than users from other projects. If they manage to finally choose a logo, they know the winning one will please the majority of their community. Though, a logo should not only please a community, it must also follow some visual identity rules.

Criteria First, a logo has to convey the good message. This is usually the case, as people tend to focus on this point and forget the other ones. Thus, we are not going to develop this part.

Then, a logo has to be of good graphic quality. Apart from the good-looking criterion, a logo has to scale well from tiny sizes (e.g. be simple enough to be used as a favicon or in some templates) to large sizes (for banners and large documents). A logo in vector graphics is obviously better since it allows resizing without any loss of quality.

Last but far from least, a logo has to *fit* in the global visual identity of the structure; this essential point is usually not taken into account.

Unique in a family A logo has both to match the global identity of the overseeing structure (here, the Wikimedia Foundation) and to be unique in the set of logos of this structure. The problem with new logos for Wikimedia projects is they are often too close, too similar to the main logo of the Foundation, both in terms of shapes and colours. When they are more original and free themselves from the pervasive Wikimedia colours, they inevitably fall on a classic imaginationless colour already used on several logos.

We need to be bold in choosing our logos and their colours. The community also needs to take advantage from the advice of graphics designers or people whose role is to help them designing a good logo with innovative colours. One of the missions of the Marketing committee is to act as a bridge between the community and the board in terms of graphics, design and logos. What we propose below is to identify each project with a dedicated distinctive colour that will appear in the main design of its interface.

Examples Two logos are currently being discussed: one for Wikibooks and one for Wikiversity. The final one for Wiktionary has just been chosen.

Current discussions about Wikibooks and Wikiversity new logos are very revealing about the actual difficulties encountered by our community⁵. Although first phases have been fulfilled quite fastly, both processes seem to be stuck in the last phase, consisting in choosing the final colours. As logos are mainly

⁵See [[m:Wikibooks/Logo]] and [[m:Wikiversity/Logo]]

decided by people from the concerned project, everybody wants a blue⁶ logo and does not care if this color is already used by another Wikimedia logo or if the logo does not fit in the family.

Wiktionary logo is an example of a successful logo choice process. It has led to an original logo using distinctive colors. One may argue it does not fully fit in the Wikimedia logo family, but this argument vanishes when compared to the beloved well-known extravagant Wikipedia globe.

3.2 Wikimedia and non-Wikimedia MediaWikis

All Wikimedia projects use the default layout of MediaWiki, called *Monobook*. MediaWiki is also used by many websites that need a wiki engine, as it is actively developed and it has proven to be both reliable and able to manage huge projects such as Wikipedia.

Though, the large majority (TAB. 1) of these websites using MediaWiki has kept the default layout of MediaWiki, which is the same that is used by Wikimedia wikis. The three fourth of the tested wikis have only changed the top-left corner logo and kept the default backgrounds, colors and menus. If we add the wikis that have slightly changed the site appearance, we reach 85% of websites running MediaWiki with a similar or identical design as the one of Wikimedia projects.

Table 1: Statistics about the layout of non-Wikimedia MediaWiki websites (based on the 100 largest non-Wikimedia wikis listed on http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_wikis.)

only the logo is different	74
similar to very similar design	12
different to very different design	14

This similarity is a serious issue for two main reasons. First, it is very easy to have a website looking like Wikipedia or another Wikimedia project. All one has to do is *not* changing the default parameters. Second, the multiplication of MediaWiki websites implies Wikimedia projects are getting swallowed up in the mass of them. We need to achieve a clear transformation of Wikimedia wikis appearance in order to make them distinguishable, unique and to show these websites are members of the Wikimedia family.

4 Towards a new design of Wikimedia projects appearance

4.1 The time of maturity

Maturity for the foundation The Wikimedia Foundation has initiated a series of deep reforms in its administrative structure [6]. A process of professionalization has been engaged and several positions have been created to consolidate its structure [7]. Deep reforms about its decision-making processes are also on their way to insure the future and good works of the foundation [8].

Maturity for the content Most developed Wikimedia projects are leaving their expansion phase and reaching a sort of maturation plate. Important thoughts are also conducted about stabilizing content and developing stable versions [9]; developers are working hard on the technical part and the global community is thinking about the community processes to engage. Stable versions are a serious step towards reliability⁷.

Selection of the content for the Wikipedia 1.0 project⁸ has also made a big step forward with the release of the 0.5 CD version containing around 2000 articles from the English-language Wikipedia [10].

Maturity, reliability and credibility The maturation phase of both the foundation and some of the projects comes along with a will of credibility and reliability. Reliability on the facts found in the articles, credibility of the projects. Reliability and sustainability of the foundation, credibility towards external partners.

⁶Blue is taken as an example here, of course not *everybody* wants a blue logo. But participants can be very stubborn when they discuss about “their” logo.

⁷For a more comprehensive and historical review of the reasons to have stable versions, one can read http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Why_stable_versions.

⁸On the English-language Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WP:1>. Other local Wikipedia have engaged similar selection processes.

Showing we evolve We have shown in the first part that the design of Wikipedia (and other Wikimedia projects) was very basic at the beginning and was improved in 2004. Yet, the foundation is evolving and so are the projects. This evolution must come along with a serious change of the design of the Wikimedia websites. We have already explained why the default MediaWiki layout cannot be kept on Wikimedia wikis. Here we go a step further and advocate for a more professional, ergonomic and aesthetic design. The layout we propose is aimed at being a solution to several major issues we have discussed previously in this paper.

4.2 A more professional design

A new default skin We have been working on a new design that looks more professional and reflects the changes in the way the Wikimedian community considers itself and its projects. Some examples are given on FIG. 7. This refined interface is aimed at being both more user-friendly and more aesthetic. The use of drop-down menus provides a modern touch and lightens the page.

Guiding the community Such a major change of appearance must be engaged with the approval and input of the global Wikimedian community. A contest could be organized by the committee to gather the best proposals from members of the community. Precise specifications would be given to insure quality and accessibility standards.

One color per project Wikimedia projects must be identifiable from the first look. They must both be different from non-Wikimedia wikis and have their own identity as a project. One of our proposals in order to strengthen Wikimedia projects visual identity is to attribute a dedicated color to each project. This color would be derived from logos. For instance, Wikipedia would be light gray, Commons dark red, Wikisource light blue, etc. Wikimedia projects would thus be clearly identifiable and distinguishable online but also on offline promotional material.

Identification as Wikimedia projects The Wikimedia logo should be more visible on our wikis. It could be displayed on the top-right corner⁹ of the top bar and link to the Foundation website.

The Foundation website A foundation hosting one of the ten biggest websites in the world cannot take the liberty of keeping a poor-design outdated website, whatever its size and its number of employees. It is a simple matter of credibility. One may argue the Foundation website is not the real showcase of Wikimedia, that Wikimedia projects are, which is not completely false. Though, the Foundation deals with serious companies, organizations and media that expect higher standards of quality than those of the wiki-way. Some are afraid that a total redesign of the Foundation website may get people lost, as “it would not look like Wikipedia any more”. Modernizing Wikimedia projects interface should thus be the opportunity to remodel the Foundation website too.

4.3 Strengthening the bonds within the families

Wikipedia and “the others” There is a clear distinction between the large, famous encyclopedia that anyone can edit and all its “small sister projects”. Wikipedia unwillingly shadows other Wikimedia projects instead of taking advantage of its fame to lead visitors to them. When press team members try to promote other projects than Wikipedia, journalists rarely care about them. Wikimedia Commons is getting some interest due to its status of free online media lrepository, but other projects fail in bringing attention to them.

It has been recently proposed [3] to merge all Wikimedia projects in a large *Wikipedia project* and to rename all projects to *Wikipedia <content>*¹⁰. This proposal has appeared to be a bad solution to a real problem. As a matter of fact, renaming Wikimedia projects when they start to get some attention is not only a bad marketing strategy, it also denies the specificity of each project whose community does not want to fall under the Wikipedia umbrella. But what other solutions are there?

⁹Warning: this sentence is left-to-right-writing-centric.

¹⁰Though the same user also proposed in his email a concept similar to the cross-project navigation bar we are presenting, the authors swear they got this brilliant idea first.

The screenshot shows the German Wikipedia homepage with a new design. The header is dark with the Wikipedia logo and a search bar. The main content area is light and features a navigation menu, a main article titled 'Enzyklopädie', and a sidebar with 'Über Wikipedia', 'Hilfe', 'Mitmachen', and 'Mein Account'. The article text is in a light color, and the sidebar is in a dark color. The overall design is clean and modern.

The screenshot shows the German Wikisource homepage with a new design. The header is blue with the Wikisource logo and a search bar. The main content area is light and features a navigation menu, a main article titled 'Enzyklopädie', and a sidebar with 'Über Wikisource', 'Hilfe', 'Mitmachen', and 'Mein Account'. The article text is in a light color, and the sidebar is in a dark color. The overall design is clean and modern.

Figure 7: Example of a new design implementing the *one color per project* proposal applied to the German-language Wikipedia and Wikisource.

Existing templates Some links exist between Wikimedia projects through the use of templates that direct to pages on other Wikimedia projects. These pages are about the same subject but contain other types of content (media, quotations, etc.). The problem with current templates is they come at the end of articles and they are hardly noticed, even by people who are looking for them. Moreover, they really give the impression that Wikipedia is the central project around which all projects are second-zone satellites.

Cross-project navigation bar What we propose is to take advantage of the change of design to add a cross-project navigation bar whose links would have the same role as current templates. This bar would work the same way interwiki links do. For example, an encyclopaedic article about William Shakespeare would direct to images in *William Shakespeare* gallery on Commons through a media button, study guides on Wikibooks through textbooks, quotations on Wikiquote through quotations etc. dictionary, sources, news and learning would direct to relevant content if it exists. If no resource of that kind is available, links would be gray. Of course, all these pages would link back to Wikipedia and between each other. This would really make easier to browse the free Wikimedia content in its globality.

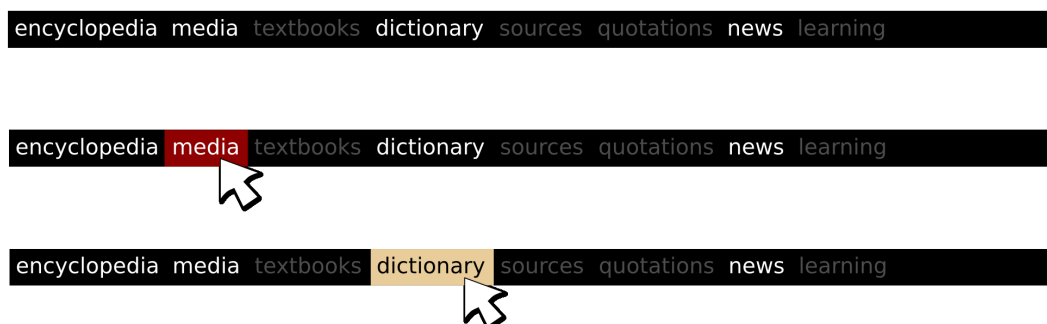


Figure 8: Proposed implementation of the cross-project navigation bar. Gray-tint text indicates no resource is available.

Conclusion

In this paper we have identified and analysed current issues in terms of visual identity, marketing and graphics and tried to provide solutions. Both the Foundation and its projects are reaching a turning point in their evolution and they need to go ahead.

This paper is aimed at raising awareness from the community about necessary evolutions and about people who are available to guide them. The marketing committee has been created to help local communities and chapters but it has not been much hooked since its creation.

We do hope that important visual changes can coincide with serious evolution of the foundation and local communities showing they have both become aware of their maturity and they are ready to make their next step towards stability.

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