Wikipedia World

An Internet entrepreneur argues that knowledge is power.

On a rainy spring evening, Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales asked audience members at the Iowa Memorial Union Main Lounge if they'd ever used his free online collaborative encyclopedia. Nearly every hand shot up.

Over the past decade, Wikipedia has grown into the world's fifth most popular website, with around 408 million unique visitors per month. Judging by the site's popularity—especially with high school and college students—it seems as if the whole world is addicted to Wikipedia.

In fact, in many countries, illiteracy, lack of computer and Internet availability, or government censorship limit access to the site's wealth of information. In China, the government blocks access to articles on sensitive topics such as Taiwan, the Dalai Lama, and 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner and human rights activist Liu Xiabo. In his UI lecture on "Democracy and Internet," Wales imagined a world where "every single person is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge."

In its early days the site was ridiculed widely or regarded warily for the ease with which people could post hoax information. Wikipedia's credibility has improved since then, and Wales says the website and others like it can have earth-shattering applications. In recent months, people have used the Internet to expose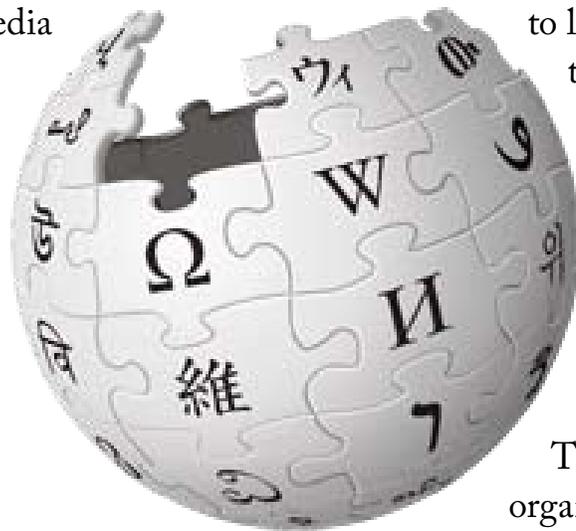 plagiarism in German defense minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg's Ph.D. dissertation, leading to his resignation. It also became a major organizing force behind the political uprisings that rocked Middle Eastern countries such as Libya and Egypt.

Wikipedia still has work to do to bring to life Wales' vision of universal access to knowledge. Currently, although it offers more than 16 million articles in 270 languages, many people have yet to experience the site in their native tongue. Plus, many Wikipedia entries reduce thousands of years of history or culture to a few paragraphs, usually written from an American perspective. The Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit organization that runs Wikipedia, recently opened an office in India to boost the site's content in five of the country's languages.

Members of the UI campus community are also helping deliver Wikipedia to a larger and more diverse audience. Information technology expert Cliff Missen, 92MA, directs the WiderNet Project, which brings online information to nearly one million users in countries without reliable Internet connections. Wales met with WiderNet volunteers as part of his visit to campus and applauded their efforts during the lecture.

"We're interested in getting [other ethnic groups'] perspectives integrated into Wikipedia to reflect the broader range of ideas," Missen says. "Six out of seven people in the world don't have the Internet, though, so we still have a lot of work ahead of us."