

# Boise Wiki Local History Project

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**List of participants**

Ivanov, Michael; LocalWiki

Madsen-Brooks, Leslie; Boise State University Department of History

Miller, Nick; Boise State University Department of History and Boise State Arts and Humanities Institute

Neustrom, Philip; LocalWiki

Two digital humanities interns (to be hired with grant funds); Boise State University

Project coordinator (to be hired with grant funds); LocalWiki

**Abstract**

The Boise Wiki is a city-wide wiki that will make it easy for residents to share their own recollections of, and perspectives on, Boise's history. This public history project will begin as a partnership between professional and amateur historians in Boise and the nonprofit LocalWiki, but within a short time the resource will be community-owned and -driven. The wiki explores what kind of history community members create when given encouragement, support, and a wiki platform designed specifically for communities. We anticipate the media-rich storytelling engendered by this foundational history project will remain at the core of the Boise Wiki. We envision the wiki's local history articles will provide the raw material for storytelling (for example by Boise's schoolchildren, writers, and artists) or the memory-jogging spark that will inspire senior Boiseans to share their own stories in digital and analog forms.

**Statement of innovation**

The project differs from existing public history and wiki projects in both content and form. It emphasizes a local, vernacular historiography because it encourages community members to write their own histories rather than placing that responsibility solely in the hands of professional historians. Technologically, the open-source LocalWiki platform will support functionality especially important for a local, historical information resource. For example, the software features a collaborative mapping function and an interactive timeline.

**Statement of humanities significance**

There appear to be no other genuinely community-scale digital humanities projects that ask the lay public to collaboratively author a historiography of a metropolitan area. Most significantly, the Boise Wiki places the opportunity to write this history with the public rather than in the hands of academically trained historians. The Boise Wiki thus represents an opportunity to shift the discourse of history by expanding the locations in which it is practiced and by whom, by releasing historiography to a largely (academically) undisciplined public.

## Narrative

### Background

Public history has traditionally been defined as historical projects or programs created or led by professional historians and targeted at a public audience. Many of these programs have recently taken a digital turn. At the same time, social media platforms and relatively easy-to-configure databases have lowered the bar for entry to anyone who wishes to create a dynamic website on an historical topic.

Public history projects thus have an opportunity to move from being exclusively *for* the public to being just as much *of* and *by* them. This democratization is exciting, but it comes at a moment of crisis in the humanities, and particularly in K-12 schools. In many parts of the U.S.—and especially in politically conservative states such as Idaho—there is a concern that state and federal governments are mandating too narrow a focus (or in some cases the “wrong” focus) in the history curriculum and are not adequately representing the history of constituents’ forebears. There has been much public critique of history textbooks, and the media has been awash with pundits spinning versions of history that match the talking points of one end of the American political spectrum or the other.

What happens, however, if we shift the discourse away from such flashpoints as Jefferson and slavery, the founding fathers and Christianity, and the appropriateness of sesquicentennial celebrations of the secession of Southern states? What kind of narratives do citizens craft when they don’t have a national narrative or political talking points as a foundation for the histories they want to share? This project aims in part to answer such questions through the foundation of a Boise Wiki.

In 2010, the 501(c)3 non-profit LocalWiki received a grant from the Knight Foundation to fund the creation of the next generation of wiki software—one tailored to the needs of local communities. LocalWiki’s mission is to craft community-owned, living information repositories that provide much-needed context behind the people, places, and events that shape communities. The Knight grant funds the software, but the project also requires extensive community outreach, coordination, and education.

Boise, a city in the midst of major demographic and economic shifts, is an excellent site for a local wiki. This is an ideal moment to bring a wiki to Boise; residents whose families have been here for generations are eager to share the history of their city, and newcomers are crafting their own cultural syntheses of, for example, Somalia and Idaho. These continuities and changes in everyday life are best documented by the people living them, and LocalWiki provides an excellent way to capture these communal histories.

We are asking for funding to create the first island in what we hope will become an archipelago of city wikis that embrace local history. We need funds to hire an outreach specialist to show Boiseans how to take full advantage of the wiki’s technology; defray the travel expenses of LocalWiki’s staff when they visit Boise; hire local interns to serve as project liaisons and editors; and pay Dr. Madsen-Brooks’s summer salary so that she may dedicate a summer to the project.

### Enhancing the humanities through innovation

#### *History by the public*

The Boise Wiki represents an opportunity to shift the discourse of history by expanding the locations in which it is practiced and by whom, by releasing historiography to a largely (academically) undisciplined, amateur public.

The Boise Wiki innovates public history practice by transferring the responsibility of crafting and editing local history to lay stakeholders. Whereas the Wikipedia model asks for pure objectivity and requires the citation of “outside” sources, the Boise Wiki assumes that local, insider knowledge is valuable. This kind of subjectivity allows the community to explore what happens when its members craft history by beginning not with the national narratives they learned in school, but with their own lives. It also opens discussions among community members about what distinguishes Boise from similarly sized cities and its municipal brethren in the Intermountain West.

It also lets residents collaboratively answer common questions. Boiseans wonder, for example, what happened to Boise’s Chinatown, about Boise’s symbiotic relationship with crime-plagued Garden City, why Boise razed most of its downtown in the 1970s, and how the city came to be a refugee resettlement community. They also want to know: Are there really nineteenth-century tunnels under the city? Why in old aerial photographs does the Boise River lack the forest that currently grows on its banks? When did white supremacists last come to Boise, and what was the result? Why do we have an Anne Frank memorial? Were there really African-American neighborhoods where the freeway runs now?

Many of these questions may have painful answers, but exploring these issues will give the city’s younger and older generations the opportunity to discuss the ways Boise’s identity has morphed as it and its suburbs have grown into a metropolitan area of nearly 600,000 people. Boise has been especially hard-hit by the recession, and the city needs to emerge from this economic downturn with a clearer vision of its future. Such a vision will need to be rooted in the historical experiences of Boiseans, but many newer and younger residents remain semiliterate at best about that history. The Boise Wiki offers Boiseans the opportunity to tell their own stories—a powerful way of constituting community—and in so doing calls on Boiseans to collectively recollect, reflect, and move forward. As they write their histories, they will emphasize those places, events, and cultural phenomena they value—and suggest draft a trajectory for the city’s future.

The Boise Wiki project innovates the humanities on two levels. First, it redefines the local humanities, and historiography in particular, not as something one goes to *see* (at a museum, for example) but as something one *does*. It asks Boiseans to tell the stories of their past, and it challenges them to engage with one another as they collaboratively revise this new historiography. The Boise Wiki, in short, asks them what constitutes the process of writing history at a moment when so many of the historical narratives being shared in the media by political factions are questionable at best. Second, it provides humanities scholars with a laboratory for observing which topics emerge when the public is given the autonomy to decide which histories are important enough to document—and an easy-to-use authoring platform on which to do it; the process by which local residents construct and present historical narratives, and how they imagine the local past; and what difference especially “community-friendly” sharing platforms like LocalWiki have on participation in local history projects.

### *Start-up activities*

We anticipate the start-up funds will cover 18 months of project expenses, from September 2011 to March 2013. During this time we will

- convene consultations in Boise with the LocalWiki team to familiarize them with Boise’s culture;
- hold initial meetings with core group of initial contributors from public history organizations (these people will “seed” the wiki with articles of varying completeness to kickstart it);
- use public history courses as laboratories for experimenting with content and collaboration;
- hire interns to assist with both technical and community-building aspects of the wiki;

- finalize a plan for outreach to the broader community;
- hold community workshops on why and how to contribute to the Boise Wiki;
- connect Boise's community of wiki participants with a network of participants from LocalWiki pilot projects in other cities so that we may better sustain the project;
- seek further funding from, among others, the Idaho Humanities Council, the Office of Digital Humanities, Boise State, and Idaho-centric private foundations—as well as the community.

### *Ultimate project results*

Among the project's anticipated outcomes are several thousand pages on Boise Wiki related to local history and several hundred contributors by the end of the start-up period (for comparison, Davis Wiki had 6,000 pages one year after its launch); an ever-growing, comprehensive resource on Boise's history; increased digital literacy and interest in further experimentation in the digital humanities on the part of the community, local public history professionals, and K-18 students; and better understanding by humanities scholars and digital humanities practitioners about how the public conceives of local history and what patterns emerge (in content and form) from a collaboratively-authored, local historiography.

### **Environmental scan**

A local public history project within the Boise Wiki may at first glance appear similar to several other projects. Among these are wiki-based projects such as Wikipedia, the Davis Wiki, and smaller projects such as the Historic Saranac Lake Wiki and the Minnesota Historical Society's Placeography, as well as projects that crowdsource historiography by allowing members of the public to contribute bits of what they know about a specific topic; this last category includes projects such as WereYouThere, the Flickr Commons, and Omeka-based exhibits.

The Boise Wiki project differs from those mentioned above in several respects. Unlike Wikipedia, the Boise Wiki will not embrace an ethic of pure objectivity, for both practical and philosophical reasons; while we will encourage participants to correct errors on the wiki, we don't anticipate implementing the level of editorial control over the wiki exercised by Wikipedia's large team of volunteer editors. Placeography ([placeography.org](http://placeography.org)) allows users to contribute information about local places, and it reflects users' voices, but its content is limited to places, and the Boise Wiki will also cover events, people, and more ephemeral topics. The Historic Saranac Lake Wiki ([hsl.wikispot.org](http://hsl.wikispot.org)) invites public contributions, but it is largely a historical society website; as it is currently organized it lacks the sense of serendipity and play, as well as the potential for organic growth, we hope to put at the heart of the Boise Wiki.

This insistence on serendipity, curiosity, organic growth, and play makes the Davis Wiki perhaps the closest existing project, both in terms of platform and sensibility. We anticipate that over the years, the Boise Wiki will come to resemble the Davis Wiki as a space where residents share information about Boise's past and present, voice community aspirations as well as critique the status quo, and craft a wiki culture that mirrors the culture of the city itself.

The difference between the Davis and Boise wikis becomes clearest when we consider the motivation for the creation of each wiki and the community behind it. The Davis Wiki was begun as a space where students exchanged information about the town's social scene and the university, and only after many years did the Davis Wiki come to tell the story of the city's recent past. The Boise Wiki, on the other hand, is being launched as a media-rich public history project that will grow to encompass information about present-day Boise. We are consciously soliciting the participation of a larger cross-

section of the community even before we officially launch the wiki. These individuals bring a network representing diverse segments of Boise's community, including native-born politicians and recently arrived refugees, schoolchildren and senior citizens, state employees and entrepreneurs, wealthy retirees and migrant laborers.

The Boise Wiki will also differ significantly, in both content and form, from projects that solicit public input but either publish such contributions as comments appended to a primary entry (as in blog- or Flickr-based projects) or that curate the comments, using them as primary source material to be integrated into a larger narrative. In the Boise Wiki, public contributions appear immediately, and they are integrated into the text of the article. In this way we preserve the voices of individual Boiseans.

Technologically, the LocalWiki platform is much easier to use than other wiki software, and it supports functionality especially important for a local, historical information resource. The LocalWiki founders have committed to working alongside Boise to shape the software to meet local needs. The software includes a collaborative mapping function and an interactive timeline. The open-source LocalWiki software uses the Python programming language, and it will take advantage of the Django web framework, GeoDjango mapping framework, OpenStreetMap, CKEditor, jQuery, and others.

The Boise Wiki project also differs from other wikis in that it has the community-building expertise of the LocalWiki team behind it. On Wikipedia, only 0.02% of those who visit the website end up contributing; on the Davis Wiki, one in seven residents contributes to the wiki every year. The ease of use built into the LocalWiki platform will bolster contribution rates, and the cultivation of a strong base of interesting historical material provided by a core group of dedicated, diverse community members will drive the project through its infancy and adolescence. Also working in our favor is the maturity of online collaboration. Mass collaboration is finally entering the mainstream—witness the popularity of Google Docs—and we believe the time is ripe for exactly this sort of ambitious, collaborative, local project.

Finally, a huge number of digital public humanities projects—as represented by those receiving ODH funding as well as by those that have received attention from humanists and the media—are geographically located in the eastern half of the United States. A large number of the projects based in the western U.S. are being developed almost exclusively by university institutes and programs. Those that are located in the western U.S. frequently focus on regions outside the west or they tackle a more generalized challenge in the digital humanities, such as quantitative textual analysis. These projects are all valuable. However, the Boise Wiki is different because its scope situates it in the western U.S. and it is truly public, with the bulk of contributions expected to come from people unaffiliated with a university.

### **History and duration of the project**

*Spring 2010:* LocalWiki receives Knight Foundation award to create community-friendly wiki software.

*March 2011:* Boise Wiki is born as a small project within a graduate seminar.

*Summer 2011:* Transition Boise Wiki from Wikispot.org platform to new LocalWiki platform.

*Fall 2011:* Madsen-Brooks's undergraduate public history course seeds the wiki with local history topics, drawing media-rich content from local archives, museums, and historical societies.

*Spring 2012:* Madsen-Brooks's graduate seminar in applied history continues to build the wiki's content, and will recruit participants from select local organizations. Interns hired.

*Summer 2012:* Conduct community workshops on the local history project within the Boise Wiki as well as a publicity campaign. LocalWiki continues to refine software to better meet the needs of Boise's community. Fundraising begins for the post-start-up phase of the project.

*Fall 2012:* Madsen-Brooks and interns continue community workshops and publicity efforts.

*Spring 2013:* LocalWiki and Madsen-Brooks reflect on start-up phase of the Boise Wiki in a white paper that shares best practices and suggests improvements in the project framework.

*Summer 2013:* Madsen-Brooks authors article on start-up phase of the Boise Wiki and plans for conference presentations in 2013-2014 academic year.

*Beyond Summer 2013:* Madsen-Brooks and interns continue community workshops, fundraising.

## **Work plan**

### *Tasks*

As described in the section above, the Boise Wiki local history project comprises the launch of the wiki, the initial participation of public history students at Boise State University, hiring and training interns, the recruitment of participants from local organizations, community workshops facilitated by both the project director and LocalWiki's outreach coordinator, and locally relevant improvements to the LocalWiki software.

### *Technical Resources*

LocalWiki is providing the server space and software required to host and run the wiki. (For more about the LocalWiki platform, see the description under "Environmental Scan" above. Staff members at LocalWiki and Boise State University will use computers to which they already have access. Community members participating in the project will use their own computers or publicly available computers, such as those in local public libraries. The only software users of the wiki must have on their computers is an Internet browser.

### *Evaluation*

The start-up phase of the Boise Wiki project will be evaluated in several ways. As a formative assessment, we will conduct an environmental scan of the scope, scale, and intellectual accessibility of local history resources available online prior to the launch of the Boise Wiki. As a summative assessment, we will investigate how much—qualitatively and quantitatively—those resources grew during the start-up phase of the Boise Wiki compared to the growth of the wiki itself. Ongoing feedback from community members and detailed surveys sent to historians familiar with Idaho history will provide further qualitative assessment of the project and allow for iterative change. We examine site metrics, including number of contributors, number of articles on local history, pageviews, links to the wiki, and search engine rankings for relevant keywords. We will also compare our data and experience with that of other pilot LocalWiki communities.

## **Staff**

### *Project director*

*Leslie Madsen-Brooks*, Assistant Professor, Department of History, Boise State University: Madsen-Brooks will administer the wiki, hire interns, facilitate workshops, and conduct research on the vernacular historiography emerging from the Boise Wiki. During the academic year, she anticipates dedicating 30 to 35 percent of her time to the project. During summer 2012, Madsen-Brooks will focus almost exclusively (at 75 percent time) on the Boise Wiki. During both the academic year and the summer, she will supervise interns and liaise with the LocalWiki community coordinator.

### *Collaborators*

*Philip Neustrom and Michael Ivanov*, co-founders, LocalWiki: Neustrom and Ivanov will be contributing the LocalWiki software, as well as Boise-specific modifications to it. The work Neustrom and Ivanov will be doing for other pilot LocalWiki communities will undoubtedly benefit Boise as well.

*Nick Miller*, Professor, Department of History, Boise State University: The new Boise State University Arts and Humanities Institute—Miller is its foundational committee chair—will serve as the intellectual home for the Boise Wiki project. Miller will help Madsen-Brooks secure the resources she needs from the university, as well as assist in liaising with local historians and publicizing the project.

*Outreach Coordinator*, LocalWiki: The outreach coordinator will liaise with the Boise community on behalf of LocalWiki, assisting Madsen-Brooks and local organizations in building community participation and support and in training community members to use the LocalWiki platform. It is anticipated that the coordinator will make up to four week-long trips to Boise during the start-up phase.

*Two digital humanities interns*, Boise State: The interns will build community participation, assist with the technical aspects of managing a wiki, and serve as facilitators on the wiki by moderating pages that may prove controversial, answering questions, and editing articles. They will seed the wiki and assist with research into Boise's vernacular historiography. During summer 2012, the interns will work at least 20 hours per week. During the academic year, the interns will work at least ten hours per week.

### **Final product, dissemination, and sustainability**

By the end of the start-up phase of the project, we anticipate the Boise Wiki will include thousands of pages related to local history and will have attracted the participation of hundreds of contributors. We will have established a core, actively engaged group of wiki contributors with an interest—perhaps professional, but more likely amateur—in local history.

We will publish a white paper exploring the extent to which we have developed a comprehensible and replicable model for a local wiki as a form of capturing a community's conception of its history. We will share our research findings in academic journals, at public history and/or digital humanities conferences, and on a public website. These articles and presentations will address not only the logistics of building community participation in a local history project, but also explore the kinds of history created by the lay public when they are given encouragement and easy-to-use digital tools for collaboration.

In looking at models for sustaining a project over the long term, the most realistic model is the one offered by the Davis Wiki. Past fundraising efforts for that wiki suggest the community may contribute \$30,000 to \$60,000 per year. Based on recent campaigns here for other kinds of community-funded media—notably NPR and Boise Community Radio—we believe similar numbers are achievable for Boise. We plan to explore a subscription-based verified member system, direct community voting, and cooperative membership structures. A verified member system would likely improve the quality and reputation of our content and allow us a potentially meaningful revenue source.

The community-building experience of other wikis has demonstrated that wiki content can be effectively moderated by the community itself, and that beyond the start-up phase, the vast majority of topics do not require dedicated moderators. This spirit of voluntarism is already evident in Boise's public history community, where nonprofit staff and interns contribute considerable time and effort with little or no remuneration.

## Biographies

*Leslie Madsen-Brooks* is an assistant professor of history and a public historian at Boise State University. For years, she has participated in community-building new media; for example, she served as the contributing editor for education and research BlogHer.com from 2006 to 2010. She has presented at multiple conferences, including the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, on using collaborative media in both formal and informal learning, and she co-taught a first-year seminar at UC Davis on wiki-based writing. She holds a Ph.D. in cultural studies from the University of California, Davis.

*Philip Neustrom* is a software engineer in the San Francisco Bay area currently co-directing the LocalWiki effort. He co-founded DavisWiki.org in 2004. For the past several years he has worked on a variety of nonprofit efforts to engage everyday citizens. He oversaw the development of the popular VideoTheVote.org, the world's largest coordinated video documentation project, and was the lead developer at Citizen Engagement Laboratory, a nonprofit focused on empowering traditionally underrepresented constituencies. He is a graduate of the University of California, Davis, with a bachelor's in mathematics.

*Mike Ivanov* is a software engineer in the San Francisco Bay Area currently co-directing the LocalWiki effort. He co-founded DavisWiki.org in 2004. He, along with Philip Neustrom, was awarded the Excellence in Community Involvement Award by the City of Davis for his work on the DavisWiki, an honor usually reserved for traditional local media formats such as radio and television. He is a graduate of the University of California, Davis, with a bachelor's in mathematics.

*Nick Miller* is a professor of history at Boise State University, serves as chair of the History Department, and chairs the committee establishing the university's new Arts and Humanities Institute. Miller has been a recipient of fellowships from the International Research and Exchanges Board, the Andrew Mellon foundation, American Council of Learned Societies, and Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Locally, Miller acted as historical advisor and field producer for a documentary entitled *Bosnia to Boise and Back*. The documentary, focused on the lives of one family of Bosnian refugees in Boise. He holds a Ph.D. in history from Indiana University.

**Letters of commitment and support***Letters of support*

Phoebe Ayers, Trustee, Wikimedia Commons, and author of *How Wikipedia Works: And How You Can Be a Part of It*

Alan Levine, Vice President of Community and Chief Technology Officer, the New Media Consortium

*Letters of commitment*

Nick Miller, Committee Chair of the Arts and Humanities Institute and chair of the History Department at Boise State University

Philip Neustrom, co-founder of LocalWiki



PHYSICAL SCIENCES & ENGINEERING LIBRARY

ONE SHIELDS AVENUE  
DAVIS, CALIFORNIA 95616

Phoebe Ayers  
Physical Sciences and Engineering Library  
University of California, Davis  
Davis, CA 95616

February 11, 2011

To the Review Committee:

I am writing in support of the NEH Grant Proposal for the Boise Local History Wiki, submitted by Dr. Leslie Madsen-Brooks. Wikis are a tool for catalyzing communities to come together around a shared topic and build an informational resource over time. The wiki format has unique characteristics that support community building through collaborative writing and editing, including software features that make it easy to contribute small pieces of information over time and social features that make it easy to collaborate. The act of working on a wiki with a group of other people has benefits that go well beyond the finished piece of work – the wiki transforms a subject into a living discussion and collaboration.

We have seen this in the case of Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org>), the world's largest wiki-based site, which I have been deeply involved in for seven years; I currently sit on the Board of Directors for the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation, which runs Wikipedia and her sister sites. Wikipedia provides disparate people all around the world a way to collaborate on topics of interest. We have found that the shared mission of providing neutral, free information on encyclopedic topics is enough to galvanize an international community of 100,000 active monthly participants who have built the world's largest encyclopedia (over 17 million articles) in over 270 languages. The fact that Wikipedia is based on wiki software is a core part of our ability to build this remarkable achievement with such a diverse and entirely volunteer contributor base.

However, Wikipedia is not the world's only wiki, nor does it cover all of the world's information – Wikipedia's focus on only "encyclopedic" topics means it does not cover local or subjective topics, such as personal histories. There is a pressing need for sites that cover this gap and provide a way for communities to document their histories, folklore, and other information deemed not suitable for Wikipedia, but in a similarly inclusive and collaborative way. This is a new area, and one that is quite promising and exciting for wikis.

The LocalWiki project does just this. It is a successful project to take the wiki model and extend it to local communities, enabling those in a specific geographic area to collaborate on topics of interest to the community. I have seen this success first-hand. For the past five years, I have lived in Davis, California, which is the home of the first LocalWiki project: the DavisWiki, which has been an extraordinary success and a model for community wikis world-wide. As both a resident of Davis (and therefore first-hand user of the wiki) and a scholar and observer of wikis generally, I have seen the impact that having a vibrant

wiki has had in our community. The DavisWiki is a shared resource that long-time residents and short-term college students alike use to find out information about their community (“especially the small, enjoyable things” as the site’s tagline says), to review local services and restaurants, to update one another on special events and business changes, and share similar details of community life. “Did you check the wiki?” is now a common phrase in Davis.

The success of the DavisWiki has led it to be not only an indispensable resource for every Davisite, but to be recognized world-wide in the wiki industry and community of wiki developers. I have every confidence that the LocalWiki team has the skills and tools to help galvanize a successful collaborative project in Boise. The LocalWiki software – which is different from Wikipedia’s software, and is developed specifically for the purpose of local community wikis – is recognized as being a particularly user-friendly tool, usable by even novice participants or those unused to online collaboration such as will be cultivated in a local history project. And the LocalWiki team, along with Dr. Madsen-Brooks, understand the culture of successful projects such as the DavisWiki.

I am excited by this proposal and by the prospect of a local collaboration project focused around public history. Wikipedia’s success in large part depends on small groups of people who work on specific topics of interest; the encyclopedia’s coverage is maintained by hundreds of topical “projects”. There is thus a model, even in the largest wikis, for how having a specific area of focus can often galvanize participation by those who might not otherwise contribute. That, combined with the LocalWiki model of community-wide coverage, is a promising basis for an exciting, novel and much-needed project that will not only improve documentation of the public history of Boise and help educate its citizens, but will help advance our understanding of how community collaborations and wikis can work.



Phoebe Ayers

Trustee, Wikimedia Foundation (<http://wikimediafoundation.org>)  
Steering Committee, WikiSym: The International Symposium on Wikis and Open Collaboration (<http://wikisym.org>) and Chair, WikiSym 2010 (Gdansk, Poland)  
Author, *How Wikipedia Works: And How You Can be a Part of It* (2008, No Starch Press)  
Librarian, University of California at Davis

[http://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Board\\_of\\_Trustees#Phoebe\\_Ayers](http://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Board_of_Trustees#Phoebe_Ayers)



sparking innovative  
learning & creativity

To Whom It May Concern,

I enthusiastically support the idea of the Boise Wiki project as both an excellent example of the application of the technologies we describe in the NMC *Horizon Reports* and the type of relevant connection between academia and local communities. While the wiki technology is now 15 years old, the ideas for using it as a community tool are more vital than ever now as a platform for expression, and as described in this grant, would be more locally relevant than a web site or Facebook presence.

For several years I have known and respected the work of Dr. Leslie Madsen-Brooks and have full confidence in her skills to coordinate this project effectively. During a visit to Boise last year for a mobile technology symposium at Boise State, I had a chance to get a sense of a city with a story-rich history, a connection with the land, and at the same time facing the challenges of growth and change. There is much to work with for this project, and taps into my own interests in storytelling through media.

We will be certainly interested in following the Boise wiki project and sharing it with possible collaborators among the community of 270+ organizations in the NMC.

Regards

Alan Levine  
Vice President Community & CTO



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National Endowment for the Humanities  
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20506

February 15, 2011

To whom it may concern:

I am writing to confirm that the Arts and Humanities Institute at Boise State University will gladly join in sponsoring the Boise Wiki project proposed by Dr. Leslie Madsen-Brooks.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nicholas J. Miffer".

Nicholas J. Miffer

Chair, Arts and Humanities Institute Planning Committee

Chair, Department of History



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We are extremely excited about the prospect of working with Leslie Madsen-Brooks, Nick Miller and their peers at Boise State University to help develop the Boise Wiki project.

Leslie Madsen-Brooks is very well-acquainted with collaborative 'wiki' systems. While at UC Davis, Leslie helped teach a course entitled "Writing for the Wiki: Publishing in an Age of Ubiquitous Authorship." In this course, she introduced students to the concept of a wiki, Wikipedia, and our local DavisWiki project. Leslie has the unique combination of technical savvy and historical mindfulness that's required to make the Boise Wiki a success.

Leslie became acquainted with our work while living in Davis, California, where we developed the DavisWiki. The non-profit, community-owned DavisWiki is now the largest media source in the community, with nearly every resident visiting the DavisWiki in the course of a month and one in seven residents contributing in the course of a year.

Our goal, with the LocalWiki software, is to create a new sort of collaborative 'wiki' system designed specifically for local communities. With the Boise Wiki, we plan to work alongside those in Boise to tailor our software to the particular needs of a local, historical project.

With the Boise Wiki, Leslie and her colleagues have the opportunity to improve not only how historians access information about a local community, but also completely reshape how the general public interacts with its own historical record.

Sincerely,  
Philip Neustrom  
Executive Director  
LocalWiki

*Our work on the LocalWiki software is funded largely by a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. We are a 501(c)3 non-profit organization.*

## Appendices

### I. Davis City Council proclamation honoring Davis Wiki for excellence in community involvement

In 2007, the Davis City Council recognized the value of the Davis Wiki to the community, and lauded its usefulness as a collaborative hub providing essential information to visitors and residents. It also highlighted Davis Wiki as “a free, public forum for all to use and update, giving community members the opportunity to speak out against civil inequality and to support positive social movements within Davis.” The Boise Wiki’s team includes the co-founders of the Davis Wiki, and we believe their vision can be implemented in Boise as well.

### II. Article from the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University

Michael Anderson, “Welcome to Davis, Calif.: Six lessons from the world’s best local wiki.” 6 November 2009. <http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/11/welcome-to-davis-calif-six-lessons-from-the-worlds-best-local-wiki/>

This article details the reasons for the success of Davis Wiki. Although the Boise Wiki differs from the Davis Wiki in significant ways (see the “Environmental Scan” section of this proposal), our plans for building community on the Boise Wiki draw on the lessons learned by the community that built the Davis Wiki, the world’s largest city-centric wiki.

## **PROCLAMATION**

### **HONORING DAVIS WIKI RECEPIENT OF THE 2007 THONG HY HUYNH EXCELLENCE IN COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AWARD**

**WHEREAS**, the Excellence in Community Involvement Award recognizes a business or professional organization that has demonstrated significant efforts in promoting and practicing equal opportunity and has contributed to community efforts that promote positive human relations and civil rights in Davis; and

**WHEREAS**, individuals such as Philip Neustrom took the task upon themselves to cultivate and grow a site to serve the common good rather than for specific individual gain; and

**WHEREAS**, Davis Wiki has become a valuable resource in the Davis community; and

**WHEREAS**, Davis Wiki was built to serve as a constantly evolving and improving information tool for the community and is currently a website used by many; and

**WHEREAS**, the Wiki is used for collaboration, visitor and new resident information, housing assistance information, local group formation and much more. It serves as the primary internet presence for many local organizations and remains free for all users; and

**WHEREAS**, the Davis Wiki provides a free, public forum for all to use and update, giving community members the opportunity to speak out against civil inequality and to support positive social movements within Davis.

**NOW THEREFORE**, I, Sue Greenwald, Mayor of Davis, hereby proclaim Davis Wiki the 2007 recipient of the Thong Hy Huynh Excellence in Community Involvement Award.

Date: May 15, 2007

Sue Greenwald  
Mayor

## Welcome to Davis, Calif.: Six lessons from the world's best local wiki

By Michael Andersen / Nov. 6 / 9:54 a.m.



Ah, Davis: home of 60,000 people, 30,000 students, 188 sunny days a year, a 16 percent bike commute mode share and the busiest local wiki in the world.

If I were Omaha World-Herald Publisher Terry Kroeger, I'd be booking my post-holiday flight immediately.

As Gina reported here last week, Omaha's employee-owned metro daily just bought WikiCity, an Omaha-based Web startup that wants to provide mini-Wikipedias for every city in the country. Creating a cheap platform for evergreen, user-generated local Web content has been tried, um, once or twice before. But with some notable exceptions, corporations have turned out to be really, really bad at this.

Philip Neustrom hasn't.

Today, the quirky 500-page wiki Neustrom launched with fellow UC Davis math student Mike Ivanov in 2004 has 14,000 pages and drew 13,000 edits by 3,300 users last month, averaging 10,000 unique visitors daily. More importantly, it's the best way in town to find a lost cat, compare apartment rental prices or get a list of every business open past 10 p.m. Operating budget, not counting its founders' part-time volunteer labor: about \$2,000 a year.

What's the secret? Neustrom, who now wrangles code for the Citizen Engagement Lab in the Bay Area, was nice enough to tell us.

**Wikis need content to breed content.** Or, as evergreen-content guru Matt Thompson put it last week, a wiki written primarily by robots will appeal primarily to robots.

"Starting anything is hard," said Neustrom, now 25. "The issue is predominantly an issue of outreach, of coordinating people and making sure people understand that they can't just put something up there and add 50 pages and walk away, and then come back in a month and hope that it's taken off."

Instead, Neustrom, Ivanov convinced some of their friends to spend four summer months writing snippets about things that only exist in Davis, like drunken biking through late-night fog, oversized playground equipment and the smell from the cow farm on the edge of town.

"We were just trying to do something that we liked," Neustrom said. "We certainly weren't trying to do anything that was very useful."



PHILIP NEUSTROM

**Business information is the holy grail.** Pages about your local toad tunnel are dandy, Neustrom said, and quirky content kept the site from feeling generic to early users. But the feature that made DavisWiki take off was what the traditional media calls "consumer reporting."

"After we'd sort of seeded it with 500 pages or something like that, we opened it up to the public," Neustrom said. "First, it was pretty slow going. Nothing really happened."

Then, sometime in late 2005, pages on things like lunch specials and Davis's nicest bathrooms started filling up. Local business coverage has been "a big driving force" ever since, Neustrom said. Today, he said, retail businesses in town often keep their own information on DavisWiki up to date.

**A wiki's strengths kick in after one year.** The web craves news like kids crave sugar. Blogs and tweets are gobbled fast and burn quick. But wikis are the whole grains of the web: One year after news breaks, someone will want to find and link to it again — and a wiki is likely to be the only place it's still hanging around.

"All of the existing online resources for sort of cataloging anything about the town were sort of time-based," Neustrom said. "After about a year and a half, these things would sort of disappear, even if they'd been around for 100 years, like the local newspaper...So we became the resource of record."

**Start with a subculture, then build out to a general audience.** DavisWiki has always aspired to cover its whole town, but it's always served students best.

That's all right, Neustrom thinks. If he'd tried to please everybody who showed up, no one would have come back.

"When building something like this, you can't just aim for this wide spectrum at first," Neustrom said. Some companies try to launch wikis by writing programs that "crawl through a database, that spit out statistics and create 13 million pages and put that out there and hope that it's going to stick. You can't do that. It's just not going to work."

Neustrom, who spent 2004 sharing a house with musicians, found his base among the artsy, but he thinks any subculture would do. "You could have, like, a physics grad student start a community for their town, and it's a bunch of physics nerds," he said. "And that could spiral out and out."

**Keep your content open source, no matter what.** Don't do it for marketing reasons or out of the kindness of your heart. Do it because it's the only way to guarantee to your users that if you fold, all their hard work won't die with you.

Good wikis inspire rabid devotion — if they don't, they never become good wikis. Neustrom and Ivanov [keep their budget online](#) and think of the project as a user co-op. Their users did, too. "There are people on there who literally spend four hours a day looking at DavisWiki," Neustrom said. "People had free [computer lab] pages every quarter, so they would use their excess printing to [print out 400 fliers and staple them to every room on campus.](#)"

People don't do that for sites they think are "neat," Neustrom said. They do it for sites they own.

**Don't get hung up on mimicking Wikipedia.** Sure, it may be the most useful object ever created by human beings. But as Marshall Poe showed in his [terrific biography of Wikipedia's youth](#), its rules — universal editorship, neutral point of view, no original research — were forged out of year-long flamewars among the early Wikipedians. Neustrom and his friends didn't think NPOV was suited to an inherently Davis-centric site, so they ditched it.

Wikipedia's widely used software, [MediaWiki](#), isn't perfect either. DavisWiki uses a modified [Sycamore](#) platform but it, too, has flaws.

"People want to be able to search for all elementary schools within a certain radius of a certain point, or all of the restaurants that serve vegan food," Neustrom said. "MediaWiki suffers the same issue [as Sycamore] — it was written before the advent of modern web framework."

Neustrom is yearning for a modern wiki platform. That's why he's been messing around with [Django](#) this year. It's also why he's incorporating Wikispot, the nonprofit he set up to reproduce DavisWiki for other towns and topics, as a 501(c)3.

Looking for a tax write-off, Terry?

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