# Failures that made us better

## A brief history of the Wikimedia Foundation as a learning organization

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# Why talk about failures?

- WMF does many new things, for which there are no ready-made recipes or industry standards.
- Finding out how to do them right is not easy. Elsewhere on the Internet, much of this happens by trial and error (startup culture: don't be afraid to try and fail).
- "Failing well" is important though: Learn from failures, and change course

# This talk

- Overview: historical examples (pre-2014), and a bit about the learning mechanisms in place at WMF today
- Myself: Wikipedian since 2003, working for WMF since 2011, e.g. editing our regular activity reports (quarterly, formerly monthly)
- Presentation is informed by conversations with several current and former WMF staff, in particular Sue Gardner
- ...but POV and mistakes remain my own ;)

*User data retention:*
**The Video Professor Incident (2008)**

**What happened:**
- A US company objected to the description of its business practices on Wikipedia and on other websites.
- It demanded the IP addresses of Wikipedians who had edited the article, in order to sue them.
- After trying to resist, WMF handed over IP addresses, reasoning that the company would still need to subpoena an ISP (Comcast) to obtain real names.
- Wikipedians protested, also because they had never been notified about the demand.

***User data retention:***
**The Video Professor Incident (2008)**

**Changes made:**
WMF made changes in its new data retention policy and privacy policy the same year, e.g. about notifying users when possible, and restricting release of users' private information to narrow exceptions (see also James Alexander's talk).

**Today:**
- see e.g. this week's transparency report: *"None of the 23 user data requests we received (including informal government and non-government requests, one criminal subpoena, and one court order) resulted in the disclosure of nonpublic user information."*
- WMF received a perfect score in the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)'s 2015 "Who's Got Your Back?" report.

*Advertising on Wikipedia*
**The Spanish fork (2002)**

(This actually predates WMF.)
**What happened:**
- A comment by Bomis employee Larry Sanger was (mis)understood as indicating plans to introduce advertising on Wikipedia
- Spanish Wikipedians created a fork (Enciclopedia Libre) that remained ahead of Spanish WP for several years

**Changes made**
None (still no ads) – but avoid misunderstandings

***Employee background checks:***
**Hiring a convicted felon (2007)**

**What happened:**

- An employee with central responsibilities turned out to have an extended criminal record (no wrongdoing at WMF found, but fired nevertheless)

**Changes**

- Routine criminal background checks for new hires. (A usual procedure that WMF would probably have made anyway… but here learned the hard way.)

**Today**

- Background checks "saved us a few times after that".

***Global South strategy:***
**The Catalyst Projects (ca. 2010-2014)**

**What happened**

- Three major projects to support the growth of Wikipedia in the Global South (India, Brazil, Arab countries), run by paid "boots on the ground"

- Various problems, including relationship with local volunteer communities

- Local offices did not happen as planned

*Global South strategy:*
**The Catalyst Projects (ca. 2010-2014)**

## Main lessons

- (in Brazil and India:) **Endorsement and active interest by the community** is essential for effective deployment of paid staff.

- WMF needs to maintain trust and effective with these communities, via **community consultations.**

- In the Global South, most groups need and welcome **proactive support in strategy and non-financial resources.**

## Today:

India program lived on as grant program (CIS), Brazil program ended. Still many activities supported in Middle East.

***Year-end fundraising:***
**The 2003 Christmas outage**

**What happened**

- Days-long Wikipedia outage in December 2003 (Bomis donated a server, but it wasn't enough)

**Changes made**

First ever year-end fundraiser, to fund server purchase. Including the first Jimmy letter, and Slashdot coverage.

**Today**

Still year-end fundraisers

***Introducing Agile software development principles:***
**The Fundraising tech deathmarches**

## What happened:

- A very common thing in software development: Missed deadlines, staff working overtime, burnouts ("nobody stays longer than 2 y on the Fundraising tech team")

## Changes

- Introduction of Agile principles, also elsewhere in Engineering

## Today

- The "Team Practices Group" continues to drive adoption of best practices, to enable developers to deliver on time and on budget.

# Learning mechanisms at WMF today

- A lot is still informal (in people's heads, or mailing list archives)

- But also: quarterly review mechanism: determine success /failure, identify reasons for failure