One of the online lookup resources I am fond of for network-related information is the Wikipedia. This free online encyclopedia has extensive listings of network and security entries that have been helpful to my students and me and that many readers may already be using.

I recently ran across an interesting challenge to the integrity of Wikipedia; perhaps some of you will also be interested in the issue and others will be prompted to examine the resource for yourselves. The case also raises very general questions about the trustworthiness of collaborative documentation efforts on the Web – methods that are may soon be applied to commercial software development.

The issue arose when one of the instructors in the MSIA (Master of Science in Information Assurance) program at Norwich University recently posed the following question to the Lead Instructor for his seminar:

>I came across this article today:

"Librarian: Don't use Wikipedia as source"

The fact is, several of my students do cite Wikipedia in their discussions and essays. Do we have an official MSIA program stance on the legitimacy of such sources? Or is this a matter best left in the hands of individual instructors?<

The article referenced is by Al Fasoldt of _The Post-Standard_ newspaper. He explained that a school librarian pointed out that Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page> is “not the online version of an established, well-researched traditional encyclopedia. Instead, Wikipedia is a do-it-yourself encyclopedia, without any credentials.” The librarian, Susan Stagnitta, wrote, “Anyone can change the content of an article in the Wikipedia, and there is no editorial review of the content.” Mr Fasoldt then goes on to dismiss the entire Wikipedia as untrustworthy.

Not so fast.

I looked at a range of entries concerning information assurance in the Wikipedia and, although I didn’t agree with everything I read, I certainly found no cause for wholesale rejection of this resource. All the articles had cross-references and many had links to authoritative source materials. The overview article on “computer security” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer_security> has a brief summary of key issues and includes many internal and external links.

In addition, although it is true that anyone can modify text, the FAQ <
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:FAQ > has sections that discuss how changes are discussed and accepted or rejected. The process is by no means random. Changes are flagged as major or minor; those who are interested in a particular page can find out when it has been changed and exactly what the changes are. Errors and vandalism can be corrected immediately by reversion to a previous state. Vandals can be blocked from further access to editing functions.

I cannot discount Wikipedia simply because it lacks centralized control; neither does the Web as a whole. The Wikipedia project reports that as of early November, the contributors are working on 385,078 articles. It includes facilities collaboration by people from around the world, including groups for serious discussion of articles, lists of open tasks and specific requests for help in active projects.

From a security standpoint, I have no particular complaints; the resource is at least as good a contribution as many a commercial site I have looked through. As always, _caveat emptor_: translating loosely here, “user beware.”

So in summary, far from dismissing this resource, I think it is a useful and exciting venture. My hope is that some among you will be sufficiently pleased to contribute to the work and thus improve a resource that can benefit network and security managers in the long run.

Interestingly, NewsScan editors John Gehl and Suzanne Douglas published the following interesting summary of new applications of the “Wiki” phenomenon in a recent issue of their INNOVATION magazine:

>SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT THE WIKI WAY
A Palo Alto startup called JotSpot plans to offer tech-savvy people a shortcut to software development by harnessing the power of once-obscure Web software called wiki (Hawaiian for "quick"). Wikis are collaborative sites that allow visitors to post and edit material, and are making their way into the corporate world for communications among team or committee members or tracking customer support. "Like eBay empowers the part-time seller, we want to empower part-time programmers," says JotSpot co-founder and CEO Joe Kraus. "We've lowered the energy and skill level required to create an application." JotSpot does this by providing basic programming components that users can assemble, Lego-style, to create their own customized applications. And while there are certainly thousands of off-the-shelf software programs to manage customers and company resources that businesses could install, companies like SAP, PeopleSoft and Siebel Systems specialize in software that's expensive, complex and inflexible. One sign that JotSpot might be on to something is a recent move by Microsoft and IBM to incorporate the wiki concept into some of their collaborative applications, and Netscape co-founder Marc Andreessen's endorsement of wikis as the most efficient way to compile customer data. "Information just flows a lot more quickly," he notes. (Business Week 6 Oct 2004)<

Go see for yourselves!

* * *

For further reading:
Hof, R. (2004). Do-It-Yourself Software for All? Upstart JotSpot aims to tap the power of "wiki" software and let nonexperts become their own programmers.

A Master’s degree in the management of information assurance in 18 months of online study from Norwich University – see

M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP is Associate Professor in the Division of Business and Management at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. Mich can be reached by e-mail at <mailto:mkabay@norwich.edu>; Web site at <http://www.mekabay.com/index.htm>.

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