



Wikipedia: Ban It or Boost It?

“Wikipedia Celebrates 750 Years of American Independence”

—headline from *The Onion*, July 26, 2006

A collective gasp and shudder went palpably through the entire room of library media specialists when I first heard a conference presenter describe how Wikipedia (<http://wikipedia.org>) entries are written—by anyone, at any time, on nearly any topic. No editors or editorial process. Instantaneous changes. Faith that the “lay” viewer of the entry will correct any inaccurate information found. Wikipedia flaunts every rule our library schools taught us about the authority of a reference source.

Wikipedia, that growing, user-created online encyclopedia, is the poster child for Web 2.0 and is fostering a sea change in ideas about the credibility and value of information, products, and services. The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote: “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.” Since it has emerged on the scene in 2001, Wikipedia seems to have already gone through Schopenhauer’s “stages of truth” in the general public’s mind. More than a million people a day visit the site.

The thought of a reference source that anyone can edit seems ridiculous on its face to those of us who have been taught to identify the reliability of a resource using traditional criteria. And indeed there have been highly publicized cases of deliberately false, even malicious, content placed in Wikipedia entries. But when *Nature* magazine reported a study late in 2005 that

showed *Encyclopedia Britannica* and Wikipedia were comparatively accurate in their respective science entries, the theory of “self-correcting” information seemed to be validated. Historian Roy Rosenzweig defends the accuracy of Wikipedia entries as well: “Wikipedia is surprisingly accurate in reporting names, dates, and events in U.S. history. In the 25 biographies I read closely, I found clear-cut factual errors in only four. Most were small and inconsequential.” And on May 8, 2006, respected *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman quoted from Wikipedia to define “conspiracy theory.”

Ridicule, opposition, self-evidence. Where are you? How many of you already turn to Wikipedia for a quick understanding of a topic? How many of your students do? And how do you counsel them when asked about accuracy? Should Wikipedia be an accepted source for a research assignment?

Although it is difficult to give Wikipedia a blanket endorsement, it can be a valuable resource for students and staff alike. Why would you turn to Wikipedia instead of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*?

It has a wider scope. As of August 2006, Wikipedia contained more than a million articles in its English-language version; *Encyclopedia Britannica* had 65,000 articles in its 2005 print edition and 120,000 in the online edition. In her delightful *New Yorker* article, Stacy Schiff writes:

By Doug Johnson

Doug Johnson has been director of media and technology for the Mankato (Minnesota) Public Schools since 1991. He is a veteran author whose works have appeared in books, journals, and magazines. Johnson serves on ISTE’s board of directors and as a volunteer columnist for L&L.

“Apparently, no traditional encyclopedia has ever suspected that someone might wonder about Sudoku or about prostitution in China. Or, for that matter, about Capgras delusion (the unnerving sensation that an impostor is sitting in for a close relative), the Boston molasses disaster, the Rhinoceros Party of Canada, Bill Gates’ house, the forty-five-minute Anglo-Zanzibar War, or Islam in Iceland. Wikipedia includes fine entries on Kafka and the War of Spanish Succession, and also a complete guide to the ships of the U.S. Navy, a definition of Philadelphia cheesesteak, a masterly page on Scrabble, a list of historical cats (celebrity cats, a cat millionaire, the first feline to circumnavigate Australia), a survey of invented expletives in fiction (“bippie,” “cakesniffer,” “furple”), instructions for curing hiccups, and an article that describes, with schematic diagrams, how to build a stove from a discarded soda can.”

It has up-to-date information on timely topics. Wikipedia may be one’s only reference source on recent technologies and events. For current popular social concepts such as “the long tail,” technology terms such as “GNU,” or up-to-date information on political groups such as Hezbollah, print or traditionally edited sources can’t keep up. (As I write this, dozens of updates have been made to the Hezbollah entry already today.)

Web 2.0 sources may state values closer to that of the reader. The voice of the common man, vox populi, is being heard and heeded as a source of authentic, reliable information. My own view of the reliability of informa-

tion has changed. In selecting hotels, I now use TripAdvisor.com, with its multiple, recent, and personal reviews of lodging rather than Fodors or Frommers. Why? It’s more accurate, timely, and allows me to read a variety of opinions. This has become my habit with almost any consumer-type purchase. What do “real” people have to say?

Controversial/undocumented information is noted as such. David Weinberger writes, “There’s one more sign of credibility of a Wikipedia page: If it contains a warning about the reliability of the page, we’ll trust it more. This is only superficially contradictory.” Wikipedia entries are flagged with readily visible warnings such as “The neutrality and factual accuracy of this article are disputed. See the relevant discussion on the talk page.” The user who reads the “talk page” will glean an understanding of the controversies about the topic.

Hey, it’s only an encyclopedia! Basic references sources—whether Wikipedia or *World Book*—should be used to get a general overview of a topic or put a topic in context, not be used as a sole and final authoritative source.

We also need to teach our students strategies for evaluating Wikipedia entries—indeed, any information source online or in print. Even very young students can and should be learning to consider the accuracy and potential bias of information sources. Because junior high students can make Web sites that look better than those of college professors, appearance is no guarantee of authority. We need to teach students to look:

- For the same information from multiple sources
- At the age of the page
- At the credentials and affiliation of the author
- For both stated and unstated biases by the page author or sponsor.

Kathy Schrock has a useful and comprehensive approach to Web site evaluation at <http://schrockguide.org/abceval>, listing 13 questions students might ask to determine the reliability of a resource.

As students use research to solve problems about controversial social and ethical issues, the ability to evaluate and defend one’s choice of information source becomes as important as finding an answer to the research itself. As the Internet (and especially Web 2.0) allows a cacophony of voices to rise, expressing an increasing range of views, a conclusion without defensible sources in its support will not be of value.

Look that up in your *Funk and Wagnalls*...er, Wikipedia.

Resources

- Rosenzweig, R. (2006). Can history be open source? Wikipedia and the future of the past. *Journal of American History*, 93(1). Available: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/resources/essays/d/42>
- Schiff, S. (2006). Know it all: Can Wikipedia conquer expertise? *New Yorker*, July 31. Available: http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/060731fa_fact
- Schrock, K. (n.d.). *The ABC’s of Website Evaluation*. Available: <http://schrockguide.org/abceval>
- Weinberger, D. (2006). Why believe Wikipedia? *JOHO: Journal of Hyperlinked Organization*, July 23. Available: <http://www.hyperorg.com/backissues/joho-jul23-06.html#wikipedia>