

infolitland

What to Do With Wikipedia

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If you want to get five opinions from four information professionals, just mention Wikipedia. Often banned by professors, panned by traditional reference book publishers, and embraced by just about everyone else, Wikipedia marches on like a great beast, growing larger and more commanding every day. With no paid editors and written by almost anyone, it shouldn't have succeeded, but it has. In fact, it's now emerged as the No. 1 go-to information source in the world. It's used not only by the great unwashed but also by many educated people as well. *ONLINE* reported on the Pew Internet & American Life Project's findings that 36% of the American population regularly consult Wikipedia (July/August 2007, p. 6).

Admit it—you use Wikipedia too. Someone comes to you wanting to know how to find some good stuff on quantum physics, so you sneak a peak at the relevant Wikipedia article just so you won't sound stupid to your patron. Or someone queries, "What year did George Washington die?" and you could look it up in Oxford Reference, but you don't. I mean, even Wikipedia couldn't get the date of George Washington's death date wrong, could it?

Maybe the newer, supposedly more reliable Citizendium (<http://en.citizendium.org>) will provide a better alternative, but the standards for Citizendium article production are not much higher than those for Wikipedia. Moreover, Wikipedia remains the online encyclopedia of choice for users.

Some Just Don't Like It

There are detractors. I know of any number of professors who will not allow a Wikipedia article to appear in a student's research paper. Wikipedia is labeled as shallow, unreliable, sometimes slanderous, and too often dead wrong. On a more philosophical note, Wikipedia is viewed as the child of our postmodern age in which "truth" is measured by how many people believe something.

The satirist Stephen Colbert introduced the term "Wikiality" (truth by consensus) to poke fun at the concept that if enough people support a Wikipedian statement it becomes true (*The Colbert Report*, July 30, 2006; www.comedycentral.com/motherload/index.jhtml?ml_video=72347). This is closely related to another term Colbert created: "truthiness" (*The Colbert Report*, Oct. 17, 2005; www.comedycentral.com/motherload/index.jhtml?ml_video=24039). Researchers at the University of California at Santa Cruz have created software that uses the measures of age of an entry and number of edits to gauge reliability of articles (the code was released on Dec. 14, 2007). But this, of course, only determines level of consensus (<http://trust.cse.ucsc.edu>).

Which begs the question: If Wikipedia is so bad that we caution our students not to use it for academic work, how can it be so good that much of what you need to know is found there?

Wikipedia's Edge

Though traditional encyclopedia producers disdain it, Wikipedia has an edge in one area—currency. If I want an article on "folksonomy," I can't find it in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, whereas Wikipedia will instantly tell

me that it is “a user-generated taxonomy used to categorize and retrieve web content...using open-ended labels called tags.” A month after the terrible Asian tsunami of Dec. 26, 2004, I found a very helpful Wikipedia article detailing what was known about what happened, why it happened, and the results (“2004 Indian Ocean earthquake”). As far as I could determine, it was all good stuff.

Wikipedia has another edge—millions of devoted users who simply don’t understand what all the fuss is about. They find reliable material (for the most part), get their questions answered (usually), and recognize how easy it is to use.

We know from history that prohibition is not a viable means to control consumption of “bad” things. This is especially the case for Wikipedia if information professionals are sneakily using it themselves. Like the 1930s war on alcohol, a ban on Wikipedia would mean far more losses than gains.

The DumBing Down of the Academic World

Academia has an edge too—its expertise, built upon years of study at a depth most people can scarcely imagine. The elites of the academic world have a message for the rest of us: “We are the people who know things. If you want to know things, you have to come to us.”

But notice how very analog that is, just as much of academia remains analog and simply has not bought into the amazing power of the digital Information Age. For most academics, peer review and print publication are a mainstay. True, academia has made concessions to digital reference sources, electronic full text, and open access. But all of this is simply an electronic format for an analog world in which most of what is available as electronic full text has a counterpart print version. Even those peer-reviewed, open access, online-only journals are produced by the same principles as print production—submission to an editor, peer review, and publication in tidy volumes and issue numbers.

Wikipedia is an affront to academia, because it undercuts what makes academics the elite in society. In saying that, I am not condemning academia. Unless there are people with required training who can produce knowledge by required standards, the whole academic enterprise falls apart. Thus, the academic world could justly believe that Wikipedia is an assault upon its very reason for being. Wikipedia doesn’t depend on elite scholars. There’s no peer review, except after the fact by volunteer watchdogs. No editors, no easy-to-find revision dates (unless you know to click on the “History” tab). In fact, the article I read this morning may be very different when I go back to later this afternoon.

This amounts, at first glance, to a dumbing down of knowledge. If the average university student can safely go to Wikipedia instead of consulting a specialized print reference source, then academia is broken. It is a finger in the eye of the whole academic enterprise. It’s as if our students are saying, “We don’t care if it breaks the rules, deceives us, or is dumber than print reference books. We like Wikipedia, and it rarely lets us down.”

The Wikipedia issue has become a flashpoint for information literacy. On one side, we have opponents who view Wikipedia users as ignorant of the need to use reliable sources when doing academic work. On the other, we have devoted users who have embraced this tool as the crown jewel of the new digital information world.

Moving Beyond the Impasse

Wikipedia itself provides disclaimers and advice on comparing information in its site with that found in other sources. Thus, blaming Wikipedia for its influence on young people is scarcely fair, although we know that most people don't read directions.

Banning Wikipedia from the academic world doesn't work either. It doesn't prevent students from using it secretly (or plagiarizing from it), plus it helps further the anti-academic subculture. We need to be aware that academia is primarily analog and that our students are largely digital. Academics have, for the most part, yet to embrace the new reality that much of the information produced today comes from the users of that information. These users are blithely establishing a whole other world out there, where their information needs may, in their view, be better met by a YouTube video than an article from *Journal of Echocardiography*.

But isn't that just the point? Wikipedia users appear to be abandoning a world of certainty for an intangible universe made up of half-blown ideas and blatant errors. The problem is, they have not abandoned anything. They have never been part of the analog generation. Wikipedia is their world, and it has met their needs wonderfully. To tell them to use only the print encyclopedias for reference information is to make them ask, "Why should I when Wikipedia is at my fingertips?" They don't know the analog world very well, and what they see is a law of diminishing returns—too much effort for too little benefit.

Academia can insist that Wikipedia be banned and that students spend their time in the analog or analog-digital realms, but that makes academia an anachronism. As soon as these students get out of our clutches, they'll abandon us as old-fashioned and eccentric.

We could take the other tack and simply accept Wikipedia as the new benchmark for the Information Age. But we know that there are resources far better equipped to give students what they really need. In fact, most students are unaware of just how much quality information is available to them. So leaving them with Wikipedia alone hardly seems an option.

Embracing the World of Wikipedia

Figuring out what to do with Wikipedia is part of a larger question: When is academia going to acknowledge the elephant in the room? Over the past decade, the web has become the primary informational environment for the average student. This is where our students live. Wrenching them out of it in the name of academic quality is simply not going to work.

But the genius of the web is that it is a means, not an end. The same medium that brings us Wikipedia also brings us e-reference and e-journals. Thus we have an opportunity to introduce Wikipedia devotees to three undiscovered realities:

1. Truth to tell, much of Wikipedia is simply amazing in its detail, currency, and accuracy. Denying this is tantamount to taking ourselves out of the new digital reality. But we need to help our students see that Wikipedia is also an environment for shallow thinking, debates over interpretation, and the settling of scores. Wikipedia itself advises that its users consult other sources to verify the information they are finding. If a key element in information literacy is the ability to evaluate information, what better place to start than with Wikipedia? We can help students to distinguish the trite from the brilliant and encourage them to check their Wikipedia information against other sources.

2. We need to introduce students to digital resources that are, in many cases, stronger than Wikipedia. Some of these are freely available online, like the amazing Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu>). Others may be commercial e-reference sources with no barrier except a user name and password.

3. The most daring solution would be for academia to enter the world of Wikipedia directly. Rather than throwing rocks at it, the academy has a unique opportunity to engage Wikipedia in a way that marries the digital generation with the academic enterprise. How about these options:

- A professor writes or rewrites Wikipedia articles, learning the system and improving the product.
- A professor takes his or her class through a key Wikipedia article on a topic related to the course, pointing out its strengths and weaknesses, editing it to be a better reflection of reality.
- A professor or information literacy instructor assigns groups of students to evaluate and edit Wikipedia articles, using research from other sources as an evaluative tool.
- A course takes on specific Wikipedia topics as heritage articles. The first group of students creates the articles and successive groups update and expand on them. In this way, collections of key “professor approved” articles can be produced in many subject areas, making Wikipedia better and better as time goes on.

If you want to see further options, Wikipedia itself provides examples (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School_and_university_projects).

What to Do with Wikipedia

When academia finally recognizes that Wikipedia is here to stay and that we can either fight it or improve it, we may finally discover that professors and students have come to a meeting of minds. This doesn't mean that Wikipedia articles will now be fully acceptable in research paper bibliographies. But surely there is a middle ground that connects instruction on evaluation with judicious use of Wikipedia information.

Ultimately, the academy has to stop fighting Wikipedia and work to make it better. Academic administrators need to find ways to recognize Wikipedia writing as part of legitimate scholarship for tenure, promotion, and research points. When professors are writing the articles or guiding their students in article production and revision, we may become much less paranoid about this wildly popular resource. Rather than castigating it, we can use it as a tool to improve information literacy.