

Wiki-what-ia? Approaching Encyclopedia Entries in the Electronic Age

Kristen King

With the era of e-communication in full swing, changes are showing up across the board in publishing. Editing and composition tools have morphed into something faster and more technologic, so it only makes sense that research tools would follow suit.

Enter Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), a free, collaboratively built online encyclopedia. Wikipedia, which was started in 2001, had nearly 1.5 million entries in English alone as of this writing and articles available in more than 100 languages.

Anyone with Internet access can edit, correct, or create entries, and more than 65,000 people around the world do so actively. Because of its wide content base and ready availability, Wikipedia is gaining speed as a resource for students and researchers. But does the communal, everyman approach to its writing make it a stronger source for information, or a weaker one?

Evaluating the Evidence

According to a 2005 study by *Nature*,¹ Wikipedia may be holding its own as far as reliability goes, with an average of about four errors per article for Wikipedia compared with about three per article for *Encyclopædia Britannica* (EB).² However, EB disputes those results, stating in a 20-page rebuttal in March 2006 that “almost everything about [Nature’s] investigation . . . was wrong and misleading. . . . The study was so poorly carried out and its findings so error-laden that it was completely without merit.” In the same document, titled “Fatally Flawed: Refuting the Recent Study on Encyclopedic Accuracy by the

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Journal *Nature*”, EB urged *Nature* to “issue a full and public retraction of the article”.³ *Nature* declined and published an editorial responding to and discrediting each of EB’s claims.⁴

Although *Nature* seems to have made up its mind, the jury is still out in the scientific editing community. “I understand that Wikipedia can often give helpful lay summaries of important topics. Sometimes I consult it to satisfy my curiosity or find more information. But given that . . . Wikipedia is not a static source, my gut tells me to give a more formal citation,” says Gabe Waggoner, a technical editor and former *Science Editor* intern in College Station, Texas. “More and more authors are starting to cite this resource. This trend reminds me of a quip I heard: ‘. . . and here’s the Wikipedia article I made up—er, found—to support my argument.’”

Waggoner is not alone in his concerns. Says Katy German, a project editor for Benjamin Cummins in Pacifica, California, “I think Wikipedia is a nice idea that cannot fulfill its mission: to be an accurate encyclopedic online reference tool. Anyone can enter information, but there is no expert evaluation of that information, even for those articles which have moderator oversight. Even if authors are not vandals, they can enter incorrect information. With no review process implemented and managed by scholars or other authorities, I feel I cannot trust the information in Wikipedia.”

German brings out a point shared by others who commented on Wikipedia’s usefulness and reliability in scholarly works: the absence of a peer-review process. The information found in Wikipedia articles isn’t necessarily incorrect, but there’s no formal process for verifying that every article is accurate. However, according to Wikipedia, that’s what the open-editing function is supposed to provide. A reader who finds an inaccuracy need only click

the “edit this page” tab that appears at the top of nearly every Wikipedia article. When the edit screen appears, the reader can either log in to (or create) a Wikipedia user account or edit without logging in; this records the IP (internet protocol) address from which the editorial change was made in the page’s editing history.

Meaning and Merit

“I find the whole proposition intellectually and emotionally exciting. The idea that a freely editable communal document could eventually become an extremely polished, valuable, basically unimpeachable source of information is wonderful to me,” says Carol E Church, an editor for the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences in Gainesville. “I also love the fact that Wikipedia is not at all limited to the traditional degreed and pedigreed experts and academics. I actually had a heated discussion with a friend of mine (not an editor) about this topic. She maintained that because it is not written by commonly recognized experts and is freely editable, Wikipedia will always be inherently suspect and will never be a truly reliable resource. I maintained that it may well eventually become an academically reliable resource if the right safeguards are in place and if people keep an open mind.”

Church’s hopes for Wikipedia don’t seem to be out of the question, considering the favorable reviews the encyclopedia has received, both in *Nature* and elsewhere. An informal evaluation in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in October 2006 gave Wikipedia grades of B-, C, and A on three articles reviewed by scholars.⁵ In July 2005, the *Roanoke Times* asked Virginia professors to examine Wikipedia articles in their fields of expertise. Results were mixed but mostly favorable, and one professor actually corrected some of the inaccuracies he found, demonstrating the usefulness of the

What in the World Is a Wiki?

Not to be confused with a Wookiee, a fictional species of biped created by George Lucas in the *Star Wars* films, a wiki is a collaborative Web site or the software that supports it. *Wiki wiki* means “quick” in Hawaiian, so it’s the perfect term to describe a site that’s freely editable by any of its users: Click, type, click again, and the wiki is updated.

Wikipedia, probably the best-known wiki right now, is the ultimate example of collective authorship, with its community of more than 65,000 active contributors around the globe. Although registering for a Wikipedia user account is encouraged, it’s not required to create an article or make changes in

an existing one in this online encyclopedia.

The steps for editing a Wikipedia article are simple:

- Click on the “edit this page” tab at the top of any article you’d like to edit.
- Make your changes in the editing window that appears.
- Use the self-explanatory buttons at the top of the editing window to insert links or images, apply heading styles, or add mathematical formulas.
- Type a quick summary of your changes (for example, “added info on recent discovery”).
- Click “Show preview” to make sure everything looks okay.
- Click “Submit”.

Visit Wikipedia at www.wikipedia.org to access, add, or edit entries from any Internet-capable device.

anyone-can-edit feature.⁶

That being said, “eventually” isn’t here yet, and many folks are cautious about putting too many eggs in the Wikipedia basket. “I like being able to do research electronically, but I filter out a lot of what I read,” says Jane Lyle, an article editor in Bloomington, Indiana. “I think there is a time and place for the ‘real people’ sites, but I’m more enthused about the more scholarly material that is now becoming available online.”

Betsy Garman, a copyeditor at the American Society of Clinical Oncology, agrees with Lyle’s sentiment. “Wikipedia should not be a substitute for research within a specific field, and overall I suggest finding a more standard source (such as a book or journal articles) and citing it. . . . I think that the acceptance of Wikipedia as a credible and common source will change, and in time citing it will become more popular, and perhaps even the norm,” Garman says. “As long as material is reliable, I am thankful that it is becoming more readily available. Over time, I think that it will become more possible to produce a quality research product without spending a large quantity of time with physical resources or in a library. Libraries are expanding their online resources and databases because they recognize the importance of electronic information-sharing and the ways

that research is changing.”

Garman raises a good point about the more ready availability of information and research to a broader audience through online tools. Although accuracy can be an issue at times, accessibility and participation may offset that challenge. With Wikipedia, scholarship is open to anyone with knowledge on a topic, not only those whom many see as being in the ivory towers of formal education, as Church suggested. Furthermore, its electronic format, coupled with its open authorship, allows Wikipedia to provide information on potentially infinite subjects, whereas traditional encyclopedias are typically confined by space and available “scholarly” resources.

However, neither Wikipedia nor a traditional encyclopedia should be the be-all and end-all of any research, because of the sheer fact that encyclopedic information isn’t comprehensive but rather is an overview of a topic. “Before I started editing full-time, I taught college-level grammar and composition,” says Desiree Talbert, an editor for the National Council of Examiners for Engineering and Surveying in Clemson, South Carolina. “I would tell my freshman students to look at encyclopedias at the beginning of the research process. They’re a good place to start your research but not a good place to end it.”

Drawing the Line

Because Wikipedia isn’t officially peer-reviewed, Talbert feels that caveats beyond the normal encyclopedia cautions may be in order. “With Wikipedia”, she says, “I’d take my advice a step further. It is certainly the easiest reference to find, but is it *ever* the best? Citing Wikipedia doesn’t suggest thorough research; more likely, it means that the author took the easy way out. Is that the kind of source that should support a scholarly article?”

Beth Kamp, vice president for scientific services at ApotheCom Associates LLC in Yardley, Pennsylvania, says that her medical communications company has instituted a strict no-Wikipedia policy for use in its projects. “I’m sure writers in my group have used Wikipedia to look things up, but they are required to go to the original source. It would never be used to confirm data obtained from scientific databases,” Kamp says. “In my opinion, there is no reason to cite Wikipedia in scientific writing, and if I found that a submitted article had done so, I would probably question all the content in the piece. My biggest concern is that many people, lay public and scientists alike, do not understand the limitations of Wikipedia, or any Web site content for that matter, and accept information at face value.”

Kamp’s comments reiterate Waggoner’s

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observation that Wikipedia is useful for getting basic information on a topic or finding an explanation in lay terms but not for definitive research. Says Kamp, “I do believe that we are moving to a completely electronic world and do see the need for electronic databases and ‘freedom of information’. In the same breath, the medical community has made huge strides toward evidence-based medicine; thus, non-peer-reviewed literature works completely against this premise. Until I can see that there’s an editorial board of peers reviewing and critiquing the content or some other system of checks and balances, I can’t see the true utility of something like Wikipedia in medical writing.”

Church echoes that sentiment. “I do not feel it is currently appropriate to cite Wikipedia in scholarly work, but I would add that this is in part because I don’t feel that it is yet accepted practice. At

this time, it will make the author appear amateurish to some”, she says. “I do use it casually in my own work, but I would not accept it is as a sole authority, even for a minor fact. I would double check.”

Tallying the Votes

So what’s the verdict on Wikipedia? Talbert sums it up succinctly: “If I find something in Wikipedia, chances are I can find similar (and maybe even exactly the same) information in a more reputable source.” In other words, until it’s been around a little longer, Wikipedia is probably best regarded as a stop along the way, not the final destination for research. 📌

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Correction

In the January-February issue of *Science Editor*, the report on the annual-meeting session “Capturing, Interpreting, and Using Your Web Use Statistics” (page 11) should have identified the moderator: Seth Beckerman, Business & Technical Communications, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.