

Wikipedia, The Review

How the online behemoth compares to standard reference works

By Robert Eiffert -- School Library Journal, 3/1/2006

While media specialists and librarians would agree that no one should rely on any single source for research, we all have our favorite tools, especially when doing searching online. Google or Clusty, for example, might be the search engine we choose for a quick consult, in those instances when we don't utilize a database or encyclopedia.

Through our choices, we model research behavior for both students and teachers, who rely on us to identify the best and most authoritative resources available.

Among the reference choices in cyberspace, there's Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org). The popular online encyclopedia, whose entries are written and edited by any user, may inspire trepidation, even fear, yet the behemoth is impossible to ignore. What should we make of it as educators? Is Wikipedia an appropriate reference for our students?

Accuracy

Wikipedia has been widely embraced by the general public, while also drawing plenty of controversy. Reports of inaccuracy, bias, and vandalism have plagued Wikipedia since its launch in 2001.

In December 2005, the journal *Nature* published a head-to-head comparison of Wikipedia and Encyclopedia Britannica (EB). EB came out with only slightly fewer factual errors, which the media represented as a vindication of Wikipedia. However, most accounts failed to mention that the Wikipedia articles selected for the study had writers and editors with some expertise, and were often shorter in length compared to their counterparts in EB. Moreover, some Wikipedia articles actually contained twice as many errors. *Nature's* study reviewed articles on aldol, epitaxy, Stephen Wolfram and many other topics that would be infrequently used by students, making it difficult to use the study as a basis for recommending Wikipedia here.

Even the most ardent Wikipedia fans, while praising its growing size and editor base, still caution against relying on it as a sole source of information. Wikipedia itself provides evaluative tools for selecting sources and stresses the importance of citing those sources. Based on the talk-back pages that accompany each article, the Wikipedia community appears to be concerned about fact-checking entries and the over-reliance on online sources used to create Wikipedia articles. Users have also raised questions over the relative expertise of article authors and editors.

The ease of creating or editing an article is one of the most attractive features of Wikipedia. But it also opens the door to vandalism. One well-publicized example involved television journalist John Seigenthaler, whose biographical entry in Wikipedia described his direct involvement in the assassination of President Kennedy. More recently, Senate office staff have been accused of deleting or altering Wikipedia entries about opposing party members. While proponents of Wikipedia claim that vigilant contributors maintain the accuracy of articles by immediately correcting errors, Seigenthaler's "biography" stayed online for four months before being fixed.

One can assess the history of changes that accompany each article, showing how long the current version has been up and all changes made since the article's first posting. The history page also notes who was responsible for each change, with links to all that party's other contributions to Wikipedia. The site has altered its policy for writers, who are now required to log in prior to creating new pages. Unfortunately, that requirement does not extend to editors of existing pages.

Readability

Overall, Wikipedia entries vary widely in terms of the writing. The text can be confusing for younger readers and many entries are overly lengthy. But editing, by and large, is relatively minor; contributors seem reluctant to rewrite sections that have grown ungainly in structure and content. Confusing text, lack of useful links, and no editorial

accommodation of younger users make some articles less useful than those found in traditional encyclopedias, books, and Web sites developed and selected specifically for our patrons.

Scope

With Wikipedia there are no limitations on subject matter—anyone can write about anything. With its all-encompassing, often eclectic topic range, Wikipedia provides information unavailable in standard references. For example, Wikipedia might be the only encyclopedic, edited resource on new topics in political science, emerging science, technology, or current events. It also means there are articles on defunct '70s rock bands and obscure patron saints, written with as much passion and research as articles on Queen Boadicea, or Dwight D. Eisenhower.

According to the *Nature* report, however, Wikipedia gives “undue prominence to controversial scientific theories.” So you'll find a “Validity of Astrology” article, and in the entry on Black Death, the cause of the Bubonic Plague is described as “theory.”

Style and Layout

Online versions of WorldBook (WB) and EB place the article index in a sidebar, providing easy access to any article section. Wikipedia's indices appear after the introduction of the article, requiring the user to scroll up to find the index. Encyclopedia Americana (EA) requires users to open a second window for the index. I like Wikipedia's articles appearing on a single page so users can word-search the entire article quickly. This can be especially helpful when there isn't a full article on the topic and the search engine points you to an entry, but doesn't send you to the particular section. EB's and EA's search does point to and takes you to the needed section; WB sends you to the lead section, but leaves it to the reader to figure out the subsection that is most likely to contain the needed information. WB requires clicking back and forth to find elusive bits of information. On slower connections, that can frustrate users waiting for pages to load.

Wikipedia seems to be developing a more consistent layout for country and state entries; teachers and librarians have always appreciated consistent formats when presenting this information, which enables students to make comparisons. However, with no supervising editor, Wikipedia's content is frequently inconsistent in terms of format, styles, size, and quality of maps and other graphic material.

Side-by-side Comparison

Respective articles describing the Black Death provide a good look at how the encyclopedias compare. Wikipedia far surpasses the others in length, 6,500 words compared to 580 in EB and WB's 570 (as part of the article on plague), and 3,500 in EA. The EB and WB Black Death articles provide the briefest of overviews, not much more than a social studies text provides and doesn't send the user anywhere for more detail. Meanwhile, EA gives a good accounting of the main points.

EB states that the plague was started in Europe by a “Kipchak army, besieging a Genoese trading post in the Crimea,” which catapulted “plague-infested corpses into the town.” WB and EA say the cause of the plague was rats transported on ships from the Middle East. Wikipedia, which also shares the rat theory, goes more in depth than the other sources, describing how poor sanitation, crowding, and famine exacerbated the disaster. However, perhaps because of multiple contributors, paragraphs in Wikipedia bounce from one topic to another, and many of the internal links are not helpful.

The Black Death entries in WB and EB have no bibliography, while EA cites five books and three Web sites. Wikipedia lists eight books and provides links to many primary and secondary resources online. A search for “Black Death” in Wikipedia, EB, and EA retrieves the entry Black Death as the first hit, while WB forces you to scroll down a list to find the best hit, which is listed as Plague.

While the reading level of these four encyclopedias is about the same, Wikipedia suffers from discussions of side topics that would be better expanded to separate articles.

Intelligent Design is treated to its own article in Wikipedia, while WB discusses it only briefly in three separate articles (“Creationism,” “Evolution,” and “Fundamentalism”). EA does not have an entry for Intelligent Design, while EB includes a section in the evolution article, which focuses on William Paley, the Anglican priest whose 1802 book *Natural Theology* originated the designer argument. A complex topic, in manageable paragraphs and logical transitions, this signed article will help answer questions. However, there is no bibliography or links to further information.

Wikipedia’s entry on Intelligent Design is three times longer (6,300 words) than EB’s and is heavily footnoted (70 notes as of February 8), citing primary sources as well as popular and scientific publications. This article provides good working definitions of the terminology—much needed to follow the arguments. There is also discussion of some concepts (i.e. Specified Complexity) missing in the EB article. Where EB doesn’t mention any of the political or social controversies involved, and WB just briefly mentions Intelligent Design’s rise in the 1990s, Wikipedia devotes nearly a third of the article to the political and social impact of Intelligent Design.

Intelligent Design is probably one of the most watched and edited articles on Wikipedia’s site. There were nearly 500 edits (including reversions) in January 2006 alone. Vandalism is fixed in minutes. There is a healthy discussion of concepts that extends beyond the page. The writing is generally clear, with interested editors reviewing and revising. There is a short, well-edited set of links to further resources, with annotations regarding which side of the argument they fall on. Unfamiliar terms are linked to articles for further explanation.

Newton’s laws of motion in WB are covered in 400 words at an 8.4 reading level, with very basic definitions. There are no images to clarify the concepts that can confuse a middle school student. EB, with almost double the words at an 11 level, offers one simple diagram, but does not identify which law it illustrates. Only the third law has examples, even though EB says that the second law is the most important. Meanwhile, EA describes the three laws of motion within a “Motion” article. Comparable in level and word count to WB, it provides small images with captions for each law. But the layout is confusing; the illustration for the third law appears to be a part of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. Grolier’s Popular Science Encyclopedia, at 1,400 words for the three laws of motion section of the “Motion” article, offers multiple examples, including pop-up illustrations.

The Wikipedia article, at 2,300 words, fully explains the formulas for the second law and select terms link to other articles for further clarification. Wikipedia also includes an image of the first edition of Newton’s *Principia Mathematica*. There are six links to additional resources, including a video and two textbooks online. None of the subscription encyclopedias specifically cite what resource gave what fact, but Wikipedia is starting to, especially in controversial and newer articles.

Bottom line: Subject to ongoing critical review, Wikipedia articles are generally well-researched and substantiated by footnoting and linking to sources, allowing readers to judge the quality of information being used. Moreover, Wikipedia entries often have more, and more current information. That said, no resource can be considered infallible, including Wikipedia. Ultimately, reliance on any single reference will not help students develop the necessary understanding of a subject that’s needed to successfully complete projects.

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