

Wikipedia and the Collaborative Library
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Introduction

An e-mailed open-ended question was sent to researchers, information brokers, content management specialists and association professionals in December 2009. The participants were members of the Special Libraries Association, American Library Association, and Maryland Library Association. This was a study for a course on integrating technology within a classroom.

When Wikipedia, advertised as the free encyclopedia, first appeared on the Net, it was a unique project to allow an online community, inhabitants of Earth, to contribute to knowledge that people may or may not have known. Because of the creative spirits of some of the members, some Wikipedia entries can become corrupt. Are there sufficient watchdogs in Wikipedia to stop wrong information from being posted? Luckily, other members can “red flag” entries that have questionable content. This alerts problematic entries to Wikipedia editors.

Some institutions and associations have posted pages dedicated to their subject areas. They also have a dedicated staff member to monitor and maintain the pages so that they always have the correct information for their staff, members and public online community. Wikipedia is a great place to start when looking for information. If online members use it for technical issues, they may find themselves constantly updating the pages with those issues stated in their content. Engineering pages can be updated and maintained by online members who have that knowledge.

How many qualified people are actually contributing to Wikipedia? If more contributors are subject specialists for those articles, then Wikipedia could be a professional learning network full of possibilities. The negative light is that anyone can put themselves into Wikipedia and put their accomplishments in the entry. Anyone can edit that entry and anyone can post anything to any entry.

Survey Participants

The following map shows locations, within the United States, of the participants who answered Yes to the question: “Are you using Wikipedia as a research tool?” The participants were also in Canada, India and the United Kingdom.



Wikipedia research usage

All of the participants stated that they used Wikipedia for the following research:

1. Definitions
2. Historical Dates
3. Biographies
4. *See Also References* (pointers to other sources of information)
5. Geography

Wikipedia's Reliability

Some of the participants used to think Wikipedia was a scam at the beginning but now all of them see it as a way of life when researching. The participants said that Wikipedia should not be used as the primary source. It should be used as a guide to help you get your footing in the research subject area that you are pursuing. If it can be verified that the pages you need are being maintained by subject specialists (people skilled and have knowledge in that subject area), then you may want to use the page but cite the other sources that are scholarly and verified to have accurate information.

Participants viewed Wikipedia as a generic online encyclopedia. They did not see any academic or scientific quality implied. Wikipedia for a general subject overview is helpful through its reference section. Participants believed that the inaccuracies within Wikipedia are no different than the errors you may find in printed reference sources. One participant remembered how librarians use to update their printed reference sources by handwriting new information into the printed source.

Wikipedia organizes information pertaining to different subject areas into specific pages with a search engine attached. It is a starting point for researchers looking for information on a subject that is unknown to them. Wikipedia, for some participants, is used when they would be desperate to find sources for their projects. Participants discussed the option of using Wikipedia for trivia facts on their personal time and not on the job. Personal searches can also find inaccurate information about actors or politicians being dead when they are very much alive.

Participants were found to use Wikipedia frequently but as a last resort when there were little to no reference links listed in the entries. A participant remembered how teachers would deduct points from papers if students used an encyclopedia as a reference source. Wikipedia can be viewed as an encyclopedic source . It should be cited as little as possible. All participants emphasized their use of listed references.

Wikipedia is great in helping participants with the crossword puzzles in their local newspapers. Another participant discussed the reliability of Wikipedia for the rail transit industry. The data would be updated and verified by rail transit enthusiasts and staff in the industry. Participants believed that Wikipedia has content that is vast with tremendous depth so it has more breadth and relevance than most sources online or in print. Wikipedia does not make a claim about being valid. It is a user-created mechanism that can have an accurate or inaccurate entry so readers beware.

Wikipedia for Organizational Usage

Those who are identified as subject specialists, in their organizations, usually identify themselves and start adding/subtracting information on pages that interest them or their organization. Usually an organization will have an assigned staff member whose responsibility would be to check on the organization's page for accuracy. Pressley and McCallum (2008) discussed how librarians are conflicted as to whether Wikipedia belongs in the library.

Everyone seems to accept Wikipedia except for academia which could usually mean a **red X** when it comes to using it as a tool for research libraries in organizations and higher educational institutions. This is hard to believe considering librarians had written library card catalogs long before there were electronic library catalogs. They would input *access points* and *see also references* to help them help others find the information they would be looking for at that time. The card catalog was a *finding aid tool* for librarians and other researchers. It was trusted

because it was constantly being updated by the librarian who was either a generalist or subject matter specialist. The information could be trusted.

Wikipedia could easily be the connection between libraries and research. Pressley and McCallum (2008) mentioned how “the presence of librarians in Wikipedia” could be “as content contributors.” If there are more specialists to manage Wikipedia, then academia would not view Wikipedia “as a flawed information resource” (Pressley and McCallum, 2008). Contributions from librarians could link researchers to thinking about using a library to follow-up on information found in Wikipedia.

Wikipedia entries contain “graphics, internal links to related entries, external links to related websites, and references to other information sources”(Pressley and McCallum, 2008). These features give researchers more of an interactive approach to finding information in addition to the card catalog. At least the world could depend on a Wikipedia page edited by a librarian and it would be free. Pressley and McCallum (2008) stressed that librarians are the one type of member in this online research community that would “efficiently” locate, use and cite scholarly information sources. Librarians would function as the gate-keepers and *watchers* of accurate information in the Wikipedia environment.

Researcher as Gate-Keeper and Watcher

The researcher can manage and monitor the content that goes on pages related to their content. The following steps could help Wikipedia rise in the ranks of a scholarly source.

1. Get an individual account for the researcher. Wikipedia does not accept organizational entries.
2. State the facts for your institution or organization. Avoid tabloid points.
3. Get the directions pertaining to Wikipedia formatting for the body of the entry and references (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:How_to_edit_a_page).
4. Follow the policies and guidelines for content and grammar (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Policies_and_guidelines#Content).
5. Make tag entries that are cellphone readable hyperlinks by using Semapedia (<http://en.semopedia.org/>).

Conclusion

As Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>) puts it, it exists “to cover existing knowledge which is verifiable from other sources. Original research and ideas which have not appeared in other sources are therefore excluded.”

If the supplier of the information has been verified as a subject specialist, then the information is sound. In scholarly, academic circles, use Wikipedia as a guide but cite

other sources that are peer-reviewed and scholarly in nature until Wikipedia can stand on its own as a source full of factual content.

Wikipedia's history of some pages being inaccurate may haunt it for a while but do not let that stop you from using it as a *finding aid tool* for your research. Other pages are rich with content so it may prove beneficial for us to support it with facts whenever possible or we may lose a potential model of a working online research community.

For More Information

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Want to be a Wikipedia Editor?

- [Wikipedia:Contributing_to_Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Librarians), Librarians wishing to become involved in Wikipedia should join the group of librarian editors (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Librarians).