

Wikipedia--Friend or Foe?

Final Project Paper

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## Abstract

In a time when we are inundated with information from all directions, it is oftentimes difficult to distinguish between sound, credible and useful information and information that is not. We receive information from friends, family, television shows, the news, commercials, billboards, radio, digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and we receive information from our teachers and educators. With all the information we receive, it is oftentimes difficult to determine if information is fact or personal opinion; or, if the information is truthful or not. In addition, it is frequently difficult to know what to do with the information that is received. Using and becoming proficient in media literacy will assist early academic researchers in accessing information and critically thinking about the information and whether is it credible. One popular and controversial source of information is Wikipedia. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that is created collaboratively by its users. Because of the open forum, Wikipedia has been under scrutiny in the past as an unreliable source of information. This essay will take a preliminary look at Wikipedia and whether this online platform is a credible source of information for academic research.

## Media Literacy

Researchers at the University of California-San Diego conducted a study that found people are inundated with 34 Gb of information per day (Andrea, 2020). Andrea elaborates, “Through mobile phones, online entertainment services, the Internet, electronic mail, television, radio, newspapers, books, social media etc. people receive every day about 105,000 words or 23 words per second during waking hours” (Andrea, 2020). J. W. Potter, author of *Media Literacy*, states, “Because our environment is ‘media-saturated’, effects are constantly happening to us as the media shapes our knowledge patterns, beliefs, attitudes, emotions and behaviors” (Potter, p.

301). Given that the amount of information we receive on any given day is monumental, the ability and skill to decipher the information is an important one. Literacy is the ability to read and comprehend letters and words at a specific level. Media literacy is the ability to not only read words, but to analyze information contextually, understanding visual images, sounds, the ability to follow plots and the ability to process meaning from a digital screen (Potter, 2016).

### Credible Information in Academics

Receiving that amount of information and from various media sources can be overwhelming and exhausting. Put yourself in the world of academia and education, and deciphering information can be daunting. As an English instructor, I'm continually educating students on proper MLA formatting, how to research credible information, take notes, avoid plagiarism, and finally, how to cite sources correctly.

As we begin to research many of our topics for our essays, my students will use primarily the Internet as their source of information. The goal is to find credible information and then articulately paraphrase the information, provide critical thinking on the subject matter and proficiently cite sources at the end of each essay. When researching information, the criteria must meet the following.

Is the source of information, the author of the information and the information itself:

- Truthful?
- Neutral?
- Accurate?

Truthful information should be free from lies. Neutral information should be unbiased and balanced and accurate information should present a full set of facts and be contextually relevant (Potter, 2016).

## Wikipedia

One source of information that has taken tremendous criticism from the academic world is Wikipedia. Wikipedia is essentially an online encyclopedia founded in 2001. Today, the website is translated into 299 different languages, has over 32.5 million editors and has an average of 600 new articles every day on the site (Leadem, 2018). The original thought of Wikipedia was to be a source of information created by “experts only”. However, the ability to receive information was slow and arduous. Eventually, the founders (Larry Sanger and Jimmy Wales) saw the need for a website with an endless amount of information that was free and accessible to everyone. Today, there are over 6.1 million articles listed on the Wikipedia website (Wikipedia.com). Several years ago, there was much controversy over whether Wikipedia was a credible source of information. After all, there are millions of editors. How can they possibly all be experts in their fields? While the website is self-governed, there are clear and distinct pillars of etiquette and source checking protocols. And, while anyone can anonymously contribute, only some have access to edit the information and even fewer are considered system administrators. The majority of information on Wikipedia is biographies and Wikipedia does not allow for individuals to write their own biographies, in which case they would be considered autobiographies (Graham, 2015). According to Piotr Konieczny in his article titled *Rethinking Wikipedia for the classroom*,

Anybody can contribute to Wikipedia—that means experts and amateurs alike. There are respected academics editing Wikipedia, but there are a small minority among the mass of volunteers, many of whom are students or young professionals. Most Wikipedians share a set of common values: they like the idea of volunteering to share knowledge (many see this not only as a common good, but as fun to do); they believe that information should

be free; and they appreciate Wikipedia's philosophy of openness and collaboration”  
(Konieczny, p 82).

The issue is whether or not Wikipedia is a useful and credible source of information or is it considered to be what some refer as a “digital tsunami of intellectual junk food” (Graham, 2015). Even if there is a small percentage of information that is deemed “not credible” on Wikipedia, does this mean the entire platform of information is useless?

### Using Wikipedia with a Critical Eye

While Wikipedia may have some inaccurate information, as a user being introduced to digital literacy, we must ask ourselves again, is the information credible? Is the information truthful, neutral and accurate? Within all topics of information from all sources on the Internet, there are a few key factors to consider when engaging in academic research. First, ask yourself who is the author and what is the source of information? All Wikipedia articles have a work-cited section at the bottom of the page. Wikipedia, can often be considered the middle ground of information. Depending on your research topic, Wikipedia may be a good starting point for one's preliminary research. Dig deeper into the original sources of information using the bibliography at the end of each article, and as a researcher, you'll find greater depth and details into your academic research. Like all research, using a single source of information is usually not ample.

In many ways, Wikipedia has changed the playing field for academic research. Some of these changes may be productive and many may be counterproductive. The majority of my students do not necessarily remember the days of card catalogs, microfiche and microfilm. The digital age of social media and the Internet are game changes. Information is more easily accessed and shared. Misinformation is also more easily accessed and shared. Even today using

the Internet, accessing journals and articles from experts in the field can be costly and much of the information is not accessible without access from an accredited university (Konieczny, 2014). Wikipedia disrupts the knowledge-power arrangement that often makes technical knowledge the exclusive property of credentialed academics and selective academic institutions (Konieczny, 2014). Wikipedia has created an open playing field to be accessed by anyone. In addition, many people including experts, students and hobby aficionados can contribute to the information on Wikipedia; sources must be cited, and others can offer neutral and credible information as well. In addition, Wikipedia reserves the right to ban and delete contributions to the articles if the information is deemed inaccurate or false.

### Conclusion

As those learning and focusing on media literacy, we must learn to look at all sources of information, not only Wikipedia, with a clear and unbiased lens. As an academic researcher, we must distinguish between reality and fantasy, truth and opinion and fact and fiction (Potter, 2016). Again, is the information truthful, neutral and accurate? If we are reading an article on the benefits of drinking milk and all the nutritional benefits dairy offers and we find that the article is written by the National Dairy Foundation, that might be considered a biased article. The National Dairy Foundation has a vested interest to sell more milk, cheese and other dairy products. They will financially benefit when more dairy products are consumed in the United States or around the world.

As an academic researcher, we must understand that we have the advantage of accessing millions and millions of online articles and resources. Both personally and academically, we have the responsibility to educate ourselves on how to decipher credible information. Wikipedia can be a useful source of information when used correctly with a critical eye and the research

topic is of appropriate subject matter. Researching the population growth of a country, the average speed of a cheetah, and other factual topics can be found and trusted on Wikipedia. Highly controversial topics may require additional research. Topics such as affirmative action, stem cell research and Roe v Wade may require greater due diligence and research. Again, like all information and research, we need to critically analyze the information and better understand if it fits the criteria of being credible information. Wikipedia can be a source for finding information and statistics as part of one's overall research process.

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