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Final Paper
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Free, Open, and Pseudo Neutral

The Reliability of Wikipedia

Like with all new technologies the words "free," "open," and "neutral," are used to drive

society's use and interest in the new advancements of the day. These same words give us

ease when we are confronted with new technologies. They ask us to look past possible

problems in order to advance growth. Yet, when technologies change the way we collect

information and construct language should we become more cautions of what we are

doing? Over the past several months the topic of research for this course has been

language, but in almost every class discussion students discussed the numerous critiques

about the community-based encyclopedia known as Wikipedia. Much of the class

discussion mirrored the current debates about the validity of Wikipedia as a source for

legitimate information. While the standing critiques of Wikipedia rest in the searchable

information compiled by a community of editors, know as syops, this online resource has

become a principal example of the problems with contemporary digital language,

scholarship, and the supposed decline of language. In most cases what becomes

problematic in Wikipedia's structure is the question of the authenticity and conception of

the information presented. Unlike other sources, where it is assumed that an autonomous

and authoritative person, researches and writes the entries in an encyclopedia, Wikipedia

is built by a group of volunteers that come together and construct a collaborative

definition on a topic. Even on its own page, the administrators of Wikipedia suggest that

they do not know the background of many of its authors; "Wikipedia allows anonymous editing: contributors are not required to provide any identification, or even an email address."[1] The critical debate around Wikipedia's validity as a reliable source remains the focus for much of the larger debate on the changes in digital technologies and how language itself may be degrading. Yet, I find that the crucial question to ask is how Wikipedia's structure creates assurances in its information and reputation. In this paper I hope to make clear the practices put into place by Wikipedia's administration in order to address its negative perception amongst academics. I hope to show how the community structure does exhibit failures and successes when questioned as a reliable source and at the same time makes assumptions of the "democratic" nature of the digital group and the nature of the digital environment.

The Wikipedia community prides itself on announcing that it is an open environment where anyone can enter and edit any Wikipedia entry. Also, what is critical to the democratic nature of this resource is that editors, syops, do not have to be scholars. In fact, as Wikipedia suggests, a degree or background in a topic of study is not needed in order to enter or edit information. "Anyone can be bold and edit an existing article or create a new one, and volunteers do not need to have any formal training. The people who create and edit articles in Wikipedia come from countries all around the world, and have a wide range of ages and backgrounds.[2] These "Wikipedians", are given the resources to Wikipedia's platform where they can make any changes they want in an entry. But, what is not announced on Wikipedia's home page is the administrative hierarchy editors are faced with in relation to the online community. (See my other

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[1] Wikipedia contributors, "Wikipedia: Reliability of Wikipedia"
[2] Wikipedia contributors, " Wikipedia: Who Writes Wikipedia"

papers during this semester for more information on the pecking order of Wikipedia.)

Even though there are problems with the ways Wikipedia handles its collaborative

structure, the administrative hierarchy has given Wikipedia the ability to present itself as

a refined structure that has an elaborate type of checks and balances. According to its

administrative policies Wikipedia suggests that it "has established 'a bureaucracy of

sorts', including 'a clear power structure that gives volunteer administrators the authority

to exercise editorial control.'" [3]

The Wikipedia community sees itself as a democratic community that is both

beneficial to the world and its community members and at the same time governed by a

type of "good natured" scholarship where people add and edit in order to build a better

resource. Wikipedia quotes a 2010 study as evidence to the fact its editors are

volunteering because they "believe" in the benefits of the resource and of building the

collection. In this study editors are not necessary entering information for the excitement

or enjoyment of the act, this could be an initial response to first time entries, editors are

adding into the database in order to develop validity or factual researched work.

"Although members may initially contribute to the site for pleasure, they are motivated

primarily by an internal drive to feel efficacious and self-confident. Aside from

potentially fueling a first-time contribution, enjoyment was found to have no significant

impact on knowledge-sharing behavior in Wikipedia."[4] The reliability of Wikipedia's

entries rests in the hands of these editors, not in the general public. The Wikipedian

editors, the syops, carry the responsibility for the development of the resource. But, does

this mean that anonymous editors, the syops who are not as prevalent within the

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[3] Wikipedia contributors, " Wikipedia: Administrator"
[4] Wikipedia contributors, " Wikipedia: Wikipedian"

hierarchy, have as much to add to the validity of the discourse? Another study by researchers at Dartmouth College suggested that the anonymous editors are equally as reliable than those who are registered. "A 2007 study…found that "anonymous and infrequent contributors to Wikipedia ... are as reliable a source of knowledge as those contributors who register with the site." [5]

While background, education, expertise, and authority of the editors are not scrutinized, what Wikipedia uses to determine what is relevant and useful information is the number of documented sources that are used as citation material for the presented entry. Wikipedia seems to be changing the foundational practice of scholarship with increasing pressure not on the background of the presenting scholar but on sources and documentation. This approach can be a problem, and has been one of the underlining concerns for Wikipedia's validity, because the resource does not rely on the scholar but on how information is linked to each other through source material. The traditional academic pressure attached to the work of the scholar resides in the amount and level of developed scholarship or training an individual receives and not on the topic under study. Relying on the information for reliability takes tension off the editor and redirects authority to the collection and relation of all information. This redirection in structure also speaks to Wikipedia's attempt in becoming more democratic. "Although some contributors are authorities in their field, Wikipedia requires that even their contributions be supported by published and verifiable sources. The project's preference for consensus over credentials has been labeled "anti-elitism."[6]

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[5] Wikipedia contributors, " Wikipedia: Administrator"
[6] Wikipedia contributors, " Wikipedia: Administrator"

Changing the way we address authorship in Wikipedia assumes that there is no original creator or information, that the entry is a collaborative experience and one that is built out of common knowledge. Much like Roland Barthes's 1967 "The Death of the Author" Wikipedia presents information as shared language. In his article, Barthes suggests that the author was not a creative autonomous genius but that the author shared responsibility with the social context that gave meaning to the words. In Barthes' argument, society and author performed together to reveal amended information. Barthes writes, "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture."[7] The importance applied to Wikipedia sources creates a resource that can grown, change, and evolve without the need for an administrative body, a oversight committee that "verifies" the information "truthfulness." What is weighed is the information's connection to other information. This assumes that knowledge is relational and that information is linked to other ideas that have been tested and accepted before. "All material added to articles must be attributable to a source with a reputation for fact-checking and accuracy, and one appropriate for the information in question. In practice you do not need to attribute everything; only quotations and material challenged or likely to be challenged must be attributed, through an inline citation that directly supports the material."[8]

The problem with this model, and the reason for Wikipedia's validity as a "factual" resource, is that if a subject is somehow related to compromised information

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[7] Roland Barthes. P.146
[8] Wikipedia contributors, " Wikipedia: Verifiability"

then the entry's link to that source is also compromised. In other words, if the initial scholarship is wrong, and not checked for validity, then the scholarship on Wikipedia is problematic. Yet, for Wikipedia, truth is not at the crux of the matter. What is critical for information is how it relates to "other" information. "The threshold for inclusion in Wikipedia is verifiability, not truth: whether readers can check that material in Wikipedia has already been published by a reliable source, not whether editors think it is true."[9] In order to "verify" the authenticity and substance of an entry it must show how it relates to other information and that original scholarship, entries not presented with sources, will not be allowed. Also, in order for the source to remain as substantive data the entry may be subject to scrutiny from any editor at any time. "The sourcing policy, verifiability, says a source must be provided for all quotations, and for anything challenged or likely to be challenged—but a source must exist even for material that is never challenged…To demonstrate that you are not adding OR, you must be able to cite reliable, published sources that are both directly related to the topic of the article, and directly support the material as presented."[10]

According to Wikipedia any type of entry can be under examination for its relationship and substance to other citations. Additionally, any type of documentation within the entries' composition can also be challenged independently from the entry and at the same time put the entry into jeopardy of reprimand or removal from the resource. "This policy applies to all material in the mainspace—articles, lists, sections of articles, and captions—without exception, and in particular to material about living persons. Anything that requires but lacks a source may be removed, and unsourced contentious

[9] Wikipedia contributors, " Wikipedia: Verifiability"
[10] Wikipedia contributors, " Wikipedia: No Original Research"

material about living persons must be removed immediately."[11] This process of

verifiability encourages the resource's continual growth and appropriate construction and

validity to the change in language/ideas. Along with the process of verifiability,

Wikipedia relies on other procedures to make sure its information remains contingent on

already approved knowledge and presents "accountable" data. These other policies are

"No Original Research" and "Neutral Point of View."

     While the No Original Research policy stipulates that editors/authors must refrain

from creating entries that are original in nature, research that is not linked to other

sources, the other process ask that the editor abstain from emotional and biased opinions

instead of factual documentation. "These policies jointly determine the type and quality

of material that is acceptable in articles. They should not be interpreted in isolation from

one another, and editors should familiarize themselves with the key points of all three."[12]

How Wikipedia accomplished an environment that is built out of editors who are not

emotional, not biased, and still scholarly is still very much up for discussion and

examination.

     Unlike other resources that rely on the scholarship of the presenter Wikipedia

relies on what they call "reliability." This would be any information that can be linked to

other information and is documented through its linkage, a type of digital trail to other

scholarship. What is of importance for Wikipedia is not an established presence of

academic scholarship when the entry "went live" but that the entry will undergo change

and prove to be more scholarly over time. This transition into a better, more pure,

established entry takes time and the combinations of the general editors are what, for

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[11] Wikipedia contributors, " Wikipedia: Verifiability"
[12] Wikipedia contributors, " Wikipedia: Verifiability"

Wikipedia, makes the information more accountable. "It is inherent in Wikipedia's editing model that misleading information can be added, but over time quality is anticipated to improve in a form of group learning as editors reach consensus, so that substandard edits will very rapidly be removed."[13] While a Wikipedia entry must be duly sourced to other citations the process of deeming reliable also must go through a barrage of qualifications: as suggested by the list below. The nine criteria used to measure the reliability of an article can themselves be places under examination fro their broad qualities. Take for example the final criteria, quality of writing. What is the proper way to write a high quality entry and who deems this proper use? Most of the criteria listed below can be challenged or overlooked as general policy statements that do not add to the validity of what is reliable or not.

The reliability of Wikipedia articles can be measured by the following criteria:[14]

- Accuracy of information provided within articles
- Appropriateness of the images provided with the article
- Appropriateness of the style and focus of the articles[12]
- Susceptibility to, and exclusion and removal of, false information
- Comprehensiveness, scope and coverage within articles and in the range of articles
- Identification of reputable third-party sources as citations
- Stability of the articles
- Susceptibility to editorial and systemic bias
- Quality of writing

In a 2007 *Inside Higher Ed* internet journal article, the Chair of the History Department at Middlebury College, presented a "Stand Against Wikipedia." Don Wyatt's department bared students' use of Wikipedia as a citable scholarly source. Along with his colleagues Wyatt felt that Wikipedia was not a reputable source and should not be treated as an academic resource. In taking this stand against the only

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[13] Wikipedia contributors, " Wikipedia: Reliability"
[14] Wikipedia contributors, " Wikipedia: Reliability"

encyclopedia the article suggests that Wyatt "stressed that the objection of the department to Wikipedia wasn't its online nature, but its unedited nature, and he said students need to be taught to go for quality information, not just convenience."[15] What is important in Wyatt's statement is not that he was against Wikipedia for being a community resource but that it was the speed that information can change and the quickness students acquired information from the online resource. Much criticism of Wikipedia, and the Internet in general, comes from the speed at which digital information may change. For Wyatt, and I am assuming for many scholars, what is hard to stomach is that students can go to Wikipedia and fund information without much effort and may never absorb what they have read. Instead of trudging through library catalogs by hand and copying information from a book to a piece of paper to turn in, students now have the ability to take information easier then ever before and pass it off as finished ideas. What I wish to propose is that we not look at the pitfalls and critiques of Wikipedia as a digital resource built out a community system, whether it is adequate or not, but that we address what it means to acquire information faster than we have before. Are we condemning Wikipedia because of our fear of community, or of information and language being under a constant microscope, or because we don't like that it is easier to take ideas and spread them on. If these are our main critiques, then our entire foundation of language should be in question, not just Wikipedia. What is needed is to find better ways in order to judge how students, scholars, etc collage information into a solid argument through the digital environment. Additionally, is our cut and past method by Wikipedia collage artists different than the copy method used by school children in the past? Even though the administrative

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[15] Scott Jaschik.

structure has severe problems the nature of Wikipedia is to share ideas and to do so with a hope for better knowledge in the future. Does this help the argument about Wikipedia's validity as a reputable resource? No, but like language, Wikipedia shows us how all information is linked by a vast web of shared knowledge. Wikipedia exemplifies how language and ideas changes depending on the progression and manipulation by community.

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