

Don't Believe Everything You Read

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

Many educators and editors are leery of Wikipedia because students and less experienced writers use it as a primary source, rather than as a compendium of background information that needs to be checked and confirmed before being included in an article or essay.

It also seems to be a temptation to plagiarists. Some journalists have been found to include large blocks of Wikipedia text, verbatim, in work under their bylines, raising doubts about their commitment to fact-checking, reporting and writing, as well as honesty.

Even if a writer is clever enough to rewrite the Wikipedia text into her own words, the “facts” have not been checked. The articles on Wikipedia are in most cases not written by experts in those fields (in fact, real experts are forbidden from quoting their own work on Wikipedia), and it is impossible to know for sure which bits in the lifted material are correct and which are not. This undermines the purpose of writing academic or journalistic articles: to convey accurate information to the reader.

In the United States, some high schools have blocked their students from accessing Wikipedia, others are trying to teach pupils how to use it as a general resource along with more reliable, primary material. At universities, professors are warning their students about relying upon Wikipedia. These educators are concerned because they want their students to learn correct information and concepts, not incor-

WIKI FACTS

- “Wiki” is used in Hawaii to mean “quick.”
- Wikipedia contains nearly 2 million entries.
- In more than 253 languages.
- Owned by the Wikimedia Foundation.
- Biggest expense is Internet hosting, at \$189,631, according to its 2006 financial statement.
- Total expenses were \$791,907 in 2006.
- Received \$1.3 million in contributions last year.

rect ones. They also want them to learn to be discerning, to ask, when they read: “Who says so? And does the person who is saying so have enough knowledge or experience that I should rely on it?” Wikipedia does not supply this information.

“I think what is more important than banning resources that a student might or might not use is helping students to understand how to make critical judgments about the resources they uncover,” Sandra Jordan, associate provost of Murray State University in Kentucky, was quoted as saying in an article in the school newspaper about professors’ concerns with Wikipedia. The April 6, 2007 Murray State News article, by Emily Wuchner, also quoted student Tyler Moore as saying he still uses the site for background information. But he has learned from his teachers to search out research-based articles that have “actual sources and references and citations in them.” When he first started

using Wikipedia, he said, “I thought I could trust all of the information that was on the site. I didn’t really know that anyone could go in and just modify or change it, so I took all of the information as being correct.”

There is a problem with inaccurate postings like the hoax article about the “Upper Peninsula War” between Canadians and Americans, complete with maps and “historical photos.” This war never happened, yet the article remained on Wikipedia for two weeks. Articles on obscure topics receive less monitoring from Wikipedia checkers.

Other problems have arisen when companies, organizations, governments, groups and individuals write their own Wikipedia entries (which the site says it does not allow), when they “edit” articles written by others to make themselves look better, or “correct” articles on their opponents to make them look worse.

“Young and old alike often go to Wikipedia and see that its name ends in ‘-pedia,’” says Andy Carvin (<http://www.andycarvin.com/archives>) in his blog on Internet culture.

“They assume it’s just like any other encyclopedia and they should take its content as vetted, accurate information, which ain’t

