

Crown Jewel or Pure Evil? Wikipedia Through an Information Literacy Lens

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& Cameron Hoffman

How are information literacy practitioners discussing Wikipedia? Just as important is this question: what do these discussions say about us as teachers? This article will consider these questions and reflect on their implications for our work.

A good starting point here is a brief survey of the roots of Wikipedia's ability to incite debate. As Trinity Western University librarian Bill Badke notes in his article "What to Do With Wikipedia":

On one side, we have opponents who view Wikipedia users as ignorant of the need to use reliable sources when doing academic work. On the other, we have devoted users who have embraced this tool as the crown jewel of the new digital information world.¹

Given Wikipedia's prominence as a go-to information resource for millions of searchers, recognizing why it inspires heated debate among library practitioners is fairly straightforward. On one hand, Wikipedia embodies many of our traditional values. It's non-profit, it makes information widely accessible, and it inspires collaboration and debate. On the other hand, Wikipedia can

seem horrifying to us. It can be breathtakingly ephemeral. It privileges verifiability above truth. Using our standard information literacy checklist of the characteristics of high-quality web-based information – stability, peer review and author credentials, for example – we could easily stamp Wikipedia with the latest web slang label: EPIC FAIL.

In April 2007, the Pew Internet & American Life Project stated, "36% of online American adults consult Wikipedia."² Measured another way, among "the cluster of sites that are focused on educational and reference material, Wikipedia is by far the most popular site, drawing nearly six times more traffic than the next-closest site."³ We have no reason to suspect that Wikipedia traffic has declined since this study's publication, or that Canadians approach Wikipedia in an appreciably different way.

Despite misgivings we may have, many of us consult Wikipedia, too. How do information literacy practitioners view Wikipedia, and how do we discuss it with our patrons? In the long run, what can the answers to these questions tell us about the evolution of our information literacy work?

An information literacy lens

Like anyone with an instructional role, those of us who do information literacy work communicate our views through our teaching. An examination of the Wikipedia-related postings made to the Information Literacy Instruction Discussion List (ILI-L)⁴ between January and October 2008 reveals that listserv participants (generally professional librarians) hold a variety of views about Wikipedia. Not surprisingly, their approaches to using and framing Wikipedia within their teaching are also highly varied. One theme emerging from these discussions deals with the issue of whether Wikipedia is good or evil.

Wickedpedia

Evil is one of many recurring themes in information literacy practitioners' conversations about Wikipedia, as exemplified by ILI-L. Wikipedia has been cast not merely as unreliable, and not merely as lacking trustworthy editorial processes, but as evil. Library resources, in contrast, are often cast as good. These forces of good and evil, not surprisingly, are often couched in adversarial terms.

For example, one ILI-L contributor related that during her training as a

librarian, she “was trained to see [Wikipedia] as pretty much pure evil,” adding, “you can’t really fight this resource.” Another posting stated: “Wikipedia is different than anything librarians have encountered thus far. It has blurred the boundaries of good and bad information.” When another posting suggested that library patrons “should be encouraged to use ‘the good stuff,’” Wikipedia was decidedly excluded.

This discourse, the casting of Wikipedia as “evil” or “bad,” is itself neither good nor bad, but neutral. It reflects a point of view shared by some participants in ILI-L discussions. There are certainly competing points of view, and many ILI-L contributors disagree strenuously with casting Wikipedia in these terms.

Within the classroom or at the reference desk, however, we might consider how espousing a “good versus evil” point of view may affect our efforts to foster a sophisticated conceptual understanding of where information comes from, and how it is organized, described, found, understood and used. Having learned that Wikipedia is “bad,” some patrons may avoid it, but this knowledge alone does not help them make agile critical decisions about today’s swath of information resources. If, even unintentionally through our use of language, we encourage patrons to focus primarily on classifying information resources along a continuum of “good” or “evil,” we risk oversimplifying the complex conceptual understandings required to make such an evaluation.

From marketing to pedagogy

What is also interesting in exploring recent ILI-L discussions about Wikipedia is to see the way our profession is altering or adjusting its perception of the role the social web plays in our institutions.

In 2007, we conducted a discourse analysis of some 80 articles that were published in the literatures of librarianship, education and computer science about the relationship between Web 2.0/the social web and information literacy.⁵ We discovered that in the library literature, social web applications were viewed mainly as marketing tools for libraries. Articles we studied at that time described very creative methods of library promotion: RSS feeds were first used to inform patrons about newly acquired materials, blogs were used to engage young adults to comment on books they had read, and instant messaging was being deployed to enhance reference services.

However, our analysis at that time did not see many discussions or examples of the social web being used significantly in pedagogical ways or as a means to achieve information literacy outcomes. In the education literature, we saw examples of social web tools being used to teach research skills. In the library literature, though, this discourse was practically absent. Rather, librarians in their own literature were identified more as marketers than as information experts or as practitioners having a teaching role. Library patrons were viewed mainly as consumers of information rather than as people engaged meaningfully in learning.

Our 2008 examination of how librarians on the ILI-L listserv talk about Wikipedia appears to reveal a changing mindset in our profession about the relationship between the social web and information literacy. In March 2008 alone, 49 messages were posted to ILI-L in response to Badke’s Wikipedia article. Certainly in these discussions, Wikipedia is criticized, and its volatility critiqued. Occasionally in the ILI-L threads there are even nuances about how Wikipedia could possibly spell doom for libraries: “Who will need a reference librarian when everyone can look up information in Wikipedia?”

Yet in these same messages, librarians speak passionately on the topic of Wikipedia as a pedagogical tool, even as a teaching platform. One librarian, protesting an outright ban of Wikipedia in some academic institutions, noted: “a prohibition of this sort communicates to students that they can avoid thinking critically about the content of their research through a policy of ignoring sections of the library.” Another librarian noted: “I’m definitely going to mention some of these ideas to instructors I work with – using Wikipedia to teach critical thinking is a great concept to explore.”

Collections mind, information literacy mind

In these recent ILI-L discussions, librarians situate themselves in a teaching role. They view their patrons as learners. Applications such as Wikipedia are seen as means of teaching information competence instead of as library marketing tools.

This shift may mean that many librarians are identifying as public educators. Interestingly, this shift seems to enable librarians to consider information resources more from a pedagogical point of view (how can we use this resource to teach?) than from a traditional collections management perspective (is this resource current and what is its authorship?).

The emphasis on using Wikipedia as a means of teaching evaluation skills and critical thinking corresponds well to educational outcomes such as the ACRL Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education,⁶ as well as what may prove to be emerging conceptions of multiple information fluencies such as visual literacy, contextual literacy and skepticism.⁷ Perhaps the discussions we library practitioners have about Wikipedia and other social software – whether they are good or evil, whether they are pedagogically useful – speak most to our changing role as educators within an increasingly complex information landscape. 🌸

Notes

1. William Badke, "What to Do With Wikipedia," *Online* 32, no. 2 (2008), www.infotoday.com/online/mar08/Badke.shtml (accessed Feb. 4, 2009).
2. Lee Rainie and Bill Tancer, "Wikipedia Users," Pew Internet & American Life Project, April 2007, p. 1, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Wikipedia-users.aspx> (accessed Mar. 25, 2009).
3. Rainie and Tancer, p. 2.
4. This research was undertaken with the permission of ILI-L administrators. All contributors have been anonymized. ILI-L is hosted by the American Library Association and has approximately 4,700 subscribers.
5. Cameron Hoffman and Sarah Polkinghorne, "Launching 'InfoLit 2.0'? Considering Web 2.0's Potential to Support Critical Thinking and Higher-Level Learning in Information Literacy Practice" (presentation, Workshop on Instruction in Library Use, York University, Toronto, May 17, 2007), www.yorku.ca/wilu2007/programme/hoffman_slides.ppt (accessed Feb. 3, 2009).
6. Available from www.ala.org.
7. For more, see Lee Rainie's recent presentation, "How Libraries Can Survive in the New Information Ecosystem," www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/257/presentation_display.asp (accessed Feb. 4, 2009).

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INDEX TO ADVERTISERS

ASSOCIATIONS, INSTITUTES & EDUCATION

[The Canadian Library Association \(www.cla.ca\)](http://www.cla.ca) 80, 97, 111, 113, IBC, OBC
[Canadian Union of Public Employees \(CUPE\) \(www.cupe.ca\)](http://www.cupe.ca) IFC

INFORMATION PROVIDERS

[H.W. Wilson \(www.hwwilson.com\)](http://www.hwwilson.com) 83
[OCLC \(www.oclc.org\)](http://www.oclc.org) 77

ONLINE RESEARCH SERVICES

[EBSCO Canada Ltd. \(www.ebsco.com\)](http://www.ebsco.com) 85

PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS

[Carr McLean \(www.carmclean.ca\)](http://www.carmclean.ca) 80
[Greyhouse Publishing Canada \(www.greyhouse.ca\)](http://www.greyhouse.ca) 87
[Nature Publishing Group \(www.nature.com/libraries\)](http://www.nature.com/libraries) 91
[Wild Cards Inc. \(www.wildcards.ca\)](http://www.wildcards.ca) 100
[John Wiley & Sons \(www.wiley.ca\)](http://www.wiley.ca) 85

[The Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada](http://www.priv.gc.ca)

[\(www.priv.gc.ca, www.youthprivacy.ca\)](http://www.priv.gc.ca) 115 & Insert