

Kelli McBride, an English professor at Seminole State College in Oklahoma, USA, defines an academic source as one which “is credible and verifiable, relying on objective, scholarly methods of problem solving, not personal, biased methods.” (2009). She lists “credible source” as a synonym for an academic one. In order to decide whether or not Wikipedia can be used as an academic source, it is therefore necessary to decide whether or not it is a credible one.

The arguments against using Wikipedia as a source are infinite. Even founder Jimmy Wales said he has considered putting together a sheet explaining what Wikipedia is and that it should not be considered a definitive source, particularly for school assignments (Young 2006). Middlebury College in Vermont released a statement after banning the use of the online encyclopedia as source in 2006 saying that, while Wikipedia is convenient, “it nonetheless suffers inevitably from inaccuracies deriving in large measure from its unique manner of compilation.” (qtd. in Jenkins 2007).

The basis of Middlebury College’s rejection of the use of Wikipedia as a source revolves heavily around the way in which information is obtained. Andrew Keen describes the website as being “an online encyclopedia where anyone with opposable thumbs and a fifth-grade education can public anything on any topic from AC/DC to Zoroastrianism” (2008, p. 4). This is exactly how Wikipedia was designed.

Wikipedia was launched in 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger as a compliment to Nupedia, the pair’s first endeavor. Nupedia was a volunteer-based free encyclopedia similar to Wikipedia. Unlike Wikipedia, however, contributors were expected to be experts in their field and all articles went through an extensive peer review process before being published. Wikipedia was created to be a space in which articles could be discussed in a more open space than that of the critical peer review system. (“Nupedia”).

The highly democratic format of Wikipedia attracted more contributors than Nupedia, rendering the latter obsolete. Within one year Wikipedia had over 20,000 articles. At the same time, Sanger became openly critical of the way the encyclopedia was being run and severed ties with Wikipedia and Wales. Contrary to Sanger, Wales pushed for Wikipedia to be run through “self-governance” and “encourage[d] it to learn to self-manage and find its own best approaches.” (“History of Wikipedia”).

Supporters of Wikipedia point to “the wisdom of crowds” and T. H. Huxley’s “infinite monkey theorem” (Surowiecki 2007; Keen 2008, p. 2). Huxley’s theorem essentially says that if enough monkeys are given enough typewriters and enough time, one of the monkeys will eventually produce a masterpiece. In today’s world, of course, the monkeys are the public and the typewriters are computers connected to the internet.

Andrew Keen and Charles Leadbeater each give anecdotal evidence to support the idea of listening to a crowd of amateur people rather than experts. Keen tells of the British scientist Francis Galton: In 1906, Galton attended the West of England Fat Stock and Poultry Exhibition where he saw a competition to guess the weight of an ox. Rather than participate himself, the scientist watched as 800 people – some who were butchers and farmers and therefore may have had a better understanding of the ox’s weight and some who had absolutely no “insider knowledge” – placed their wagers. After the competition, he found the average of the group’s guesses. This number was what the crowd would have guessed if it were a single person. Initially, Galton thought the number would be “way off the mark. After all, mix a few very smart people with some mediocre people and a lot of dumb people, and it seems likely you’d end up with a dumb answer. But Galton was wrong.” The crowd’s guess was that the ox weighed 1,197 pounds. The true weight of the ox was only one pound more. (2007, p. xi-xiii).

In perhaps a more timely example, Leadbeater describes I Love Bees, a game-*cum*-marketing tool promoting the video game Halo 2. The company behind I Love Bees set up a website describing a missing beekeeper. Clues were scattered through the website. Six hundred thousand people got involved in the game, trying to figure out what had happened to the fictional beekeeper. The clues led to payphones around the world, and players showed up at these payphones en masse to share information with each other. These 600,000 strangers worked together to play and solve a puzzle which had no instructions and no rules. (2009, p. 10-12).

Leadbetter's example shows that "a mass of independent people, with different. . . skills and outlooks, working together in the right way, can discover, analyse, co-ordinate, create and innovate together. . . without much by way of a traditional organization" (*ibid.*, p. 12). Interestingly, the group imposed on itself a form of self-governance. A band of about 4,000 "Beekeepers" led the larger group in finding the correct path.

In many ways, this behavior is seen in Wikipedia. Everyone in the world has knowledge, however limited, on certain topics. Wikipedia allows the various amounts of knowledge to come together, combining different perspectives to create a larger image of a given topic. This large sum of knowledge from numerous sources is precisely what makes Wikipedia so special. Throughout his book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, Surowiecki provides several anecdotes with the same conclusion: While it is important to listen to the group consensus so long as there are intelligent people within the group, it is equally important to *not* listen to an individual expert (2007). Wikipedia gives the reader a large group of people with experts scattered throughout.

In its first article about Wikipedia, *The New York Times* described the website as "a kind of virtual barn-raising" (Meyers 2001). Contributors work together to find the best way to write an entry. And, in a way, a small group of contributors keep control.

One study showed that by mid-2006 a few hundred users had made over 10,000 edits and, conversely, there were well over 10,000 users who had made around 100 edits. The “elite editors” accounted for around 30% of content changes. (Kittur, et. al. 2007). These editors – Leadbetter’s Beekeepers – keep watch on changes made to articles and do their best to keep things truthful and unbiased.

Quentin Langley describes a Wikipedia user who, “in an effort to prove the site’s lack of merit, posted 13 misleading or fictitious amendments to Wikipedia articles” and watched as three hours later all his edits were deleted and he received messages of complaints (in Franklin, et. al. 2009, p. 237). Political activist and writer Aaron Swartz explains this phenomenon by saying people step up because they genuinely care about the website:

“People are constantly trying to vandalize Wikipedia, replacing articles with random text. It doesn’t work; their edits are undone within minutes, even seconds. But why? It’s not magic — it’s a bunch of incredibly dedicated people who sit at their computers watching every change that gets made... Why does anyone do such a thing? It’s not particularly fascinating work, they’re not being paid to do it, and nobody in charge asked them to volunteer. They do it because they care about the site enough to feel responsible. They get upset when someone tries to mess it up.” (2006)

Both Langley and Swartz provide evidence that vandalism in Wikipedia is rapidly cleaned. However, the fact remains that vandalism of the website is a very common occurrence. And when vandalism is so common – or common enough that even supporters of Wikipedia nearly always feel the need to comment on it – it becomes difficult to tell whether or not information is credible. There is no way to trust all the information posted. This is where the problem of using Wikipedia as an academic source arises. Put simply, it cannot be used as one. This is not to say, however, that given more time – and direction – Wikipedia cannot *become* a valid academic source.

In an interview in June 2008, Jimmy Wales discussed a new feature of the German Wikipedia website called “flagging.” A flagged article is a version of the entry which has been examined and approved by a committee. “We’d still allow further editing, but if you really wanted one that as of three months ago we had three Ph.D.’s look at it, and they checked it off as being good, you could see that.” (qtd. in Young 2008).

Enforcing the flags or a similar feature would certainly make the entries more credible. But that would turn Wikipedia into a non-democratic encyclopedia. Experts would need to be chosen rather than relying on the community at large, thereby changing the heart of Wikipedia’s identity. Marshall Poe explained, “The community decided that two plus two equals four the same way it decides what an apple is: by consensus. Yes, that means that if the community changes its mind and decides that two plus two equals five, then *two plus two does equal five.*” (in Keen 2008, p. 21). It is highly unlikely the Wikipedia community would change a fundamental mathematic fact, but if it did, the alteration would become Wikipedian fact: although not factually true, it would be considered true on Wikipedia.

While everyone knows the true sum of two plus two, not everyone knows journalist John Seigenthaler was a conspirator in the assassinations of both John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, nor would the average person be aware that Seigenthaler “started one of [America’s] largest public relations firms.” In reality, the journalist was not involved in either Kennedy assassination nor the founding of Seigenthaler Public Relations. Because the average visitor to Seigenthaler’s entry had only a casual knowledge of the man, few people noticed. As a result, these “facts” remained on Seigenthaler’s Wikipedia page for months before being removed. (“Seigenthaler incident”).

As Jimmy Wales said after Middlebury College’s ban on citing Wikipedia, “[Middlebury is] recommending exactly what we suggested – students shouldn’t be citing encyclopedias. I would

hope they wouldn't be citing Encyclopedia Britannica, either." (qtd. in Jenkins 2007). Wikipedia is an aggregator of factual knowledge. It is meant to be unbiased, just like any other encyclopedia. Wales and the band of elite editors do their best to keep ideas and bias out of every entry, and facts are common knowledge and are therefore unnecessary to cite especially at a higher education level. Like any encyclopedia, Wikipedia is a good starting point for research, but should not be the end source. As long as anyone can edit, everyone must double check the "facts."

If the flagging feature were implemented throughout Wikipedia, it is possible for it to become a valuable source. However, putting every article through a validation process would not only destroy the immediacy of the revision feature, it would change Wikipedia. The website was designed to be a democratic encyclopedia, one in which the crowd dictates what is posted and, as Poe said, what is true. Ensuring Wikipedia entries are accurate and not based on crowd decisions is needed for the website to be a credible, academic source – though not necessarily one which would be cited – but doing so would destroy its very essence.

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