



ONLINE ENCYCLOPEDIA UNDER SCRUTINY AFTER PRANK

December 30, 2005

A few months ago, John Siegenthaler Sr. read on the Web site Wikipedia that he had been a suspect in the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy. The 78-year-old newspaper editor was shocked to see those statements, considering neither was true.

The article ended up being a joke and has since been removed.

Siegenthaler described his experience with the online encyclopedia, in which anyone with an Internet connection can edit the content, in a USA Today op-ed.

“[W]e live in a universe of new media with phenomenal opportunities for worldwide communications and research – but populated by volunteer vandals with poison-pen intellectuals,” wrote Siegenthaler.

The incident sparked a debate between Wikipedia’s supporters and its critics over the site’s accuracy and methods.

How Wikipedia works

In 2001, former stock trader Jimmy Wales created Wikipedia, a combination of the word encyclopedia and the Hawaiian word “wikiwiki” meaning quick.

The idea was to create a public encyclopedia that could be updated and revised instantaneously by the vast Internet community.

“Wiki” Web sites use software that allows any user to edit the sites' content. Unlike other sites that have a staff paid to update the online material, wikis rely on an all-volunteer community to constantly check and revise information posted by their peers.

Other examples of wikis are WikiHow, a library of how-to guides, and World66, a collaborative travel guide.

Wikipedia has tens of thousands of contributors who can create or edit any material on any subject. Each article has a log that details the history of all the edits made, in addition to a discussion page where users can talk about what should or should not be printed in the article.

Controversial subjects, such as most articles regarding the Israel-Palestinian conflict or global warming, are flagged with disclaimers citing concerns about bias and inaccuracies.

Since its founding, Wikipedia has grown exponentially and now has millions of articles in nearly 200 languages. In October 2005, 1,500 articles were created each day.

According to the Web research service Alexa, Wikipedia gets 1.5 billion page views each day, making it the 34th most popular Web site in the world.

Among those billions, there is a core group of approximately 16,000 visitors who contribute to Wikipedia articles.

Problems in accuracy

The Siegenthaler incident brings to light the inherent problems of an encyclopedia written and edited by anyone. Factual mistakes, whether they are unintentional, a biased opinion, or a prank, can slip through Wikipedia's thousands of eyes.

The false statement in the article about Siegenthaler was on Wikipedia for months until he notified Wales about the mistake. According to Wales, such instances are the exception, not the rule, and most errors are caught within minutes of being published.

"These problems exist on any sort of open discussion. ... The difference [on Wikipedia] is, you can actually correct it," Wales said.

After reading about the controversy, the writer of the false statement, Brian Chase, publicly apologized. He said he had written it as a joke to shock a colleague on what he thought was a "gag" site.

In another incident, one of the leaders of podcasting, Adam Curry, was accused of deleting mentions of other podcasting pioneers in a Wikipedia article. He claimed to be making the site more accurate.

Inspired by these events, the scientific journal *Nature* compared 42 entries on science-related subjects from Wikipedia and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The journal found an average of four inaccuracies in a Wikipedia article and an average of three in *Britannica*.

Wikipedia in the classroom

Richard Kassissieh, the director of technology at San Francisco University High School, said he thinks Wikipedia is a good research tool if students use it as springboard for further research, not as a citable source.

"Students need to be able to critically evaluate any information resource. Often they don't do that, for encyclopedias or Web sites they find via Google, or Wikipedia," Kassissieh said.

Even though Wikipedia is full of entries written by anonymous users, Kassissieh said he also is skeptical of students using print encyclopedias for research. "From a student perspective, they don't know who's providing the information in encyclopedias either."

Kassissieh said he hopes someday to create an activity for students to understand the pros and cons of Wikipedia. After reading about a subject on Wikipedia, they would research the subject independently, and then return to the original article and identify any mistakes on the site.

If there were mistakes, the students would then take part in what Kassissieh calls "a democratic activity," correcting the article for the world to read.

-- *By Brian Wolly for NewsHour Extra*

© 2005 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions