Wikipedia and the Two-Faced Professoriate

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ABSTRACT

A primary responsibility of university teachers is to guide their students in the process of using only the most accurate research resources in their completion of assignments. Thus, it is not surprising to hear that faculty routinely coach their students to use Wikipedia carefully. Even more pronounced anti-Wikipedia backlashes have developed on some campuses, leading faculty to forbid their students to use the popular on-line compendium of information. Within this context, but directing the spotlight away from students, this pilot study uses survey and content analysis research methods to explore how faculty at U.S. universities and colleges regard Wikipedia's credibility as an information source, as well as how they use Wikipedia in their academic work. The results of the survey reveal that while none of the university faculty who completed it regard Wikipedia as an extremely credible source of information, more than half stated it has moderate to high credibility, and many use it in both their teaching and research. The results of the content analysis component of the study demonstrates that academic researchers from across the disciplines are citing Wikipedia as a source of scholarly information in their peer-reviewed research reports. Although the study's research findings are not generalizable, they are surprising considering the professoriate's oft-stated lack of trust in Wikipedia.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.3 [Information Systems Applications]: Miscellaneous

Keywords

Wikipedia, higher education, credibility, usage

1. INTRODUCTION

Ask any university faculty member whether her/his students use Wikipedia, and there's a good chance you'll hear complaints about problems with its accuracy, and threats about how they ought to get tough with students who they believe are overly dependent on it for information. In fact, some college professors have done just that by curtailing students' use of Wikipedia. At Wichita State University, in the state of Kansas, the Graduate School announced, in 2009, that Wikipedia should not be included in any thesis or dissertation submitted for final approval. And in 2007, faculty at Middlebury College's history department, in the state of Vermont, ordered their students not to cite it in any of their research papers.

After the Middlebury history department announced its new policy, Chair Don Wyatt said, "As educators, we are in the business of reducing the dissemination of misinformation." But ask college student about Wikipedia, and they'll likely praise it for its ease of use and copious amounts of helpful information. New research suggests faculty efforts to steer students away from Wikipedia may not be having much of an effect. A pair of California researchers reported in a *First Monday* article published in March 2010, that "far more students, than not" use Wikipedia as they gather information for research projects.

University professors are aware that mistakes exist in all published materials, even the most prestigious. That said, what bothers faculty members so much about Wikipedia? The lack of academic credentials of many of Wikipedia's contributors raises red flags in academic circles. And the grievousness of some of Wikipedia's most widely publicized errors, such as a 2005 false and defamatory biography of journalist John Seigenthaler, have further sullied its reputation. The founder of Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales, owned up to its weaknesses in a 2005 interview published in that year's Dec. 14 online edition of *Business Week*. He said, "No, I don't think people should cite it, and I don't think people should cite Britannica, either—the error rate there isn't very good."

All this begs questions about whether college and university faculty members follow their own advice by avoiding or refusing to use Wikipedia. In response, a pilot study was designed to address the following research questions: How do university professors and instructors regard Wikipedia's credibility? And, how do university professors and instructors use Wikipedia in their own academic work?

2. METHODS

Two methods were used to address the study's research questions: content analysis and survey research. For insights into faculty members' views on Wikipedia's credibility and whether they use it in their teaching and/or research, a survey was launched on SurveyMonkey.com. Respondents were solicited using a snowball sampling method. To date, a total of 141 responses have been gathered.

The study's second method—content analysis—was employed to learn how academics are using Wikipedia in their published research. A sample of peer-reviewed research reports, published from 2009 to May 19, 2010, was compiled through a search of Academic OneFile's electronic databases using the word "Wikipedia" as a search term. Academic OneFile advertises itself as "the premier source for peer-reviewed, full-text articles from the world's leading journals and reference sources." The word "Wikipedia" appeared in Academic OneFile's electronic database for the first time in 2002. Since then, it has appeared in nearly 3,000 additional Academic OneFile documents. Such documents range widely from reports, to essays, to letters to the editor. A total of 594 of these documents were categorized as "research reports." This group was narrowed to 250 by identifying those published between 2009 and 2010 (as of May 19, 2010). Such reports were examined to determine why their authors included the word "Wikipedia."

3. RESULTS

3.1 Survey

Overall, the survey's results suggest that while some university faculty never or rarely use Wikipedia, and have little if any trust in its credibility, others regard it highly enough that they use it not just occasionally but frequently.

Figure 1 presents data on respondents' responses to a question on Wikipedia's credibility, from rank one (no credibility) to rank seven (extremely credible). While none of the 105 respondents awarded Wikipedia its top rank of seven, 54.4 percent of the survey's respondents ranked it from moderately credible to very credible (ranks four to six). In contrast, 20 percent of the respondents said Wikipedia has "no credibility," and 26.6 percent said it has some credibility, although not much.

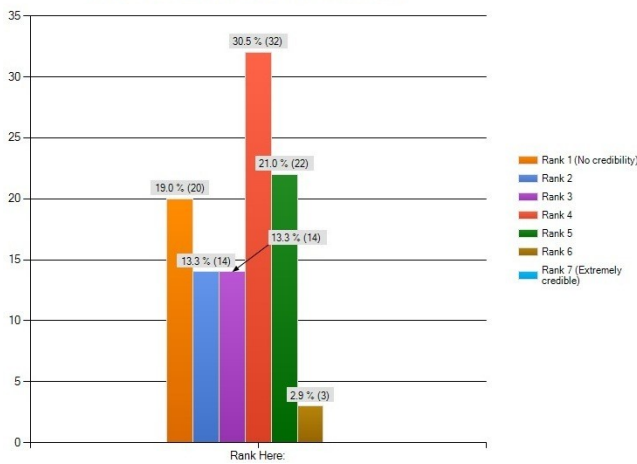Figure 1. Credibility of Wikipedia (105 responses)

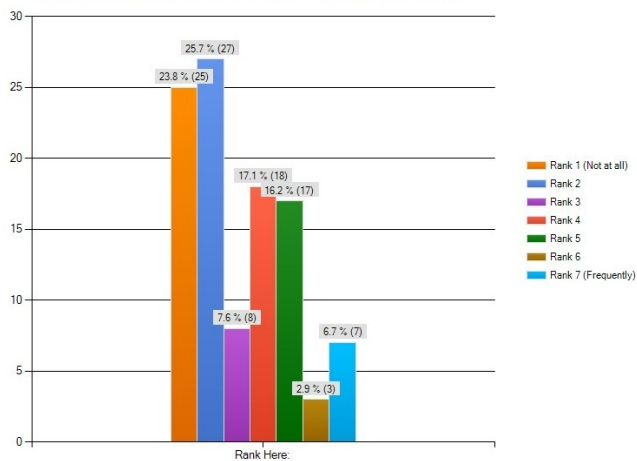Figure 2. Use of Wikipedia: Teaching/Research (105 responses)

Figure 2 displays the answers of 105 respondents on how frequently they use Wikipedia in their teaching and/or research. Their choices ranged from rank one (I don't ever use Wikipedia in my teaching/research) to rank seven (I frequently use Wikipedia in my teaching/research). Forty-five of the 105 respondents ranked their Wikipedia use from four (moderate use) to seven (frequent use), 40 of the respondents said they occasionally use Wikipedia (ranks two and three), and 20 of the respondents said they never use Wikipedia in their teaching and/or research.

3.2 Content Analysis

Analysis of the group of 250 peer-reviewed research reports compiled in the research demonstrates that the authors who included the word "Wikipedia" in their scholarship used it for one or more of the following reasons: 1. Wikipedia was included as a source of scholarly information, as was indicated by its inclusion within an endnote or some other form of citation; 2. Wikipedia was the main topic of the research report; or, 3. Wikipedia was briefly mentioned in the report's narrative as an example or for some other non-citation reason.

As is indicated in Table 1, by far the most common function of the word "Wikipedia" in the research reports relates to its use as a scholarly source. Some of the report's authors used the word "Wikipedia" for more than one purpose.

Table 1. "Wikipedia" in Peer-Reviewed Journal
Research Articles, 2009-2010

Scholarly Sources	Report's Main Topic	Brief mentions
249	27	62

4. CONCLUSION

Although the results of the research conducted for this pilot study are not generalizable, it is clear that some university faculty members depend on Wikipedia in their teaching and published research despite the fact that they often discourage their students from using it. This is surprising, considering faculty members' concerns about Wikipedia's accuracy, and the backlash that has developed on some college campuses leading to strictures against its use by students. Future research should be based on a larger, more representative, sample of faculty respondents. In addition, new questions probing more deeply the complex nature of the professoriate's relationship with Wikipedia should be included in future studies.

3. REFERENCES

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