

## History is Written by Us All: In Defense of Wikipedia

Film critic Roger Ebert once said, “Doing research on the Web is like using a library assembled piecemeal by packrats and vandalized nightly.” In years past, university students conducting research for academic papers visited libraries. Now, however, when beginning a research project, many students look first to the Internet, which, as Ebert points out, can be likened to a library. Just as traditional libraries contain encyclopedias, so too does the Internet. In fact, it is home to many, including such well known names as *Britannica* and *World Book*. One, however, stands out as unique: Wikipedia, “The Free Encyclopedia that **anyone** can edit” (“Wikipedia”). Unlike *Britannica* and *World Book*, which are essentially conventional print encyclopedias made available online, Wikipedia utilizes the power of the Internet to gather a diversity of expertise from the world over. This unorthodox approach has been praised, and it has been decried. By cautiously navigating through this discord, however, it becomes clear that Wikipedia provides an ideal starting point for research projects because it presents the various sides of complex, controversial topics, because of its commitment to maintaining a neutral point of view, and because the quality of information is monitored by a conscientious community of editors.

Wikipedia provides researchers a broad overview of a complex topic. By analyzing the ways in which the numerous meanings of a single word are presented on the Internet, one can understand the challenge students face when trying to gain a basic understanding of an issue, concept or event. What, for instance, does “globalization” mean? As a Senior Fellow of Economic Studies and Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution points out, for many of the world’s people, it means “Americanization” and is cause for concern (Brainard). Certainly this perspective has merit. The reach of Starbucks and McDonalds stretches across the planet. This view, however, is clearest when considered from the streets of Tokyo, Paris or Mexico City, where evidence of the presence of American brands is apparent. In contrast, anyone who pays attention to news from the United States, such as reports on CNN from Lou Dobbs, knows that to many U.S. citizens “globalization” means the outsourcing of “American” jobs to people in countries such as India. According to a

recent article in *Business Week*, three million U.S. jobs have been lost to countries that could do them more cheaply (“America's New Competition”). With this information in mind, the position that globalization means global domination by the United States becomes more difficult to defend. The question remains: What exactly is globalization? As Lee Sustar of the anti-globalization group the International Socialist Organization aptly puts it, “the meaning of ‘globalization’ depends almost entirely on who is talking about it.” If this is true, one would need to include the perspectives of diverse groups, ethnically, philosophically and economically, in order to develop an accurate picture of what the word means to the world. This is precisely what Wikipedia does.

Looking at the entry for “globalization” on the Wikipedia website, it is readily apparent that the word has numerous meanings. Furthermore, it is clear that an effort is made to present this variety in an unbiased manner. This is crucial. Researchers see that diverse and perhaps conflicting perspectives exist; however Wikipedia’s policy ensures that neutrality is maintained. It is apparent, for example, that there are two distinct sides of the issue: pro-globalization and anti-globalization. Moreover, both sides are given a dedicated article, or entry, on the website. There is no evidence that Wikipedia supports one view or the other. Indeed, this commitment to objectivity is one of their stated goals: “*representing* disputes, *characterizing* them, rather than engaging in them” (“Wikipedia”). Wikipedia is the only free, Web-based resource up to the task of fairly presenting the breadth and depth of meanings associated with complex, controversial terms like “globalization.”

Wikipedia, of course, is not without its critics. One of the main complaints is that anyone with an Internet connection may revise Wikipedia entries. In his article “The Faith-Based Encyclopedia,” Robert McHenry, a former *Britannica* editor, writes, “However closely a Wikipedia article may at some point in its life attain to reliability, it is forever open to the uninformed or semiliterate meddler.” One could, for example, pull up the article for the planet Venus and write that it is the largest planet in the solar system. This inaccurate information would be posted; it would become part of the encyclopedia. However, this error would remain only until someone corrected it. As members of the Wikipedia community point out, “Really egregious errors are fixed quickly by the

thousands of people who read Wikipedia every day” (“Wikipedia”). A recent experience of an economics professor reveals this to be true:

In conducting research on globalization, I consulted Wikipedia. The entry began with these words: “Globalization ... is a term used to describe the dog in cat and the changes in societies and the world economy that result from dramatically increased international trade and cultural exchange.” Confused by the odd presence of “dog in cat,” I refreshed the screen and found that the wording had been corrected. (Cohen)

As indicated by this account, Wikipedia is self-healing. While vandalism may occur, the damage is quickly repaired. Additionally, Wikipedia is considering the introduction of “stable versions” of articles that have been thoroughly examined. According to a recent article in *Nature*, “Once an article reaches a specific quality threshold it will be tagged as stable” (Giles). Additions to these stable versions would be subject to approval. This innovation demonstrates that Wikipedia is committed to and capable of moving towards increasingly higher levels of quality.

In the words of George Orwell, “History is written by the winners.” Though this may have rung true in 1946 when it was penned, the sentiment is a product of a world without the Internet. The world is now a Global Village, and history is being written as it happens – and participation is not limited to the winners, the wealthiest and most powerful. The Internet has democratized the enterprise of writing history, and Wikipedia embodies this. Is it a perfect resource for serious academic work? No. However, it does serve as an excellent starting point in that it presents researchers with background information and many potential avenues of further research. In closing, it is worth stating that a vote of confidence for Wikipedia is a vote of confidence for humankind, who can indeed cooperate on a global scale in order to create something valuable and truly beautiful.

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