The Wiki: Friend or Foe?

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We've all been there, whether it's for in-depth research on a subject of interest or a quick search for a piece of trivia. We hop on the Web to learn something we didn't know before. Gone are the days of dragging out the dusty World Book Encyclopedia that consisted of twenty-six volumes and a dictionary, and took up an entire shelf in the family room, where we sifted for information that was limited in its scope of knowledge and reference. Today, the resources are endless, and any Internet search will take you to Web pages on just about everything imaginable. The unwritten rule of thumb is that the first hit is usually understood to be the most reliable. However, this is not always the case.

Wikipedia. It's fast. It's easy. It's costless. And it's at our fingertips. Self-declared as "the Free Encyclopedia," Wikipedia (Wiki for short) is available in 10 different languages, with the English version boasting more than 1,780,000 articles to date. Germany's Wiki site hosts close to 600,000 articles, with France at 500,000, and the remaining seven sites hovering around the 300,000 mark. Certainly, with all this information just a click away, it would seem that researchers and trivia hounds alike have discovered a missing treasure chest of information, and it's free! How much better could it get?

The truth is, it could get a whole lot better. The element that turns this wonder site into a questionable source is that articles appearing on Wikipedia can be created and edited by anybody. If you have access to the Internet, you can create or edit a Wiki article. What's even more disturbing is that you don't need any specific knowledge on the subject matter. All you need is a nugget of information and a computer, and away you go. Where encyclopedias that were purchased once at a time over the course of several months were compiled by experts in the field and then edited by professional publishers, the door to free Wiki information is left open for all to access, compose, and amend.

For the past two years, I have been co-researching a biography with an author about the life of a well-known actor who is deceased. The Internet has been a reliable tool in our quest for information; however, we have also been researching the old-fashioned way – through old books; radio airchecks; tattered newspapers; high school, college, and military records; and interviews with family, friends, and co-workers. What we have learned through the painstaking and expensive process of real research is glaringly and immeasurably different than what the general public knows, most of which has been made available via a Wiki article. The author and I visit this article routinely, and with a few keystrokes, have removed untruths and slanderous comments that have ranged from this individual never graduating from high school (when he did) to him burning down a local radio station (which, in fact, he did not). And as easy as it is for us to correct this article, it is just as easy for someone else to jump in and toss another tidbit into the mix that may or may not be accurate.

Welcome to the world of Wiki. But this is not to say that Wikipedia is without total merit. A Wiki article can and should be used as a springboard on your pursuit of research. Links buried within each article will direct you to reputable Web sites that contain material specifically related to your topic. Many times, a Wiki article will be taken verbatim from a respected Web site, and this will be indicated, usually with a link directly to that original site.

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Health care professionals stress to their patients that as they search for information about their health condition, diagnosis, and treatment, they must be aware that the Internet has its drawbacks. Quick and easy do not always mean truthful and dependable. Likewise, we need to relay to our association members that basing their research findings on information found through Wikipedia is not only telling readers that they were too lazy to go beyond the springboard, but that their manuscript may be inaccurate. Some peer-reviewed journal editors will not even bother with manuscripts that rely on Wiki references, rejecting those submissions or forcing a revision that insists upon valid research.

In the end, the research you conduct for the manuscript you will eventually write is only as good as the source. In this high-speed world of instant gratification, sacrificing conclusive evidence for saved time and money may only prove more costly in terms of additional work, or worst-case scenario, adverse events in patients. Remember the saying, “You get what you pay for.” In the case of “the Free Encyclopedia,” costs are paid not in dollars, but in sense.

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