

# FREEDOMISM

## *Randomly generated opinions*

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote an article concerning virtual books — more specifically, Google Books, an online book depository — and how they should not be considered inferior to physical books (they are, after all, direct copies). In that article I mentioned that Wikipedia is the king of the unreliable label on the Internet: even with its massive popularity internationally, driving millions of page views a day, there is still an ever-strong opposition to Wikipedia's "the encyclopedia that anyone can edit" philosophy. Many people, including prominent scholars, consider this ideal, the motto of Wikipedia itself, to be an open invitation to a swath of false information and trolls. This is the main argument that drives thousands of schools across the United States to ban Wikipedia and other wikis for use in citations.

I'm not writing today to completely defend Wikipedia from the academic world. There is undoubtedly some truth to the accusation that Wikipedia can be home to false information — it's an issue that thousands of Wikipedians must deal with every day. Opening a website to editing by any person on the Internet is bound to create problems and conflicts, but Wikipedia has overcome these obstacles with its massive self-regulating community and flexible editing tools that allow malicious or misdirected edits to be reverted within seconds. Now 8 years old, Wikipedia is the world's largest encyclopedia, the pinnacle of the Internet's goal of making information easier to access and share. For millions of people it is their first stop for information on a ridiculous array of subjects covering almost every category of human knowledge. It makes research easier by combining information from hundreds of different sources into one easy-to-read article. When it comes to major topics such as current events (*Deepwater Horizon*) or general knowledge (the Civil War), Wikipedia is extremely well-cited and heavily scrutinized by editors. Even the smallest bits of unreferenced information are removed within seconds. Librarian organizations (such as the *Library Journal* and Trent University's library in Ontario, Canada) have acknowledged that Wikipedia, after substantial research, is better-cited than many critics perceive it to be. Academic organizations from a variety of colleges across the world have compared areas of Wikipedia to other forms of media (such as news organizations and other encyclopedias) only to find that Wikipedia is, in many cases, equally or more accurate than alternative sources.

Even with these studies backing up Wikipedia's reliability, it is unanimously agreed that not everything on the website is entirely reliable. The darker parts of Wikipedia — articles that cover topics that only a few specialize in, or are limited to a localized area — are magnets for newly registered editors. In many cases they are home to paragraphs that are badly written, terribly formatted and deprived of any citations whatsoever. Some articles are simply plagiarized from websites in a quick, dirty copy-and-paste job. Because the subjects they cover are so, for use of a better word, unpopular, they attract nearly no editorial traffic and are left to sit in the virtual dust. Occasionally a visitor may use it as a citation, but for months on end the article can remain in an unaltered state of mediocrity. It's these parts of Wikipedia that prevent it from becoming a completely reliable source for information. Even on the larger articles, small bits of un-cited information can leak through and stay buried in the text, unnoticed for weeks. Therefore, everything on Wikipedia should be taken with a grain of salt and a backup citation, just in case it was faulty.

Still, the popular argument among teachers, librarians and other academic persons is that because anyone can edit Wikipedia, it is inherently unusable as a citation for anything. This is a weak argument, because it fails to recognize that Wikipedia has strict editing standards and a strong, sharp-eyed community that strives to make articles as factually accurate and clean as possible. Banning Wikipedia as a resource for anything is unreasonable — it is largely agreed within academic circles that Wikipedia should be used as a starting resource on projects. It would also be unreasonable to disallow use of a Wikipedia article if it happens to be an article that has dozens of citations — a good chunk of articles fit this description, most of them on major topics and current events. While Wikipedia is not written in a closed environment by "experts", after much work by hundreds of different people from all over the world, the material can be equally factual and high-quality as work from an expert on the subject. Wikipedia may not ever be accepted fully by educators, but the bad reputation it has among them must be cited itself. When debunked, it reveals an encyclopedia that isn't as unreliable as too many of us say it is.

Miller, Barry X., Karl Helicher, and Teresa Berry. "I Want My Wikipedia!" *Library Journal Library News, Reviews and Views*. N.p., 1 Apr. 2006. Web. 4 June 2010. <<http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6317246.html>>.

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