

Wikipedia site quick - and flawed

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Wikipedia.org is an online encyclopedia. It differs from traditional encyclopedias in that the entries are created by users rather than corporate writers and editors.

So, how can something created by so many people, in the absence of a central authority, ever be accurate?

A study recently published in the British journal Nature concluded that Wikipedia has a level of accuracy only slightly lower than that of Encyclopedia Britannica. It showed that, on average, there are 2.92 mistakes per article for Encyclopedia Britannica and 3.86 for Wikipedia.

Wikipedia was launched in January 2001. Founders Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger wanted to create "an international collaborative free-content encyclopedia on the Internet" where the content was created by the users. To accomplish this, they decided to use "wiki" technology.

Wiki technology is the brainchild of Ward Cunningham. Cunningham launched the first wiki based site, the WikiWikiWeb on March 25, 1995. Wiki means "quick" in Hawaiian. As for the wiki technology, Cunningham says, "I chose wiki-wiki as an alliterative substitute for 'quick' and, thereby, avoided naming this stuff quick-web."

Many web-based reference sites now use this technology.

So what exactly is "wiki technology"? Basically, it's a simpler way of creating HTML pages combined with a recording system that tracks each individual change. This allows a page to be constantly updated while preserving the previous versions.

It is this concept that lies at the heart of wikipedia. It is also Wikipedia's greatest weakness. An enormous amount of trust must be placed in Wikipedia's users. And we all know how trustworthy the Internet can be.

This trust was put to the test in 2005.

In May, the biography of John Siegenthaler Sr. was edited to suggest that he had been involved in the Kennedy assassinations. The edits were posted by an individual who was playing a prank on a co-worker. There was no truth in the allegations and Siegenthaler -- who had worked on Robert Kennedy's campaign -- was outspoken in his desire to have the entry removed. However, it wasn't until September that the entry was corrected.

In December, it was reported that Adam Curry, a former MTV VJ and key player in the podcasting phenomenon, had anonymously edited the Wikipedia entry on podcasting. Certain paragraphs were reworded to enhance Curry's role and diminish that of other key developers of the technology.

When he was confronted with this information, Curry first claimed that he was unfamiliar with the Wikipedia system of editing and later apologized for making the edits.

Also in December, reports emerged that Wikipedia founder Wales had edited his own bio roughly 18 times. The edits had the effect of downplaying the contribution of Sanger, with whom Wales had had a falling out.

When he was asked about the edits, Wales insisted that they were only meant to provide a more rounded picture of the early days of Wikipedia and to correct some factual errors.

With all of this controversy, it is natural that people began to question the general accuracy of Wikipedia. The release of the accuracy study was certainly helpful to Wikipedia.

To address this issue, Wikipedia has implemented a time-delay system, where popular entries are reviewed before being posted to the website. It will be interesting to see if this provides the proper balance to end up with the right kind and amount of editorial control -- without requiring the kind of central gatekeeping that would render the concept useless.