**STUDENTS ARE TOLD NOT TO USE WIKIPEDIA FOR RESEARCH. BUT IT’S A TRUSTWORTHY SOURCE**

At the start of each university year, we ask first-year students a question: how many have been told by their secondary teachers not to use Wikipedia? Without fail, nearly every hand shoots up. Wikipedia offers free and reliable information instantly. So why do teachers almost universally distrust it? Wikipedia has community-enforced policies on neutrality, reliability and notability. This means all information “must be presented accurately and without bias”.

Wikipedia is free, non-profit, and has been operating for over two decades, making it an internet success story. At a time when it’s increasingly difficult to separate truth from falsehood, Wikipedia is an accessible tool for fact-checking and fighting misinformation.

Many teachers point out that anyone can edit a Wikipedia page, not just experts on the subject. But this doesn’t make Wikipedia’s information unreliable. It’s virtually impossible, for instance, for conspiracies to remain published on Wikipedia.

For popular articles, Wikipedia’sonline community of volunteers, administrators and bots ensure edits are based on reliable citations. Popular articles are reviewed thousands of times. Some media experts argue that because of this process, a highly-edited article on Wikipedia might be the most reliable source of information ever created. All modifications to an article are archived in its “history” page. Traditional academic articles – the most common source of scientific evidence – are typically only peer-reviewed by up to three people and then never edited again.

Many teachers also argue the information on Wikipedia is too basic. This argument supposes all fact-checking must involve deep engagement. But this is not best practice for conducting initial investigation into a subject online. Deep research needs to come later, once the validity of the source has been established. Still, some teachers are horrified by the idea students need to be taught to assess information quickly and superficially. Yet, in reality, everything on the internet is vying for our attention and yes, our students clearly need more media literacy education. Wikipedia can be a good media literacy instrument. It is the perfect classroom resource for this purpose, even for primary-aged students. When first encountering unfamiliar information, students can be encouraged to go to the relevant Wikipedia page to check reliability. If the unknown information isn’t verifiable, they can discard it and move on.

In the future, we hope first-year university students enter our classrooms already understanding the value of Wikipedia. This will mean a widespread cultural shift has taken place in schools. In a time of climate change and pandemics, everyone needs to be able to separate fact from fiction. Wikipedia can be part of the remedy.

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