Digital Media Literacy: Wikipedia and its Place in the Classroom

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Abstract:

The rise of fake news and false information–particularly in the previous U.S. Presidential Elections–has reignited the discourse on digital media literacy in the educational arena. Critical development must take place should the modern digitally centric society continue to function democratically. New methods on digital media literacy have been uncovered. These newer methods focus on project-based learning and hands-on activities that directly guide and instruct students. This paper looks at how Wikipedia can play a positive role in the digital media literacy educational experience.

Digital Media Literacy: Wikipedia and its Place in the Classroom

Digital media has become a significant part of many people's lives – including children. With the rise of Instagram and TikTok, along with many other platforms, children have the opportunity to interact with "friends" all over the globe. Although this may not necessarily be an issue when under parental supervision, it may lead to some safety concerns, especially with younger teenagers and children. Despite all the negatives, the digital media arena provides many resources to children, particularly in education. Throughout history, children have been welcomed and encouraged to participate with adults in conversations, activities, and entertainment. However, under most of those circumstances, they were supervised and taught how to interact and engage with other people.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many students were forced to migrate to digital classrooms and virtual spaces of learning. This has resulted in children becoming digitally native at a much younger age, in comparison to previous generations. PrakashYadav and Rai (2017) share that Millennials, although they were exposed to media, are only considered "tech savvy" while Generation Z, has been exposed to digital media significantly more, thus being "tech innate" (p. 111). This may seem natural because as humans progress further into the 21st century and beyond, their children will be surrounded by digital media more and more. Therefore, the generation following Gen Z may be considered even more innate – or whatever term scholars deem appropriate.

There is a vast array of false information available on the internet. Moreover, research suggests that people lack the ability to reason what they encounter online, meaning that they may be more susceptible to false information and false narratives online (McDowell & Vetter, 2020).

Unfortunately, this has led to issues within the American narrative of truth. One could argue that there may be a perceived divide between people and what they consider true information and false information. The notion of discerning what is considered reliable and unreliable information is an age-old process; however, in the modern digital age, it is one of the most useful skills. With the internet, people can disseminate information at a much greater rate than ever before – and often without moderation.

Although it is important to invite children to participate in digital media, care should be taken as they enter these arenas. Young people must be instructed and taught how to effectively navigate in these spaces, so they are not victims of fake news, false information, and blind faith in what they view online. Progress has been made within American educational system to encourage the incorporation of media literacy within educational standards; however, only one state, Illinois, requires media literacy at the high school level (Media Literacy, n.p., 2022). Scholars define media literacy as enabling students "to adequately read media messages and produce media themselves in order to be active participants in a democratic society" (Kellner & Share, p. 3, 2007).

Much of this indicates the importance of digital media literacy. This area of study should be incorporated into the streamlined curriculum and pedagogy of all schools within the United States. As a modern society, the United States should not be facing battles of misinformation on the scale it currently does. By incorporating media literacy, it may teach students how to identify the source of informational materials they find online. Ultimately this will allow them to discern whether the information they read digitally is trustworthy or not. However, it must require active readers within the society, so they may seek information that is trustworthy.

This research study will analyze digital media literacy and its relationship with the free online encyclopedia, Wikipedia. A digital ethnography is conducted to understand the public's perception of Wikipedia, in an attempt to discover their approval of credibility towards the platform.

Literature Review

Despite the lack of digital media literacy's incorporation into educational instruction, there is significant literature on the issue. Kellner & Share (2007) explain that society has drastically changed over the past several decades, many thanks to technology. Therefore, they explain that because there has been such significant change, "it requires the development of critical media literacy to empower students and citizens to adequately read media messages and produce media themselves to be active participants in a democratic society" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 3). A critical aspect of this statement is the recognition of media literacy for a democratic society. By being media literate, it enables citizens to read and create media, thereby creating healthy discourse on public matters. Ultimately, this is vital in a democratic society.

Furthermore, there is no formally established media education curriculum available to students in the United States (Kellner & Share, 2007). This presents a problem since media and technology play a significant role in a democratic society, as previously mentioned. Several scholars emphasize the importance of critical media literacy, which "empowers students to analyze and use media and technology to express their views and visions in critical solidarity with the world around them" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 18). By utilizing their resources of technology and media, they are able to actively participate and develop their abilities while also developing literacy skills in that area as

well. This is critical if educators want students to be interested in developing their digital media literacy skills. By using their skills and interests in technology and media, there may be more success in developing interest in literacy skills for students.

Wikipedia as an Approach to Media Literacy

One approach that McDowell & Vetter (2020) consider is using Wikipedia as an method to teach media literacy. Some readers may find this to be an interesting approach, as educators in the past have discouraged students from utilizing Wikipedia. However, McDowell & Vetter explain they believe that the policies and procedures to ensure misinformation is not disseminated can be useful to teach students critical information/media literacy skills (McDowell & Vetter, 2020). These skills ultimately teach students to seek the source of their information, forcing them to be more aware of the information they are receiving or sharing. This is vital, as disinformation has become a major issue in the United States political arena, as it has altered the outcome of national elections (McDowell & Vetter, 2020).

By students participating in Wikipedia through editing and creating content on the website, they are exercising their agency in the validation of information. The validation of information is often limited in traditional educational systems – as students often rely "on the curation of content by other authorities" (McDowell & Vetter, 2020, p. 2). Therefore, by students writing content on the digital encyclopedia, they are actively seeking quality sources that can reinforce their statements. Moreover, students may be more likely to find quality sources if they know false information will be removed by bots and moderators. This is evidently noticed as students who engage in Wikipedia show pride in the

work they create; therefore, they may be more likely to create quality content that is less likely to be removed (McDowell & Vetter, 2020).

However, it is important to recognize how Wikipedia gained its reputation of being uncredible. In 2005, just four years after Wikipedia's launch, David Pogue of the New York Times, opened an article with the following question: "Is it the end of an era for Wikipedia, the popular Internet encyclopedia?" (Pogue, 2005). This was primarily in response to many notable people, including journalists, who had their Wikipedia page defamed, which led to them taking class action lawsuits. After this incident in the years that followed, Wikipedia focused on its policies and practices, which inherently helped its issue of unreliability (McDowell & Vetter, 2020). Moreover, as technological advancements continued, bots were incorporated into the policy and practices, which allowed for greater maintenance and defense against disinformation. This became critical for Wikipedia, as it primarily functions on the volunteers that edit information on the website.

Nevertheless, Wikipedia prevailed, eventually regaining its reputation. However, that does not negate the damage that was done to the minds of students. Readers are reminded of danah boyd's question of "media literacy … backfiring" because they were simply told not to use the website (McDowell & Vetter, 2020, p. 1). Ultimately reinforcing the aforementioned arguments that students are not actively seeking their information but relying on people in authority for the approval of information sources that are deemed credible. If students rely on people in authority for the approval of credible sources, the students lose their agency to determine what is credible.

Ultimately, digital media literacy skills are vital for a modern society to function, as much of life functions digitally or in online spaces. Several researchers proclaim the need for digital media

literacy to be incorporated into educational systems within the United States. McDowell and Vetter share their advocacy for utilizing Wikipedia as an approach to information/media literacy. Their approach is reminiscent of traditional information literacy teachings; however, they reposition these skills on the online platform Wikipedia.

Digital Ethnography

This study will utilize a digital ethnography to understand and analyze the perception of Wikipedia's reliability for information. A digital ethnography uses the traditional methods of ethnography and utilizes them in the digital space (Kidd, 2017). This will be critical as Wikipedia is an online space; therefore, much of the discourse on it may be available digitally as well. The researcher will observe comments in a YouTube video titled *Using Wikipedia: Crash Course Navigating Digital Information #5* published by CrashCourse that discuss Wikipedia and its reliability to determine the general public's perception of Wikipedia's reliability.

Purposive sampling will be used within this study. Purposive sampling provides the control the researcher needs to choose an intentional group of people for the digital ethnography (Barbour, 2001). By controlling the selected population, the information and data gathered allow the specific needs of this research project to be met. Furthermore, a discourse analysis is utilized to understand connections and common patterns of thought between commentators on YouTube.

Analysis

An overwhelming number of users on videos that was analyzed for this research shared they felt Wikipedia was an important resource for people. In contrast to earlier criticisms that Wikipedia was unreliable and a source of false information, it appears that many people embrace the digital encyclopedia. Moreover, despite harsh criticisms in the past, particularly by educators, users find this platform to be a good source to begin their research. Similar to how traditional encyclopedias are not – or should not – be used to reference in scholarly research, neither should Wikipedia; however, Wikipedia should be utilized as a starting place to seek and gather information.

Open Access to Wikipedia

One of the greatest features of Wikipedia is that it provides information to the public for free. One user by the name of ThePhantom explained this is something that is completely different than other encyclopedias (Figure 1). Traditional paperback encyclopedias require payment; however, those who use Wikipedia now only need an internet connection, as shared by ThePhantom.

Figure 1:

ThePhantom 3 years ago
One of the other things about Wikipedia that's different than other encyclopedias is this: you don't have to pay for it. It gives anyone with an internet connection access to its content and not just those who pay for it.

👍 1 👎   REPLY

Figure 2:

Felixkeeg 3 years ago
One of my professors always says: "You have the power of the internet nowadays. Wikipedia is the best stepping stone into any topic and I wish we had it, when I was still a student"
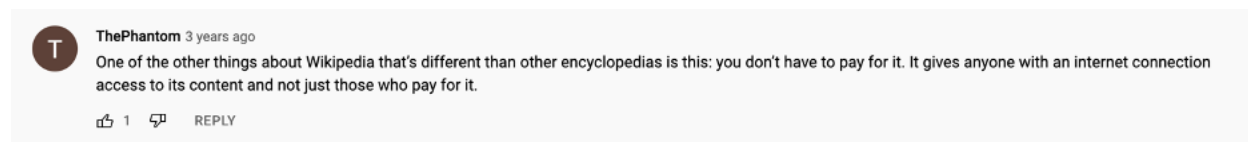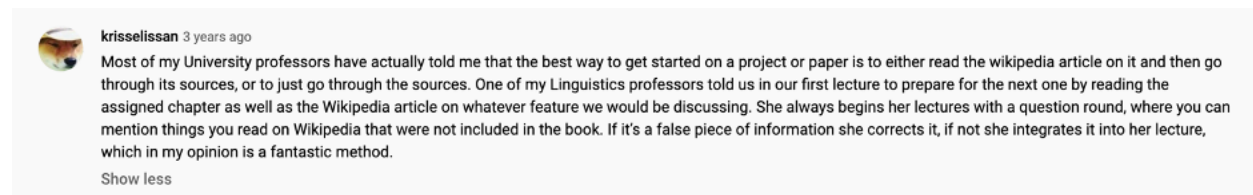
👍 👎   REPLY

Another individual explained their professor promotes the use of Wikipedia. Felixkeeg's professor explains that "Wikipedia is the best stepping stone into any topic and I wish we had it when I was still a student" (Figure 2). This sheds light on the value people place on Wikipedia. For those who grew up in a time when it was not available, they are able to view the similarities and differences between Wikipedia and traditional encyclopedias. In the case of Felixkeeg's professor, they recognize the significance Wikipedia plays in the modern information and data search for research. Moreover, the value of the comments of Felixkeeg's professor are significant because the individual making the claim is a professor. Therefore, an experienced and professional researcher is suggesting and recommending that students utilize the tool that Wikipedia is.
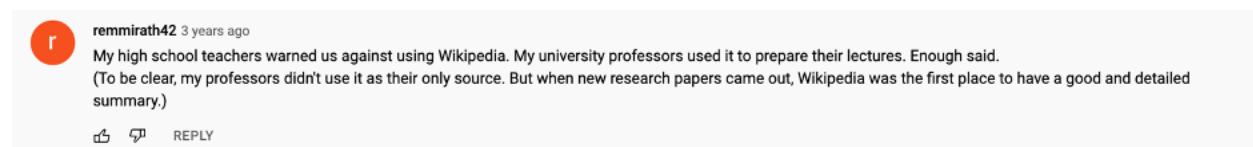
Wikipedia in the Classroom

As previously mentioned, and seen in Figure 2, professors are encouraging students to use Wikipedia as a space to find information. In the case of the user krisselissan, they explained that many professors at their university recommended using Wikipedia as a starting place for their work (Figure 3). Professors by and large seem to recommend students to use the reference section of Wikipedia to find additional sources and to validate claims. When professors assign their students to read both scholarly articles and Wikipedia articles, it may encourage them to use this method of information literacy when conducting their own research for personal or professional matters. Professors are people of authority, and as previously mentioned, more often students are relying on people in authority to help them make decisions regarding what is considered a reliable source.

Figure 3

krisselissan 3 years ago
Most of my University professors have actually told me that the best way to get started on a project or paper is to either read the wikipedia article on it and then go through its sources, or to just go through the sources. One of my Linguistics professors told us in our first lecture to prepare for the next one by reading the assigned chapter as well as the Wikipedia article on whatever feature we would be discussing. She always begins her lectures with a question round, where you can mention things you read on Wikipedia that were not included in the book. If it's a false piece of information she corrects it, if not she integrates it into her lecture, which in my opinion is a fantastic method.
Show less

Another individual expressed what seemed to be frustration on the matter. When they were in high school, teachers were against Wikipedia; however, when they started their education at the university level, professors were using it in class. They concluded that remark with "Enough said." emphasizing some of their frustration toward their high school teachers (Figure 4). This shows that they place their value judgment on their professors over their teachers. However, this individual did clarify that Wikipedia was the first place to start research, and it wasn't the only place to cite their information.

Figure 4

remmirath42 3 years ago
My high school teachers warned us against using Wikipedia. My university professors used it to prepare their lectures. Enough said.
(To be clear, my professors didn't use it as their only source. But when new research papers came out, Wikipedia was the first place to have a good and detailed summary.)
REPLY

However, it appears that professors are not the only instructors that approve of the use of Wikipedia as a place of information. Some teachers at the middle and high school levels encourage their students to use Wikipedia for their assignments. Kala Ask explains how she teaches middle and high schoolers (Figure 5). However, because these students are still developing information literacy skills, she reminds them that Wikipedia is "a great source of sources" however, it shouldn't be explicitly cited in a student's work. She uses another critical aspect of teaching because not only is she teaching her students that Wikipedia isn't a cesspool of false information, but she is teaching her students to

think critically and follow the sources to their original location. This ultimately shows students that despite her not allowing her students to use the platform as a source, it still provides value to those who are researching.
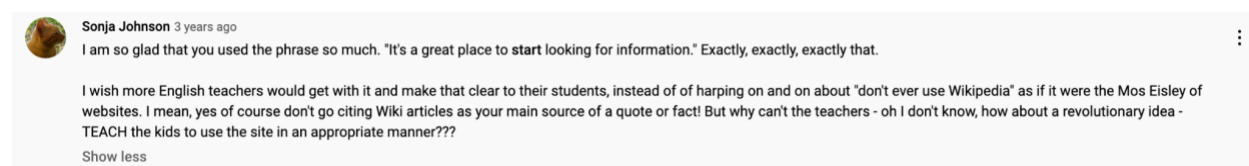
Figure 5
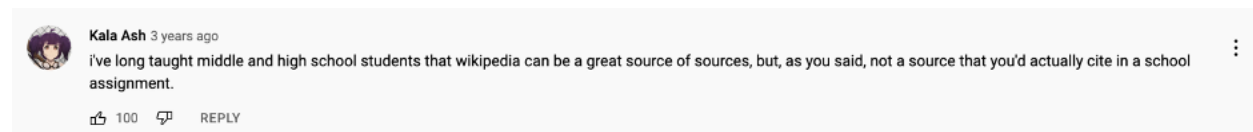
However, some university professors may still feel hesitant toward Wikipedia. Another teacher, Daniel Näsman, who appears to teach at the secondary level explained that he constantly is defending the use of Wikipedia from colleges, as they "dogmatically condemn it as unreliable" (Figure 6). Perhaps this instructor may be referring to people who aren't professors but rather admissions staff who reviews essay. Regardless, the commenter does not make clear who they are referring to except that it is a college they condemn as unreliable. However, Daniel Näsman also explains how his "students are amazed when [he] recommends them to start their research by reading up on Wikipedia." Therefore, in his geographical region, it is still becoming acceptable for students to use Wikipedia in the research process.

Figure 6
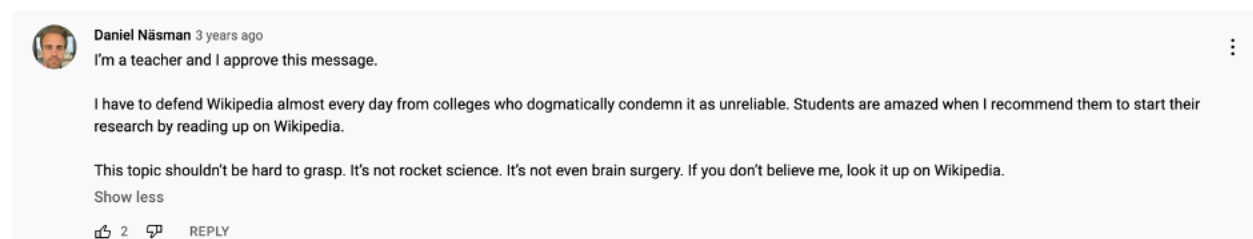
Unfortunately, some teachers still tell their students "[never] use Wikipedia." (Figure 7). This person's criticism is focused more on the lack of instruction to find reliable sources rather than simply telling students what is reliable and what is not reliable. It is important to teach students why a source is reliable. This will help them develop information/media literacy skills. In the matter of Sonja Johnson (Figure 7), this shows how teachers may simply continue to reinforce stereotypes of Wikipedia. Ultimately, Sonja's comment follows back on the notion that students are more likely to use "the curation of content by other authorities" (McDowell & Vetter, 2020, p. 2).

Figure 7

Sonja Johnson 3 years ago
I am so glad that you used the phrase so much. "It's a great place to **start** looking for information." Exactly, exactly, exactly that.

I wish more English teachers would get with it and make that clear to their students, instead of of harping on and on about "don't ever use Wikipedia" as if it were the Mos Eisley of websites. I mean, yes of course don't go citing Wiki articles as your main source of a quote or fact! But why can't the teachers - oh I don't know, how about a revolutionary idea - TEACH the kids to use the site in an appropriate manner???
Show less

Findings

Based on the findings above, it appears that most people are sympathetic towards Wikipedia and its reliability. For many people, despite being taught at a younger age, they have learned to embrace and accept the platform, and understand that it is an excellent place to begin research. An important aspect of Wikipedia is that it is an open-source platform, meaning that anybody can access it if they have an internet connection. Therefore, this makes Wikipedia an extremely useful tool for educators and students, as there is no cost to using the online encyclopedia.

The comments above indicate that some secondary school teachers are beginning to embrace Wikipedia and the resource it provides to the community. Many of these teachers are encouraging their students to simply start their research journey on Wikipedia, which will direct

them to other sources that can be cited in their studies. Based on the comments analyzed, professors are more likely to suggest to their students to use Wikipedia to begin their research.

Overall, it appears that as Wikipedia has aged, it has become more acceptable to use the online encyclopedia to begin research. Many of the old stigmas are beginning to fade. For some people, their instructors – whether they be secondary or higher education teachers – they still maintain old opinions on the platform; however much of it is changing and it is becoming welcoming and embraced in the classroom.

Conclusion

This research sought to understand the relationship between Wikipedia and students. A review of previous literature has indicated that Wikipedia's reputation and credibility have been increasing over time, thereby allowing it to be welcomed in the classroom. Scholars such as McDowell and Vetter (2020) have shared that Wikipedia is a platform that can teach students how to develop critical informational/media literacy skills. By encouraging students to participate and write on Wikipedia, it teaches them how to find appropriate information that is credible.

Furthermore, this research also conducted a digital ethnography that analyzed people's perception of Wikipedia – particularly noting its reliability. This digital ethnography reviewed the discussion of students and educators, along with former students who were able to provide their opinion of what comments were made by instructors in the past. Ultimately, this research concluded that people have become more receptive to Wikipedia. Students explain their teachers are encouraging them to utilize the platform to begin their research. At the university level, it is more common for professors – who are professional researchers – to encourage students to use the platform.

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