

## THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

# Navigating the online information maze: should students trust Wikipedia?

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Do we know where to find the most credible information in an age of digital literacy?  
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Being literate used to be about knowing how to read. In the 21st century it also means knowing how to negotiate through the torrent of information coming at you from all directions. Information Fatigue Syndrome, or “Infoglut” is a defining issue of modern life. For students particularly, it is getting harder to find useful, quality information.

### **Information literacy to digital literacy**

Educators have been teaching information literacy skills to students for many decades: learning to read, how to use libraries etc. Now with the increasing amount of information on the internet, it is more important than ever for higher education to teach students to apply these metacognitive skills — searching, retrieving, authenticating, critically evaluating and attributing material — to the online environment.

Digital information literacy skills have already been recognised as essential for study and for students' future employability.

Academia has long discouraged students from using general search engines like Google and crowd-sourced information resources like Wikipedia for their assignments. It's no big surprise, though, that students continue to access these resources. That may not be such a bad thing.

The crowd-sourcing review practices of Wikipedia, though criticised for favouring rapid turnaround over reliability, are forcing educators to reconsider the value and credibility of digital resources, or at least to rethink their attitude towards them. As scandalous as it might sound to old-school academics, Wikipedia is arguably subject to more rigorous review practices than are many scholarly publications.

Any interested party can contribute to a Wikipedia page. This community of gatekeepers, which is not unlike a community of scholars united by a common interest, assures quality of content. The influence of a minority of rogues is unlikely to taint the overall quality for long.

## **Who determines the value of knowledge?**

The traditional academic attitude to crowd-sourced content raises serious questions about who determines the value of knowledge. Why should a journal article reviewed by a relatively small, self-selected group of academics be regarded as more valuable than an article in Wikipedia, which has been peer-reviewed by possibly thousands of interested readers?

The value of online information will undoubtedly differ in certain disciplines. A medical student is unlikely to rely on content generated from a search engine. I, for one, certainly hope that individuals in the medical profession draw on information from scholarly publications and not the top Google entry, which could be a popular blog or tabloid newspaper.

But for highly technical, fast-moving fields, such as information technology (IT), the lag between journal article submission and publication invariably means that this information is outdated before it is released.

A student writing about emerging technologies, for example, needs access to, and institutional permission to use, information that is available via online newspapers, blogs, RSS feeds, wikis and social media sites. Digital literacy skills can help them sift the wheat from the chaff.

## **A threat to the gatekeepers**

Unfortunately, these new forms of knowledge construction represent a potential threat to the authority of academic gatekeepers. Unsurprisingly, these educators shun Wikipedia and insist on the use of peer-reviewed sources alone.

This archaic practice continues despite demands from employers for graduates who can critically judge the validity and reliability of online information.

Higher education institutions need to equip students with digital literacy skills. Otherwise, new modalities of education, such as Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs, are likely to become increasingly popular, threatening traditional models over time. While disciplines that rely heavily on practical instruction, such as medicine, will retain their value, highly technical and fast-moving fields such as IT may be at risk.

How then can formal institutions remain relevant in the digital age with the proliferation of MOOCs?

### **Keeping formal institutions relevant**

Students want an easy and reliable way to quickly validate online information. Unfortunately, many are not comfortable using materials outside those that are institutionally provided. As educators, we need to find ways to teach students how to cut through the noise and find quality information.

This raises questions about what an education that incorporates the development of digital literacy skills would actually look like.

The annotated bibliography is certainly not a novel idea. For countless years it has allowed students to demonstrate how they account for the currency, relevance and authority of information. If this task has worked so successfully for printed texts, surely it can be adapted for the digital environment.

The incredibly popular image-sharing platform Pinterest may be unintentionally fostering the development of these skills. Users are seduced by the aesthetically pleasing pictorial representation of ideas. Without even realising it, they are selecting, analysing and prioritising content for their own digital collections.

Other digital curation tools also function in this way.

These are just some of the tools that could be used to explore how students determine the relevance and credibility of web-based content. However, despite Infoglut, digital curation tools remain a largely untapped resource in the higher education sector. As educators, we ignore these new tools at our peril.