

Wikipedia's Role and Value in the Advertising Classroom

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Abstract

Higher education periodicals like The Chronicle of Higher Education have sought to inform readers about the state of Wikipedia's use in higher education. How can the academic literature inform scholars about this tool? This paper seeks to address the use of Wikipedia as a source of information in advertising courses. It explains, in layman's terms, the peer-review and editing system used by Wikipedia. A categorical distinction content analysis is used to compare a sample of 321 advertising terms and definitions listed in three advertising textbooks with the definition of the term located on Wikipedia's own Web site. Analysis of 1,127 printed pages of data suggested, overall, that Wikipedia is an accurate source of information for advertising courses. Advertising faculty should continue to engage in the philosophical discussion about the merits of using and contributing to advertising content on the Wikipedia Web site.

Introduction

Wikipedia has continued to impact searching, collaboration and accessing information since its inception as Nupedia in 2000. Lorenzen (2006) found that the exponential growth combined with increased tendency of students to use Wikipedia for academic assignments results in what "is forcing many to reconsider what is and what is not valid and authoritative online." (p. 1) Should higher education faculty who teach advertising courses allow students to use Wikipedia for their assignments? How can the literature inform scholars on this tool? This paper seeks to address the appropriateness of using Wikipedia as a credible source of information in advertising courses.

Literature Review

Advertising educators have investigated a number of ways that technology impacts the classroom. Studies have been conducted that explore the use of the World Wide Web (Barnes, 1996), the use of consumer simulations in the classroom (Bovinet & Elcombe, 1999), Web-based projects (Everett, Siegel & Marchant, 1999), online peer learning (Hachtmann, 2006), using Google (Lavin, Van Alstine, Scott, Oliver & Murphy, 2009), the opportunities and challenges

presented by Web 2.0 (Caravella, Ekachai, Jaeger & Zahay, 2009), social media (Kalamas, Mitchell & Lester, 2009), and the role of Facebook in the advertising classroom (Muñoz & Towner, 2010). However, no research to date explores the use of Wikipedia in the advertising classroom.

Wikipedia strikes fear into some, particularly in academia, and it has been banned from some classrooms, departments and colleges. For example, the History Department at Middlebury College "banned students from citing Wikipedia articles in their papers and exams." (Maddox as cited in Maehre, 2009, p. 229) Though the action was cheered by many at Middlebury and other institutions nationwide, it is alternately viewed by some in the higher educational community as a missed opportunity to engage students in "their role as learners and thinkers" (Maehre, 2009, p. 235) by using Wikipedia as a tool to help students learn to explore and think for themselves in a collaborative, interactive environment. Wikipedia represents a peer-produced encyclopedia that has shown "... significant improvements in terms of effective quality prediction" (Dalip, Goncalves Cristo & Calado, 2009, p. 295) and improved accuracy of major real-life applications to the research

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process (Kazama & Torisawa, 2007). The peer-review process used by Wikipedia, along with the examination of the selection of content, is a major factor determining the quality and reliability of information it contains (Halfaker, Kittur, Kraut & Ridel, 2009; Milne & Witten, 2008). The growth in access to the Internet has created an almost limitless source of information, which creates a need for a tool to “lead the creation of an ontological view based on Wikipedia which could be the reference for many domains” (Fogarolli & Ronchetti, 2008, p. 260) and accurately filter the vast amount of information on the Internet.

Head and Eisenberg (2010) and Lim (2009) found that Wikipedia is used by a majority of students across disciplines. The Wikipedia experience engages students in what has been addressed as “the uses and gratifications (U & G) approach [which] provides a useful framework for the study of people’s motivation in using Wikipedia.” (Lim, 2009, p. 2190) The U & G approach incorporates social cognitive theory into how information is found, how a positive experience is associated with success, and how information searches encourage collaboration (Lim, 2009). Head and Eisenberg (2010) also suggest: “Wikipedia’s information utility [for students] is tied to the “Four C’s” it delivers – currency, coverage, comprehensibility, and convenience” (p. 3). Wikipedia has embraced the use of a peer-review process and has taken measures to strengthen the accuracy of its content. Tollefsen (2009) compared the maturation of Wikipedia to the progression of growth from child to adult.

In an effort to improve quality, Wikipedia has enriched its peer-review process. Young (2006; 2008) contends that the improved quality should not be construed as limiting the need for students to use sources other than online or hardcopy encyclopedias, but an opportunity to explain the research and peer-review process. The objective of quality is an ongoing process that includes all the stakeholders of Wikipedia, including faculty (Bauerlein, 2008; Foster, 2008). The emphasis on quality through involving Wikipedia stakeholders in a peer-like critical review process should give critics cause to review and re-examine how Wikipedia might be incorporated effectively into higher education academic research (Dolan, n.d.; Lam & Riedl, 2009; Ponzetto & Navigili, 2009) and into the classroom. Anecdotal evidence suggests some faculty are happy to take a stance to ban Wikipedia as a source in a paper, but there are scholars who are concerned and “interested in an exploration of the pedagogical principles behind [such a] decision. At stake...

are two chief dichotomies: students learning by engaging in a process versus students producing a product, and students thinking individually and evaluating vs. students as following rules.” (Maehre, 2009, p. 229)

Should scholars examine how Wikipedia might contribute to student learning, collaborative group projects and other academic assignments? Some suggest the academy should have an open mind on this topic and explore its use in light of recent research (Bateman, 2008; Hu, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlien, 2009). Wikipedia has approached the improvement of its content with an attitude of “commitment to openness [that] is at the core of growing our community and increasing the wealth of content we can share freely with the world” (Wikimedia Foundation, 2009, p. 13). It appears that Wikipedia is a willing partner in creating an innovative learning environment for education at large. If Wikipedia is a credible, reliable and accurate source of information, higher education stakeholders might re-consider being part of designing a solution to the collaborative online learning community that harnesses the tremendous potential to help students learn.

How Does Wikipedia Work?

The process begins with what is referred to as a *wiki*, which is an open source model that allows many people to edit postings simultaneously. When an article is posted on wiki, it is edited anonymously. Anyone can edit Wikipedia, but there are some basic rules. For example, the author is expected to create a user account to publish new entries. This policy discourages spam and vandalism. However, an account is not needed to edit a pre-existing entry; the editor simply clicks the edit button at the top of an entry’s page and starts editing. For many educators, this fact is Wikipedia’s greatest weakness (Carson, 2006). Wikipedia also creates a virtual paper trail for each user on the site that allows the public to review the work of every contributor. It gives the reader a sense of the editor’s interests, skills and behavior (Carson, 2006). Computer programs called Internet bots have been used to remove vandalism, grammar, spelling, punctuation and format issues to improve the integrity of entries (“Wikipedia,” n.d.). All entries on Wikipedia include what is known as a discussion page. When looking at the top of that page, the reader sees a link to the entry’s discussion page, which at any particular moment contains the edits and postings for the cited topic. This is the essence of how Wikipedia works: while anyone may go and edit an entry, the Web site’s

community etiquette encourages Wikipedians to talk about each other's edits to achieve clarity or consensus. These discussions often focus on whether or not a particular edit follows Wikipedia's editorial policies, which center on five concepts: 1) Wikipedia is an encyclopedia, 2) with a neutral point of view, 3) where information should be unbiased and verifiable, 4) providing free content, 5) with a code of ethics (Carson, 2006; "Wikipedia Main Page," n.d.)

Studies cited thus far suggest Wikipedia has matured and contributed to the increased quality of its content. The goal for Wikipedia quality is a continuous self-betterment process that encourages accuracy through peer review and collaboration (Bauerlein, 2008; Foster, 2008). This emphasis on quality through a collaborative review process should give critics pause to re-evaluate how Wikipedia might be incorporated effectively into higher education academic learning and thinking (Dolan, n.d.; Lam & Riedl, 2009; Ponzetto & Navigili, 2009). The peer review process assumes that Wikipedians take *ownership* of their area of expertise and make corrections and adjustments to content as errors become known or content becomes outdated. Wikipedia has an advantage in that content can be updated in real time and peer reviewed in real time. There is a host of studies that have been conducted at universities across the world and across many disciplines that address the accuracy of Wikipedia¹. The majority of these studies indicate that Wikipedia is, overall, an accurate source of information, given the trade-off between peer review and open editing. We believe each discipline should explore the accuracy of Wikipedia for itself. Who can be better judges to determine the accuracy of content than experts in their own discipline? There is no study that seeks to open the discussion in the advertising discipline. The objective of this paper is to use categorical distinction content analysis to make a determination about the accuracy of Wikipedia as it relates to advertising course content.

Method

Research Design

Krippendorff (2004) suggests that content analysis is a quantitative method that can be applied when any communication (written or verbal) is classified and categorized. Because of cost and time constraints, the scope of

this investigation is limited to the Principles of Advertising subject area. The advertising subject was chosen over other marketing areas because of its high enrollment, fairly standardized textbooks and a high volume of well-known (to faculty) terms and definition content. Other marketing-specific disciplines and high enrollment marketing courses were not used for this study, though it would be appropriate for future research to generate additional studies regarding Wikipedia in marketing disciplines such principles of marketing, marketing research, sales, buyer behavior and marketing strategy.

Holsti (1969) identifies 15 different uses of content analysis; in this study, we "compare communication content to some standard." (p. 3) The glossaries of three advertising textbooks were used: *Advertising and Promotion* (Belch & Belch, 2009), *Essentials of Contemporary Advertising* (Arens, Schaefer & Weigold, 2009) and *Promo* (O'Guinn, Allen & Semenik, 2011). These textbooks were chosen because they represent a wide variation in advertising textbooks used by faculty and cover a three-year copyright period. Authors of the three texts are widely known and respected and have been writing textbooks in the advertising field for more than two decades. Lastly, the advertising textbooks used in this study include fairly standard advertising concepts. Krippendorff's guidelines (2004) for content analysis were used to determine the accuracy of a sample of terms and definitions randomly chosen from the three textbook glossaries. The total number of terms found in each glossary was counted, and a 20% sample rate was calculated for each textbook. The sample rate was divided by the total number of terms in each glossary, and every n -th term beginning with 1 was selected for comparison until the 20% sample was reached. Each term selected was entered into the search engine on the Wikipedia Web site. When each term was located, all pages related to the Wikipedia definition/description of the term were printed. Across the three textbooks there were 321 terms yielding a total of 1,127 pages of content to analyze. Sixty-six terms were not found on Wikipedia (Please see Table 1).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed following the guidelines set forth by Krippendorff (2004). The data were organized into paired units (text-

¹For a complete list of the studies, universities, summary of findings and links to these studies please see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliability_of_Wikipedia (last accessed May 10, 2010).

book definition versus Wikipedia definition) using *categorical distinction*. As defined by Krippendorff (2004), “categorical distinction defines units by their membership in a class or category by the units having something in common. A common reference is typical.” (p. 105) Categorical distinction is a good fit for organization of this dataset because it allows the researcher to make inferred comparisons or evaluations. In addition to relying on exact verbiage and synonyms, evaluators used taxonomies of the words, or inferred meanings (Krippendorff, 2004).

Coding was not the method used for data analysis, as it was not relevant to the research project at hand. When using coding, the codes are used to record the data. Krippendorff (2004) suggests data that are organized by categorical distinction can be recorded using a scale as the recording device. In essence, the researcher must choose a scale with which to evaluate the data collected and then record the findings. In this case, a three-point scale was used, where 1 = Correct definition, 2 = Correct but difficult to find the term, or the definition was not easy to decipher, and 3 = Incorrect definition when compared with the three advertising textbook definitions. When evaluating the Wikipedia definition for accuracy against the textbook definition, the researchers looked for the inferred meaning and overall content and took into consideration the syntax of the description, as well as the overall meaning. Wikipedia is not bound by paper publishing constraints, and its goal is not to find the shortest or most precise definition of a word or term. The number of references or citations listed for the Wikipedia definition was also taken into consideration. The reference data listed in this study give the reader a sense of the depth of the Wikipedia definition. Future research might examine the quality and quantity of the references relative to the accuracy of the definition itself.

With respect to the authors’ qualifications/expertise in making a decision about the fitness of a term’s Wikipedia definition, the authors together hold four graduate degrees in marketing and have 35 years of university teaching experience. Moreover, the authors have taught an estimated 150 Principles of Marketing courses. One of the authors is a tenured Associate Professor of Marketing.

Results

Overall Wikipedia’s definition of the advertising terms was accurate 97% of the time (310 terms out of 321 terms). There were 11 terms that warranted a score of 3 — these 11 terms

were not correct as compared to the textbook definition. The terms were: “source,” “benefits,” “broadside,” “distribution objectives,” “environments,” “leading,” “noise,” “share,” “verbal,” “image,” and “hit.” The 11 terms that yielded a score of 3 appear to have a common thread — they are broadly interpreted words or are so general in nature, multiple meanings are common across the English language.

Results of this study are detailed in three separate tables. Because of publication constraints Tables 2, 3, and 4 can be found on the *Journal of Advertising Education* Web site (<http://www.aejmc.net/advertising/JAEWeb/index.html>). Over 1,000 pages of data were collected and summarized on the three tables. Each table contains the name of the textbook, the textbook glossary term, the recorded assessment (1-3), the number of printed pages associated with the term and the number of citations used for each definition as listed on Wikipedia. The tables also indicate if the exact match to the textbook term was located. If not, the alternate term is listed. The alternate term was either the term Wikipedia provided when the textbook term was inputted into the search window on the Wikipedia Web Site or a singular or plural syntax of the term inputted by the data collectors. The number of citations/reference data was collected to demonstrate the breadth and depth of the content found on Wikipedia. Though this data is peripheral to this study, perhaps future studies should examine the influence, if any, of the number of references relative to the ‘correctness’ of the Wikipedia definition.

When students or faculty use Wikipedia for advertising information occasionally they will find that terms don’t match perfectly or they will find very specific terms cannot be located at all. Conventional wisdom suggests users should enter a similar term or a different phrase. For example the term “reference groups” is listed in the Belch and Belch (2009) textbook, but the term found on Wikipedia is the singular version of the word “reference group.” The term “slotting allowance” (Arens et al, 2009) is listed under “slotting fee” on the Wikipedia Web site. Future research might investigate what strategies students and faculty use that yield the best search results when the specific term is not found.

The majority of terms are not found on a stand-alone page but is a part of a larger topic. The Wikipedia search engine accounts for this by redirecting the user to the search term in the larger content area. This is a benefit for Wikipedia in terms of Web site organizational

structure but it is also a benefit to the student because the student can read about concepts that are related to their search. For example, when the user enters the following terms into the Wikipedia search engine: “Business-to-Business Agency,” “Creative Boutique,” “Local Agency” (Arens et al, 2009; Please see Table 2 on the *JAE* website) and “In-house Agency” from the Belch and Belch (2009) textbook (Please see Table 4 on the *JAE* website) they are redirected to the definition of the terms that is found within the “Advertising Agency” pages. Again, the benefit to the student is that they can learn about many types of advertising agencies though they may only be interested in one type of agency at the time of their search. The disadvantage however is that sometimes the term’s definition is not immediately clear because it is being discussed within the broader concept. These terms consistently earned a score of two because the definition was not immediately clear or was difficult to decipher. The key finding is that Wikipedia is an accurate source of information about advertising concepts.

Discussion

Research is very limited on the use and accuracy of Wikipedia in the advertising discipline. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, no studies similar to the one reported here could be found. The data in this study confirm previous investigations across a wide range of disciplines that attest to the accuracy of Wikipedia. This study suggests that faculty should have confidence in encouraging students to use Wikipedia as a source of information for general advertising courses. As is the case with all other sources of information, Wikipedia should be cited appropriately when used as a source. Typically, students are taught to use more than one source of information when

researching. Jaschik (2007) suggests students should be taught how to triangulate a source like Wikipedia to determine its trustworthiness for complex ideas or concepts.

Faculty who are aware of others in higher education institutions that have banned the use of Wikipedia in the classroom should be wary of following suit. It is the faculty who should lead students in the appropriate use of source material. Faculty members are the experts in their respective disciplines, and they should remain open to new and different methods of collecting and presenting information. The reputation of faculty is at stake if Wikipedia is openly disregarded as an accurate source of information – students know differently and are active users of the Internet. Of particular relevance is Wikipedia, a live, peer-reviewed, real-time content provider. The data suggest that faculty who teach general advertising courses can have confidence in referring students to Wikipedia if they are unclear about a term found in their textbook. Wikipedia is not bound by publication constraints and, therefore, can provide a detailed explanation of an advertising term. Moreover, Wikipedia provides a plethora of references and related information that further inform the student. Wikipedia has taken many steps to ensure the accuracy of its content and should be given due respect in the advertising classroom. Faculty should begin to discuss the benefits of contributing to, and peer reviewing, Wikipedia pages that contain material on which they are experts. This would not only advance and improve the accuracy of Wikipedia, but would also ensure that academicians are aware of the material that Wikipedia reports. By contributing to Wikipedia, faculty could be recognized for their expertise and contribution to the subject matter.

Table 1.
Summary of Terms from Textbooks and Wikipedia

	Total # of Terms in Glossary	Sample Size	# of Terms Not Found on Wikipedia	Average Score of All Terms	# of Terms with a Score of 3	Total # of Pages Printed	Total # of References
Advertising & Promotion	525	104	32	1.25	1	341	651
Contemporary Advertising	880	176	29	1.33	8	612	872
Promo	204	41	5	1.33	2	174	349
Total	1609	321	66		11	1127	1872

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