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ONLINE DATABASES

Quality Still Matters

By Carol Tenopir

MOST LIBRARIANS AGREE THAT quality matters, but the ongoing debate recently raised about the quality (or lack thereof) of Wikipedia entries (both intentional and unintentional) and the falsified credentials of some Wikipedia editors referenced in a *New Yorker* article (7/31/06) have spawned another round of discussions, particularly from instruction librarians, about the need to preach quality to students.

Critical evaluation

The Digital Divide mailing list recommended web sites that teach quality, including the University of California–Berkeley library’s “Critical Evaluation of Resources,” which provides a no-nonsense conversation of the evaluation criteria.

Students learn about the difference among scholarly journals and magazines using the criteria of suitability (scope, audience, timeliness), authority, and other indicators (documentation, objectivity, and primary vs. secondary research). The site cautions students to look for potential biases of authors, producers, and links, particularly for web sites.

A more in-depth web site evaluation checklist shows students how things such as the URL, quality of links, and peripheral information found on the site can reveal quality and reliability issues, such as whether unbiased, sanctioned organizations are responsible for the content.

Johns Hopkins University Sheridan Libraries’ “Evaluating Information Found on the Internet,” a detailed list of evaluation criteria, calls authorship the most important criterion and advises using biographical or contact information as ways to assess author credentials. The authority of the publishing body and potential bias of the site come next. The site emphasizes how to recognize bias and the harm it can do, including links to “Information and Its Counterfeits: Propaganda, Misinformation and Disinformation,” which has tips on recognizing fake sites and those that intend to deceive.

Detectives

For a nonlibrary orientation, the Internet Detective helps students learn evaluation criteria without using standard librarian vocabulary (such as “evaluation criteria”). Interactive quizzes and summaries make this an excellent learning tool for high school students or undergraduates.

In a section labeled “The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly,” students learn about the quality derived from scholarly publishing, peer review, and library-provided web sites; about the “bad” that can happen because people say whatever they want online and search engines don’t cover everything; and about the downright ugly from malicious or fraudulent sites.

Studying errors

Although Wikipedia has many more correct entries than not and the most egregious cases, such as a fake biography about

John Siegenthaler, had been caught by readers and corrected, the unintentional and intentional errors in Wikipedia get lots of attention. *Nature* conducted a controversial head-to-head comparison between Wikipedia and Encyclopaedia Britannica in December 2005 that showed errors in both sources. Although Wikipedia had one-third more errors than Britannica, the study was roundly criticized by Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. *Nature* revealed its methodology: human experts review entries in both encyclopedias to find any type of error. Britannica pointed out that the experts were not always sent full entries, minor inaccuracies were not distinguished from major errors, and differences of opinion were labeled as errors.

Citizendium

Nothing demonstrates success like imitation. Citizendium, from former Wikipedia founder Jerry Sanger, is another free, ad-free, volunteer-created encyclopedia, but it aims to be of higher quality than Wikipedia. Citizendium contributors must identify themselves by name, and subject experts review entries. Sanger is committed to adding quality controls to a community-created encyclopedia. At its March launch, Citizendium was puny—just 1100 entries by 900 authors and 200 editors compared to 1.7 million entries and 43,000 active authors on Wikipedia—but it hopes to grow quickly as momentum builds.

A recent study of Wikipedia’s quality by Hewlett-Packard lab scientists Dennis Wilkinson and Bernardo Huberman found that entries that are frequently edited are of higher quality, showing the “value of cooperation.” Wikipedia also maintains a watch list of entries that are subject to fraudulent edits and reviews those often. Forthcoming reviews and quality comparisons will reveal if Sanger succeeds with his vision to improve quality while retaining volunteer authorship.

LINK LIST

Assessing the Value of Cooperation in Wikipedia

www.hpl.hp.com/research/idl/papers/wikipedia/wikipedia07.pdf

Berkeley’s Critical Evaluation of Resources

www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Evaluation.html

Digital Divide Mailing List

digitaldivide.net/pipermail/digitaldivide

“Evaluating Information Found on the Internet”

www.library.jhu.edu/researchhelp/general/evaluating

“Information and Its Counterfeits”

www.library.jhu.edu/researchhelp/general/evaluating/counterfeit.html

Internet Detective

www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective

Nature Comparison

www.nature.com/nature/journal/v438/n7070/full/438900a.html

Wikipedia Quality

arxiv.org/PS_cache/cs/pdf/0702/0702140.pdf

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