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Mythbusters: Citing Online Sources

Mythbusters: Wikipedia and Other Web Material as Sources for Scholarly Publishing

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Question: I learned in school that you are not supposed to cite sources on the Internet—only published articles and books. But with so many journals being online, I don't think that's true anymore. There are also lots of other types of information available online. Can you please tell me what is correct?

If you believe that change happens slowly, then you only need to look to the Internet to know this is not true—consider how a video, picture, or news article can go “viral” overnight! I recall the early days of email: messages came through using an awkward system in which green text appeared on a black screen. But despite its awkwardness as many people who could access email, did so. Once the World Wide Web (WWW) emerged with user-friendly applications and an intuitive

interface, the literate public was almost instantly on board. Except for one thing: the volume of information was both overwhelming and incomprehensible, and most of us were quite unprepared to deal with it all. The only things we had to work with were the skills and standards from our print world backgrounds.

When Wikipedia appeared, people recognized it as similar to print encyclopedias, but with a number of “quirks” that have never appeared in similar print media. As blogs began to appear, the vast diversity of what they contained, and how they were presented seemed more like the Wild West of the web rather than anything worthy of citing as a source. Even the term “blog” seemed more like something a kid might spurt out in jest than anything akin to a worthy scholarly source!

Much of what appeared on the WWW was, and still is missing some of the elements that academic traditions required for citing a source. Where are the page numbers, the volume, issue, or even the date? For many years, the standard manuals of style, such as APA and AMA, gave no guidelines for citing web sources. Many involved in academia took the stance that web content simply should never be cited, most notably, instructors who made it a policy to disallow students to use sources found on the web in their papers.

But the fact is that the WWW actually has greater power to demonstrate trustworthiness of content much more explicitly than does print media. Print media is limited by space that constrains the background information, both in depth and scope that is important to fully understand the worth of that which is published.

Web content is only limited by the imagination of those who post or publish, and by the policies that guide the nature of content that is published on any particular site. Wikipedia content, for example, is written by collaborators and can be corrected by other collaborators within seconds of being posted. In addition, Wikipedia has a page devoted to how to cite Wikipedia ([Wikipedia contributors, Last edited 19 June](#)

[2018](#)). This page contains a caution against using Wikipedia (or any encyclopedia) for research papers, against plagiarizing Wikipedia content for research purposes, and instructions for citing Wikipedia content when it is appropriately used as a source. However, this does not mean that Wikipedia, like many other sites on the web, are “bad” sources for certain purposes. Wikipedia, and many other resources on the web, are terrific places to get a general idea of the nature and scope of a topic.

On many Wikipedia pages, there are notes as to how well developed the page is, what is missing, and what contributors might be able to provide. Unlike print encyclopedias, Wikipedia content is constantly updated and there is a record of the history of the page and a date when the page was last updated. The inclusion of this kind of detail is in fact not common (yet) on the web itself, and is a model of “best practices” for the web itself.

The key for using any source, print or online, is to know how to evaluate that source, and to keep a skeptical way of assessing the value for the purpose you are pursuing. I developed an “ABCSS” guideline that is posted on the ANS blog site that you can use as for any source to assess its worth ([Chinn, 2011](#)). The ABCSS are Agency, Bias, Corroboration, Sponsorship, and Scholarly value.

AGENCY

This is an area where many sites on the web fall short. For some, the content can be assumed to be written by people who work for, or represent the entity that sponsors the website. But I recommend looking closely to determine if you can identify the people who have actually written the content, and always cite that the person or persons who are named as the author or the contributor. It is also important to know the author’s professional affiliations and qualifications, which should be clearly identified. Again this is often given in print sources, and if an

author is named on the web, their qualifications are often also given. The qualifications are not included in the reference citation, of course, but this is an important dimension that contributes to your evaluation of the source.

BIAS

Everything has a bias! Bias is not a “bad” thing, but in order to assess the worth of any source, you need to identify what possible or probable bias is inherent in the content, and keep this in mind as you decide whether or not to use the source. Social media sites are saturated with bias from all sources, but interactive features of a website can provide feedback that challenges the bias inherent in content that is presented.

CORROBORATION

For any source of information, print or digital, corroboration is key. If you find something in any source that is vastly different from another source, then you have the challenge of digging even deeper to find evidence that you can count on. Having said this, when you do find something that is not yet corroborated, or that has value because it is a valid “minority opinion,” then when you use the source you are obligated to explain how and why this is a perspective that should not be dismissed. The Web has, in fact, opened up vast possibilities for “minority voices” to be heard, and good scholarship will not dismiss a source that is coming from those who are not commonly represented in the literature.

SPONSORSHIP

Many web sources are created by groups that have a clear vested interest in the content of the site, so you can infer the perspective or bias that is probably embedded in the material. For example, a website hosted by a pharmaceutical company has an interest in presenting content that places their products in a

positive light. A site sponsored by a religious group will have that particular perspective in the content that present, and their choice of content to leave out. Less obvious bias is built in to a site for a professional organization, or for an educational institution. These kinds of sites will want their organization presented in a positive light as well, so you will not typically find content that is critical of the organization.

SCHOLARLY VALUE

One of the reasons that Wikipedia is not an acceptable primary source for research or other scholarly work is that it contains primarily tertiary descriptive information—that is, information collected primarily from primary and secondary sites (Nicoll, 2017). The site insists that the information must be as factually correct as possible, but the fact is that the content is not based on solid scientific evidence, or well-researched historical evidence. Like any other encyclopedia-type source, Wikipedia content cannot be used as sound “evidence.” Wikipedia does cite the sources on which the information is based, which is a positive feature that is often not found on websites in general, which makes it possible to trace or verify the trustworthiness of the information but you still should be very cautious about citing Wikipedia as a source.

The content that is published in scholarly print media retains the standards that are expected in order for the source to have scholarly merit, but even print media can fall far short. For web sources, and for print publications, it is your responsibility to judge if the reported methods used and the logic presented meet generally accepted standards of investigation, ethics, and logic.

CONCLUSION

So, to answer the question posed at the beginning: yes, it is acceptable to cite and quote from online sources, including journal articles, white papers, position papers,

blogs, and so on. However, you must do your due diligence to corroborate and affirm the accuracy of the information and that it is a credible source. In the case of a source that is less well known or presenting controversial material, it is worth your time and effort to make sure that the information is valid before you cite it in your own work.

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