A Study of Citations to Wikipedia in Scholarly Publications

Robert Tomaszewski¹ & Karen I MacDonald²

¹California State University, Fullerton USA | ²Kent State University, Ohio USA

Abstract

The debate on using Wikipedia as a credible academic information resource is dynamic and controversial. This study used the Web of Science (WoS) database and its ‘Cited Reference’ and ‘Analyse Results’ tools to identify and examine trends in the use of Wikipedia citations in scholarly, peer-reviewed publications for the years 2002 to 2015. Results demonstrate that the use of Wikipedia citations in peer-reviewed journals has been increasing since 2002. Given that Wikipedia is considered a non-authoritative source, it might be assumed that this resource is frequently being cited in open access (OA) journals, which are sometimes considered less rigorous when it comes to publication standards. Alternatively, it might be assumed that Wikipedia is being used by scholars from lesser quality institutions or from developing countries, where access to authoritative information resources might be limited. This study examines these assumptions and describes the disciplines, research fields, and types of journals that are accepting Wikipedia as an authoritative reference source, thereby increasing its credibility. This research is intended to fuel informed debate on the issue which will contribute to increasing its credibility. This research is intended to fuel informed debate on the issue which will contribute to increasing its credibility.

Methodology

The WoS database was used to extract, classify, and compare publications that cite (i.e., reference) Wikipedia in the scholarly literature. Using the ‘Cited Reference Search’ tool, the term ‘Wikipedia’ was used to search the ‘Cited Work’ field within each of the indexes - Science Citation Index (1970-), Social Sciences Citation Index (1981-), and the Arts & Humanities Citation Index (1975-), between the years 2002 to 2015 inclusive. For purposes of this research, scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles were separated from other document types. For comparison purposes, citations to Encyclopedia Britannica were also identified using the search string ‘Ency* Britannica’. The scholarly articles were classified as OA or non-OA using the OA refine feature, which identifies journals registered in the Directory of OA Access Journals (DOAJ). The citations were further studied using various WoS ‘Analyse Results’ tools to identify research areas and scholars’ university affiliations and native country. All searches were conducted in June 2016.

Results

• Wikipedia Citations. For the study period 2002-2015, citations in approximately 16.5 million peer-reviewed articles across the three WoS citation indexes were searched. This research identified a total of 1,551 citations to Wikipedia. The total number of citations to Wikipedia has surpassed Encyclopedia Britannica in the last few years. (Figure 1).

• Academic Field. The Science Citation Index has the highest number of Wikipedia citations (764 articles), followed by the Social Sciences Citation Index (563 articles), while the Arts & Humanities Citation Index had the lowest number of Wikipedia citations (224 articles). (Figure 2).

• Open Access Journals. The greatest number of citations to Wikipedia are to be found in non-OA journals. (Figure 3).

• Journals. The fact that the editors and reviewers of these journals are publishing articles with these citations seems to imply that they have accepted Wikipedia as a credible source of information.

• Institutional Affiliation. The majority of Wikipedia citations are in articles written by authors affiliated with academic institutions, many of which are notable Universities from around the world.

• Country of Origin. The greatest number of citations have been generated by scholars from the United States and other economically advanced countries

Conclusion

Wikipedia citations can be found in high impact journals and in articles produced by scholars from notable academic institutions. When these scholars cite Wikipedia, they affirm the credibility of the information; reviewers and journal editors who deem these citations credible for peer-reviewed publication, implicitly endorse Wikipedia as an authoritative source. The authors feel this trend cannot be reversed. The use of Wikipedia in scholarly research will only increase.

Reference


tomaszewski@fullerton.edu | kmacdon@kent.edu