Wikipedia as Public Scholarship: Communicating Our Impact Online

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assessing communication in practice. Finally, the axioms can be used as a frame for recommending, reinforcing, or teaching (Condit, 2009) communication behaviors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our alternative question uses the term ensure, and we are well aware the problems this word imposes on our recommendation. Nothing we do will be a guarantee that the centrality of communication will be fully understood and appreciated by those outside the discipline. By building a common framework with the public, we will be adapting our message to the audience. By providing better ways of assessing behavior, we hold true to our ontological focus on interaction. Thus, our discipline will hold true to itself, which is essential for communication research to have a positive effect on communication practice.

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Wikipedia as Public Scholarship: Communicating Our Impact Online[1]
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To contribute to the forum asking "Has Communication Research Made a Difference?," this essay examines whether communication scholarship makes a difference (a) to those

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who search for information online, (b) in the sense that a primary way our research can make a difference is through its accessibility, and (c) by using the criteria of its presence (or absence) on Wikipedia. In this essay, we reason that Wikipedia is a useful benchmark for online accessibility of public scholarship in that it provides immediate, freely available information to today's diverse global public seeking online answers to questions and relief from problems.

Keywords: Public Scholarship; Wikipedia; Communication Research

We attend to the question, "Has Communication Research Made a Difference?," by examining our disciplinary research presence on Wikipedia—the non-profit, web-based encyclopedia that allows anyone with an Internet connection to write, edit, and contribute. Wikipedia is the sixth most frequently used website worldwide and the only not-for-profit top 10 site, situated behind big names like Google, Facebook, and YouTube (Alexa: The Web Information Company, 2009). Its growth can be attributed to Wikipedia's optimized search position in Google, causing Wikipedia to regularly show up in the top 5–10 search results (Metz, 2009). Clearly, when journalists, researchers, students, employees, retirees, or children search for information, Wikipedia is one of the first accessible sources.

We recognize that using the benchmark of Wiki-(Hawaiian for "quick")-pedia may be controversial. A search through higher education journals as well as our own CRTNET listserv indicates that many scholars criticize Wikipedia, question its reliability, and connect its use to lazy undergraduates unwilling to venture into the library for primary sources (Cummings, 2009). In the mean time, the use of Wikipedia continues to soar for everyday web users, journalists, students, and academics alike (Kittur, Chi, & Suh, 2009; Lih, 2004; Prescott, 2006). As of December 5, 2009, Wikipedia hosted more than 3.1 million articles in English. In 2008, 12% of the entries were on topics associated with society and social sciences, an 83% jump since 2006 (Kittur et al., 2009).

As Condit (2009) noted in her essay in this forum, "Communication theory only changes the world by changing how people communicate, and that can be done primarily by teaching millions of people how to communicate better" (p. 8). We believe Wikipedia grants such opportunities as it serves as a "global community of passionate scribes" (Lih, 2009, p. 217), providing a venue to reach audiences beyond the classroom and library—to the millions worldwide who seek out knowledge from their homes, workplaces, community centers, coffee shops, and iPods. Even critics of Wikipedia admit that this online resource is a helpful placeholder for bibliographic information, quickly leading users to scholarly references. Thus, we sought to find out how communication research fared on this popular website. All searches and references to content were conducted in December 2009.

We began our investigation by searching Wikipedia with the entries of "communication," "communication studies," and "communication theory." The "communication" entry displayed an information-transmission definition saying, among

other things, that, "Communication is a process whereby information is enclosed in a package and is channeled and imparted by a sender to a receiver via some medium" (Wikipedia, 2009a). While this transmission model is certainly present in our textbooks (Griffin, 2008; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008; Trenholm, 2007), contemporary conceptualizations include social constructionist, ritual, constitutive, and transactional approaches. These more complex definitions were included on Wikipedia's "communication theory" entry—a search term that is more likely to be used by students and academics than practitioners and journalists (Wikipedia, 2009d). Someone reading only the "communication" entry, however, would not discover that communication is as much about meaning, interaction, culture, and community as it is about the effective transmission of dyadic messages.

The "communication studies" Wikipedia entry overviewed the discipline, various topic areas, and our history through the 1980s (Wikipedia, 2009c). However, the field's most contemporary research was missing, and readers could easily assume the communication discipline has stagnated in the last 30 years. Additionally, the site characterized communication studies as a field marked by "intellectual incoherence" and "confusion about what does and does not constitute communication." The entry claimed that "ongoing debates" exist about whether communication is "a discipline, a field, or simply a topic." Nothing was mentioned about the expertise of communication researchers or the various ways a communication degree is useful in multiple careers, including those of the rich and famous noted by Frey (2009) in his earlier forum essay.

What did Wikipedia have to say in terms of specific communication research areas? To interrogate this question, we chose several exemplar topics that were convincingly demonstrated by the original authors of this forum to make a difference: (a) social skills, (b) communication apprehension, and (c) diffusion of innovations. Hummert's essay (2009) offered the work of Segrin and co-authors on social skills as an example of communication research with real effects at the micro level (Segrin & Flora, 2000). The "social skills" Wikipedia entry focused solely on children's social skills and behavioral therapy (Wikipedia, 2009j). Missing was Segrin's research about the connection of social skills to depression, loneliness, and anxiety among people of all ages. Segrin's work was also absent on Wikipedia's "social anxiety" entry—a search term likely to be used by those experiencing depression (Wikipedia, 2009i).

Next we investigated McCroskey's communication apprehension (CA) theory, cited by Seeger (2009) as being "featured in virtually all" (p. 14) introductory communication and courses. Despite its prominence in our curricula, the CA Wikipedia entry was labeled by the Wikipedia staff as an "orphan, as few or no other articles link to it" (Wikipedia, 2009b). The site offered a short definition, claimed that CA is a problem in elementary school classrooms, and briefly listed causes, influencing factors, and prevention and treatment. McCroskey's extensive research (McCroskey, 1970; McCroskey, 1997; McCroskey & Andersen, 1976; Toale & McCroskey, 2001) was absent from the references.

Similar to the social skills entry, a reader of the communication apprehension page would likely assume that CA only pertains to young children, despite the wealth of

communication research that indicates CA's ubiquitous role beyond adolescence. Adults seeking aid could easily believe our field lacks solutions to problems associated with CA or social skills. Furthermore, journalists pursuing stories on these topics would likely contact disciplinary societies in psychology or education, rather than communication, in order to find expert testimonies.

Last, we analyzed the book and theories of *Diffusion of Innovations* by Everett Rogers, cited by Seeger (2009) as an exemplar of difference making research. First published in 1962 and now in its fifth edition (2003), Google Scholar estimates that this text has been cited 25,944 times, mirroring the Institute for Scientific Information's awarding it with a Citation Classic award in 1990 (Rogers, 2003). When we searched for "diffusion of innovations," an eloquent Wikipedia entry appeared as the first hit on Google (Wikipedia, 2009f). Rogers' name and work were prominent, and the entry offered easily comprehendible diagrams, definitions, and summaries from his text. Even when searching via Google for just the term "innovation," the Wikipedia page came up first (Wikipedia, 2009h), and its fifth section was dedicated to diffusion of innovations, which was hyper-linked to the "diffusion of innovations" site featuring Rogers. The Wikipedia entries make this information instantly and freely available to a range of people, therefore magnifying its impact.

So, where do we go from this brief analysis of the presence of communication research on Wikipedia? Wikipedia provides an immediate, direct, and relatively inexpensive route for communication research to make a difference. However, if Wikipedia is a benchmark, communication research does not make nearly the difference that it could. We are not suggesting that public scholarship is a quick and easy fix, or that missing data on Wikipedia is the individual fault of specific scholars. Indeed, we have personally learned that updating Wikipedia takes time and practice. However, we provide some ideas about how to improve our Wikipedia presence.

As noted, anyone—scholars, students, NCA staff and leadership, or editorial board members—can add a new topic to Wikipedia or enhance an existing page. Instructions are available through Wikipedia, YouTube, and printed volumes (Ayers, 2008). Entries must be "notable"—meaning that the person, topic, theory, or idea must reference multiple secondary sources, including major academic journals or the mainstream media. Wikipedia discourages original research essays and entries featuring not yet notable concepts or people. Entries are organized by topic and showcase the topic's different perspectives, sources, and constructions.

Updating Wikipedia could be integrated as a form of public scholarship into various aspects of our (a) research, (b) teaching, and (c) service. Scholars could submit or add to a Wikipedia page that is connected to journal articles. Authors in the journal *RNA Biology* are now required to submit a Wikipedia entry that the journal then peer reviews and publishes to Wikipedia (Butler, 2008). The possibilities for broader access and impact could be substantial if the communication discipline followed a similar practice.

We can also incorporate Wikipedia into our undergraduate and graduate courses. At Arizona State University, we regularly ask graduate students to augment Wikipedia

sites on seminar topics. Such an assignment—especially if given to those new to research—has the effect of simultaneously illustrating the potential reliability problems with Wikipedia while demonstrating that anyone with access to the Internet and secondary sources can contribute to knowledge.

Finally, we urge our professional association staff and leadership to update and enlarge entries such as "communication," "communication studies," and their own association pages. Interest groups in our professional organizations could appoint service positions for scholars to add or update entries on their division members' research. Such an effort could be especially significant if our communication research was incorporated within Wikipedia entries that speak to commonly searched-for problems like "communication anxiety," "divorce," "child abuse," "addiction," or "racism." Updating Wikipedia could also be a commitment of individual departments or universities seeking ways to become more entrenched in public scholarship.

As a part of our own commitments along with other researchers in The Project for Wellness and Work-Life (PWWL) at ASU, we have begun to contribute to Wikipedia by adding our own and others' scholarship, as well as website resources, to entries such as: "workplace bullying" (Wikipedia, 2009l), "emotional labor" (Wikipedia, 2009g), "work-life balance" (Wikipedia, 2009k), and "crystallized self" (Wikipedia, 2009e). Some entries are still considered "stubs" or "orphans," whereas others are more complex, heavily trafficked, and have led to interaction with journalists, consultants, and potential research participants. At the least, our work to enhance Wikipedia entries has provided a larger range of interested parties with references to relevant scholarly sources, our website, and email addresses.

Of course, if we want our communication research to make a difference through its public online accessibility, we must institute relevant structural motivations. Such conversations are occurring across a number of disciplines. Waldrop (2008), for instance, suggests that for physical scientists' contributions to collaborative academic wiki sites to be most effective, they must "crack the credit assignment problem, and provide some ways for scientists' efforts ... to be identified, recognized, cited and shown to funding agencies and tenure committees" (2008, p. 25). Frey (2009) echoes these structural needs in the communication discipline in his call in this very forum for implementing difference-making standards for evaluating our research.

In conclusion, we share Seeger's (2009) notion that research that makes a difference "shares the broad goals of addressing real problems in ways ... that improve social conditions" (p. 15). When today's diverse global public seek answers to questions and relief from problems, they often turn to information most immediately and freely available. By increasing our Wikipedia presence, communication scholars could more significantly make a difference to those most needing our expertise. And we can begin to immediately do so—one entry at a time.

Note

[1]   This essay is part of a joint *Communication Monographs* and *Journal of Applied Communication Research* special project titled, "Has Communication Research Made a

Difference?" The other responses to the joint forum can be found in *Communication Monographs*, Volume 77, Issue 4 and the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Volume 38, Issue 3.

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