Being digital

Using Wikipedia

1: Introduction

You may have heard people say different things about Wikipedia.

For some it is their first port of call when they come across an unfamiliar topic. However, if you are doing academic studies of any kind, it's likely you have been warned not to use it.

So should you use Wikipedia, and how far can you trust it?

Learning outcome

By the end of this activity you should be able to judge the trustworthiness of information you find in Wikipedia.

2: Evaluating a Wikipedia article

Below is a link to a short article from Wikipedia. Select the link to view the article. Alternatively, you may prefer to search Wikipedia for an article on a topic of your own choosing.

- Quickly read through the article. How far do you trust what it says? What influences your decision?

- Select the 'View history' tab to see who has edited it. What sort of motives might some of these individuals have?

- View the list of references. How far do you trust these sources?

- Go to the 'Rate this page' section at the bottom of the full article screen. Select the 'View page ratings' link. How trustworthy, objective, complete and well-written have others found it? Do you agree?

Wikipedia: Android lawn statues

3: What did you find?

If you were unsure as to the accuracy of this entry, there are a couple of things you can easily check. A quick web search for the company and individual mentioned will provide more detail. Themendous does create foam props and sculptures, including ones for Android. You can also find that Dan Morrill is a software engineer for Google who has written about Android mascots.

The 'Talk' page for the entry only has a couple of users contributing to it, we can conclude from this that it is not a controversial entry.

There are quite a few references at the end. These give you the option to verify anything said in the entry that you are unsure of. Being able to find and read a source will help you to decide if the authors correctly interpreted the information used to support the entry.

The entry provides an interesting example to show that technology companies are prepared to employ traditional advertising techniques to

market their goods and services. If you were interested in the advertising of technology companies this entry could contain relevant information.

4: Wikipedia: the questions to ask

Keeping the following questions in mind can help you make a judgement about whether to trust what you find on Wikipedia:

- **Purpose:** What do you need the information for and how important is it that what you find is accurate and reliable? If you are just getting a quick overview of something unfamiliar that has come up in conversation, it may not matter if specific details are in question. However, for academic research or decision-making at work, it is essential to verify the information carefully.

- **Author:** Do you know who put the information there? What is their authority in the subject? What are their motives?

- **Editors:** Who has edited the information? How many times has it been edited? Is there any evidence of different conflicting agendas on the part of the editors?

- **Sources:** What references are listed at the end? Do these seem reliable?

- **Double-check:** What else can you find out about the topic? Be wary of taking facts at face value and use other sources to double-check accuracy.

Further reading

Bateman, Alex (2012) Why scientists should be publishing on Wikipedia

Moran, Mark E. (2011) The top 10 reasons students cannot cite or rely on Wikipedia

References

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