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Random Ramblings - In Defense of Wikipedia and Google: When Scholarly Publications Fall Short

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The current standards for scholarly communication cause difficulties for me as a professor of library and information science. I am teaching students at the master's level who need current, general overviews of the topics in my syllabus. Using a textbook is often the best solution; but sometimes I want to give the students supplementary readings, or the textbook is no longer current enough. Finding scholarly publications that meet my objectives has proved difficult. This issue became more important this semester because I'm teaching the introduction to the profession course for the first time. I can't assume much, if any, prior knowledge about libraries. Some students have confessed that they really didn't use libraries all that much as undergraduates and are more interested in non-traditional positions with a focus on archives or information science. Nonetheless, the core competencies required for the course make it necessary to introduce them to traditional library topics.

To write this column, I replicated a search that I did earlier in the semester to find a general overview of intellectual freedom. I pretended to be a student and didn't immediately check the source where I found my answer the first time around, *The Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, where an article by **Judith Krug**, written in 2003, met my needs. I started with *Library Literature Online* where I used the search term "intellectual freedom" and kept the default "relevance" sort. I looked at the first fifty entries, probably more than a student would. None of the articles provided a general overview of the topic. I might have been able to meet my needs by selecting three broader articles on intellectual freedom in academic, public, and school libraries. No one scholarly article worked. The top five articles included very specialized publications including the Intellectual Freedom Committee report to **ALA** Council, Canadian case law, and challenges in Scottish public libraries. I was not surprised. Under the current standards for tenure and promotion, faculty and librarians almost always get rewarded more for original research than for literature reviews.

My next stop was *Wikipedia* where the entry was a disappointment. Even with the links, the article didn't provide enough content to be useful to my students. I then thought that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* might be useful. Even with forty years of library skills, I never figured out how to determine if the current edition was available in my library's online catalog as a digital resource. I moved on to **ALA** Website where I again entered the search terms "intellectual freedom"; but either the system failed or I made a mistake because I found only six entries. When I returned later to verify my original results, I was able to get a full page of responses though the **ALA** Website

wouldn't let me go beyond the first page of results. Once again, many of the entries were too specific; but one took me to the main page of the Office for Intellectual Freedom where I might have found what I wanted but only after clicking on multiple links and perhaps drilling down several levels.

My final stop was *Google* where I easily found what I was looking for. I used the search terms "'intellectual freedom' libraries," which I think would be obvious enough for beginning researchers. The eighth result looked very promising with the following description: "The principles of **intellectual freedom** — the idea that a democracy is dependent upon free and open access to ideas — are hallmarks of the **library** and education...." The link took me to the "Cooperative Children's Book Center" that had a nice definition of intellectual freedom on the first page and, more importantly, a very promising link "**Thinking about Intellectual Freedom**: definitions, general information, professional statements, policies and procedures, self-censorship, recommended books and more." The second page contained the wonderful word "overview" with one excellent choice: "Intellectual Freedom and Censorship Q-and-A (from the **American Library Association**)," which led to exactly what I wanted. In fact, I'll use this document the next time that I teach intellectual freedom.

I didn't plan to write about the difficulty in using library resources. My outline for this column focused on other aspects of the issue. Let me repeat very clearly that, in this small test, *Google* helped me find on the first page exactly what I was looking for — a general overview of intellectual freedom. I have no idea whether a serious research project would verify this finding, but I can see now that students may not be making an irrational choice in starting with *Google*.

From a student perspective, library resources are often harder to use than librarians think they are because librarians have become comfortable with their tools and forget how intimidating they are to the naïve user. I concur with the suggestion that library tools should mimic *Google*, *Wikipedia*, and other heavily used Websites since these sites have created expectations about the rules that should apply on the Web. I also believe that libraries should adopt *Google* search conventions as the industry standard. Most libraries and system vendors to libraries have learned this lesson. I am less forgiving of technical glitches. I agree with the general opinion that searching the **ALA** Website with general *Google* provides better results than the internal search powered by *Google*. I don't know why this is.

To return to my original plan for this column, students often want and need general

information. The rules of scholarly communication reward specific research that advances knowledge, albeit sometimes in trivial ways. I advise faculty who are publishing for tenure and promotion to avoid popular materials even if they will attract many more readers. As a senior faculty member, I can break this rule and have successfully worked with students to get their summary papers published. I have had no trouble in getting them accepted in quality referred publications though these articles don't include original research. One such paper received an award as one of the best four articles in the journal that year. Another was called the best paper on the subject by a reasonably prominent expert. One of them, though of recent vintage, has become my most cited publication with 50% more citations than the serious research paper in second place. Perhaps tenure and promotion committees should reform their standards to reward scholars who provide summaries of research and developments in their fields.

The undergraduate student who wants to write a general paper on a topic may have the same difficulties as I had in finding suitable materials. To return to my library science search, some of the papers were general but much too brief. Blogs posts and columns like this one seldom give the needed depth. Books are another possibility for those subject areas with a tradition of publishing monographs, but books present problems. The first issue is that some students have stopped using print materials. Online students may have problems getting print books fast enough even if the library offers this service. Finding good ebooks requires knowing how to use the online catalog and selecting the correct subject terms. A librarian could help as would a good bibliography from a faculty member teaching the course. A final option is using an encyclopedia or other reference source as I did for my initial reading on intellectual freedom. But *Wikipedia* is free, easy to access, and includes such a broad range of topics that I can understand why students often make it their first stop. As one of my students commented this week, "what has always helped me evaluate *Wikipedia* are the linked citations at the bottom. Many times I've had difficulty finding a particular subject but most likely *Wikipedia* will have it. I also like the related reading suggestions and how you can just hop from topic to topic."

The final issue with most scholarly resources is not being up-to-date. The readers of *Against the Grain* know how quickly things are changing in collection development. I suspect that the same is true for other areas. For my collection development course, I ask students to read articles on "eBooks," "pub-

lishing," "print-on-demand," and "electronic publishing" in *Wikipedia*. I didn't find any scholarly articles that were current enough and offered broad enough coverage of these topics. I ask students for feedback on using *Wikipedia* for assigned readings. Some are surprised after the negative comments from other professors. While the quality of the articles varies, I tell students that they are more current, offer multiple perspectives, and give links to more scholarly resources. I conclude by saying that they should be savvy enough information seekers to overcome any of the weaknesses traditionally assigned to *Wikipedia*.

To conclude, I would suggest to libraries that they give up on steering students away from *Google*, *Wikipedia*, and similar online resources. Instead, they should show them how to use these resources as entry points into the formal scholarly communication network. One of my students pointed out a few weeks ago that she uses *Wikipedia* to get an overview of legal topics before reading the specialized articles that most often assume this basic understanding. Instead of losing the battle against using these resources, librarians should co-opt them by showing what they do and don't do well and how they can be exceptionally useful at the start of the information gathering process.