

OS1/FR/05 - SEISMOLOGISTS AND THE WEB: IS WIKIPEDIA AN ALLY OR AN ENEMY ?

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When dealing with the search of a topic over Internet, Wikipedia is often at the top of the list of sites which can provide the required

information. As known, Wikipedia is a free, web-based, collaborative, multilingual encyclopedia supported by a non profit project.

Its 15 million articles (over 3.3 million in English) have been written collaboratively by volunteers around the world, and almost all of its articles can be edited by anyone with access to the site. Wikipedia was launched in 2001 and is currently the largest and most popular general reference work on the Internet.

Wikipedia began as a complementary project for Nupedia, a free online English language encyclopedia project whose articles were written by experts and reviewed under a formal process. Unfortunately, the times for editing and correcting the articles were too long and Nupedia only published 24 articles before being abandoned.

There are several advantages and disadvantages in a project like Wikipedia. Among the first, one should mention the rapidity in publication, the chance to enlarge a primitive article in further steps, the availability to many more people than printed documents, the free character.

On the other hand, the many disadvantages are also evident. One over all: the philosophy of publishing an article without review and in successive steps may be the source of misunderstanding and mistakes. The errors contained in an article are in fact removed time after time, however the original form is available to the public for several days, which often coincide with the period of major accesses in the search for information.

Moreover, the compilation and review made by non-experts may be not completely correct and exhaustive, but the user (which is not familiar with the topic) has no clue to distinguish a good from a fair article.

In this presentation a few examples will be given to show failures and merits of Wikipedia together with some suggestions on how to correctly approach the information contained within. The results are then used for a critical analysis on the relationships between seismologists and the web.