



The advantages of Wikipedia in comparison to its paper counterparts are numerous; it's considerably cheaper, the "publishing" cost is extremely low and there is also minimal environmental impact since it isn't printed. The editorial cycle is short; a paper encyclopaedia can't be changed until the next edition whereas writers are updating the Wikipedia round the clock. One of its biggest benefits is that the articles contain links to other sources of reference material to help verify factual accuracy and aid further research.

However, it is the very premise of an "open" encyclopaedia which can be viewed and edited by anyone, from the self taught to the expensively educated, which is cited by some as Wikipedia's greatest strength and by others as its greatest weakness. Wikipedia proponents claim that drawing on a large number of editors from diverse backgrounds reduces regional and cultural bias often found in other publications. They believe it also makes it difficult for any one group to censor and impose bias. A large editor base also provides access and breadth to subject matter that is otherwise inaccessible or little documented. Unlike a paper reference source, Wikipedia is continually updated with the creation or updating of articles on topical events within seconds, minutes, or hours, rather than months or years for printed encyclopaedias.

On the other hand, Wikipedia detractors claim that by allowing anyone to edit articles they are susceptible to unchecked, inaccurate information and are wide open to vandalism, bias and prejudice. Facts can go unchecked, axes can be ground or personal vendettas waged. Wikipedia asserts that this is combated by the fact that "for most articles all notable views become fairly described and a neutral point of view reached". It also adds that misinformation and vandalism are usually corrected quickly and that they also operate a full editorial dispute resolution process that allows time for discussion and resolution in depth.

Acts of deliberate vandalism do happen on a regular basis. Take for example, the poor old aardvark, which for some reason is subject to frequent attacks. On January 11 2008 the entire entry on the aardvark was replaced with "one ugly animal" and then in February it was described as a "medium-sized inflatable banana". Fortunately, Wikipedia has a piece of anti-vandalism software that can spot and reverse such edits in a matter of minutes.

Wikipedia has also come under fire from many educational establishments, with some even laying the blame for falling exam passes firmly at Wikipedia's feet. It has proven to be a real thorn in the side of many teachers, lecturers and professors whose students are taking information contained in Wiki articles at face value without bothering to further verify the accuracy of the data. Some Colleges and Universities are deterring students from using it and have barred students from citing the website as a source in papers or academic work. Wikipedia officials have pointed out that Wikipedia is not an authoritative source and that it is generally good research practice to cite an original source rather than an encyclopaedia in papers or exams. Whilst some teachers are cursing Wikipedia others are singing its praises. They believe Wikipedia provides an excellent opportunity to help students learn information literacy in today's "information overload" society. The underlying issue is not Wikipedia but how it is used. Students need to be taught how to assess and appraise information and to learn critical thinking skills to make judgements.

Most recently, Wikipedia has hit the headlines again with thousands of its contributors allegedly unhappy at new proposals to change the way it is run. Largely as a result of two stories put on Wikipedia in January, falsely announcing the death of two prominent US politicians, Jimmy Wales wants to introduce editorial control. Under his proposals, future changes to the site would need to be approved by a group of editors before they go live. This has caused furore amongst some Wikipedia users as it is seen as a fundamental challenge to the egalitarian nature of the site. It would also bring Wikipedia closer to its rivals, including the Encyclopaedia Britannica which is launching a new online version that will allow users to submit their own updates or entries. Any changes or editions to Britannica entries online will have to be vetted by one of the company's staff or freelance editors before the changes are reflected on the live site.

The general consensus about Wikipedia seems to be that it's a convenient and valuable resource and provides a good starting point for finding out information. However, it isn't, as some under the age of twenty seem to believe, the sum total of human knowledge. It should be best viewed, as one librarian suggested "as a survey of the collective wisdom on a topic". As with any source of information on the Internet and for that matter in print, information still needs to be viewed with a critical eye particularly when it comes to bias; Wikipedia facts still need to be checked and challenged. And, just in case you were wondering, a Markov Chain is a "stochastic process with the Markov property" or at least I think it is!