

Finding Wikipedia “*Before it was Cool*”

By Laura Robinson, Sociologist

Milo*, a 17-year-old who attends a private high school, is an exemplary example of the ways in which many middle class kids have integrated Wikipedia into their daily lives. He uses both offline and online resources on a regular basis for homework and for pleasure. An avid information consumer, Milo reads daily, uses the library approximately once per month, and consults traditional encyclopedias once per week on average. He eschews online TV sites in preference to online newspaper and news sites that he visits at least once per week. In addition Milo uses Wikipedia and search engines at least three to four times per week. He has constant access to both on- and offline resources and sources of information.

Throughout high school Milo reports using Wikipedia for leisure and for school research. A Wikipedian since 2003, Milo is a self-taught early adopter who considers himself a faithful adherent to the Wikipedian community. During our interview, he describes his status clearly, “I found it *before* it was cool.” When asked, “How often do you use Wikipedia?” Milo explains that at present he “only” visits the site three to four times per week. However he hastens to explain that this is a substantial change from a long period of time in which he consulted Wikipedia several times per day. Milo’s family substantiates this shift in use; during our interview his mother explained that Milo was so “hooked” on Wikipedia that they were forced to “unplug the computer!”

When asked about how he started using Wikipedia, Milo explains that he

found it through a Google search. He describes his first reaction to the site, "I thought it was pretty cool." Milo's fascination with the site is part of a larger understanding of technology use as potential entertainment. As he explains, "I discovered that you could push 'random page' and spend time . . . finding gems." Milo describes his delight in reading articles from the "random page" selection as a form of casual entertainment that is the antidote to boredom: "Every time I was on Internet, I would get bored and go there." Milo explains that visiting "random pages" provides a type of break or pause: "I may as well take a little break and read about something else for awhile." For Milo information on Wikipedia is serendipitous for both himself and his friends: "Most of my friends waste time on Wikipedia" through links that allow one to "meander off topic" and "drift off and read about hot sauce for half hour." These respondents experience Wikipedia as a type of play.

When Milo first began using Wikipedia, he "didn't really understand what it was for a little while. . . . I thought it was some sort of referencing site. I didn't realize that anyone who wanted to could edit it. I hadn't taken the time to think about it." However as Milo spent more time on Wikipedia, his understanding of the site changed. Once Milo read the site's official introduction from its home page, he realized that the site was a flexible, user-generated content venue rather than a stable source of pre-vetted information. Interestingly, this is in large part due to the fact that many users like Milo come to Wikipedia from a Google search that takes them directly to entries within Wikipedia. Users are directed to embedded links that appear to be static pages. This path bypasses Wikipedia's home page where links may be found explaining the site's reliance on collaborative production.

Once Milo discovered that *anyone* can edit Wikipedia entries, he “understood that it wasn’t the most reliable source of information.” From that point onward, Milo reframed his understanding of Wikipedia as a valuable starting point: “What it is good for is getting the basic information about something.” For example, for his history classes Milo regularly consults the site because, “it seems like people really geek out over wars.” I asked Milo how he determines the reliability of the information he finds on Wikipedia. More specifically, he explains: “Wikipedia comes in very helpful . . . [to] see what the basic information is about.” Knowing that Wikipedia is created by its own unpaid users who are not vetted by a third party, Milo believes that Wikipedia is written “in small portion . . . [by] everyone who looks at it . . . [and in] large portion . . . [by] geeks who spend all of their time doing it.” For this reason, Milo states that, “Wikipedia doesn’t work when the people writing the pages don’t know all that much what they are talking about” or when the site is “vandalized” or when “people are trying to intentionally . . . post false information.” In this way, Milo articulates a critical stance toward the information he finds on the site. Although he believes that Wikipedia is an excellent source of general information, he states the following caveat, “I think that most of the time the information is quite trustworthy, but there are enough exceptions that I could not say it always true.”

Laura Robinson's vignette was originally published online in May of 2007 on the Digital Youth Web site, the online home of the Kids' Informal Learning with Digital Media: An Ethnographic Investigation of Innovative Knowledge Cultures Project at <http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/>.

*Please note that the name of individual mentioned in this article is a pseudonym and was designed to protect the privacy of the research participant.