



Wikiality

Student Handout #4: **Wikipedia.org, “Seigenthaler controversy”**

In May 2005, a Wikipedia contributor named Brian Chase anonymously posted false information in the entry for John Seigenthaler Sr., a writer and journalist. The false information went undetected for more than four months. The incident received public attention when Seigenthaler publicly complained with an op-ed in *USA Today*. Eventually the controversy led to Wikimedia policy changes. “to policy changes within the Wikimedia Foundation.”¹

Hoax

According to Wikipedia, On May 26, 2005, Brian Chase, an operations manager at a Nashville, Tennessee delivery service company, altered Seigenthaler's Wikipedia biography “to suggest that Seigenthaler may have had a role in the assassinations of both John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy.” Chase’s false insertions:

John Seigenthaler Sr. was the assistant to Attorney General Robert Kennedy in the early 1960s. For a short time, he was thought to have been directly involved in the Kennedy assassinations of both John, and his brother, Bobby. Nothing was ever proven.

John Seigenthaler moved to the Soviet Union in 1971, and returned to the United States in 1984. He started one of the country's largest public relations firms shortly thereafter.

Detection and correction

In September 2005, Victor S. Johnson Jr., a friend of Seigenthaler, discovered the entry. After e-mails to friends and colleagues about the entry met with no success, Seigenthaler contacted Jimmy Wales, then-chair of the board of trustees of the Wikimedia Foundation. Wales then “took the then-unusual step of having the affected versions of the article history hidden from public view in the Wikipedia version logs, in effect removing them from all but Wikipedia administrators' view.”² Although the Wikipedia entry itself was then corrected, “some ‘mirror’ websites not controlled by Wikipedia continued to display the older and inaccurate article for several more weeks until this new version of the article was propagated to these other websites.”

Anonymous editor identified

Seigenthaler’s case received widespread attention following his Nov. 29, 2005, *USA Today* op-ed, which described the details of the incident. An expanded version published later in the *Tennessean* “detailed [Seigenthaler’s] own failed attempts to

identify the anonymous person who posted the inaccurate biography.” Eventually, a third party, Daniel Brandt, looked up the IP address that related to the false information and found that it related to a Nashville delivery service company. He contacted Seigenthaler and the media, and posted this information on his Web site.³

Shortly thereafter, on Dec. 9, Chase admitted to putting the false information in Seigenthaler’s biography.⁴ Chase then resigned from his job at Rush Delivery and sent a handwritten apology to Seigenthaler, who, in turn urged Rush Delivery to rehire Chase, a request the company granted. Seigenthaler, who declined to file a lawsuit in relation to the incident, commented: "I'm glad this aspect of it is over." He later expressed concern that "every biography on Wikipedia is going to be hit by this stuff—think what they'd do to Tom DeLay and Hillary Clinton, to mention two. My fear is that we're going to get government regulation of the Internet as a result."⁵

Seigenthaler's public reaction

On Dec. 5, 2005, Wales and Seigenthaler were interviewed on CNN, where Seigenthaler “raised the spectre of increased government regulation of the Web”:

Can I just say where I'm worried about this leading. Next year we go into an election year. Every politician is going to find himself or herself subjected to the same sort of outrageous commentary that hit me, and hits others. I'm afraid we're going to get regulated media as a result of that. And I, I tell you, I think if you can't fix it, both fix the history as well as the biography pages, I think it's going to be in real trouble, and we're going to have to be fighting to keep the government from regulating you.

In a Dec. 6, 2005, NPR interview, Seigenthaler expressed disapproval of the basic assumptions of Wikipedia and suggested that if he had in fact edited his own biography, he would have been lending credibility to a project he believed to possess “incurable flaws.”

Other reactions

Following the controversy, New York Times business editor Larry Ingrassia sent a memo to his entire staff commenting, "We shouldn't be using [Wikipedia] to check any information that goes into the newspaper."⁶ Other publications criticized Wikipedia’s open editing model as unreliable, citing the Seigenthaler incident as evidence.

In December 2005, the scientific journal *Nature* published a study that compared 42 natural-science articles in Wikipedia with the corresponding articles in Encyclopædia Britannica. The article reported four serious and 162 factual errors in the Wikipedia articles. The Encyclopædia Britannica also contained four serious errors, but only 123 factual errors.⁷ From this comparison, *Nature* drew the conclusion "that such high-profile examples [like the Seigenthaler situation] are the exception rather than the rule."

Wikimedia Foundation reaction

In a December 2005 interview in *BusinessWeek*, Wales talked about why the hoax had gone undetected for so long and how Wikipedia could prevent bogus information from popping up in the future. Wales claimed that one of the central problems was that “Wikipedia's use had grown faster than its self-monitoring system could comfortably handle,” and stated that Wikipedia would address that problem by limiting new page creation to account-holders only.

Wales also offered his opinion that encyclopedias in general (whether print or online) are “not usually appropriate for primary sources and should not be relied upon as authoritative.” He nonetheless repeated his belief that Wikipedia is more reliable as “background reading” than most online sources, categorizing Wikipedia as a “work in progress.”⁸

Source: Adapted from “Seigenthaler Controversy.” 21 Aug. 2007. Wikipedia. 26 Sept. 2007. < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seigenthaler_controversy#_note-0>

Notes

¹ The State of the News Media 2006,

http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2006/narrative_online_publicattitudes.asp

² Wikipedia deletion log,

<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:Log&type=delete&user=Essjay&page=John+Seigenthaler+Sr.>

³ Terdiman, Daniel, “In search of the Wikipedia prankster,” http://www.news.com/In-search-of-the-Wikipedia-prankster/2008-1029_3-5995977.html?tag=st.num

⁴ Buchanan, Brian J., “Founder shares cautionary tale of libel in cyberspace,”

<http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/news.aspx?id=17798>

⁵ Page, Susan, “Author apologizes for fake Wikipedia biography,”

http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2005-12-11-wikipedia-apology_x.htm

⁶ Larry Ingrassia, “The New York Times Business Editor’s Memo: Wiki-whatdia?,”

http://poynter.org/forum/view_post.asp?id=10748

⁷ Giles, Jim, “Internet Encyclopedias Go Head to Head,”

<http://www.nature.com/news/2005/051212/full/438900a.html>

⁸ Helm, Burt. “Wikipedia: A work in progress”, *BusinessWeek*,

http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/dec2005/tc20051214_441708.htm?chan=db