

Handout 1.2. Wikipedia Project: Understanding the Critical Process

Now it's your turn. To prepare for this assignment, choose a subject about which you consider yourself knowledgeable. Find the Wikipedia entry on that subject and print it out. (It helps to pick out a subject that has a relatively short entry; this will make the rest of the project much more manageable.) You will then use this entry to follow a process of media criticism, as laid out below. We will follow the critical process as outlined in *Media and Culture* (Campbell et al.).

You will compile a research journal as you complete this project. Each step in the process features questions and tasks. Answer these questions, thoughtfully but concisely, on separate paper, either typed or neatly handwritten; these will constitute your research journal. The "Taking Action" portion of the assignment requires you to write an addition to the entry; this should be typed in standard format. For extra credit, you may actually submit your changes to Wikipedia; if you choose to do this, it is your responsibility to document that you have done so. (Print it out right away, in case your changes get reverted later.)

Due dates:

- _____ Read article "All the News That's Fit to Print Out."
- _____ Submit topic for approval.
- _____ Description phase: Answer all Previewing and Description questions below in detail, in note form.
- _____ Analysis phase: Research.
- _____ Complete the Analysis & Interpretation phase.
- _____ Complete the Evaluation phase and Taking Action (and extra credit).

Previewing questions

Before you analyze your article (but after you decide on a topic), answer the following questions. Your answers will prime your brain for a more critical consideration of the article.

- Why is this person, event, invention (or whatever) of such significance that it merits inclusion in an encyclopedia?
- How would you break it down? What would the different sections be?
- What sort of images would you include in your article?
- What parts of the article might be potentially controversial? Why?
- Where would you go to find and verify information for your article?

Description

Paying close attention, taking notes, and researching the subject under study.

- How long is the entry? Does the length seem surprising or not? (Look up a couple of articles on similar topics to help you answer this question.)
- How is the entry divided into subtopics? List them.
- When was it last updated? See the very last page of the entry for this information.
- What information seems to be the most recent? How can you tell?
- What kind of visual information (photos, graphs, tables, etc.) is included? List visual elements and explain what each adds to the entry.
- Who are the experts cited in the body of the entry (if any)? List them.

Analysis & Interpretation

Discovering and focusing on significant patterns that emerge from the description stage. In the interpretive stage, we try to determine the meanings of the patterns we have analyzed. The most difficult stage in criticism, interpretation demands an answer to the "So what?" question.

- Research: Identify three pieces of information that ought to be "fact-checked"—pieces of information which are not universally known and which are not cited in the article.
- Research: Find independent sources to either support or contradict these "facts." Include full bibliographic information (including URLs for all online resources) for all sources.
- What information in the article did you find the most surprising or enlightening?
- What information seems outdated or in need of updating? Are there aspects of the subject that seem incomplete? How well does it represent current consensus on the subject?
- Look again at the selection of topics and subtopics and how these are organized. Which aspects of the subject are emphasized by this organization? Which aspects are de-emphasized? Are there any aspects of the subject which are not adequately reflected in this organization?
- To what extent do the images selected either complement or undercut the text? Which aspects of the subject are emphasized by the images? Which aspects are de-emphasized? Discuss at least one specific image you're familiar with which is not included in the entry but could be. What effect would including this image have on the impression this article makes on the user?

- How does the selection of experts affect the credibility of the article? Do the experts cited represent a balanced view of the subject? If the source does not cite any experts, then discuss the effect of this lack. Cite at least one expert you're familiar with (from other sources) who is not cited in the Wikipedia entry. What would the addition of commentary from this expert add to the entry?
- Which of the subtopics is most likely to be considered "controversial" by readers? How does the article treat this subtopic? What elements make the article appear to be biased toward one side or the other of any controversy? What aspects of the article contribute to a neutral point of view?
- What conclusions can you draw from your efforts to "fact-check" the entry? How thoroughly sourced is the entry? Are there comments which really need to be cited but are not? Which aspects of the article contribute to its general credibility? Which aspects make the article seem less credible?

Evaluation

The fourth stage of the critical process focuses on making an informed judgment. At this stage, we can grasp the strengths and weaknesses of the media under study and make critical judgments measured against our own frames of reference—what we like and dislike as well as what seems good or bad about the stories and coverage we analyzed.

- How useful is this article? To whom would it be most useful? For what purpose(s) would it be most useful?
- Where might this article fall short? Where would someone need to turn if he or she needs more information?
- How successfully does this article maintain the Neutral Point of View, which is one of the pillars of Wikipedia culture? (See *New York Times Magazine* article "All the News That's Fit to Print Out," discussion of the Neutral Point of View "pillar.")

Taking Action

For the final stage of this project, you will make changes to the article, following the steps outlined below.

- Choose one aspect of the article which, in your judgment, needs to be expanded. Clearly mark this section in your printout of the entry.
- On a separate sheet of paper, list specific sources you will use in compiling information to expand the entry. For each source, list specific bibliographic information (URL or publishing info) as well as specific facts or quotes you want to include from the source.
- Write a new section (at least 150 words).

- Another way to improve the original article is to cite sources for information that is already in the article but is currently unsourced. If you choose this option, you will not have a single, 200-word section, but a list of sources that correspond to unsourced information you've highlighted on the article.

Extra Credit

For extra credit, you can actually submit the changes to Wikipedia. Print out the revised entry immediately, in case the changes are reverted before I get a chance to look at them.

Work Cited

Campbell, Richard, Christopher Martin, and Bettina Fabos. *Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication*. 7th ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009.