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Wikipedia: When in Doubt, Multitudes Seek It Out

The online, citizen-generated encyclopedia is especially popular among the well-educated and the college-aged

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More than a third of American adult internet users (36%) consult the citizen-generated online encyclopedia Wikipedia, according to a new nationwide survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. And on a typical day in the winter of 2007, 8% of online Americans consulted Wikipedia.

The reliability of articles on Wikipedia has been the subject of ongoing controversy. Still, the Pew Internet Project survey shows that Wikipedia is far more popular among the well-educated than it is among those with lower levels of education. For instance, 50% of those with at least a college degree consult the site, compared with 22% of those with a high school diploma. And 46% of those age 18 and older who are current full- or part-time students have used Wikipedia, compared with 36% of the overall internet population.

In addition, young adults and broadband users have been among those who are earlier adopters of Wikipedia. While 44% of those ages 18-29 use Wikipedia to look for information, just 29% of users age 50 and older consult the site. In a similar split, 42% of home broadband users look for information on Wikipedia, while just 26% of home dial-up users do so.

A Profile of Wikipedia Users	
Do you ever use the internet to look for information on Wikipedia?	% of adult internet users who say "yes"
Men	39%
Women	34%
Whites	37%
Blacks	27%
English-speaking Hispanics	36%
Age 18-29	44%
Age 30-49	38%
Age 50-64	31%
Age 65+	26%
High school diploma	22%
Some college	36%
College grad +	50%
< \$30,000 household income	32%
\$30,000-\$50,000	35%
\$50,000-\$75,000	39%
>\$75,000	42%
Dial-up connection at home	26%
Broadband at home	42%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey Feb. 15-March 7, 2007. N=1,492 internet users. Margin of error is ±3%.

All told, the use of Wikipedia is more popular on a typical day than some of the more prominent activities tracked by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, including online purchasing, visiting dating websites, making travel reservations, using chat rooms, and participating in online auctions.

The popularity of Wikipedia

Several Web traffic measuring firms say that Wikipedia is one of the most heavily visited sites on the internet. comScore Media Metrix, the Web traffic measuring firm, regularly says that monthly traffic to the cluster of Wikipedia sites positions them in the top 10 global sites.

Likewise, data from Hitwise consistently registers Wikipedia in the top 10 most popular sites on the entire Web. Moreover, in the cluster of sites that are focused on educational and reference material, Wikipedia is by far the most popular site, drawing nearly six times more traffic than the next-closest site.

Top 20 Educational and Reference Websites Week Ending March 17, 2007

	Share of traffic in the category that week
1. Wikipedia	24.33%
2. Yahoo! Answers	4.23%
3. Dictionary.com	3.79%
4. Answers.com	3.53%
5. SparkNotes	1.62%

6. Google Scholar	1.31%
7. Google Book Search	1.09%
8. Find Articles	.99%
9. U.S. National Library of Medicine	.99%
10. Merriam-Webster Online	.85%

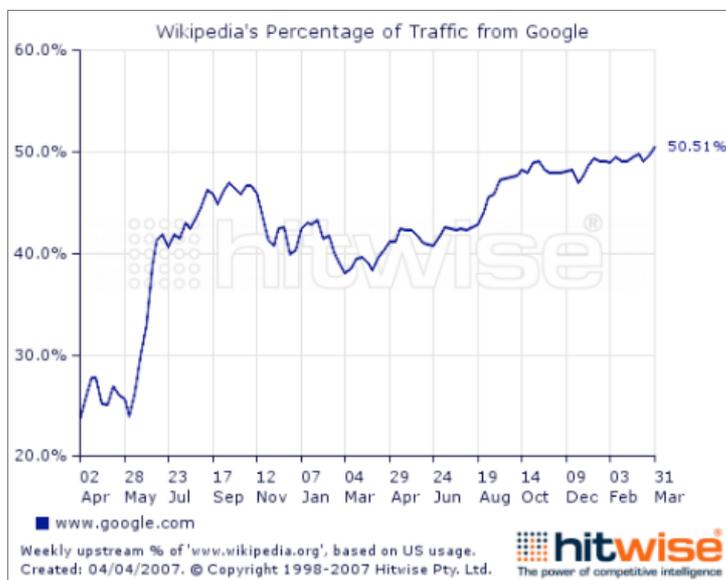
Source: Hitwise, U.S. Internet Visits (market share) for week ending March 17, 2007

Why explains Wikipedia's Large Audience?

Hitwise data suggest several reasons for Wikipedia's popularity: First, there is the sheer amount of material on the site, covering everything from ancient history to current events and popular culture. Because authors can create and edit entries at any time and in any location, new entries about emerging tech terms, celebrities or political scandals can be published or updated within a matter of minutes. In total, Wikipedia claims over 5.3 million entries, 1.6 million of them in English.

Second, Wikipedia's dramatic growth is strongly correlated with Americans' affection for search engines. Over 70% of the visits to Wikipedia in the week ending March 17 came from search engines, according to Hitwise data.

Wikipedia's article structure helps explain this. Many of the pieces in the encyclopedia are full of links to other Wikipedia articles and other material on the Web. One of the prime factors in Google's search results algorithm is the number of links connected to a given webpage. Thus, Wikipedia's culture of encouraging internal and external links gives Wikipedia material a shot at very high Google rankings on many keyword queries. In fact, Wikipedia has become the No. 1 external site visited after Google's search page, receiving over half of its traffic from the search engine.



Convenience is likely a big factor, too

In addition to having some logistical advantages in drawing traffic, Wikipedia is probably popular for other reasons as well. Research on other subjects by the Pew Internet Project has shown that the convenience of using sites makes a difference. In our "Science Online" report,² we found that science knowledge-seeking online is driven a lot by convenience -- more so than a sense that science information online is more accurate than other sources. Convenience mattered to 71% of those seeking science information, compared with 13% of those who said using the internet gave them more accurate information. In addition, our research about seekers of science information showed that users do a lot of checking using other offline and online sources of science information beyond the sites they find easily through search engines.

This finding also mirrors work we have done about the way people get both health information and political information online. The ease of using the internet to find information quickly seems a constant for many kinds of data hunts online.

[Description of the study methodology and a copy of the survey questionnaire](#)

Notes

¹Hitwise is an online competitive intelligence service that provides its 1,200 global clients with daily insights on how their customers interact with a broad range of competitive websites, and how their competitors use different tactics to attract online customers. Through relationships with ISPs around the world, Hitwise's patented methodology captures the anonymous online usage, search, and conversion behavior of 25 million Internet users.

Hitwise is a privately held company headquartered in New York City and operates in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, and Singapore. More information about Hitwise is available at www.hitwise.com.

²See http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/191/report_display.asp