Safeguarding the Accuracy of Wikipedia®

By: Mark Watkins, Esq. and Meghan Sheehan, Law Clerk

Wikipedia®, The Free Encyclopedia, is a popular online source of information. Many people turn to Wikipedia as a first resource to quickly learn about new topics, since the site is home to information on just about any subject imaginable. Articles range from obscure folklore (an entry on "Mami Wata" discusses African water deities) to the most common elements (Wikipedia has a large entry for "water"). Further, anyone can create or edit these articles, making the site inherently easy-to-use and accessible.

With so many "contributing authors," however, it's easy to wonder: just how does Wikipedia maintain the overall accuracy of the information on its site? A quick search on Wikipedia itself reveals that Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., the owner of Wikipedia, is aware of the fact that, at any given time, not every piece of information on Wikipedia is likely to be accurate. For this reason, it employs several practices to safeguard the overall reliability of the site.

Identifying its users. The majority of content in Wikipedia is freely editable by both registered and unregistered users. A registered user is able to mask his email address and internet protocol (IP) address from a majority of the public. An unregistered user's edits are not associated with an account and his IP address is freely viewable by all persons viewing the article edits.

Setting standards, policies, and guidelines. Wikipedia has established content standards to guide contributors as they create or add to articles. Generally, the site requests that all articles should be: written from a neutral point of view, verifiable, free of original research, and compliant with Wikipedia's conventions for naming article pages. Entries for living persons have the strictest content standards, for obvious reasons, as well as an extra "layer" of editorial monitoring and control over what actually gets published to the site.

Additionally, Wikipedia has published its own Wiki Manual of Style, which users are encouraged to refer to when creating or editing articles for the sake of a consistent tone and style throughout the site. The Manual of Style is an established set of guidelines for items such as punctuation, capitalization, and grammar, among others. Wikipedia also has a list of policies and guidelines for behavioral standards, in order to maintain a civil and respectful environment for its users, contributors, editors and administrators. Personal attacks and harassment are forbidden, and the site encourages use of its dispute resolution process (vs. immediate legal action) in order to resolve any differences of opinion and come to a consensus on a particular article or piece of information within.

Policing the content submitted by the internet community. Wikipedia considers 75,000 of its regular users as editors; though these individuals range from casual readers to scholarly experts, they are all people who regularly edit the site and help to maintain a consistent style throughout. Wikipedia editors tag entries to encourage further discussion and content submission, and in some cases, review articles to determine if they should be locked from global editing. This is sometimes necessary with controversial subjects. Wikipedia does not, however, accept requests for entry locking. Additionally, a force of approximately 1,500 administrators has the ability to lock articles from public editing, delete articles, and block editors.

Now that you know the basics, what do you have to do to get started?

Safeguarding the Accuracy of Wikipedia®

Create an account. Creating an account with Wikipedia is easy and free. The user first creates his own unique username, of course being mindful of the potential consequences of using identifying information in this ID. He then chooses whether to have an email address associated with his account or not; if no email address is used and the password is lost, there will be no way to retrieve the password.

Understand your identity on the site. Once registered, the user's email and IP address are held private so that only a limited number of Wikipedia administrators have the ability to see them. His username, however, will appear on the Wikipedia website whenever he makes an edit to an article. Not only will his username be viewable in a particular article's history, but other editors may reference his username across all of his edited articles across the website. It is important to note that Wikipedia does not allow users to edit its site for the promotion of a company or group, and any users found doing so will be subject to review by Wikipedia's administrators with the possibility of having their editing privileges revoked.

Start contributing. Wikipedia is designed to be very user-friendly; any individual with basic HTML coding skills should be able to learn to edit the content with little problem. Wikipedia includes a "sandbox" area for users to test drive the "Wikitext language" first and users are encouraged to use the "sandbox" freely while they are learning to edit so that their edits do not accidentally adversely affect the content layout.

The content on Wikipedia is constantly changing. As a result, many companies may want to consider establishing and/or reviewing their own Wikipedia entries, especially if the company has recently experienced a major event. If factual inaccuracies exist, editing the entry to correctly reflect the facts is easy. While many companies know that their employees use Wikipedia as an information source and that entries discussing the company exist, not many companies consider editing Wikipedia to ensure the entry is accurate. With the ever-changing nature of information on Wikipedia, however, companies may want to consider monitoring the website because ensuring the content is accurate is free and relatively easy.

Copyright 2009 Hahn Loeser & Parks LLP

Mark A. Watkins is a partner with the Akron office of Hahn Loeser & Parks LLP and serves as co-chair of the firm's Intellectual Property & Technology team. He has prosecuted and defended a wide range of intellectual property matters, including patent, trademark and copyright infringements, and the misappropriation of trade secrets. Mark also specializes in the formulation of company strategies for the procurement and protection of intellectual property rights.