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Dossier ˝Academic research into Wikipedia˝

Wikipedia's Role in Reputation Management: An Analysis of the Best and Worst Companies in the USA

Marcia W. DiStaso
Assistant professor of Public Relations in the College of Communications at Pennsylvania State University.
mwd10@psu.edu

Marcus Messner
Assistant professor of Journalism at the School of Mass Communications at Virginia Commonwealth University
mmessner@vcu.edu

Abstract

Being considered one of the best companies in the USA is a great honor, but this reputation does not exempt businesses from negativity in the collaboratively edited online encyclopedia Wikipedia. Content analysis of corporate Wikipedia articles for companies with the best and worst reputations in the USA revealed that negative content outweighed positive content irrespective of reputation. It was found that both the best and the worst companies had more negative than positive content in Wikipedia. This is an important issue because Wikipedia is not only one of the most popular websites in the world, but is also often the first place people look when seeking corporate information. Although there was more content on corporate social responsibility in the entries for the ten companies with the best reputations, this was still overshadowed by content referring to legal issues or scandals. Ultimately, public relations professionals need to regularly monitor and request updates to their corporate Wikipedia articles regardless of what kind of company they work for.

Keywords

Wikipedia, reputation management, USA, monitor, social media

El paper de la Wikipedia en la gestió de la reputació: una anàlisi de les millors i les pitjors companyies dels Estats Units

Resum

Ser considerada una de les millors companyies dels Estats Units és un gran honor, però la bona reputació no eximeix aquestes empreses de trobar aspectes negatius a la Wikipedia, l'enciclopèdia en línia editada en col·laboració. Mitjançant una anàlisi de contingut de les companyies que tenen millor i pitjor reputació dels Estats Units, aquest estudi demostra que el contingut negatiu dels articles corporatius que es publiquen a la Wikipedia supera el contingut positiu independentment de la reputació de l'empresa. S'ha comprovat que tant les millors com les pitjors companyies contenen més continguts negatius que positius. És una qüestió important, ja que la Wikipedia no és només un dels llocs web més populars del món, sinó que s'ha convertit en un dels primers indrets per buscar

informació corporativa. Tot i que s'han trobat més continguts relacionats amb la responsabilitat social corporativa en les entrades de les deu companyies amb millor reputació, aquests quedaven eclipsats per qüestions vinculades amb escàndols o assumptes legals. La conclusió és que els professionals de les relacions públiques haurien de supervisar i actualitzar periòdicament els seus articles corporatius a la Wikipedia independentment de la companyia per a la qual treballin

Paraules clau

Wikipedia, gestió de la reputació, Estats Units, supervisió, mitjans socials

Introduction

Social media has forever changed how corporations "manage" reputations. With social media and the collaboratively edited online encyclopedia Wikipedia, anyone can create and distribute content online, quickly and easily, and often for free. This connects companies and people in ways never possible before, blurring the lines that previously existed between companies, the media, and the public. The result is the public having a louder voice than ever before.

Social media are everywhere, and are increasingly being used by people in every country of the world; Wikipedia, for instance, is now available in 270 languages. No product or corporate reputation can escape the influence of social media, which need to be taken into account in every reputation management campaign. To be successful, a company's social media activities must be coordinated with broader business goals and strategy, as well as with other communication efforts.

Reputation in the past was often considered as simple as top-of-mind awareness (Fombrun *et al.*, 2003); today, however, the question is whether familiarity breeds trust or contempt (Centurion *et al.*, 2009). To balance and land on the side of trust, a strategic approach to public relations is necessary (DiStaso *et al.*, 2009), especially with today's low levels of corporate approval and trust (Edelman, 2011). With reputations on the line, companies must include social media in their strategy.

Wikipedia is part of the growing list of social media that public relations professionals need to use and monitor (DiStaso *et al.*, 2010; Paine, 2010). DiStaso *et al.* (2010) found that Wikipedia was one of the top sites listed when searching for companies using prominent search engines. This places Wikipedia in a position to potentially influence perceptions simply by being easily accessed. Plus, the depth and breadth of information available on Wikipedia far exceeds that of other encyclopedias, putting a plethora of information at the public's fingertips (Crovitz, 2009).

Since having a good reputation provides companies with a strategic advantage, it makes sense that an aggregation of corporate information in Wikipedia may influence that advantage. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to see if there is a difference in Wikipedia content for companies with good and with bad reputations.

Literature Review

Wikipedia

Wikipedia was founded in 2001 and has quickly grown into one of the most popular websites in the world. According to Alexa.com (2012), it is currently the sixth most popular website in the world and in the USA, with most visitors viewing four pages on average and with visitors spending approximately five minutes on each visit.

Wikipedia, based on the wiki concept, is a free, collaboratively built encyclopedia. The idea that any Internet user can contribute to, or modify, any topic distinguishes Wikipedia from traditional encyclopedias written solely by experts.

Because of the social aspect of its creation, Wikipedia was once criticized, but it has gradually gained credibility. In 2009, the *Financial Times* pointed out that its editors work to make sure the content is true and, according to Stross (2009), "authority now comes not from a small group of encyclopedia editors and famous contributors, but from Google's algorithms, which analyze links that point to web pages elsewhere, as well as other clues, to make an educated guess about trustworthiness" (p. BU3). Reporters are also increasing their use of Wikipedia, since sources (Shaw, 2008) and news coverage were found to be framed as credible and accurate (Messner *et al.*, 2011).

The growth of Wikipedia's popularity and its increasing credibility have posed a challenge for public relations professionals (DiStaso *et al.*, 2010); this is because anyone can now influence public opinion about a topic or company. A company's reputation is no longer largely under its own control and this poses possibly serious threats. Because of this, companies are becoming more aware of the impact of Wikipedia on reputation (Wright *et al.*, 2009).

Corporate reputation

Corporate reputation is "the overall estimation in which a particular company is held by its various constituents" (Fombrun, 1996, p. 37). A comparison of organizations is central to reputation, with one organization likely to have a better reputation than another (Deephouse *et al.*, 2005; Ruef *et al.*, 1998). Essentially it is feedback received by stakeholders.

Corporate reputation is a critical feature of organizations (Carter *et al.*, 1998; Fombrun *et al.*, 1990), but a favorable reputation does not come easy. Companies must work hard at

developing a reputation, which is often a driving force behind public relations efforts (Hutton *et al.*, 2001).

Reputation is an important strategic asset that contributes to continued organizational success (Roberts *et al.*, 2002). Having a favorable reputation has been argued to be one of the best ways to recruit and retain employees (Gatewood *et al.*, 1993), charge premium prices (Milgrom *et al.*, 1992), attract investors (Fombrun *et al.*, 1990), maintain a competitive advantage (Roberts *et al.*, 2002), and retain a reservoir of goodwill (Jones *et al.*, 2000).

The visibility of a company in the minds of its stakeholders has been considered to be one of the strongest factors in determining a favorable reputation (Fombrun *et al.*, 2003). Stakeholders include customers, suppliers, communities, employees, investors, the media, and any group that affects or can be affected by the company (Fombrun, 1996). Stakeholders construct corporate reputations from available information, such as direct communications from the company, the media, interpersonal communications (Fombrun *et al.*, 1990), and the Internet (DiStaso *et al.,* 2010).

Due to the numerous advantages of having a positive reputation, organizations are often concerned with the impact of their actions (Rawlins, 2009). There are many ways an organization can attempt to manage stakeholder perceptions, including press releases, advertising, press conferences, letters to shareholders, annual reports, and interviews in business publications (Fombrun, 1996), but social media and Wikipedia remove that level of control from the company and give high levels of influence to the public.

Research questions

Based on a thorough review of the literature, the research questions described immediately below were posed.

RQ1: Is there a difference in the tone of corporate Wikipedia articles for companies with the best reputations compared to companies with the worst reputations?

RQ1a: Is there a relationship between the overall tone in the corporate Wikipedia articles and reputation?

RQ2: Is there a difference in the amount of content for hot topics (corporate social responsibility and legal concerns/scandals) in corporate Wikipedia articles for companies with the best reputations compared to companies with the worst reputations?

RQ2a: Is there a relationship between the coverage of hot topics (corporate social responsibility and legal concerns/scandals) in corporate Wikipedia articles and reputation?

RQ3: Is there a difference in the use of reputation dimensions (social responsibility, emotional appeal, products and services, workplace environment, financial performance, and vision and leadership) in corporate Wikipedia articles for companies with the best reputations compared to companies with the worst reputations?

RQ3a: Is there a relationship between the amount of reputation sub-attributes covered in the corporate Wikipedia articles and reputation?

Method

This study builds on previous research by DiStaso *et al.* (2010), who analyzed Wikipedia entries for the top ten *Fortune* companies. While they identified Wikipedia content for the largest companies in the USA, they did not explore differences based on reputation. The goal of this particular study was to determine whether the formation of public opinion for companies with good and bad reputations differed. Content analysis was performed for 10 companies with the best reputations (Berkshire Hathaway, Johnson & Johnson, Google, 3M Company, SC Johnson, Intel Corporation, Microsoft, The Coca-Cola Company, Amazon.com, and General Mills) and 10 companies with the worst reputations (Delta Airlines, Bank of America, JP Morgan Chase, General Motors, Chrysler, Goldman Sachs, Citigroup, Fannie Mae, AIG, and Freddie Mac) as determined by the Harris Reputation Quotient 2010 (Harris, 2010).

The 2010 Harris Reputation Quotient consisted of 29,963 online interviews conducted between December 29, 2010 and February 15, 2011. It evaluated perceptions for 60 of the most visible companies in America across 20 attributes grouped into six reputation dimensions: products and services, financial performance, workplace environment, social responsibility, vision and leadership, and emotional appeal.

The complete sample included 20 articles from Wikipedia (ten companies with the best reputations and ten with the worst reputations). The unit of analysis was the sentence, so each of the 20 Wikipedia articles was analyzed sentence by sentence. The analysis was conducted for all the companies based on their Wikipedia articles as of April 9, 2011.

To increase intercoder and intracoder reliability, a codebook was created, pretested and revised before coding began. All coding was completed by two different coders and 20% was coded by both coders. The data reflected an intercoder reliability coefficient of .91 for tone, .98 for hot topics, and .90 for reputation topics using Scott's *pi* (1955).

Framing

Each sentence was analyzed for tonality and topic to determine how the companies were framed. As in previous research, tonality was determined by coding each sentence as positive, negative, or neutral (eg., DiStaso *et al.*, 2010; DiStaso *et al.*, 2007; Michaelson *et al.*, 2005). A sentence was coded as positive if it said something like: "In 1999, *Time* magazine named Bezos Person of the Year, recognizing the company's success in popularizing online shopping." An example of a negative sentence is as follows: "In late 2004, Fannie Mae was under investigation for its accounting practices." And an example of a neutral sentence is as follows: "The corporation's headquarters is located in New Brunswick, New Jersey, United States." Following the methodology in Henry (2008), the overall tone was calculated by dividing the count of

positive sentences minus the count of negative sentences by the count of positive sentences plus the count of negative sentences. Therefore, the maximum value for overall tone was one, and the minimum value was minus one.

This study was concerned with two topics: corporate social responsibility (CSR) (i.e., sentences such as: "The corporation supplied all of its employees with cash incentives to buy hybrid vehicles, and began providing mortgage loan breaks for customers whose homes qualified as energy efficient.") and legal concerns/scandals (i.e., sentences such as: "As of August 2005, when PBS's *Frontline* ran a story on the controversy, Coca-Cola strenuously denied all allegations of union-busting and murder of union leaders."). Each sentence was coded for the presence or absence of either topic.

Reputation

Reputation was analyzed based on the Harris Reputation Quotient (Fombrun *et al*, 2000) consisting of six attributes with 20 sub-attributes (see Table 1). Each corporate Wikipedia article was analyzed for the presence or absence of each sub-attribute.

Attribute	Sub-attributes
Social Responsibility	Supports good causes
	Environmental responsibility
	Community responsibility
Emotional Appeal	Feel good about
	Admire and respect
	Trust
Products and Services	High quality
	Innovative
	Value for money
	Stands behind
Workplace Environment	Rewards employees fairly
	Good place to work
	Good employees
Financial Performance	Outperforms competitors
	Profitability record
	Low investment risk
	Growth prospects
Vision and Leadership	Market opportunities
	Excellent leadership
	Clear vision for the future

Table 1: List of Corporate Reputation Attributes and Sub-attributes

Results

In analyzing the Wikipedia content for the ten US companies with the best reputations and the ten US companies with the worst reputations in 2010, a total of 3,069 sentences were analyzed (1,423 and 1,646 sentences for the companies with the best and worst reputations, respectively).

RQ1: Is there a difference in the tone of corporate Wikipedia articles for companies with the best reputations compared to companies with the worst reputations?

Both the best and the worst companies analyzed had more negative content than positive content. In the corporate Wikipedia articles, the best companies had a higher percentage of positive content (10.1%, *n*=144) compared to the worst companies (6.5%, *n*=108), and the best companies had a lower percentage of negative content (15.6%, *n*=222) compared to the worst companies (29.0%, *n*=476) (χ^2 (1, *N*=2) = 1.53, *p*<.05) (Chart 1).

Chart 1. Tone
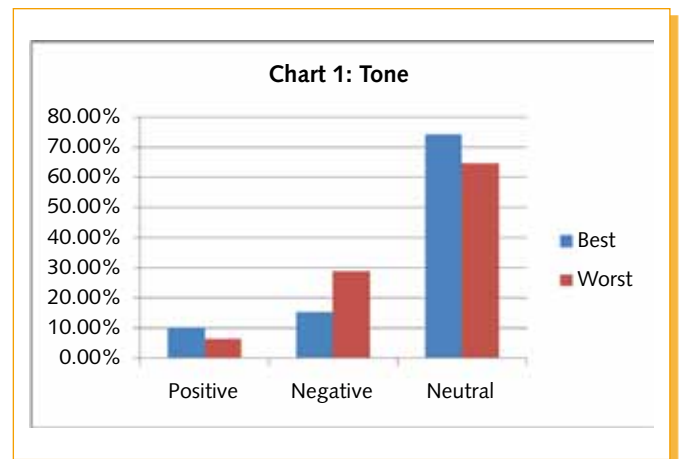
RQ1a: Is there a relationship between the overall tone in the corporate Wikipedia articles and reputation?

A Pearson correlation was calculated between the reputation quotient and the overall tone to find that there was a moderate statistically significant relationship between the reputation quotient and the percentage of CSR coverage (*r*[20]=.558, *p*<.05). In other words, as the amount of positive content improved so did reputation .

RQ2: Is there a difference in the amount of content for hot topics (corporate social responsibility and legal concerns/scandals) in corporate Wikipedia articles for companies with the best reputations compared to companies with the worst reputations?

The corporate Wikipedia articles were analyzed sentence by sentence to determine the total number of sentences that referred to the hot topics of CSR and legal concerns/scandals (Chart 2). The companies with the best reputations had more content on CSR (4.6%, *n*=65 for the best companies versus 2.2%, *n*=37 for the
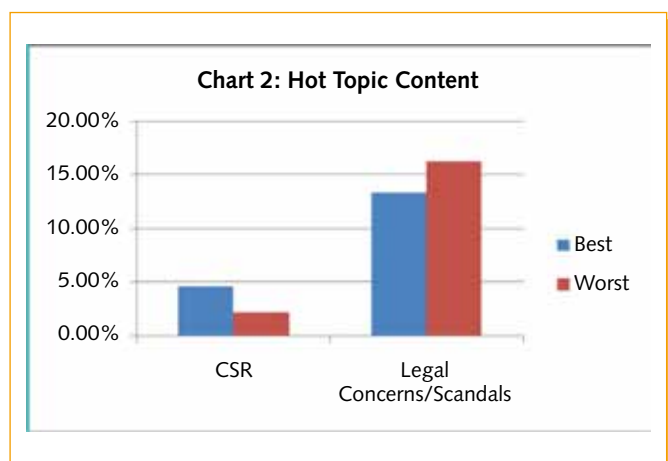
worst companies). There was only a slight difference in the amount of content on legal concerns/scandals (13.3%, n=189 for the best companies versus 16.2%, n=266 for the worst companies) (χ^2 (1, N=10) = 13.49, p<.05).

Chart 2. Hot Topic Content

Chart 2: Hot Topic Content

RQ2a: Is there a relationship between the coverage of hot topics (corporate social responsibility and legal concerns/ scandals) in corporate Wikipedia articles and reputation?

Pearson correlations were calculated between the reputation quotient and the percentage of content on CSR and legal concerns/ scandals. There was a moderate statistically significant relationship between the percentage of CSR coverage and the reputation quotient (r[20]=.465, p<.05). In other words, as the amount of CSR coverage increased so did a company's reputation . There was negative non-statistically significant relationship between content on legal concerns/scandals and reputation.

RQ3: Is there a difference in the use of reputation dimensions (social responsibility, emotional appeal, products and services, workplace environment, financial performance, and vision and leadership) in corporate Wikipedia articles for companies with the best reputations compared to companies with the worst reputations?

The overall reputation score as determined by the Harris Reputation Quotient scores for the best companies was 16% higher for companies with the best reputations when compared to companies with the worst reputations (see Table 2). All of the reputation attributes were reflected in more content in the Wikipedia articles for companies with the best reputations than for those with the worst reputations, except for the social responsibility attribute. There were 6.7% more companies with the worst reputations with content on social responsibility. Specifically, content on community responsibility was 40% more common for companies with the worst reputations, and content on environmental responsibility was 20% more common for companies with the best reputations.

Attribute	Sub-attributes	Best	Worst
Social Responsibility	Supports good causes	70%	70%
	Environmental responsibility	70%	50%
	Community responsibility	10%	50%
	Total	50%	56.7%
Emotional Appeal	Feel good about	20%	0
	Admire and respect	40%	20%
	Trust	10%	0
	Total	23.3%	6.7%
Products and Services	High quality	60%	20%
	Innovative	80%	50%
	Value for money	30%	20%
	Stands behind	60%	10%
	Total	57.5%	25%
Workplace Environment	Rewards employees fairly	30%	20%
	Good place to work	50%	40%
	Good employees	50%	20%
	Total	43.3%	26.7%
Financial Performance	Outperforms competitors	50%	40%
	Profitability record	100%	100%
	Low investment risk	0	0
	Growth prospects	50%	20%
	Total	50%	40%
Vision and Leadership	Market opportunities	50%	10%
	Excellent leadership	60%	20%
	Clear vision for the future	20%	20%
	Total	43.3%	16.7%
OVERALL REPUTATION		44.6%	28.6%

Table 2. Corporate Reputation Attributes and Sub-attributes

Products and services was the attribute with the greatest gap between the best and worst companies in Wikipedia articles (32.5% difference). The biggest differences between the two groups was content about the company standing behind its product or service (60% of the best companies had this kind of content compared to

only 10% of the worst companies) and having content about high quality products or services (60% of the best companies had this kind of content compared to only 20% of the worst companies).

The next largest difference was for the vision and leadership attribute (26.6% difference). Content on market opportunities and excellent leadership had a 40% difference (respectively, 50% and 60% of the best companies had content compared to only 10% and 20% of the worst companies).

The companies also differed for the emotional appeal and workplace environment attributes (16.6% difference for both). Although content for emotional appeal was low overall, 20% of the best companies had content about making people feel good and 10% had content about trust, while the worst companies had no content on either topic. The biggest difference in the workplace environment attribute was with content regarding good employees (50% of the best companies had this kind of content compared to only 20% of the worst companies).

None of the companies in this analysis had content regarding low investment risk, and all of them had content regarding a record of profitability at some point in their history. Approximately 50% of the best companies talked about growth prospects compared to only 20% of the worst companies.

RQ3a: Is there a relationship between the amount of reputation sub-attributes covered in the corporate Wikipedia articles and reputation?

There was a strong statistically significant relationship between reputation and the number of reputation sub-attributes given coverage in the Wikipedia articles (r[20]=.627, p<.01). In other words, the more reputation content was included in Wikipedia, the better the reputation.

Discussion

We analyzed Wikipedia articles to see if there was a difference in content for 10 US based companies with the best reputations (Berkshire Hathaway, Johnson & Johnson, Google, 3M Company, SC Johnson, Intel Corporation, Microsoft, Coca-Cola Company, Amazon.com, and General Mills) compared to 10 US based companies with the worst reputations (Delta Airlines, Bank of America, JP Morgan Chase, General Motors, Chrysler, Goldman Sachs, Citigroup, Fannie Mae, AIG, and Freddie Mac).

Not only were the Wikipedia articles of the companies with the best reputations found to be slightly shorter than those for the companies with the worst reputations, they also contained slightly more neutral content. This could possibly be a reflection of having more to talk about for the worst companies, but that seems unlikely since there should be plenty to talk about for the best companies as well .

It was not surprising to find that the companies with the worst reputations had more negative content; they had, in fact, almost double the amount of negative content, although only slightly less positive content. Both types of companies had more negative than positive content. This indicates that even if a company is considered to have a good reputation, it is still very vulnerable to having its dirty laundry aired on Wikipedia. In other words, legal difficulties and scandals are popular Wikipedia topics, irrespective of the company's reputation. In fact, the amount of content on corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts was about 10% less than the amount of content on legal issues or scandals. It is possible that the companies in this study had more negative aspects, but it seems unlikely that even the companies with the best reputations had more negative than positive aspects. Further research is needed to identify the CSR and legal issues/scandals that do or do not make it into corporate Wikipedia articles.

Looking at the reputation attributes and sub-attributes, the differences between the best companies and the worst companies were more obvious. Both types of companies had CSR content and, as mentioned previously, the best companies had more content dedicated to their efforts; in the end, both kinds of companies were fairly equal in the fact that they both had content that influences reputation. Where the companies truly differed was in content about products and services, vision and leadership, and emotional appeal. Taking into account the fact that all the companies in this study were considered to be among the most visible in the USA, not having content about how they stand behind their products and services or have high quality is surprising. A lack of excellent leadership in the companies with the worst reputations could be part of their problems, so not having content about this issue would be consistent. Emotional appeal is an attribute where both types of companies lacked content. It was rare for companies to have content about trust or feeling good, which only existed for the best companies. Admiration and respect was also low, especially for the companies with the worst reputations.

Overall, the attributes and sub-attributes that the public used to determine, through the Harris Interactive Reputation Quotient, the reputation of the companies in this study were also reflected in the Wikipedia articles. However, if a company's reputation was to be judged by this content, the worst companies would still be the worst, but the best companies might be considered to have more of a moderate reputation since, on average, they only accounted for about 45% of the reputation sub-attributes. This begs the question: why don't the best companies have more reputation building content in Wikipedia?

Public relations implications

Companies need to pay close attention to the content in their Wikipedia articles, because this social medium is often the first place people look when seeking information about companies. It is also important that public relations professionals move beyond monitoring. There are editing rules that must be followed, but this

does not mean that changes cannot be made (see the CREWE Wikipedia Engagement Flowchart on Wikimedia for guidance on making edits). The bottom line is that if information is incorrect, or if balance or positive news about a company needs to be added, requests for edits can be made with the proper references.

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Conclusion

Through an analysis of the ten best companies and the ten worst companies in the USA as determined by the Harris Interactive Reputation Quotient, this study identified differences in Wikipedia content based on reputation. Although there were some differences, most were not great and would hardly indicate a clear dichotomy of best versus worst.

These findings highlight the importance of public relations professionals monitoring and requesting updates to Wikipedia articles about their companies. Being one of the best companies does not mean that a company can afford to ignore its Wikipedia content.

As with all research, this study had limitations. A key question that this study cannot answer – because it is beyond the scope of the research – is whether the companies in this study have different Wikipedia content because of their reputation or because they simply do/did good or bad things? Future research needs to explore this issue and study the influence of corporate Wikipedia articles on public opinion.

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Marcia W. DiStaso
Assistant professor of public relations in the College of Communications at Penn State University
mwd10@psu.edu

Marcia W. DiStaso (PhD, University of Miami, 2007) is an assistant professor of communication in the Department of Advertising and Public Relations at Penn State University. Her research has been published in the *Journal of Public Relations Research, Public Relations Review, Public Relations Journal, Journalism Studies*, in over ten different books, and through the Institute for Public Relations. She is chair of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Financial Communications section, co-chair of the PRSA National Research Committee, research chair of the PRSA Educator's Academy, member of the PRSA Speaker's Board, editorial board member for *Public Relations Journal*, and a board member for the International Public Relations Research Conference. Her research focuses on exploring and informing the practice of financial communication, investor relations and social media in public relations. She has been conducting research into Wikipedia since 2006.

College of Communications
Pennsylvania State University
200 Carnegie Building, University Park, PA 16802

Marcus Messner
Assistant professor of journalism at the School of Mass Communications at the Virginia Commonwealth University mmessner@vcu.edu

Marcus Messner (PhD, University of Miami, 2009) is an assistant professor at the School of Mass Communications at the Virginia Commonwealth University. His research has been published in *Journalism Studies, Journalism Practice, Newspaper Research Journal, Public Relations Journal* as well as in *The Handbook of Computer Networks, Comparative Studies on Media Consumption and World Youth,* and *New Media & Public Relations*. He is a former head of the Communication Technology Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and serves on the advisory board of the international Social Media Club Education Connection. His research interests are in new and social media and how they are adopted and used in journalism and public relations. He has been conducting research into Wikipedia since 2006.

School of Mass Communications
Virginia Commonwealth University
PO Box 842034, Richmond, VA 23284-2034

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de Catalunya

Digithum, no. 14 (May, 2012) | **ISSN 1575-2275**
A scientific e-journal published by the Arts and Humanities Department

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