

From the TechnoManor

I didn't have a message in my Inbox this week. So I thought I'd address a side discussion we kicked around in our Friday Men's Bible Study group. I call it,
Google, Wikipedia, and Trust (Oh My!)

This isn't a "how to" article. It's my take on what we see on the Internet, how we should think about it, and how far we should trust it.

I'm going to "pick on" Google and Wikipedia, but these ideas can be applied to anything on the Web.

Let me review Google and Wikipedia before I go on.

Google (www.google.com) started as the now-ubiquitous search Web site. You type a few words into the box on its cleanly-styled page and it presents you with a list of matches. Those matches are a mix of paid-for advertising links with free Web-site links.

So far, so good. You click on a link to visit a Web site to learn more about the words you originally searched for.

Did you ever wonder, "how does it know about those sites?" "how does it make money?" "why isn't it telling me what I'm looking for?"

Google makes its money by selling advertising. It sells ads on its search results page and on other people's Web pages. It behooves you to use Google for it to make money. That's why they make it so simple (and enticing).

Google has programs (called "bots") that scour the Web. These bots automatically "visit" Web sites. At each site, the bots decompose a Web page, extract the text you see (such as "Looking for somewhere to belong" on the DCC Web site) and save the text as keywords for future searches. Google's bots also find the links on a Web page and follow those links to continue their journey through the Web. All of this information is cataloged by their servers. It's used to match future searches.

But what does this mean?

It means when you "ask" Google to tell you about some subject, Google looks in its catalog and finds your words. It then presents a somewhat arbitrary list of Web sites that may have those words somewhere on their Web page. There is little intelligence involved in this process.

How does Google decide what to display in its list of matches? Well, that's Google's secret. There are businesses that try to "game" Google to forcibly display a company, service, or whatever at the top of the list of matches. Actually, we've been lucky. If you enter **disciples plano** into Google, we're at the top of the list.

The success you have with Google depends on:

- How unique are the words you give Google.
- How well-designed and informative is the target Web page.

Google has some pretty good algorithms for how they manage their catalog of words and Web sites, but it's still a pretty dumb process.

Now Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) is different. A *wiki* is a collection of Web pages that enables anyone who accesses those pages to contribute or modify the content. *Wikipedia* is a Web-based encyclopedia. It is maintained by the Internet community.

Wait a minute. Who is this "Internet community?" Anybody and everybody. I could write or edit an article in Wikipedia (but I have better things to do). You could, too. Basically you need to register for an account, pick a topic, and start writing. If you enter absolute rubbish, someone else can come along and change it. That's the beauty.

But there's no central authority, no group of experts to assure accuracy and consistency. This isn't the Encyclopaedia Britannica! Wikipedia is a public encyclopedia.

So, here's the rub. Because Wikipedia is a public encyclopedia, you must take what you read with a grain of salt. There is no final arbiter who declares the material correct (as in a traditional printed encyclopedia). But a consensus is often reached by significant individuals to make most of the content accurate. However, you must be the final judge.

If something on Wikipedia seems outrageous, or biased, it may be.

In my experience, topics that can be verified by other means (technical documents, reference sources), are highly trustworthy. Topics related to living people (especially celebrities) or politics, are often suspicious.

So now I've given some background about Google and Wikipedia.

Should you trust them? No, you shouldn't...at least not as absolute oracles of truth and fact. Why? Because each produces results that can be rigged.

Should you totally forget them and discard anything coming from them? I say no to that question, too. Because you could be discarding valuable information that you may not find elsewhere.

Now we're both confused.

Isn't trust a continuum? There's the high end (the Bible) where we give absolute trust (or nearly so). On the lower end, we have people like used car salesmen, where we give virtually no trust. Google and Wikipedia (and other Web sites) fall somewhere in that continuum.

You should give information from the Web about the same level of trust as you would a rumor or piece of gossip. The trustworthiness depends on how reasonable it sounds, how it matches your experiences, and how verifiable it is. I think how the information passes those tests, determines how well you should trust it.

After all, didn't you know I received a Pulitzer Prize for my writing? Why, it says so in Wikipedia! (wink)

Ok, you've gotta keep my mind occupied. Send me a technical question that's been bugging you. My Inbox lives at:

frenchygrey@gmail.com

I'll answer one question each week in *The Link*.

Otherwise, I'll have to ask and answer my own questions. My dogs look at me funny when I talk to myself.