How college students use free online resources

(like Wikipedia)

1. hello everyone. Today I'm going to share some findings from a research study of how college students use free online information resources like Wikipedia for school. This study is part of an ongoing collaboration between product and research to better understand and support the needs of our readers.
2. Unlike many previous studies of Wikipedia use in education contexts, which have focused on Wikipedia as a teaching tool, we were primarily interested in how students use Wikipedia and internet resources outside the boundaries of the classroom and the syllabus.
   1. Those of you who are young enough to have been in college after about 2005 probably used Wikipedia this way yourselves at some point.

Many college students use Wikipedia as a 'supplement'

Why do they use Wikipedia?

● Accuracy and up-to-dateness

● Quantity and coverage

● Availability and ease of access

1. If so, you weren't alone. Students frequently use Wikipedia to supplement their official course resources— whether they're completing homework assignments, cramming for a test, or writing research papers.
    1. We were interested in learning more about *why* students turn to Wikipedia: is it because the find it accurate and up to date? Because of the quantity of content available or the breadth of topics covered? Because it's freely available and easy to access? Or because of something else entirely?
    2. Specifically, we wanted to learn why students are still turning to Wikipedia today, in 2016.

Since 2001, the way people use the internet has changed

- Trend lines point towards mobile, multimedia, and interaction

How have these changes affected students consumption habits?

1. Because we know that a lot has changed since 2001, when Wikipedia was launched.
   1. The way people use the internet has definitely changed. Many more people access the internet on mobile devices, they access more multimedia content, and thanks to social media there are now many more ways for people to interact with that content, and with one other, over the internet.
   2. So how have these changes affected the information consumption habits and information needs of students?

Since 2001, many other free (gratis) content providers have appeared

- They provide different content, or present it differently
- May work better for some learning styles, subjects, contexts, and use cases

When and why do students choose other providers over Wikipedia?

1. We also know that since 2001, many other sites and services have appeared that allow people to access useful information on the internet for free.
    1. Many of these sites provide different kinds of content than Wikipedia, and present it in different ways--optimized for mobile, for example, or multimedia. Some of these sites may work better than Wikipedia for students' learning styles, or help them learn about certain subjects more effectively. Students may prefer them over Wikipedia in particular learning contexts or for particular use cases.
    2. So when and why do students choose other sites over Wikipedia, when they do? Answering that question can help us understand how to prioritize our product work, to better address these users' needs.

What we did

1. To get at the answer, we went straight to the source and ask the students themselves.

**Goal:** understand student use of Free Online Information Resources (FOIRs)*

- A survey focused on which resources students used, which features they found most valuable
- Developed with students at the University of Washington
- Deployed by students via social media, listservs
- 214 other students responded

"free to use, accessible via the internet, not provided by UW, not a search engine"

1. Our goal was to understand how modern college students used Free Online Information Resources (or 'FOIRs') , including but not limited to Wikipedia.
   1. We surveyed students to find out which resources they turned to most often, why they chose those resources over others, and what they found most valuable about the resources they used. In order to avoid biasing the students, we never mentioned Wikipedia or any other resource by name in the survey.
   2. We wanted to collect a variety of examples, so we defined what a FOIR was in very general terms: it has to be free to use, accessible via the internet. College-provided resources like a course website or a subscription journal didn't count, and neither did search engines.
   3. We developed the survey in partnership with a group of students at the University of Washington in Seattle, and had those students distribute the survey through the online communication channels they and their peers used regularly. We received 214 responses over 2 weeks.

What we found

Here are a few of the things we found. The rest of the findings will be available in the research report, linked at the end of the presentation.
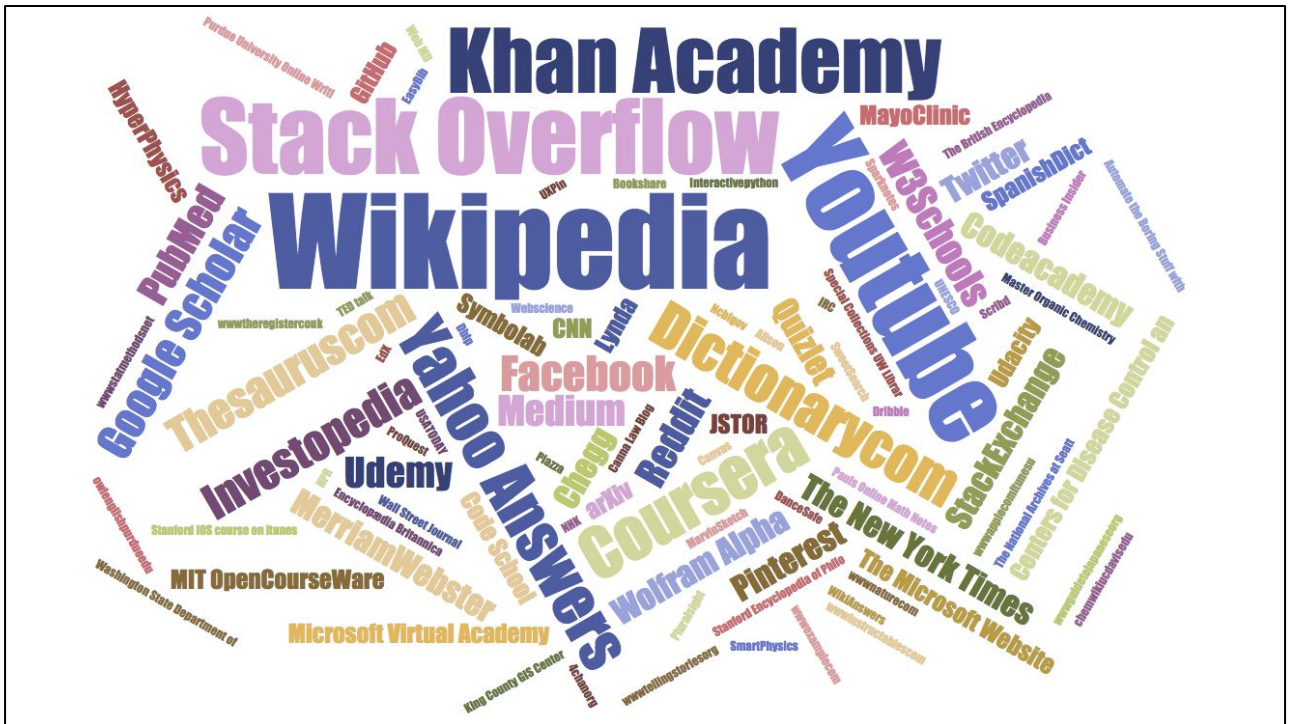
1. Not surprisingly, we found that students draw on a wide range of resources of many different types, for many different reasons. However, there were definitely some stand-outs.
   1. Video streaming sites, online courses, and social Q&A sites were popular, as was a certain free encyclopedia.
   2. Many of the less common resources that people named were subject-specific, and many of these focused on sciences and engineering disciplines (probably because our survey population contained a lot of engineering students). Social media and news sites were also well-represented.

Top 5 FOIRs

resource	mentions
Wikipedia	**74**
YouTube	40
Stack Overflow	32
Khan Academy	20
Coursera	11

Speaking of that certain free encyclopedia, Wikipedia was the most mentioned site by far. YouTube, StackOverflow, Khan Academy, and Coursera rounded out the Top 5.

Why Wikipedia?

"It's well-maintained and generally understandable. I can go to it with only a little understanding of what it is I'm interested in and follow links until I feel like I understand the concept."

"My profs don't allow Wikipedia to be used as a reference, but **I use Wikipedia as a 'jump off' for research**."

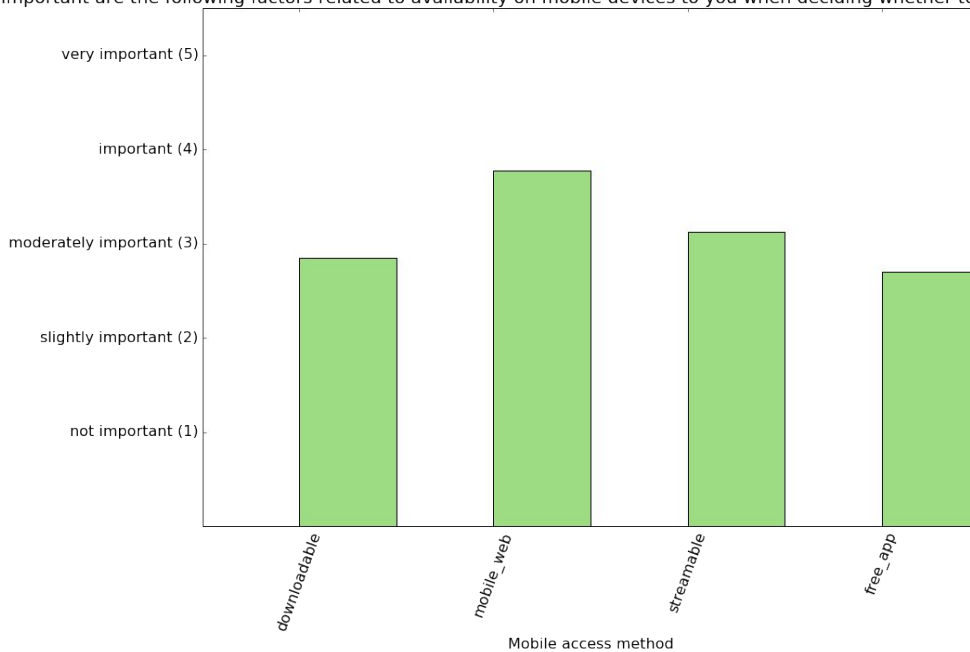"It is **quick and easy** to find information I need, though I know it is not the most reliable."

"It's **usually the first link that comes up** when I look up a topic on Google."

1. In the survey, we asked students to briefly describe why they used each of the resources they named. Here's what they said about us.
    1. These responses indicate that students find a lot to like about Wikipedia: it's well-maintained and well-written, it serves as a good jumping off point for research, its easy to find the information they need in Wikipedia, and its prominent place in Google's search rankings makes it very visible and accessible.
    2. They also suggest that some familiar prejudices still exist: students have a sense that Wikipedia is less reliable than other sources . And the final quote raises the issue that our continued popularity is self-reinforcing: one of the reasons students use Wikipedia rather than something else is that we're popular and highly ranked. This makes us easy to find, but doesn't necessarily mean we're inherently better.

How frequently do you consume information from free online resource in the following ways?
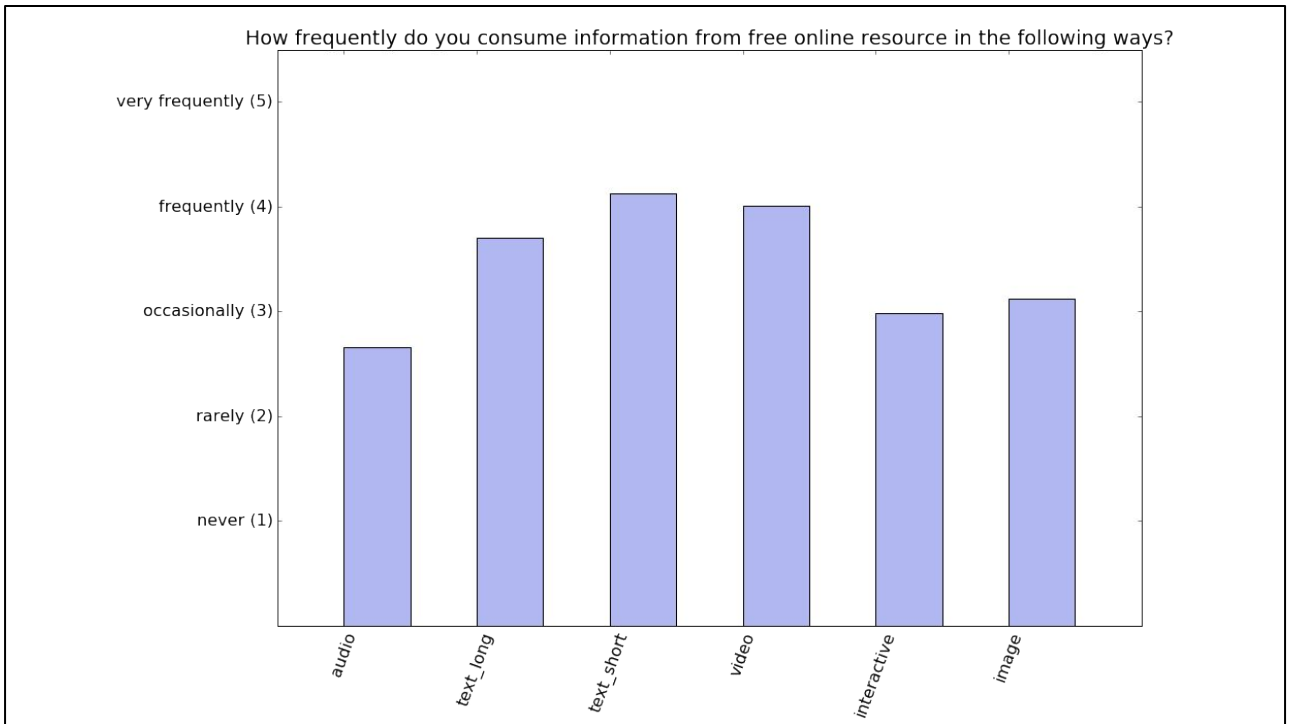
1. We also asked students several questions about how they generally consume information from the free online resources they use for school work.
   1. Fortunately for us the results show that most students still read a lot on the internet, although most of what they read is short-form text, like summaries and abstracts. And they watch videos more often than then read whole articles or books online.

How important are the following factors related to availability on mobile devices to you when deciding whether to use a free online resource?

Mobile access method

(Y-axis: very important (5), important (4), moderately important (3), slightly important (2), not important (1))

(X-axis: downloadable, mobile_web, streamable, free_app)

We also asked students to rank features or characteristics of the resources they use by importance. One area we were particularly interested in was mobile use, so we asked students how they prefer to access FOIR content on mobile devices: though downloads (like podcasts or ebooks), mobile web browser, multimedia streaming, or apps. On average students ranked access to content via mobile web and streaming as more important than downloads and apps.

Opportunities

Full report: https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research:FOIR_survey

1. We found a lot more interesting stuff as well, which I don't have time to cover today. My general take-away from this study is that while Wikipedia continues to serve students needs well, there are opportunities for us to make our content easier to use for education purposes.
   1. One thing we could do is make it easier to create and locate audio and video content on Wikimedia projects. Another possibility might be to make it easier for people to remix the content that's already hosted on our projects to create custom learning modules around particular topics.
   2. I'm curious to hear your ideas are as well. I'm happy to take your questions at the end of Metrics or offline.

Thank you!
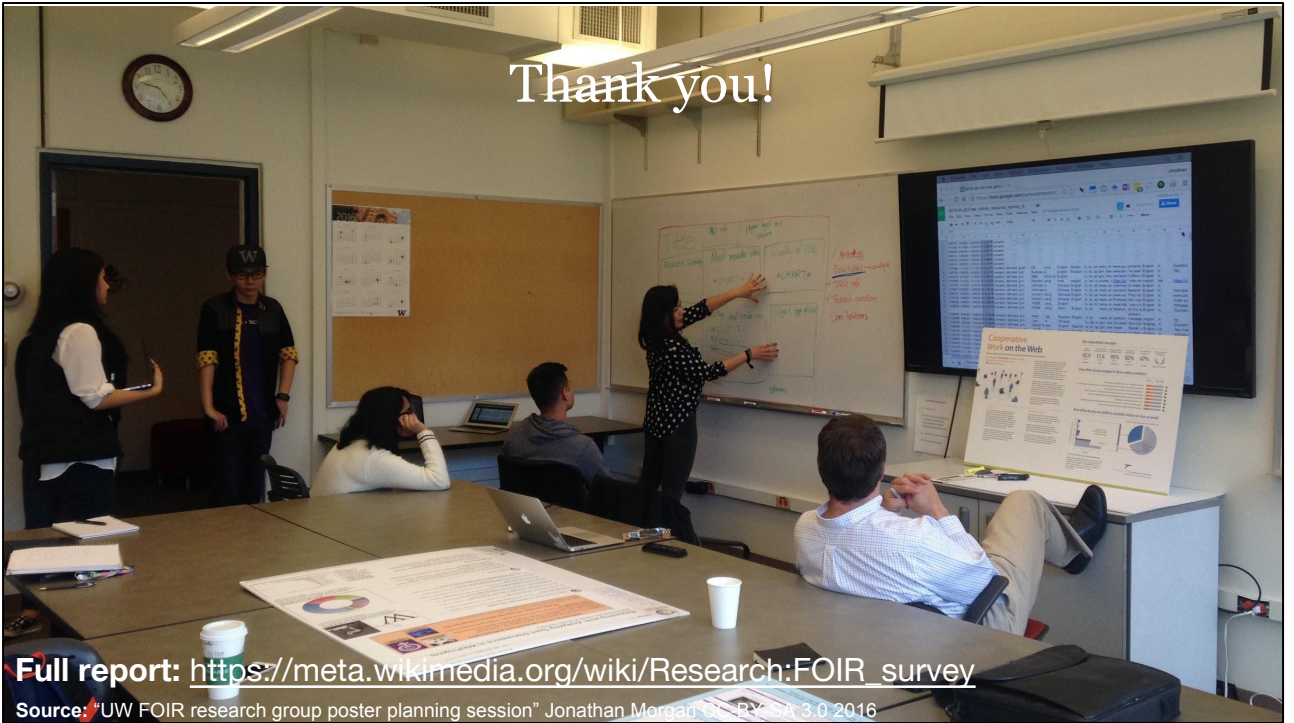
Full report: https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research:FOIR_survey

That's it for today. Quick shout out to the students who worked with me on this study, and to UW professor Mark Zachry. Thank you!