



September 12, 2006


REPLY ALL**Will Wikipedia Mean the End
Of Traditional Encyclopedias?**

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Wikipedia, the community-edited online encyclopedia, has blossomed. It has thousands of volunteers that have created more than five million entries in dozens of languages on everything from the [Elfin-woods warbler](#)¹ to [Paris Hilton](#)².

*But the popular site has also been dogged by vandals and questions about its accuracy. In one high-profile flap, retired journalist [John Seigenthaler Sr.](#) assailed Wikipedia in an [op-ed](#)³ after discovering his biography had been altered to include a reference that linked him to the assassinations of [John F. Kennedy](#) and his brother, [Robert](#). A recent [study](#)⁴ in the journal *Nature*, however, found few differences in accuracy between science entries in Wikipedia and the venerable *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. *Britannica*, which offers short versions of articles online for free and charges \$70 a year for full access, disputed the study and issued a [rebuttal](#)⁵.*

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CAST YOUR VOTE

Does Wikipedia's open-editing approach yield better results than traditional encyclopedias? Participate in the [Question of the Day](#)⁶.

At a gathering of Wikipedia contributors last month, Wikipedia founder [Jimmy Wales](#) urged them to put more emphasis on quality instead of quantity. In a bid to battle vandalism, the German version of the site is [testing](#)⁷ a new feature that will let administrators flag versions of articles as "nonvandalized," and those are the pages that will be shown

to most visitors.

*Can Wikipedia's everyone's-an-editor approach produce a reliable resource tool without scholarly oversight? Are traditional encyclopedias like *Britannica* limited by lack of input? The Wall Street Journal Online invited Mr. Wales to discuss the topic with [Dale Hoiberg](#), editor-in-chief of *Britannica*. Their exchange, carried out over email, is below.*



Jimmy Wales begins: We don't view the open system as inherently superior in all respects; it is different, and it has some major strengths and of course raises some important challenges. The strengths include a much greater timeliness, a much more comprehensive coverage, and the wide range of inputs means a good chance at a more balanced and more neutral coverage. The weaknesses include the possibility of vandalism, and the fact that in the current incarnation of Wikipedia everything is always a work in progress.

PARTICIPANTS

Jimmy Wales is [Wikipedia's](#)⁸ founder and chairman of the Wikimedia Foundation, a non-profit he

We do not believe that any resource tool can be reliable without scholarly input; this is why we so warmly welcome and invite the contributions of experts. It is a longstanding mistake to think of Wikipedia as being anti-elitist. Virtually

established in 2003 to operate the online encyclopedia and other projects. He is also the founder of Wikia Inc., a for-profit company that provides wiki hosting services. Before starting Wikipedia, Mr. Wales worked as research director at a Chicago-based options trading firm and founded Bomis Inc., a Web portal focused on pop culture.

Dale Hoiberg is senior vice president and editor in chief of [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)⁹ Inc., which began publication in 1768. He is responsible for the editorial division of the closely held company, which maintains a 55-million-word reference work available online and in print. Mr. Hoiberg joined Britannica in 1978 as an index editor. He held several editorial roles before being named editor in chief in 1997. He has a Ph.D. in Chinese literature.

every top Wikipediaian I know is an elitist of the best sort: We love people who know what they are talking about.

Wikipedia is a freely licensed encyclopedia. This means that we invite anyone to take our work and reuse it freely. You can copy it, modify it, redistribute it, and even redistribute modified versions. Commercially or noncommercially. We believe that encyclopedias should not be locked up under the control of a single organization, but a part of the healthy dialog of a free society.



Dale Hoiberg responds: I agree with some of Mr. Wales's points. Clearly, Wikipedia and Britannica are very different kinds of works. Even Wired

magazine editor Chris Anderson, a fan of Wikipedia's, says Britannica and Wikipedia are different animals.

But there is little evidence to suggest that simply having a lot of people freely editing encyclopedia articles produces more balanced coverage. On the contrary, it opens the gates to propaganda and seesaw fights between writers with different axes to grind.

Britannica draws from a community, just as Wikipedia does. Ours consists of more than 4,000 scholars and experts around the world who serve as our contributors and advisers. Our system is designed to produce sound, informed judgments that lead to balanced presentations of the most controversial subjects. Longer articles often involve multiple contributors and, importantly, all Britannica contributors are directed to include alternative points of view wherever applicable. We continually revisit controversial articles, and since we publish principally on the Internet we can revise them when we see fit to do that.

While Wikipedia may welcome scholars, all the reports I've seen suggest that most of the work is done by individuals who, though very dedicated, have little or no scholarly background.

On the question of editorial control, I hardly think having an encyclopedia published by one organization undermines healthy dialog, since in a free society there are many voices. A reliable and well-written reference work helps keep the quality of the debate high.



Mr. Wales: Artificially excluding good people from the process is not the best way to gather accurate knowledge. Britannica has acknowledged the value of having multiple contributors, although of course because they are proprietary rather than freely licensed they would have a very hard time attracting the kind of talent that we have.

The main thrust of our evolution has been to become more open, because we have found time and time again that increased openness, increased dialog and debate, leads to higher quality. I think it is a misunderstanding to think of "openness" as antithetical to quality. "Openness" is going to be necessary in order to reach the highest levels of quality.

Britannica has long been a standard bearer, and they have done a fine job within their model. But it is time to work in a different model, with different techniques made possible by new technologies but the same goals, to reach ever higher standards.



Mr. Hoiberg: I can only assume Mr. Wales is being ironic when he says Britannica would have a hard time attracting the kind of talent that Wikipedia has. Britannica has published more

than a hundred Nobel Prize winners and thousands of other well-known experts and scholars. Contrary to Wikipedia, Britannica's contributor base is transparent and not anonymous.

The way we work with those contributors has changed in important ways, however, thanks to new technologies that have improved our process and products. Interaction with our readers and contributors has always been part of our daily routine, but the Web has enabled us to enhance this interaction greatly. Our contributors now post revisions directly into our editorial workflow system, and both they and our readers can and do send us comments and suggestions, challenge our facts, and so on.

The difference is that comments and suggestions are reviewed and checked by qualified editors before they're posted.

Another thought occurs to me, though. From where I sit it seems like Wikipedia is at a bit of a crossroads. It has grown very large and now wants to focus on quality. That's good. But despite what Mr. Wales says in this post, the road to better quality at Wikipedia seems to be paved with less openness, not more. I'm thinking of Wikipedia's consideration of a so-called "stable version" that could not be revised directly. I'm curious to know how he imagines that working.



Mr. Wales: And yet, as of today, Britannica's article about Britannica claims to be the largest English language encyclopedia, while the article about Wikipedia acknowledges our size, which is of course many times the size of Britannica.

The point I am making here is not at all ironic. Britannica's contributors, while sometimes distinguished, are relatively few in number as compared to the number of high quality people that Wikipedia is able to rely upon.

We have traditionally protected articles to deal with temporary attacks of vandalism. In such a state, no one could edit those articles. We did not like this, so we moved to a system of semi-protection, and the quality improvements were impressive.

We will now be experimenting, first in the German Wikipedia, with a model of flagging versions as being "nonvandalized," while still allowing editing. Each of these steps is designed to be more open, and each is also designed to help achieve higher quality.

Britannica doesn't display its rough drafts, or the articles before being checked by a copy editor; Wikipedia does. We think this sort of open transparency is healthy and results in greater quality than doing everything behind closed doors.



Mr. Hoiberg: No, we don't publish rough drafts. We want our articles to be correct before they are published. We stand behind our process, based on trained editors and fact-checkers, more than 4,000 experts, and sound writing. Our model works well. Wikipedia is very different, but nothing in their model suggests we should change what we do.



Mr. Wales: Fitting words for an epitaph...

We have spoken openly about some of the challenges and difficulties we face at Wikipedia. Not long ago, you suffered some [bad publicity](#)¹³ due to [errors in Britannica](#)¹⁴. Have you considered changing your model to allow quick, transparent responses to such criticisms as a way to achieve a higher quality level?

MORE ON WIKIPEDIA

- [Page One: Britannica Defends Its Turf](#)¹⁰
3/24/06
- [Real Time: Wikipedia's Woes](#)¹¹
12/19/05
- [Loose Wire: Wikipedia Is Wicked](#)¹²
2/16/04



Mr. Hoiberg: In my last posting ... I described the system we are using for feedback from contributors and users. It has proved to be very helpful in our work, but as I said, all feedback from this system is reviewed by editors and fact-checked before being incorporated into the database.

I am not sure I answered the question you were asking. If you were asking whether or not we have considered adopting the Wikipedia model (allowing any user to affect articles online directly), the answer is no.

Regarding errors in Britannica, we check out all such claims or reports carefully. Real errors are corrected, but many times these things turn out to be not true or involve some misunderstanding.

Two questions for Mr. Wales:

1. Will you please explain further how "semi-protecting" articles allows for more "openness" than did the original Wikipedia model?
2. As your administrators assume more responsibility, do you not owe it to the public to explain their qualifications and the criteria they'll be using for freezing, protecting and semi-protecting articles?



Mr. Wales: 1. In the original model, we fully protected articles, which meant that no one could edit them. Semi-protection changed that by allowing anyone to edit those entries who had an account for at least four days.

2. Of course. All of the criteria are discussed and posted openly on the site. Every action can be seen easily by any interested party, and all actions are open to public review and debate.



Mr. Hoiberg: I must point out that Mr. Wales's inclusion of two links in his [question](#) to me, one to Wikipedia itself, is sneaky. I have had neither the time nor space to respond to them properly in this format. I could corral any number of links to articles alleging errors in Wikipedia and weave them into my posts, but it seems to me that our time and space are better spent here on issues of substance.



Mr. Wales: Sneaky? I beg to differ. On the Internet it is possible and desirable to enhance the understanding of the reader by linking directly to resources to enhance and further understanding.

You wrote: "I have had neither the time nor space to respond to them properly in this format. I could corral any number of links to articles alleging errors in Wikipedia and weave them into my posts, but it seems to me that our time and space are better spent here on issues of substance."

No problem! Wikipedia to the rescue with a fine [article](#)¹⁵ on the topic.

Fortunately, there is a vast army of volunteers eager to help good people like you and me who don't quite have enough time and space to do everything from scratch ourselves, and they are writing a comprehensive encyclopedic catalog of all human knowledge. They have quite eagerly amassed a fantastic list and discussion of dozens of links to such articles.

We are open and transparent and eager to help people find criticisms of us. Disconcerting and unusual, I know. But, well, welcome to the Internet.

And yes, this is an issue of substance and a fine demonstration of the strength of the new model.





Mr. Hoiberg: Mr. Wales's explanations of Wikipedia's procedures were surprisingly unsatisfying on such issues as: Who actually decides when an article has been worked on enough and should be protected from editing for a period; How and when that status changes; and, What qualifications the people making these judgments have. How the new procedures he has discussed recently in the media constitute greater openness in Wikipedia also remains unclear to me.

General encyclopedias are big by nature, since they try to encompass all of human knowledge. Anyone who works on an encyclopedia for any length of time understands the hazard in this: the whole endeavor can easily spin out of control as you try to take in everything that has ever been known, thought, or said. It's an impulse that should be resisted because it produces work without direction or focus.

Most of us don't need all the information in the world. We need information that yields knowledge - a practical and enlightened understanding of ourselves and the world we live in. For that purpose some information is more valuable than other information, and distinguishing between the two is crucial.

Long before the Web, Lewis Mumford predicted that the explosion of information could "bring about a state of intellectual enervation and depletion hardly to be distinguished from massive ignorance." Not only would lots of information fail to make us smarter; it would actually make us dumber by overwhelming us. The solution, he thought, was not to be found in technology alone but in "a reassertion of human selectivity and moral-self discipline, leading to continent productivity." In these days of information incontinence, in order to be part of the solution rather than the problem, I think it is important to remember this.

• Does Wikipedia's open-editing approach yield better results than traditional encyclopedias? Participate in the [Question of the Day](#)¹⁶.

Write to the Online Journal's editors at replyall@wsj.com¹⁷

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB115756239753455284.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

- (1) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elfin-woods_Warbler
- (2) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris_hilton
- (3) http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2005-11-29-wikipedia-edit_x.htm
- (4) <http://www.nature.com/news/journal/v438/n7070/full/438900a.html>
- (5) http://corporate.britannica.com/britannica_nature_response.pdf
- (6) <http://discussions.wsj.com/n/mb/message.asp?webtag=wsjvoices&nav=messages&msg=3998>
- (7) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/5286458.stm>
- (8) <http://www.wikipedia.org>
- (9) <http://www.britannica.com/>
- (10) <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB114317139889807191.html>
- (11) <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB113450010488821460.html>
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- (14) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Errors_in_the_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica_that_have_been_corrected_in_Wikipedia
- (15) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Wikipedia
- (16) <http://discussions.wsj.com/n/mb/message.asp?webtag=wsjvoices&nav=messages&msg=3998>
- (17) <mailto:replyall@wsj.com>

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