

# The Encyclopedia Britannica 2007 Opens to the Web

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The Encyclopedia Britannica 2007 (established in 1768) is again a completely revamped product. The rate of innovation in the last two editions is impressive and welcome. Its interface is intuitive and uncluttered and it is great fun to use. For instance, it offers a date-based daily selection of relevant information and highly edifying interactive tours of articles and attendant media. The search box is persistent - no need to click on the toolbar's "search" button every time you want to find something in this vast storehouse of knowledge. Moreover, the user can save search results onto handy "Virtual Notecards".

The new Britannica's display is tab-based, avoiding the erstwhile confusing proliferation of new windows with every move. Most importantly, articles appear in full, not in sections. This major improvement facilitates the finding of relevant keywords in and the printing of entire texts. These are only a few of the numerous user-friendly alterations and enhancements. The Britannica seems to have got it entirely right.

Perhaps the most refreshing change is the Britannica's Update Center. Dozens of monthly updates and new, timely articles are made available online (subject to free registration). A special button alerts the user when an article in the base product has been updated. Regrettably, unlike in the Encarta, the updates cannot be downloaded to the user's computer or otherwise incorporated into the vast encyclopedia.

The Britannica provides considerably more text than any other extant encyclopedia, print or digital. But it has noticeably enhanced its non-textual content over the years (the 1994-7 editions had nothing or very little but words, words, and more words): it now boasts more than 17,000 images and illustrations and 700 video and audio clips.

The Britannica fully supports serious research. It is a sober assemblage of first-rate essays, up to date bibliographies, and relevant multimedia. It is a desktop university library: thorough, well-researched, comprehensive, trustworthy.

The Britannica's 80-100,000 articles (depending on the version) are long and thorough, supported by impressive bibliographies, and written by the best scholars in their respective fields. The company's Editorial Board of Advisors reads like the who's who of the global intellectual and scientific community.

The Britannica comes bundled with an atlas (between 1600 and 2530 maps and 287 World data Profiles of individual countries and territories), the Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Thesaurus, classic articles from previous editions, ten yearbooks, an Interactive Timeline, a Research Organizer, and a Knowledge Navigator (a Brain Stormer).

In its new form, the Britannica is as user-friendly as the Encarta. With monthly updates and 3 months of free access to its impressive powerhouse online Web site, it is bound to give the former close competition.

The Britannica is an embarrassment of riches. Users often find the wealth and breadth of information daunting and data mining is fast becoming an art form. This is why the Britannica incorporated the Brain Stormer to cope with this predicament. But an informal poll I conducted online shows that few know how to deploy it effectively.

The Britannica also sports Student and Elementary versions of its venerable flagship product, replete with a Homework Helpdesk - but it is far better geared to tackle the information needs of adults and, even more so, professionals. It provides unequalled coverage of its topics. Ironically, this is precisely why the market positioning of the Britannica's Elementary and Student Encyclopedias is problematic.

The current edition is fully integrated with the Internet. Apart from the updates, it offers additional and timely content and revisions on a dedicated Web site. The digital product includes a staggering number of links (165,808!) to third party content and articles on the Web. The GeoAnalyzer (compares national statistical data and generates charts and graphs) is now Web-based and greatly enhanced.

The Britannica would do well to offer a browser add-on search bar and integrate with desktop search tools from Google, Microsoft, Yahoo, and others. A seamless experience is in the cards. Users must and will be able to ferret content from all over - their desktop, their encyclopedias, and the Web - using a single, intuitive interface.

Some minor gripes:

The atlas, dictionary, and thesaurus incorporated in the Britannica are surprisingly outdated. Why not use a more current - and dynamically updated - offering? What about dictionaries for specialty terms (medical or computer glossaries, for instance)?

Despite considerable improvement over the previous edition, the Britannica still consumes (not to say hogs) computer resource far in excess of the official specifications. This makes it less suitable for installation on older PCs and on many laptops.

The Britannica uses a new graphic and text renderer. On some systems, the user needs to modify his or her desktop settings to get rid of jagged fonts and blurry photos.

But that's it. Don't think twice. Run to the closest retail outlet (or surf to the Britannica's Web site) and purchase the 2007 edition now. It offers excellent value for money (less than \$50) and significantly enhances your access to knowledge and wisdom accumulated over centuries all over the world.

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#### AUTHOR BIO

Sam Vaknin ( <http://samvak.tripod.com> ) is the author of Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited and After the Rain - How the West Lost the East. He served as a columnist for Global Politician, Central Europe Review, PopMatters, Bellaonline, and eBookWeb, a United Press International (UPI) Senior Business Correspondent, and the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in The Open Directory and Suite101.

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