

# Wikipedia vs. Britannica - Interview with Tom Panelas

Contributed by Sam Vaknin  
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(Author of "Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited")

Q. Is the Wikipedia an encyclopedia in any sense of the word?

A. I don't think it's crucial that everyone agree on whether Wikipedia is or is not an encyclopedia. What's important is that people who might use it understand what it is and how it differs from the reference works they're used to. Wikipedia allows anyone to write and edit articles, regardless of their knowledge of the subjects on which they're writing, their ability to write, or their commitment to truth. This policy has allowed Wikipedia to grow large very fast, but it's come at a price.

The price is that many of its articles are inaccurate, poorly written, long and bloated, or laden with bias and spin. Despite what some people would like to believe about Wikipedia, that its system is self-correcting, many inaccuracies remain for long periods of time, new ones are added, and, judging from quite a few media reports, sound information posted by people knowledgeable on a subject is often undone by others who know nothing about it. This is a natural result of the way Wikipedia is put together, its willingness to let anyone write and edit and unwillingness to give precedence to people who know what they're talking about. People who use Wikipedia should be aware of these liabilities.

Q. The Britannica used to be freely accessible until it was converted, a few years back, into a subscriber-only resource. Do you regret this decision? Perhaps if the Britannica were to provide a free authoritative alternative to the Wikipedia, it would still be the first stop of seekers of information online?

A. We don't regret the decision to charge a subscription fee for the premium portions of Britannica Online. Today our site has thousands of free articles, and those who subscribe to our premium service pay a fraction of what it cost for access to a high-quality, reliable encyclopedia only a few years ago. About a hundred million people worldwide have access to the Encyclopaedia Britannica online, through schools, libraries, and universities, and they don't pay for it at all.

Britannica has indeed become an alternative - not just to Wikipedia but to all of the unreliable information that courses through the public sphere these days, much of it on the Internet. The Web has been great for enabling publishers like us to reach many more people than we ever could before, but it's also made it possible for errors, propaganda, and urban myths to appear in the guise of factual truth. As more people realize that the contents of the Internet are often not what they seem to be, they've turned to sources like Britannica, which apply the same rigorous standards to our online products that we have always used in all of our products.

Q. "Nature" compared the Wikipedia to the Britannica and resolved that both suffer, more or less, from the same rate of errors. You hotly disputed these findings. Can you elaborate?

A. The Nature article was bogus. Responsible people who paid attention to the facts understand that it's been discredited and don't even cite it. We spent twenty single-spaced pages rebutting it, so there's little need for elaboration beyond that. You can read what we said here

[http://corporate.britannica.com/britannica\\_nature\\_response.pdf](http://corporate.britannica.com/britannica_nature_response.pdf)

You can also read what USA Today

[http://www.usatoday.com/tech/columnist/andrewkantor/2006-03-30-nature-britannica\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/columnist/andrewkantor/2006-03-30-nature-britannica_x.htm)

and Nicholas Carr

[http://www.routhtype.com/archives/2006/03/britannicas\\_ind.php](http://www.routhtype.com/archives/2006/03/britannicas_ind.php)

had to say about it.

Q. Peer-reviewed, professionally-edited reference works do have their shortcomings (elitism, conservatism, lack of pluralism, limitations of information available to the scholars involved). "Egalitarian" communal efforts like the Wikipedia do unearth, at times, data not available in "old-fashioned" encyclopedias. Moreover, the Wikipedia offers a far wider range of coverage and real-time updates. Can't it complement the Britannica? Can't the two even collaborate in some

ways?

A. It's a myth that professionally edited reference works are limited or elitist. On the contrary, using a rigorous editorial method that draws on people who have spent their lives mastering their subjects produces an excellent balance in perspective. We always direct our contributors to include all major controversies in their surveys of a subject, whether those points of view are fashionable or not. This approach produces good articles for lay readers, who are the people who use encyclopedias. When the work is done by volunteers who aren't adept at this kind of work, the results often settle into a comfortable consensus that favors the viewpoint in vogue among the group of people doing the work. Usually, it's the people who are trained and experienced in going beyond their own points of view that manage to do it well.

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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.

Until recently, he served as the Economic Advisor to the Government of Macedonia.

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