

# Wikipedia boasts over 17 million entries. But is it might always right?

Courier-Mail Jan 21, 2011



Can an encyclopedia pooling the wisdom of crowds be as accurate as one with entries compiled by experts?

As a boy, my most treasured possession was my two volume *Usborne Children's Encyclopedia*, which first introduced me to the pleasures of discovering our world. Later, I spent much of the 1980s squirreled away in my school library working my way through the 17 bound copies of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. If you play soccer with me you'll already know the error of my misspent youth. Although I didn't advance my football ability beyond my two left feet, those hours thirsting for knowledge played a key role developing the left hemisphere of my brain: now filled with useless facts. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was first published in 1768 in Edinburgh, my home town. By the time I was exploring the universe through its dusty pages, *Britannica* contained some 40 million words, covering half a million topics. More than 4000 experts contributed to what I then imagined to be the greatest

In 1772 Goethe wrote that "it is evident that the active attention of many, when concentrated on one point, produces excellence"

reference work the world would ever know. Yet today, *Britannica* and thousands of similar printed fonts of knowledge have been superseded by a free, rapidly growing online encyclopedia that already contains more than 17 million entries. Ten years ago this month, American internet entrepreneur Jimmy Wales and philosopher Larry Sanger launched Wikipedia, the *Britannica*-busting peer reviewed online encyclopedia. Today, wikipedia.org is the seventh highest ranked site on the web, and, whatever you type into Google, a Wikipedia entry is almost always on the first page of results. I consult Wikipedia dozens of times a day. You probably do too. Unlike the multi-volume printed encyclopedias of old, Wikipedia is updated, on the fly, every day. As soon as a news story breaks, someone

somewhere is creating or updating the Wikipedia entry. So today, an article on the Queensland floods, already more than 5000 words long, claims December 2010 was Queensland's wettest on record, spring 2010 the state's wettest since 1900, and 2010 the continent's third wettest year ever. Can these facts be trusted? The entry references 116 sources, all hyperlinked. The main criticism of Wikipedia is that because the website's open, or "wiki" editing model lets anyone edit entries, anyone can add patent nonsense. Certainly, Wikipedia falls victim to vandalism, although the zealousness of the website's editors ensures the addition of spurious or unverified information is usually short-lived. An investigation in *Nature* magazine found that the science articles they compared came close to the level of accuracy of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, with a similar rate of "serious errors". So who can you trust? According to Wikipedia: "not everything on Wikipedia is accurate, comprehensive, or unbiased". But this goes for all reference works. If you want to ensure your fact is correct, be wary of a single source and triple check any sources listed. If you're using Wikipedia for serious research, you're using the wrong tool. If you simply want to know which creature is the biggest primate, you're in the right place.