ANNALS OF INFORMATION

KNOW IT ALL

Can Wikipedia conquer expertise?

BY STACY SCHIFF

On March 1st, Wikipedia, the online interactive encyclopedia, hit the million-articles mark, with an entry on Jordanhill, a railway station in suburban Glasgow. Its author, Ewan MacDonald, posted a single sentence about the station at 11 P.M., local time; over the next twenty-four hours, the entry was edited more than four hundred times, by dozens of people. (Jordanhill happens to be the "1029th busiest station in the United Kingdom"; it "no longer has a staffed ticket counter.") The Encyclopaedia Britannica, which for more than two centuries has been considered the gold standard for reference works, has only a hundred and twenty thousand entries in its most comprehensive edition. Apparently, no traditional encyclopedia has ever suspected that someone might wonder about Sudoku or about prostitution in China. Or, for that matter, about Capgras delusion (the unnerving sensation that an impostor is sitting in for a close relative), the Boston molasses disaster, the Rhinoceros Party of Canada, Bill Gates's house, the forty-five-minute Anglo-Zanzibar War, or Islam in Iceland. Wikipedia includes fine entries on Kafka and the War of the Spanish Succession, and also a complete guide to the ships of the U.S. Navy, a definition of Philadelphia cheesesteak, a masterly page on Scrabble, a list of historical cats (celebrity cats, a cat millionaire, the first feline to circumnavigate Australia), a survey of invented expletives in fiction ("bippie," "cakesniffer," "furgle"), instructions for curing hiccups, and an article that describes, with schematic diagrams, how to build a stove from a discarded soda can. The how-to entries represent temtory that the encyclopedia has not claimed since the eighteenth century. You could cure a toothache or make snowshoes using the original Britannica, of 1768-71. (You could also imbibe a lot of prejudice and superstition. The entry on Woman was just six words: "The female of man. See HOMO.") If you look up "coffee preparation" on Wikipedia, you will find your way, via the entry on Espresso, to a piece on types of espresso machines, which you will want to consult before buying. There is also a page on the site dedicated to "Errors in the Encyclopaedia Britannica that have been corrected in Wikipedia" (Stalin's birth date, the true inventor of the safety razor).

Because there are no physical limits on its size, Wikipedia can aspire to be all-inclusive. It is also perfectly configured to be current: there are detailed entries for each of the twelve finalists on this season's "American Idol," and the article on the "2006 Israel-Lebanon Conflict" has been edited more than four thousand times since it was created, on July 12th, six hours after Hezbollah militants ignited the hostilities by kidnapping two Israeli soldiers. Wikipedia, which was launched in 2001, is now the seventeenth-most-popular site on the Internet, generating more traffic daily than MSNBC.com and the online versions of the *Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* combined. The number of visitors has been doubling every four months; the site receives as many as fourteen thousand hits per second. Wikipedia functions as a filter for vast amounts of information online, and it could be said that Google owes the site for tidying up the neighborhood. But the search engine is amply repaying its debt: because Wikipedia pages contain so many links to other entries on the site, and are so frequently updated, they enjoy an enviably high page rank

Anyone with Internet access can create a Wikipedia entry or edit one. The site has hundreds of thousands of contributors.

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The site has achieved this prominence largely without paid staff or revenue. It has five employees in addition to Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia's thirty-nine-year-old founder, and it carries no advertising. In 2003, Wikipedia became a nonprofit organization; it meets most of its budget, of seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars, with donations, the bulk of them contributions of

twenty dollars or less. Wales says that he is on a mission to "distribute a free encyclopedia to every single person on the planet in their own language," and to an astonishing degree he is succeeding. Anyone with Internet access can create a Wikipedia entry or edit an existing one. The site currently exists in more than two hundred languages and has hundreds of thousands of contributors around the world. Wales is at the forefront of a revolution in knowledge gathering: he has marshalled an army ofvolunteers who believe that, working collaboratively, they can produce an encyclopedia that is as good as any written by experts, and with an unprecedented range.

Wikipedia is an online community devoted not to last night's party or to next season's iPod but to a higher good. It is also no more immune to human nature than any other utopian project. Pettiness, idiocy, and vulgarity are regular features of the site. Nothing about high-minded collaborationguarantees accuracy, and open editing invites abuse. Senators and congressmen have been caught tampering with their entries; the entire House of Representatives has been banned from Wikipedia several times. (It is not subtle to change Senator Robert Byrd's age from eighty-eight to a hundred and eighty. It is subtler to sanitize one's voting record in order to distance oneself from an unpopular President, or to delete broken campaign promises.) Curiously, though, mob rule has not led to chaos. Wikipedia, which began as an experiment in unfettered democracy, has sprouted policies and procedures. At the same time, the site embodies our newly casual relationship to truth. When confronted with evidence of errors or bias, Wikipedians invoke a favorite excuse: look how often the mainstream media, and the traditional encyclopedia, are wrong! As defenses go, this is the epistemologicalequivalentof "But Johnny jumped off the bridge first." Wikipedia, though, is only five years old. One day, it may grow up.

The encyclopedic impulse dates back more than two thousand years and has rarely balked at national borders. Among the first general reference works was Emperor's Mirror, commissioned in 220 A.D. by a Chinese emperor, for use by civil servants. The quest to catalogue all human knowledge accelerated in the eighteenth century. In the seventeen-seventies, the Germans, champions of thoroughness, began assembling a two-hundred-and-forty-two-volume masterwork. A few decades earlier, Johann Heinrich Zedler, a Leipzig bookseller, had alarmed local competitors when he solicited articles for his Universal-Lexicon. His rivals, fearing that the work would put them out of business by rendering all other books obsolete, tried unsuccessfully to sabotage the project.

It took a devious Frenchman, Pierre Bayle, to conceive of an encyclopedia composed solely of errors. After the idea failed to generate much enthusiasm among potential readers, he instead compiled a "Dictionnaire Historique et Critique," which consisted almost entirely of footnotes, many highlighting flaws of earlier scholarship. Bayle taught readers to doubt, a lesson in subversion that Diderot and d'Alembert, the authors of the Encyclopédie (1751-80), learned well. Their thirty-five-volumework preached rationalism at the expense of church and state. The more stolid Britannica was born of cross-channel rivalry and an Anglo-Saxon passion for utility.

Wales's first encyclopedia was the World Book, which his parents acquired after dinner one evening in 1969, from a door-to-door salesman. Wales—who resembles a young Billy Crystal with the neuroses neatly tucked in—recalls the enchantment of pasting in update stickers that cross-referenced older entries to the annual supplements. Wales's mother and grandmother ran a private school in Huntsville, Alabama, which he attended from the age of three. He graduated from Auburn University with a degree in finance and began a Ph.D. in the subject, enrolling first at the University of Alabama and later at Indiana University. In 1994, he decided to take a job trading options in Chicago rather than write his dissertation. Four years later, he moved to San Diego, where he used his savings to found an Internet portal. Its audience was mostly men; pornography—videos and blogs—accounted for about a tenth of its revenues. Meanwhile, Wales was cogitating. In his view, misinformation, propaganda, and ignorance are responsible for many of the world's ills. "I'm very much an Enlightenment kind of guy," Wales told me. The promise of the Internet is free knowledge for everyone, he recalls thinking. How do we make that happen?

As an undergraduate, he had read Friedrich Hayek's 1945 free-market manifesto, "The Use of Knowledge in Society:' which argues that a person's knowledge is by definition partial, and that truth is established only when people pool their wisdom. Wales thought of the essay again in the nineteen-nineties, when he began reading about the open-source movement, a group of programmers who believed that software should be free and distributed in such a way that anyone could modify the code. He was particularly impressed by "The Cathedral and the Bazaar," an essay, later expanded into a book, by Eric Raymond, one of the movement's founders. "It opened my eyes to the possibility of mass collaboration," Wales said.

The first step was a misstep. In 2000, Wales hired Larry Sanger, a graduate student in philosophy he had met on a Listserv, to help him create an online general-interest encyclopedia called Nupedia. The idea was to solicit articles from scholars, subject the articles to a seven-step review process, and post them free online. Wales himself tried to compose the entry on Robert Merton and options-pricing theory; after he had written a few sentences, he remembered why he had dropped out of graduate school. "They were going to take my essay and send it to two finance professors in the field," he recalled. "I had been out of academia for several years. It was intimidating; it felt like homework."

After a year, Nupedia had only twenty-one articles, on such topics as atonality and Herodotus. In January, 2001, Sanger had dinner with a friend, who told him about the wiki, a simple software tool that allows for collaborativewriting and editing. Sanger thought that a wiki might attract new contributors to Nupedia. (Wales says that using a wiki was his idea.) Wales agreed to try

it, more or less as a lark. Under the wiki model that Sanger and Wales adopted, each entry included a history page, which preserves a record of all editing changes. They added a talk page, to allow for discussion of the editorial process—an idea Bayle would have appreciated. Sanger coined the term Wikipedia, and the site went live on January 15, 2001. Two days later, he sent an e-mail to the Nupedia mailing list—about two thousand people. "Wikipedia is up!" he wrote. "Humor me. Go there and add a little article. It will take all of five or ten minutes."

Wales braced himself for "complete rubbish." He figured that if he and Sanger were lucky the wiki would generate a few rough drafts for Nupedia. Within a month, Wikipedia had six hundred articles. After a year, there were twenty thousand.

Wales is fond of citing a 1962 proclamation by Charles Van Doren, who later became an editor at Britannica. Van Doren believed that the traditional encyclopedia was defunct. It had grown by accretion rather than by design; it had sacrificed artful synthesis to plodding convention; it looked backward. "Because the world is radically new, the ideal encyclopedia should be radical, too," Van Doren wrote. "It should stop being safe--in politics, in philosophy, in science."

In its seminal Western incarnation, the encyclopedia had been a dangerous book. The Encyclopédie muscled aside religious institutions and orthodoxies to install human reason at the center of the universe—and, for that muscling, briefly earned the book's publisher a place in the Bastille. As the historian Robert Darnton pointed out, the entry in the Encyclopédie on cannibalism ends with the cross-reference "See Eucharist." What Wales seems to have in mind, however, is less Van Doren's call to arms than that of an earlier rabble-rouser. In the nineteen-thirties, H. G. Wells lamented that, whiie the world was becoming smaller and moving at increasing speed, the way information was distributed remained old-fashioned and ineffective. He prescribed a "world brain," a collaborative, decentralized repository of knowledge that would be subject to continual revision. More radically—with "alma-matricidal impiety," as he put it—Wells indicted academia; the university was itself medieval. "We want a Henry Ford today to modernize the distribution of knowledge, make good knowledge cheap and easy in this still very ignorant, ill-educated, ill-served English-speaking world of ours," he wrote. Had the Internet existed in his lifetime, Wells might have beaten Wales to the punch.

Wales's most radical contribution may be not to have made information free but—in his own alma-matricidal way—to have invented a system that does not favor the Ph.D. over the well-read fifteen-year-old. 'To me, the key thing is getting it right," Wales has said of Wikipedia's contributors. "I don't care if they're a high-school kid or a Harvard professor." At the beginning, there were no formal rules, though Sanger eventually posted a set of guidelines on the site. The first was "Ignore all the rules." Two of the others have become central tenets: articles must reflect a neutral point of view (N.P.O.V., in Wikipedia lingo), and their content must be both verifiable and previously published. Among other things, the prohibition against original research heads off a great deal of material about people's pets.

Insofar as Wikipedia has a physical existence, it is in St. Petersburg, Florida, in an executive suite that serves as the headquarters of the Wikimedia Foundation, the parent organization of Wikipedia and its lesser-known sister projects, among them Wikisource (a library of free texts), Wikinews (a current-events site) and Wikiquote (bye-bye Bartlett's). Wales, who is married and has a five-year-old daughter, says that St. Petersburg's attractive housing prices lured him from California. When I visited the offices in March, the walls were bare, the furniture battered. With the addition of a dead plant, the suite could pass for a graduate-student lounge.

The real work at Wikipedia takes place not in Florida but on thousands of computer screens across the world. Perhaps Wikipedia's greatest achievement—one that Wales did not fully anticipate—was the creation of a community. Wikipedians are officially anonymous, contributing to unsigned entries under screen names. They are also predominantly male-about eighty per cent, Wales says—and compulsively social, conversing with each other not only on the talk pages attached to each entry but on Wikipedia-dedicated I.R.C. channels and on user pages, which regular contributors often create and which serve as a sort of personalized office cooler. On the page of a twenty-year-old Wikipedian named Arocoun, who lists "philosophizing" among his favorite activities, messages from other users range from the reflective ("I'd argue against your claim

that humans should aim to be independent/self-reliant in all aspects of their lives... I don't think true independence is a realistic ideal given all the inherent intertwinings of any society") to the geekily flirtatious ("I'm a neurotic painter from Ohio, and I guess if you consider your views radical, then I'm a radical, too. So ... we should be friends").

Wikipedians have evolved a distinctive vocabulary, of which "revert," meaning "reinstate"—as in "I reverted the edit, but the user has simply re-reverted it"—may be the most commonly used word. Other terms include WikiGnome (a user who keeps a low profile, fixing typos, poor grammar, and broken links) and its antithesis, WikiTroll (a user who persistently violates the site's guidelines or otherwise engages in disruptive behavior). There are Aspergian Wikipedians (seventy-two), bipolar Wikipedians, vegetarian Wikipedians, antivegetarian Wikipedians, existential Wikipedians, pro-Luxembourg Wikipedians, and Wikipedians who don't like to be categorized. According to a page on the site, an avid interest in Wikipedia has been known to afflict "computer programmers, academics, graduate students, gameshow contestants, news junkies, the unemployed, the soon-to-be unemployed and, in general, people with multiple interests and good memories." You may travel in more exalted circles, but this covers pretty much everyone I know.

Wikipedia may be the world's most ambitious vanity press. There are two hundred thousand registered users on the English-language site, of whom about thirty-three hundred—fewer than two per cent—are responsible for seventy per cent of the work. The site allows you to compare contributors by the number of edits they have made, by the number of articles that have been judged by community vote to be outstanding (these "featured" articles often appear on the site's home page), and by hourly activity, in graph form. A seventeen-year-old P. G. Wodehouse fan who specializes in British peerages leads the featured-article pack, with fifty-eight entries. A twenty-four-year-old University of Toronto graduate is the site's premier contributor. Since composing his first piece, on the Panama Canal, in 2001, he has written or edited more than seventy-two thousand articles. "Wikipediholism" and "editcountitis" are well defined on the site; both link to an article on obsessive-compulsive disorder. (There is a Britannica entry for O.C.D., but no version of it has included Felix Ungets name in the third sentence, a comprehensive survey of "OCD in literature and film," or a list of celebrity O.C.D. sufferers, which unites, surely for the first time in history, Florence Nightingale with Joey Ramone.)

One regular on the site is a user known as Essjay, who holds a Ph.D. in theology and a degree in canon law and has written or contributed to sixteen thousand entries. A tenured professor of religion at a private university, Essjay made his first edit in February, 2005. Initially, he contributed to articles in his field--on the penitential rite, transubstantiation, the papal tiara. Soon he was spending fourteen hours a day on the site, though he was careful to keep his online life a secret from his colleagues and friends. (To his knowledge, he has never met another Wikipedian, and he will not be attending Wikimania, the second international gathering of the encyclopedia's contributors, which will take place in early August in Boston.)

Gradually, Essjay found himself devoting less time to editing and more to correcting errors and removing obscenities from the site. In May, he twice removed a sentence from the entry on Justin Timberlake asserting that the pop star had lost his home in 2002 for failing to pay federal taxes—a state-

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After the storm white and black clouds hung
in the sky like dogs and cats drinking
out of the same blue bowl.
It has been so long since we danced,
not counting the slow shuffle at the Zoo Ball,
you in the black tie the valet knotted in the parking lot
after the Internet instructions failed.
"Failure" is such a beautiful word for something
lousy, the lure of it not at all like the rain,
the drenching rain after the long hot drought that ended today.
When you said you loved substations, I thought of long
sandwiches until across the street I saw
the electricity-making equipment you'd already started
naming the parts of. I wanted to name the clouds—
dogwood, tiger lily, lilac, the lost flowers
of my girlhood, and of course the thousands of blossoms of phlox
in the rock garden my impossibly young grandmother sat in
for the photograph with three stone ducks.
What if we went back,
as c h i i e n, to where no one asks how long the blooms
will bloom, to sleep with our grandmothers
in the feather bed carried from the old country,
all of us dreaming our own painful music, the songs
that will wake us in time for the next storm,
and even if it brings down limbs and live wires
dancing in wild arcs, well watch
the wind rouse the trees whiie the petals
of where we belong blow down
to rain on the unkissably muddy ground.

—Barbara Ras

ment that Essjay knew to be false. The incident ended there. Others involve ideological disagreements and escalate into intense edit wars. A number of the disputes on the English-language Wikipedia relate to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to religious issues. Almost as acrimonious are the battles waged over the entries on Macedonia, Danzig, the Armenian genocide, and Henry Ford. Ethnic feuds die hard: Was Copernicus Polish, German, or Prussian? (A nonbinding poll was conducted earlier this year to determine whether the question merited mention in the article's lead.) Some debates may never be resolved: Was the 1812 Battle of Borodino a victory for the Russians or for the French? What is the date of Ann Coulter's birth? Is apple pie all-American? (The answer, at least for now, is no: "Apple trees didn't even grow in America until the Europeans brought them over," one user railed. He was seconded by another, who added, "Apple pie is very popular in the Netherlands too. Americans did not invent or introduce it to the Netherlands. You already plagiarized Santa Claus from our Saint Nicholas. Stop it!") Who could have guessed that "cheese" would figure among the site's most contested entries? (The controversy entailed whether in Asia there is a cultural prohibition against eating it.) For the past nine months, Baltimore's climate has been a subject of bitter debate. What is the average temperature in January?

At first, Wales handled the fistfights himself, but he was reluctant to ban anyone from the site. As the number of users increased, so did the editing wars and the incidence of vandalism. In October, 2001, Wales appointed a small cadre of administrators, called admins, to police the site for abuse. Admins can delete articles or protect them from further changes, block users from editing, and revert text more efficiently than can ordinary users. (There are now nearly a thousand admins on the site.) In 2004, Wales formalized the 3R rule—initially it had been merely a guideline—according to which any user who reverts the same text more than three times in a twenty-four-hour period is blocked from editing for a day. The policy grew out of a series of particularly vitriolic battles, including one over the U.S. economy—it was experiencing either high growth and low unemployment or low growth and high unemployment.

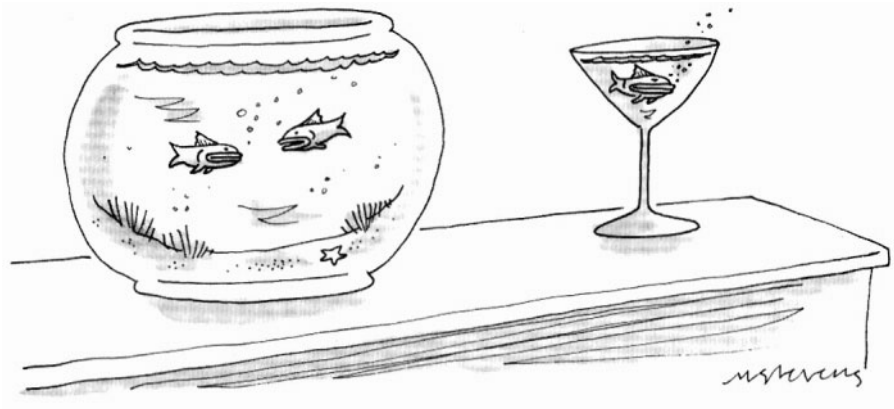
Wales also appointed an arbitration committee to rule on disputes. Before a case reaches the arbitration committee, it often passes through a mediation committee. Essjay is serving a second term as chair of the mediation committee. He is also an admin, a bureaucrat, and a checkuser, which means that he is one of fourteen Wikipedians authorized to trace I.P. addresses in cases of suspected abuse. He often takes his laptop to class, so that he can be available to Wikipedians while giving a quiz, and he keeps an eye on twenty I.R.C. chat channels, where users often trade gossip about abuses they have witnessed.

Five robots troll the site for obvious vandalism, searching for obscenities and evidence of mass deletions, reverting text as they go. More egregious violations require human intervention. Essjay recently caught a user who, under one screen name, was replacing sentences with nonsense and deleting whole entries and, under another, correcting the abuses—all in order to boost his edit count. He was banned permanently from the site. Some users who have been caught tampering threaten revenge against the admins who apprehend them. Essjay says that he routinely receives death threats. 'There are people who take Wikipedia way too seriously," he told me. (Wikipedians have acknowledged Essjay's labors by awarding him numerous barnstars—five-pointed stars, which the community has adopted as a symbol of praise—including several Random Acts of Kindness Barnstars and the Tireless Contributor Barnstar.)

Wikipedia has become a regulatory thicket, complete with an elaborate hierarchy of users and policies about policies. Martin Wattenberg and Fernanda B. Viégas, two researchers at I.B.M. who have studied the site using computerized visual models called "history flows," found that the talk pages and "meta pages"—those dealing with coordination and administration—have experienced the greatest growth. Whereas articles once made up about eighty-five per cent of the site's content, as of last October they represented seventy per cent. As Wattenberg put it, "People are talking about governance, not working on content." Wales is ambivalent about the rules and procedures but believes that they are necessary. "Things work well when a group of people know each other, and things break down when it's a bunch of random people interacting," he told me.

For all its protocol, Wikipedia's bureaucracy doesn't necessarily favor truth. In March, 2005, William Connolley, a climate modeller at the British Antarctic Survey, in Cambridge, was briefly a victim of an edit war over the entry on global warming, to which he had contributed. After a particularly nasty confrontation with a skeptic, who had repeatedly watered down language pertaining to the greenhouse effect, the case went into arbitration. "User William M. Connolley strongly pushes his POV with systematic removal of any POV which does not match his own," his accuser charged in a written deposition. "His views on climate science are singular and narrow." A decision from the arbitration committee was three months in coming, after which Connolley was placed on a humiliating one-revert-a-day parole. The punishment was later revoked, and Connolley is now an admin, with two thousand pages on his watchlist—a feature that enables users to compile a list of entries and to be notified when changes are made to them. He says that Wikipedia's entry on global warming may be the best page on the subject anywhere on the Web. Nevertheless, Wales admits that in this case the system failed. It can still seem as though the user who spends the most time on the site—or who yells the loudest—wins.

Connolley believes that Wikipedia "gives no privilege to those who know what they're talking about," a view



"Sad, isn't it? And he won't admit he has a problem."

that is echoed by many academics and former contributors, including Larry Sanger, who argues that too many Wikipedians are fundamentally suspicious of experts and unjustly confident of their own opinions. He left Wikipedia in March, 2002, after Wales ran out of money to support the site during the dot-com bust. Sanger concluded that he had become a symbol of authority in an anti-authoritarian community. "Wikipedia has gone from a nearly perfect anarchy to an anarchy with gang rule," he told me. (Sanger is now the director of collaborative projects at the online foundation Digital Universe, where he is helping to develop a Web-based encyclopedia, a hybrid between a wiki and a traditional reference work. He promises that it will have "the lowest error rate in history.") Even Eric Raymond, the open-source pioneer whose work inspired Wales, argues that "'disaster' is not too strong a word" for Wikipedia. In his view, the site is "infested with moonbats." (Think hobgoblins of little minds, varsity division.) He has found his corrections to entries on science fiction dismantled by users who evidently felt that he was trespassing on their terrain. "The more you look at what some of the Wikipedia contributors have done, the better Britannica looks," Raymond said. He believes that the open-source model is simply inapplicable to an encyclopedia. For software, there is an objective standard: either it works or it doesn't. There is no such test for truth.

Nor has increasing surveillance of the site by admins deterred vandals, a majority of whom seem to be inserting obscenities and absurdities into Wikipedia when they should be doing their homework. Many are committing their pranks in the classroom: the abuse tends to ebb on a Friday afternoon and resume early on a Monday. Entire schools and universities have found their I.P. addresses blocked as a result. The entry on George W. Bush has been vandalized so frequently—sometimes more than twice a minute—that it is often closed to editing for days. At any given time, a couple of hundred entries are semi-protected, which means that a user must register his I.P. address and wait several days before making changes. This group recently included not only the entries on God, Galileo, and Al Gore but also those on poodles, oranges, and Frédéric Chopin. Even Wales has been caught airbrushing his Wikipedia entry-eighteen times in the past year. He is particularlysensitive about references to the porn traffic on his Web portal. "Adult content" or "glamour photography" are the terms that he prefers, though, as one user pointed out on the site, they are perhaps not the most precise way to describe lesbian strip-poker threesomes. (In January, Wales agreed to a compromise: "erotic photography.") He is repentant about his meddling. "People shouldn't do it, including me," he said. "It's in poor taste."

Wales recently established an "oversight" function, by which some admins (Essjay among them) can purge text from the system, so that even the history page bears no record of its ever having been there. Wales says that this measure is rarely used, and only in order to remove slanderous or private information, such as a telephone number. "It's a perfectly reasonable power in any other situation, but completely antithetical to this project," said Jason Scott, alongtime contributor to Wikipedia who has published several essays critical of the site.

Is Wikipedia accurate? Last year, *Nature* published a survey comparing forty-two entries on scientific topics on Wikipedia with their counterparts in Encyclopædia Britannica. According to the survey, Wikipedia had four errors for every three of Britannica's, a result that, oddly, was hailed as a triumph for the upstart. Such exercises in nitpicking are relatively meaningless, as no reference work is infallible. Britannica issued a public statement refuting the survey's findings, and took out a half-page advertisement in the *Times*, which said, in part, "Britannica has never claimed to be error-free. We have a reputation not for unattainable perfection but for strong scholarship, sound judgment, and disciplined editorial review." Later, Jorge Cauz, Britannica's president, told me in an e-mail that if Wikipedia continued without some kind of editorial oversight it would "decline into a hulking mediocre mass of uneven, unreliable, and, many times, unreadable articles." Wales has said that he would consider Britannica a competitor, "except that I think they will be crushed out of existence within five years."

Larry Sanger proposes a fine distinction between knowledge that is useful and knowledge that is reliable, and there is no question that Wikipedia beats every other source when it comes to breadth, efficiency, and accessibility. Yet the site's virtues are also liabilities. Cauz scoffed at the notion of "good enough knowledge." "I hate that," he said, pointing out that there is no way to know which facts in an entry to trust. Or, as Robert McHenry, a veteran editor at Britannica, put it, "We can get the wrong answer to a

question quicker than our fathers and mothers could find a pencil."

Part of the problem is provenance. The bulk of Wikipedia's content originates not in the stacks but on the Web, which offers up everything from breaking news, spin, and gossip to proof that the moon landings never took place. Glaring errors jostle quiet omissions. Wales, in his public speeches, cites the Google test: "If it isn't on Google, it doesn't exist." This position poses another difficulty: on Wikipedia, the present takes precedent over the past. The (generally good) entry on St. Augustine is shorter than the one on Britney Spears. The article on Nietzsche has been modified incessantly, yielding five archived talk pages. But the debate is largely over Nietzsche's politics; taken as a whole, the entry is inferior to the essay in the current Britannica, a model of its form. (From Wikipedia: "Nietzsche also owned a copy of Philipp Mainlander's 'Die Philosophie der Erlosung,' a work which, like Schopenhauer's philosophy, expressed pessimism.")

Wikipedia remains a lumpy work in progress. The entries can read as though they had been written by a seventh grader: clarity and concision are lacking; the facts may be sturdy, but the connective tissue is either anemic or absent; and citation is hit or miss. Wattenberg and Vitgas, of I.B.M., note that the vast majority of Wikipedia edits consist of deletions and additions rather than of attempts to reorder paragraphs or to shape an entry as a whole, and they believe that Wikipedia's twenty-five-line editing window deserves some of the blame. It is difficult to craft an article in its entirety when reading it piecemeal, and, given Wikipedians' obsession with racking up edits, simple fixes often take priority over more complex edits. Wattenberg and Vitgas have also identified a "first-mover advantage": the initial contributor to an article often sets the tone, and that person is rarely a Macaulay or a Johnson. The over-all effect is jittery, the textual equivalent of a film shot with a handheld camera.

What can be said for an encyclopedia that is sometimes right, sometimes wrong, and sometimes illiterate? When I showed the Harvard philosopher Hilary Putnam his entry, he was surprised to find it as good as the one in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. He was flabbergasted when he learned how Wikipedia worked. "Obviously, this was the work of experts," he said. In the nineteen-sixties, William F. Buckley, Jr., said that he would sooner "live in a society governed by the first two thousand names in the Boston telephone directory than in a society governed by the two thousand faculty members of Harvard University." On Wikipedia, he might finally have his wish. How was his page? Essentially on target, he said. All the same, Buckley added, he would prefer that those anonymous two thousand souls govern, and leave the encyclopedia writing to the experts.

Over breakfast in early May, I asked Cauz for an analogy with which to compare Britannica and Wikipedia. "Wikipedia is to Britannica as 'American Idol' is to the Juilliard School," he e-mailed me the next day. A few days later, Wales also chose a musical metaphor. "Wikipedia is to Britannica as rock and roll is to easy listening," he suggested. "It may not be as smooth, but it scares the parents and is a lot smarter in the end." He is right to emphasize the fright factor over accuracy. As was the Encydoptdie, Wikipedia is a combination of manifesto and reference work. Peer review, the mainstream media, and government agencies have landed us in a ditch. Not only are we impatient with the authorities but we are in a mood to talk back. Wikipedia offers endless opportunities for self-expression. It is the love child of reading groups and chat rooms, a second home for anyone who has written an Amazon review. This is not the first time that encyclopedia-makers have snatched control from an élite, or cast a harsh light on certitude. Jimmy Wales may or may not be the new Henry Ford, yet he has sent us tooling down the interstate, with but a squint back at the railroad. We're on the open road now, without conductors and timetables. We're free to chart our own course, also free to get gloriously, recklessly lost. Your truth or mine? ♦