

Re: a little something for all you wikipedia-lovers

# Re: a little something for all you wikipedia-lovers

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*Source:* <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2007-01/msg01757.html>

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- *From:* "grapheus@xxxxxxx" <grapheus@xxxxxxx>
  - *Date:* 28 Jan 2007 13:51:21 -0800
- 

On Jan 28, 9:59 pm, "Brian M. Scott" <b.sc...@xxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

On 28 Jan 2007 11:38:25 -0800, "Peter T. Daniels"  
<gramma...@xxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote in  
<[news:1170013105.222944.54000@xx](mailto:news:1170013105.222944.54000@xx)>  
in sci.lang:

Brian M. Scott wrote:

On 28 Jan 2007 10:40:46 -0800, "Peter T. Daniels"  
<gramma...@xxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote in  
<[news:1170009646.840896.286660@xx](mailto:news:1170009646.840896.286660@xx)>  
in sci.lang:

On Jan 28, 1:12 pm, "Brian M. Scott"  
<b.sc...@xxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

On 28 Jan 2007 08:31:06  
-0800, "Peter T. Daniels"  
<gramma...@xxxxxxxxxxxx>  
wrote in  
<[news:1170001865.970364.82760@xx](mailto:news:1170001865.970364.82760@xx)>  
in sci.lang:

On Jan 28,  
10:28 am,  
Joachim  
Pense  
<s...@xxxxxxxxxxxx>  
wrote:[...]

So  
is  
it

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really  
acceptable  
to  
cite  
Britannica  
(rather  
than  
a  
research  
paper  
or  
monography)  
in  
a  
research  
article?  
What  
would  
be  
a  
reason  
to  
do  
so?

For some of  
the  
history-of-linguistics  
things I've  
done,  
encyclopedia  
articles are  
excellent  
sources for  
the  
"common  
wisdom" of  
their age.

This is irrelevant. When you  
do that, you're not using it  
as a general reference, but  
rather as a primary source,  
much  
as one might use the Paston  
letters as a primary source  
for  
15th century English social  
history. Its quality as a  
reference work is not at  
issue in such applications.

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Which I trust answers grapheus's question, and which provides a further differentiation between Britannica and wikipedia,

Well, no. As you've been told many times, each Wikipedia article has associated with it both a history page, which contains all prior versions of the article, and a discussion page, on which those who are interested may discuss possible changes.

And no control over who contributes to the "versions" or to the "discussions." If Brian Scott "discusses" the damage done to his initial article on [whatever the topic of Brian's dissertation may have been], how is any user to know that Brian is any more qualified to discuss it than anyone else? First, by now I probably would not be more qualified than

anyone else. Secondly, if I chose to do so, I could always point to

<http://genealogy.math.ndsu.nodak.edu/html/id.phtml?id=9569>

(though I'd have to note that the last seven letters of the title have disappeared: the last word should be 'Paracompact'). But in my field the competence of the people discussing a topic is likely to be evident very quickly, and there's little room for differences of opinion about the facts.

Whereas, if Brian Scott was invited to write an encyclopedia article on the topic of his dissertation, it's there in the encyclopedia in exactly the form in which he was the most qualified person in the world to present it. Not necessarily: someone else might be a better expositor,

or better able to put it into a larger context.

This is a rich source of primary evidence of the range of opinions on various subjects, evidence that could obviously be appropriately cited in moderately ambitious undergraduate papers in a number of sociological topics.

And no control over the validity of those "opinions." Irrelevant to the point that I was making.

Should the Afrocentrist view of the relationship between Egyptian and Wolof, or between Mandinke and Dravidian,

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be given equal consideration with the scientific view? Have you actually looked at articles dealing with such

things to find out what actually happens? No, of course not. But to pick two that came readily to mind, the article on 'Proto-World language' is properly skeptical, and the article on 'Altaic languages' looks to be a pretty up-to-date summary of the history and current status of the notion.

and for which reason, totally banning citing EB in college work is unwise.

So is totally banning the citing of Wikipedia, or even <shudder> the World Book.

Hey, in my 1961 World Book, the Writing articles are by I. J. Gelb. (They're not in the current edition.) They would be excellent for the grade-schoolers and junior-high-schoolers it's intended for. What seems to be the last edition of Collier's (ca. 1980; it's on the shelf in the NYPL's main reading room) has a superb article on Writing by my phonology teacher the Sinhala expert Jim Gair, which was at least 20 years old, as he's credited as Assistant Professor; I think its audience was high-schoolers, and is excellent for them.

It's the lazy way out. The proper course of action is to (try to) teach students to use sources appropriately. But if you're going to be that lazy, it would be far more principled to ban the citing of \*all\* general reference encyclopaedias: the differences among them are precisely the sorts of considerations that you've already decided your students can't handle.

Do college libraries even \_have\_ World Book? If not, I expect that they have things equally likely to be

totally inappropriate, which was the point. The real problem faced by the Middlebury history department has nothing to do with Wikipedia; they're merely putting a Band-Aid on its most visible symptom (and incidentally ignoring a splendid opportunity to teach something that in the long run is likely to be more valuable to most of their students than any specific historical content).

[...]

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Bluntly, your attitude towards Wikipedia is irrational. You completely ignore considerable evidence that your concerns, which would have been entirely legitimate early on, are in fact greatly exaggerated.

You completely ignore the fact that in general the quality of the articles has gone steadily up.

This is the point I disagree. Of course, a Wiki-article improves when more and more people become editors. But since it has been the rule to block (and eventually ban) an author instead of blocking the article in case of an "Edit-War", the quality has gone VERY SERIOUSLY down !.. BTW, I am curious about what you think on this peculiar point (which doesn't concern mathematical articles : in mathematics, a thing is true or wrong. But this is not the case in sciences like Linguistics, Archaeological Theories, etc. The "Truth" of today may become tomorrow an "error" !).

grapheus

You completely ignore the ways in which Wikipedia is superior to dead tree references, namely, timeliness and breadth of coverage.

Please note that I'm by no means an uncritical user; in the early going I was very skeptical, and even now I'm well aware of Wikipedia's shortcomings. The fact remains that I now find it extremely useful and expect it to become more so as it continues to improve. In mathematics — admittedly a special case — it's already the best single general reference available for my more advanced undergraduates. (Wolfram's MathWorld may indeed be 'the web's most extensive mathematics resource', but Wikipedia is typically more accessible.)

Brian