

SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

Encyclopedias, then and now

An A-to-Z history explores the evolving nature of knowledge curation

By **Andrew Robinson**

In the first series of the BBC television comedy Monty Python's Flying Circus, broadcast in 1969, a man tells a slightly nervous woman on her doorstep that he would like to come into her house and steal a few things. Suspiciously, she asks him: "Are you an encyclopaedia salesman?" No, he announces, he is a burglar. Eventually, she lets him in. Once inside, he says: "Mind you, I don't know whether you've

fortunate that *Britannica* was first published near the beginning, and Wikipedia was launched near the end."

Garfield's passion for encyclopedias began as a child in the 1960s and continues to this day. *All the Knowledge* opens with a description of his online purchase in 2021 of yet more historic *Encyclopaedia Britannica* editions. But now, of course, like everyone else, he searches for information online too. "Is the information we receive today more or less reliable than the information we received



Britannica's early forays into digital encyclopedias failed to compete with Bill Gates's (center) *Encarta*.

really considered the advantages of owning a really fine set of modern encyclopaedias...." The self-proclaimed thief was, we learn from a seemingly objective third party, a successful encyclopedia salesman after all.

Author and journalist Simon Garfield quotes this sketch with relish in *All the Knowledge in the World*, his "history" of the encyclopedia. It is an enjoyable tour, if quirkily structured. "I'd be missing a trick if my book wasn't in alphabetical order, and with the exception of the letter *A*, it will follow a vaguely chronological pattern," he explains in the introduction. He adds: "I count myself

in our childhood?" he asks at the end of the book (under *Y* for "Yesterday"). It is a fascinating question, which his book goes at least some of the way toward answering.

Although it discusses many encyclopedias, ranging from Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, started in Paris in 1751, to Microsoft's *Encarta*, withdrawn in 2009, Garfield's account is dominated by *Britannica*, launched in the United Kingdom in 1768, and Wikipedia, launched in the United States in 2001.

Britannica's contributors have always been selected for their expertise by editors. Two centuries ago, they included the extraordinary polymath Thomas Young—physicist, physician, and Egyptologist—"to whose profound and accurate knowledge, rare erudition, and other various attainments, this

All the Knowledge in the World: The Extraordinary History of the Encyclopedia
Simon Garfield
William Morrow, 2023. 400 pp.



work is largely indebted in almost every department which it embraces," according to *Britannica's* editor in the 1820s.

During the 20th century, named contributors included Cecil B. DeMille on motion pictures, Albert Einstein on space-time, J. B. S. Haldane on heredity, T. E. Lawrence on guerrilla warfare, J. B. Priestley on English literature, George Bernard Shaw on socialism, Alfred P. Sloan Jr. on General Motors, Konstantin Stanislavsky on theatre directing and acting, Helen Wills on lawn tennis, and Orville Wright on Wilbur Wright. Most were paid a fee, however nugatory; Einstein, for example, received \$86.40 for his entry. The contrast with Wikipedia is stark: Anyone may contribute to it, contributors are anonymous, and none receives payment.

Authority is therefore the keynote of *Britannica*, although it certainly contains errors—whereas variety of expertise defines Wikipedia, leaving the latter open to both praise for its unparalleled diversity and criticism for its elementary errors. By way of ironic example, Wikipedia's current entry on *Encyclopaedia Britannica* lists 12 scholars on *Britannica's* editorial advisory board—four of whom are deceased, including the physics Nobel laureate Murray Gell-Mann, who died in 2019.

Even so, "You could make a strong case," writes Garfield, for Wikipedia as "the most eloquent and enduring representative of the Internet as a force for good." Yet he also wryly notes that "wiki" is the Hawaiian word for "quick." Wikipedia tends to be quickly written, quickly consumed, sometimes quickly corrected, and often—many users suspect—quickly forgotten.

Meanwhile, use of *Britannica* is falling off a cliff. The last year in which it made a profit was 1990. In 2012, it published its final print edition, and today it is available only online. Its website receives incomparably fewer daily hits than Wikipedia's.

"I hope this book has encouraged you to think twice about throwing out an old set of encyclopedias," concludes Garfield. As it controversially suggests, despite—or perhaps because of—the continuing growth of the internet, including social media, we are sometimes less reliably informed today than during the Age of Enlightenment or, indeed, the time of Monty Python. ■

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