

Encyclopaedia Britannica and Nature: a response
23 March 2006

In our issue of 15 December 2005 we published a news article that compared the Internet offerings of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and Wikipedia on scientific topics (“Internet encyclopaedias go head to head”, *Nature* **438** (7070) p900-901; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/438900a>). *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has now posted a lengthy response to this article on its website, accusing *Nature* of misrepresentation, sloppiness and indifference to scholarly standards, and calling on us to retract our article. We reject those accusations, and are confident our comparison was fair.

Our original article made clear the basis of our comparison. Conducted by our news staff, it consisted of asking independent scholars to review 50 pairs of articles from the Wikipedia and *Encyclopaedia Britannica* websites. The reviewers were not informed which of their pair of articles came from which source; the subjects of the articles were chosen in advance to represent a wide range of scientific disciplines. Our staff compiled lists of factual errors, omissions and misleading statements that the reviewers pointed to (we had 42 usable responses) and tallied up the total number for each encyclopaedia: 123 for *Britannica*, 162 for Wikipedia. Turning the reviewers’ comments into numerical scores did require a modicum of judgement, which was applied diligently and fairly.

Britannica’s general objections to this article were first made to us in private some months ago, at which point we willingly sent them every comment by a reviewer that served as the basis for our assessing something as an inaccuracy. While we were quite willing to discuss the issues, the company failed to provide specific details of its complaints when we asked for them in order to be able to assess its allegations. We did not receive any further correspondence until the publication of its open letter on 22 March 2006. It is regrettable that *Britannica* chose to make its objections public without first informing us of them and giving us a chance to respond.

The company claims that our article gave a misleading impression of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*’s accuracy. Specifically, the company objects to our headline, which says that Wikipedia “comes close” to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in its coverage of scientific topics. We feel this was a reasonable characterization, and the full figures featured prominently in the text of the article. The company also objects to the fact that in some cases we took material from *Britannica*’s *Book of the Year* and its *Student Encyclopedia*. This was done in a few cases when the *Britannica* website provided articles from these sources when queried on the pre-determined topics; as we said, the survey compared the content of the websites. In a small number of cases, to ensure comparable lengths, we provided reviewers with chosen excerpts, not full articles; this was done with entries from both *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and Wikipedia.

In one instance *Britannica* alleges that we provided a reviewer with material that was not from the *Britannica* website. We have checked and are confident that this was not the case.

Britannica objects that *Nature* did not check the assertions of its reviewers. This is true; nor did we claim to. We realised that in some cases our reviewers' criticisms would be open to debate, and in some cases might be wrong. But this applied as much to criticisms of Wikipedia as of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Because the reviewers were blind to the source of the material they were evaluating, and material from both sources was treated the same way, there is absolutely no reason to think that any errors they made would have systematically altered the results of our inquiry.

We note that *Britannica* has taken issue with less than half the points our reviewers raised. Both encyclopaedias have made corrections to some of the relevant entries since our article was published.

We do not intend to retract our article.