communiqué

tech talk by angelo fernando

Encyclopaedia Britannica rewires for the digital age

More than 200 years old, Britannica is taking a leap by inviting "qualified experts" to be involved in content creation

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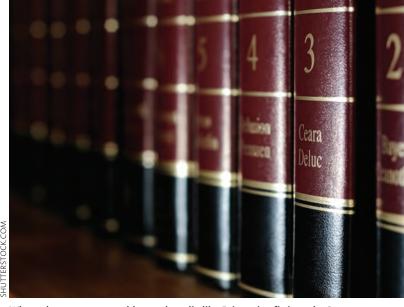
You may not know this, but Albert Einstein wore an editor's hat at Encyclopaedia Britannica, as did George Bernard Shaw and more than 80 Nobel laureates and Pulitzer Prize winners. But it's that other encyclopedia, the online one, where vandals and anonymous editors allegedly run rampant, that's been getting all the attention lately.

As hyped as Wikipedia may be, it's hard to deny that an open-source information repository that gets updated several thousand times a second is well suited to present times. I'm talking about an era defined by two phrases: *instant gratification* and *user-generated.*

So where does a 240-year-old encyclopedia like Britannica fit in today? How does it face up to the criticism that it is expensive to access, closed and out-

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dated? For starters, by being accessible, collaborative and continuously updated.

New rules, new skin, new platform

In April, Encyclopaedia Britannica began a service called Web-Share, sending a strong signal that it is still relevant for the digital age. Those who sign up for WebShare get access to any

Britannica article online—free—and can link to Britannica content from their web site. Many writers, bloggers and web publishers are eligible for the free subscription; check it out at britannicanet.com.

In June, the company launched a beta version of the new Britannica that spoke of "greater participation" from readers and—are you sitting

about the author

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down?—even invited them to become content creators. The news sent ripples through the knowledge management sector because Britannica appeared to be switching to a wiki format and conceding to Wikipedia's open-source, user-generated model.

But that would be a very simplistic way of looking at this shift. "It wouldn't make sense for Britannica to be like Wikipedia, and we're not going to be," insists Tom Panelas, director of corporate communication for Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. He describes an expanded role of collaboration in the new model—collaboration "without relinquishing the editorial stewardship that makes our products trustworthy."

Britannica's blog (yes, its editors do blog!) raises a polarizing question: How open should open source be in a knowledge platform? "The creation and documentation of knowledge is a collaborative process but not a democratic one," stated Jorge Cauz, president of Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., forcing us to rethink *collaboration* and other terms glibly tossed around, like *engagement* and *community, transparency* and *openness.*

Collaboration, not edit wars

What does *collaboration* mean to you? Would you allow someone to add comments to documents on your web site or post an entry to your corporate blog? Britannica's stand forces us to look at the backroom edit wars that go on in Wikipedia (which Wikipedia calls a "breach of wikiquette") and the vitriolic rants on your unmoderated blog as confrontation, not collaboration.

Britannica has a strong corps of writers, editors and Nobel laureates, but it is taking the leap of extending this "community of scholars" by inviting "qualified experts" to be involved in content creation. The working relationship is still being hammered out at the time of this writing. "They'll be asked to help maintain their articles, create new ones, and they'll have a place on our site where they can interact regularly with peers and colleagues around the world," says Panelas. They will be able to publish their own articles, papers and speeches. Yes, they need to be invited, but they will also be in control of their own work.

What does this signal? To me it says that the granddaddy of knowledge management isn't dismantling the walled garden, but it's leaving the gate unlocked.

Britannica is a for-profit product, and its approach to "community" involvement may have valuable lessons for other organizations struggling with the *free* and the *fee.* Articles, essays and multimedia content created by the community of users will live alongside the core content created by the community of experts. But—and here's a big "but"—if the user-generated content must be authenticated by Britannica, it will have to carry the imprimatur of being Britannica-checked before it is published. For good reason. The content-wants-to-be-free crowd does not care about the content-needs-to-be-accurate side of things. Knowledge brokers, whether they are publishers, educators or in the news and data business, understand this very well. One plagiarized, erroneous or libelous paragraph can mean loss of revenue, credibility and lawsuits. "We are not abdicating our responsibility as publishers or burying it under the now-fashionable wisdom of the crowds," says Britannica on its WebShare site.

Which sounds like what we as communicators face as we wrestle with imperfect content to meet unrealistic deadlines, and watch out for some barbarian hacking our content. Could parts of our walled garden embrace collaboration? Maybe it's time to stop dressing up in a new digital skin and think about rewiring the whole place. ●

did you know?
● The Encyclopaedia Britannica first arrived in the U.S. as a pirated edition in 1791. Owners of that set included George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton.
● Wikipedia claims to have 75,000 active contributors.

war of words!
Wikipedia's listing for Encyclopaedia Britannica notes that "some articles in certain earlier editions of the Britannica have been criticized for inaccuracy, bias or unqualified contributors."

Britannica's listing for Wikipedia states that "the troubling difference between Wikipedia and other encyclopedias lies in the absence of editors and authors who will accept responsibility for the accuracy and quality of their articles."

read more online
Visit **www.iabc.com/cw** to read Angelo Fernando's interview with Tom Panelas, director of corporate communication for Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc.