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## You just can't trust everything you read on Wikipedia.org

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Wikipedia.org is a huge, free encyclopedia on the Internet. It has lots more articles on lots more subjects in lots more languages than Encyclopedia Britannica or any other encyclopedia. But you can't trust it.

You see, the "wiki" part of the name is a tech term, meaning a web site that allows lots of people to contribute: creating, changing, or erasing information. Most web sites are created and maintained by just a few people with authorized passwords. Wikis are more open, allowing lots of people to mess with the information. Some wikis are open to anyone in the world with Internet access. Many wikis are set up for use by anyone in a club or social group. Recently some corporations are trying wikis for professional work, with access given to everyone in the company or department, or even to customers.

At Wikipedia, the articles you read could have been written by anyone in the world, for any reason, and then changed by anyone else in the world. If you go to Wikipedia right now, you can add your own article or change some of the articles already there.

One upside of the wiki approach is that you can find articles on all sorts of subjects that wouldn't have made their way into a traditional encyclopedia, printed or on the web. The traditional editors wouldn't have the time or money to find or pay that many contributors.

For some types of knowledge, this seems to be working pretty well. A recent study comparing Wikipedia and Britannica science articles found that scientists rated the two as having about the same accuracy. (Both had errors, a reminder that you should always use multiple sources in research.)

In the past 18 months, however, there have been several discoveries of wrong or hugely biased articles in Wikipedia. During the 2004 election there were partisans creating or rewriting articles about the candidates and the issues, sometimes back-and-forth-and-back-again. In 2005, as a supposed "joke", a biography was changed to wrongly accuse someone of involvement in the Kennedy assassination. It remained that way for four months. And people have been busy editing their own bio entries to their own advantage — including one of Wikipedia's founders.

Now the founders claim they're instituting some limits on who can contribute or change articles, with added editorial oversight of what's been changed. But I don't see how this can succeed. Or how they'll afford it: Wikipedia is entirely free to use and doesn't yet even show any advertising.

Clamp down a little and you'll still have people with different viewpoints, spins, beliefs, and axes-to-grind, making the wiki reflect their reality. Clamp down hard enough to guarantee the continued accuracy of nearly all articles and you'll lose the wiki advantage of authors on everything from everywhere.

This is so different from the use of open-access in programming, such as in the creation of Linux, the operating system software that's making Windows look bad. Linux does have programmers contributing from all over the world, but their results are checked by the hierarchy of Linux experts.

Wikipedia doesn't have any such controls. Wikipedia is a cool experiment that's just not reliable.