



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on March 15, 2012

Encyclopædia Britannica Adjusts to Reality, Stops Printing

Encyclopædia Britannica's president Jorge Cauz (left) announced on Tuesday that his company would no longer print its 129-pound, 32-volume sets of its iconic print encyclopedias. He put the best face possible on the decision:

Everyone will want to call this the end of an era, and I understand that. But there's no sad moment for us. I think outsiders are more nostalgic about the books that I am...

The print set is an icon. But it's an icon that doesn't do justice to how much we've changed over the years.



That change has been going on for years but *Encyclopædia Britannica* (EB) has been slow in recognizing it. Its peak year for sales of its sets was 1990 when 120,000 were sold at more than \$1,000 each. Sales dropped precipitously over the next several years and last year only 8,000 sets out of the 12,000 that were printed have been sold. The remaining 4,000 sets are currently being stored in a company warehouse.

As a result the privately-owned company went into the red and it was Cauz's job to revive it when he took over as president in November 2003. The first thing Cauz had to determine is what business the company was really in: selling encyclopedias to parents of school children, or providing low-cost, highly reliable in-depth information on important topics to researchers and scholars. As print editions dropped in popularity, the answer was clear.

But by the time that decision was made, EB's primary competitors, the search engine Google and the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, had already made substantial inroads into providing that information. As Cauz tried to find its unique position, he said in an interview with *The New Yorker* magazine in 2006 that he thought Wikipedia would "decline into a hulking, mediocre mass of uneven, unreliable, and, many times, unreadable articles," and that "Wikipedia is to Britannica as *American Idol* is to the Julliard School."

Since then Wikipedia has grown to the point where, according to the website ranking service Alexa, Wikipedia ranks 6th out of 360 million sites, while EB is rated about 7,000.

Today Cauz is still trying to differentiate Britannica from Wiki: "Google's algorithm doesn't know what's fact or what's fiction. So Wikipedia is often the No. 1 or No. 2 result on search. But I'd bet a lot of money that most people would rather use Britannica than Wikipedia." He adds:

Wikipedia is a wonderful technology for collecting everything from great insights to lies and innuendoes. It's not all bad or all good, just uneven. It's the murmur of society, a million voices rather than a single informed one.

We have an important role to play. I think Wikipedia sees us as a relic of an old era. But facts



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always matter, no matter what form they take. Our mission hasn't changed, just the method.

At the moment, EB's late entry into providing digital information for a fee which began in 1994 is stunting its growth. Just half a million people pay the \$70 annual fee for the full encyclopedia online, or for the \$2 monthly app for ipads and smartphones. As a result, just 15 percent of EB's revenues come from those subscriptions. The balance comes from providing print services to public schools, colleges and libraries.

One of those librarians who still likes Britannica is Lynne Kobayashi at the Hawaii State Library who says there will always be people who want to use the print edition. She says "Sometimes familiarity with standard resources [like EB] may get faster results than keying in a search [term] and then sifting through the results...while Wikipedia has become ubiquitous, the Britannica remains a consistently more reliable source."

Cauz's uphill battle is reflected in the numbers. First, EB's database is significantly smaller than Wikipedia's. EB has 100 editors, Wiki has thousands. There are almost 1½ billion search engine requests every month that could access some part of EB's database, but less than one half of one percent of those searches actually end up at Britannica's website.

And so Cauz is taking a softer, gentler approach when confronting Wiki's overwhelming presence. His company is now offering free access to abridged portions of its database in the hopes that some researchers will decide to subscribe to the whole package. And he is now allowing readers outside of his editors to make changes and updates to its database, which are then reviewed by EB's editors before being added.

But [differences remain](#) between the two competitors and Cauz hopes that the differentiation between mass information and careful analysis of that information will keep his company from becoming irrelevant:

We have very different value propositions. Britannica is going to be smaller. We cannot deal with every single cartoon character, we cannot deal with every love life of every celebrity. But we need to have an alternative where facts really matter. Britannica won't be able to be as large, but it will always be factually correct...

We are a very different type of knowledge base, one that is by the nature of what we do, significantly smaller than Wikipedia - but much more reliable. Right now everyone knows Google loves Wikipedia, 96 percent of the time it's in the top five [search results]. It's a pity that Britannica can't take that position too...

There's a place for well-written documents, where facts really matter, where we strive for balance. The alternative is just...different.

Whether [that difference](#) can make it into the minds of customers searching for information on the web remains to be seen. It's another reflection on the beauty and the power of the free market where companies like Britannica and Wikipedia (and others) battle it out to gain market share by keeping their customers happy. While it would be too bad to see a 244-year old company like Britannica disappear into history, that's no reason to say it should stay relevant. Only the marketplace can determine that.



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