Wikipedia's accuracy judged to be as good as that of Britannica

By Dan Goodin
The Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Wikipedia, the encyclopedia that relies on volunteers to write nearly 4 million articles, is about as accurate in covering scientific topics as Encyclopedia Britannica, the journal Nature wrote in an online article published Wednesday.

The finding, based on a side-by-side comparison of articles covering a broad swath of the scientific spectrum, comes as Wikipedia faces criticism over the accuracy of some of its entries.

Two weeks ago prominent journalist John Seigenthaler Sr. said that a Wikipedia entry that ran for four months had incorrectly named him as a longtime suspect in the assassinations of President Kennedy and his brother Robert Kennedy.

Such errors appear to be the exception rather than the rule, Nature said in Wednesday's article, which the scientific journal said was the first to use peer review to compare Wikipedia to Britannica. Based on 42 articles reviewed by experts, the average scientific entry in Wikipedia contained four errors or omissions, while Britannica had three.

Of eight "serious errors" the reviewers found — including misinterpretations of important concepts — four came from each source, the journal reported.

"We're very pleased with the results and we're hoping it will focus people's attention on the overall level of our work, which is pretty good," said Jimmy Wales, who founded Wikipedia in 2001.

Wales said the accuracy of his project varies by topic, with strong suits including pop culture and contemporary technology. That's because Wikipedia's stable of dedicated volunteers tends to have more collective expertise in such areas, he said.

Next month, Wikipedia plans to begin testing a new mechanism for reviewing the accuracy of its articles and is working to make its review process easier for people who have less familiarity with computers and the Internet.

Encyclopedia Britannica officials declined to comment because they haven't seen the data.