

Students warned to be wary of Wikipedia

The online encyclopedia is no substitute for good old-fashioned research, but simply a general starting point: website spokesman

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The Ubysey

VANCOUVER (CUP)—Although Wikipedia continues to be a popular online resource for students, some doubt its credibility and usefulness as an academic resource.

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that uses an unconventional process for gathering information: instead of seeking out experts to write and fact-check articles, Wikipedia allows any visitor to the website to write entries and make changes to existing ones.

The site received a great deal of publicity last winter when a study published in the journal *Nature* found that the accuracy of Wikipedia was comparable to that of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. According to the study, out of 42 entries, it was found that the average Wikipedia article contained four inaccuracies, while the average *Britannica* article had three.

However, Wayne Saewyc, a spokesman for Wikipedia, said the results of *Nature's* study may have been skewed in their favour. He said that *Nature* had only selected Wikipedia's science articles for the study, which tend to be more in-depth and accurate than those of the arts, politics or other topics.

"We got lucky," Saewyc admitted.

While conventional encyclopedias spend a lot of time fact-checking of all their articles, the accuracy of a Wikipedia article often depends on the popularity of the topic, which influences the number of people viewing the article and the number

of potential editors.

In addition, political articles are more likely to be tampered with. Though statistically very rare, a number of articles regarding American senators and congressmen were tampered with by both Republican and Democrat parties, in attempts to introduce particular biases or emphasis into the article.

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**WAYNE SAEWYC,
WIKIPEDIA SPOKESMAN**

"In general, our prose is not as good, and our factuality is not as good," Saewyc said, comparing Wikipedia to conventional encyclopedias.

Saewyc explained that the main advantage Wikipedia has over conventional encyclopedias is the speed in which errors can be corrected.

"It's usually fixed within minutes of coming up in a press release," Saewyc said.

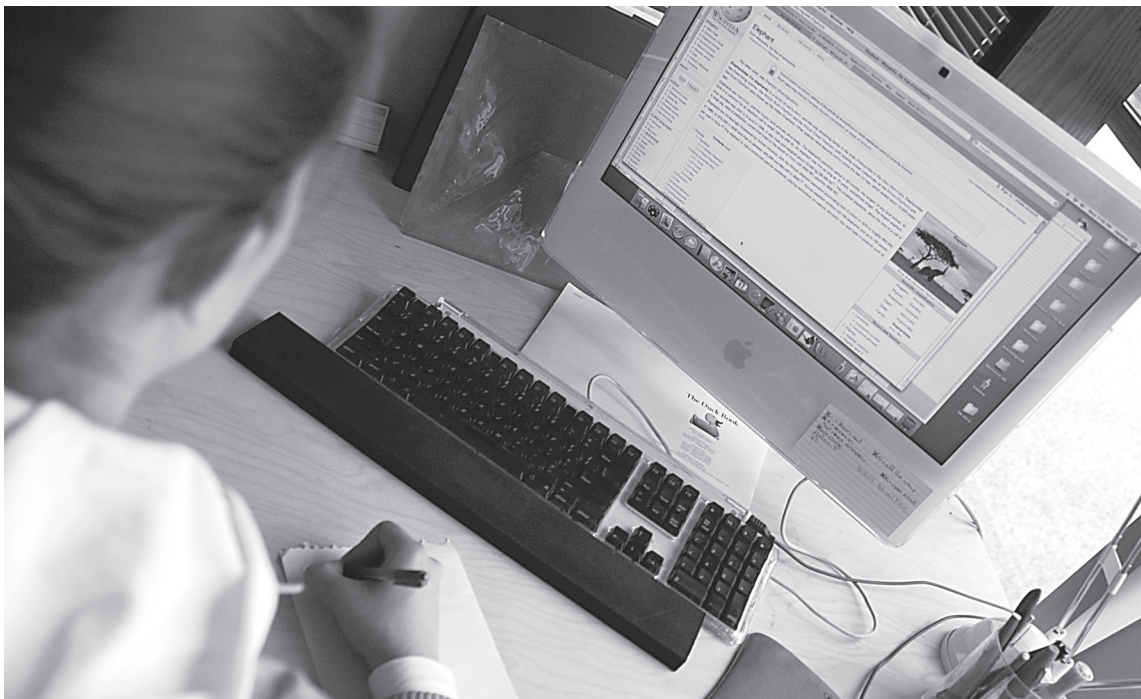


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: KRISTINA SULATYCKI

MISINFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY Whoever said that the world's elephant population had tripled was clearly lying.

Saewyc emphasized that Wikipedia should only be the first step in doing research for a paper.

"Wikipedia isn't authoritative, but it's a good place to start," he said. "Don't try to cite any encyclopedia if you want to get a good grade. Any encyclopedia is not appropriate for good research, and it just tells your teacher that you didn't put the effort in."

Like Saewyc, many professors stress caution when using Wikipedia as an academic resource. Richard Rosenberg, professor emeritus in the University of

British Columbia's Computer Science department, said that the biggest reason to read Wikipedia critically is that it's impossible to tell what the authors' backgrounds are, or what bias they are presenting in their article, given that the authors of Wikipedia's entries can remain entirely anonymous.

"I think it's a valuable resource," Rosenberg said. "But I think students should be cautious. They should use it in a careful way as an introduction to a topic, and it should lead to other

resources that are more reliable."

Many students are also wary of Wikipedia's credibility.

"I trust it enough to use it for trivial things, but I don't trust it enough to use it as a legitimate source," said Stephanie Ellis, a fourth-year biology student.

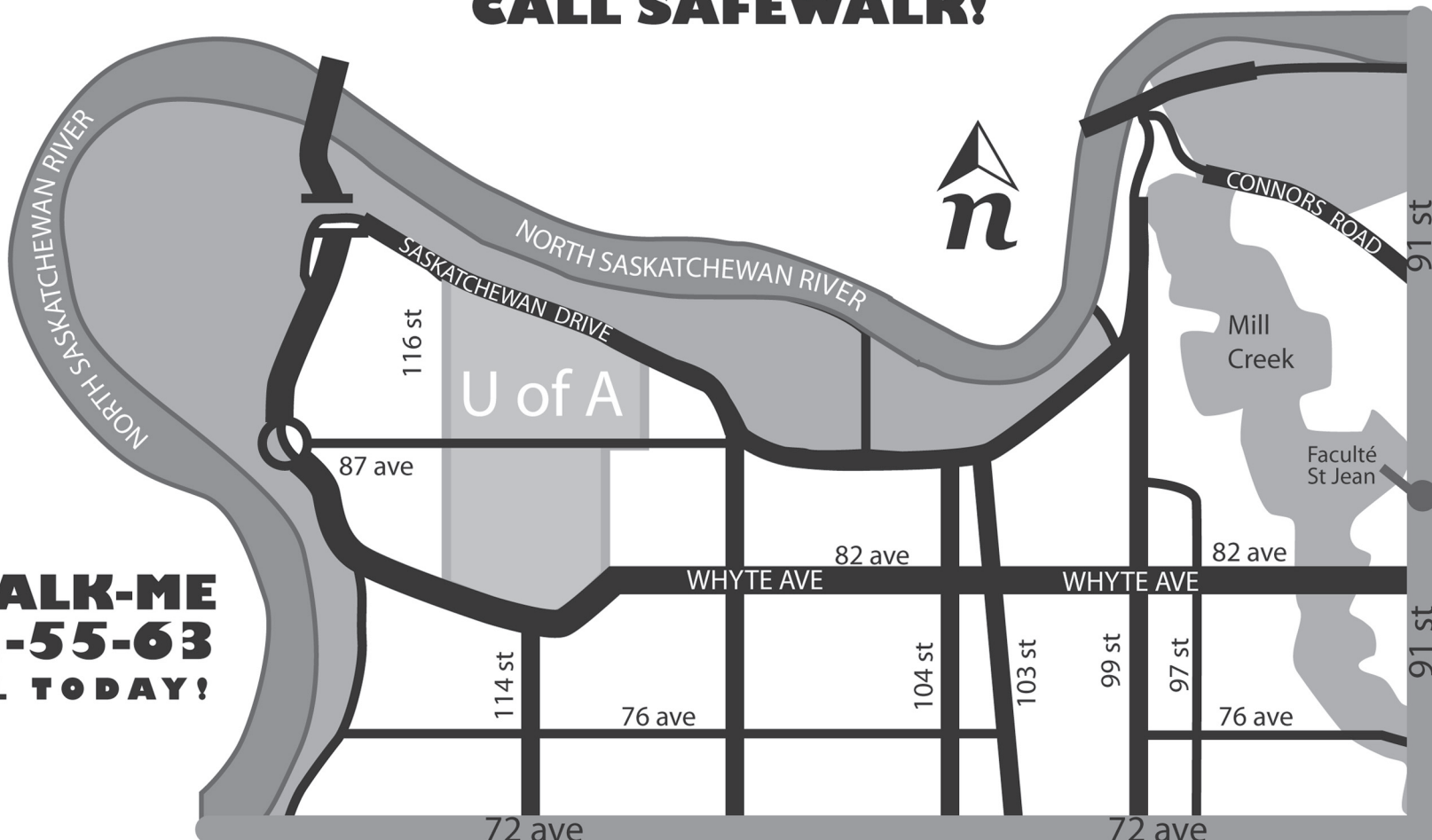
Wikipedia was created in 2001 and now contains almost four million articles in 100 languages and, according to the online ranking facility *Alexa*, it's the 16th most visited website on the Internet.

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