



Growing up, the Encyclopaedia Britannica was a permanent fixture on library shelves in all our schools. Even at a young age there was something imposing and dignified about the dark brown covers and the gold, inlaid lettering. This presumably was the intended effect. But for the urgent demands of school projects, we rarely had any need for the dusty volumes but they contributed a gravitas that was sure to be enjoyed by visiting parents and governors.

The recent news that the 2010 edition of the popular reference will be the last in print will come as a blow to bibliophiles and dent the old nostalgia for the school library. The publishers now concede that they are unable to compete with the quick fluidity and luscious multimedia offered by online resources. The end of an era, then, if you're at all sentimental about the travails of the publishing industry.

Still, it's premature to shed tears over spilt pages. If the stately Britannica will no longer be offering her vision of the world in print form, the contents will continue to live online. There in the ether of the internet, the vast collection will sit alongside all the other materials that now fill our lives. And if anything is emblematic of the way our relationship to information has changed in the last twenty years, it's the ubiquity of the search engine now that 'Google' has become a verb.

But even if there's plenty of stuff around to fill the void left by real-world publishing, there's still the thorny issue of trustworthiness. Always implicit in the enduring enthusiasm for the Britannica was the idea that it carried between its covers a uniquely authoritative view of the world that was precious and unrivalled. This claim to authenticity was central to the pitch made by the door-to-door salesmen who flogged the books and it's something that's never been captured by Wikipedia's ephemeral, vox pop content.

Why, then, the hand-wringing over publishing on a site with an Islamic focus? Even to those of us who aren't in the business of selling increasingly outdated and outmoded encyclopaedias, authenticity is still an important commodity. Particularly when it comes to the foundational tenets of our Religion, every Muslim needs to be careful about where to place trust. As an organisation, the AICP are conscientious about authenticity and we have always stressed the

importance of learning about the Religion from reliable and trustworthy teachers.

As children we were mostly unconcerned, but publications like the Britannica traded in the currency of authenticity when persuading us of their values and worldview. Perhaps many consumers of the written word are similarly oblivious, but when it comes to publishing we often allow ourselves to become passive recipients of the materials we read and forget about the active agency of the author and publisher in crafting content.

It's easy and common nowadays to sneer at the amateur scholarship of Wikipedia et al., but in the old days how confident could we really be of the opinions and ideas put about by the trusted encyclopaedia? Now we're putting this old standby to rest, how sophisticated will we be in judging the reliability of Britannica's online inheritors? Most importantly, how diligent will we be in seeking authenticity in our Religion?