



TECHNOLOGY

## The facts depend on where you are coming from

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DID Thomas Edison invent the incandescent light bulb? Or was it Sir Joseph Swan?

An encyclopaedia published on CD-ROM by my company in the US has an article on Edison that mentions Swan.

"In 1878 and 1879, British inventor Joseph Swan and American inventor Thomas Edison simultaneously developed the carbon-filament lamp," it says.

But the edition sold in Britain reflects a different reality. It adds an article on Swan, saying: "In 1878 he demonstrated an electric light using a carbon wire in a vacuum bulb. Thomas Edison arrived independently at the same solution the following year."

Did the American Alexander Graham Bell invent the telephone? Or was it the Italian-American Antonio Meucci?

Both English-language versions credit Bell, who patented the invention in 1876. None of the 30 000 articles in the US version or the 28 000 articles in the British version even mention the name Meucci.

But in a coming Italian version, Meucci is credited with developing the first rudimentary telephone in 1854 and filing preliminary papers with the US patent office in 1871.

"In 1876 another inventor, A G Bell, patented a similar device . . . Bell obtained fame and wealth, while Meucci died in poverty," it says.

Reality can be subjective, as I'm learning as our editorial teams localise the Encarta encyclopaedia for different world markets. It's a lesson many publishers will learn well in the coming years as information increasingly flows to worldwide audiences via the Internet.

Software companies with global markets already adapt their products to some extent. We translate menu names, command names, and instructional files into local languages. We build logic into our software to understand different calendars, different keyboards, and different currency symbols. Electronic spell checkers and thesauruses are created for numerous languages and can be used interchangeably, a boon for people who work with multilingual documents.

But none of such localisation prepared us for localising an encyclopaedia into five languages. No company had taken up the challenge of thoroughly adapting such a massive amount of information for readers around the world.

The task was an eye-opener.

It was not possible to simply translate encyclopaedia text from English into other languages. Countries and cultures have different interests and interpretations so we had to get the local angle.

The last thing we wanted people to say was that this was an encyclopaedia from the US. So experts around the world were empowered to do as they saw fit.

The result is a series of CD-ROM encyclopaedias rooted in the US version, but as local as possible, representing what we call "local, educated reality".

The sometimes tricky task was immensely enjoyable for the people involved.

Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of new articles were written and shortened or lengthened to reflect relative importance. Because of the random-access nature of an encyclopaedia, importance was expressed by the length of an article and the number of photographs, sound clips and videos it had, rather than by the prominence of its placement.

For example, the English language version of Encarta has a much longer treatment of Shakespeare than of Cervantes, while the Spanish one balances the entries more evenly.

The Spanish editors treated bullfighting as a performing art and delved much deeper than the Americans into the flora and fauna of South America.

The French editors added much detail regarding French art and literature, particularly in areas like the Renaissance and Impressionism. They also added poetry readings.

The British editors substituted English words for US ones so "pants" became "trousers" because in England "pants" refers to underwear so a reference to cowboys wearing "tight pants" amused the British.

They also injected a stronger point of view in signed articles by respected authorities, while the US editors sought a neutral tone.

Regarding World War II, the US account emphasised what happened after the US entered the war. The British editors beefed up the conflict's early years and the Germans made extensive revisions. They also added references to important Germans, such as Ulf Merbold, a physicist who was the first astronaut to fly on both the US Space Shuttle (in 1983 and 1992) and the Russian MIR space station (in 1994).

The Japanese edition was enhanced with extensive content reflecting their traditions and perspectives. For example, the Japanese discussion of printing delves into early Asian techniques that predated the invention of movable type by Gutenberg in Germany in about 1450. The discussion of cherries and cherry blossoms contains 10 photographs and six pages of text, compared with only two photographs and five paragraphs of text in the US edition.

While the US edition includes 46 topics on North or South Korea, the Japanese edition has 216. Korean experts reviewed all discussions of Korea, and Chinese specialists reviewed all discussions of China.

Border disputes between nations are tricky matters for encyclopaedias that will be read around the world. In one map showing a disputed border between India and Pakistan, editors resorted to dotted lines.

And in another edition we made the factual mistake of saying that a small state in southern Korea, known as Kaya to the Koreans and Mimana to the Japanese, had been "dominated" by Japan in the 3rd and 4th centuries. Before corrected, this error provoked outrage in South Korea with one newspaper calling for a boycott of all Microsoft products.

In 1982 Great Britain and Argentina fought a war over a group of islands off the tip of South America. Britain, which won the war and maintains control of the islands, calls them the Falklands but Argentina calls them the Islas Malvinas. The Spanish version of Encarta deems Britain's possession of the islands "one of the last remnants of European colonialism in America".

The Spanish editors worried about "cultural colonialism", too. They made sure the voices on the CD-ROM didn't have European Spanish accents, and that Spanish words used in the text reflected wide practices.

For example, the word "bean" would have been "judia" if the encyclopaedia had been distributed only in Spain. But a variety of additional synonyms were used by the editors, because in various Spanish-speaking countries the word for bean is "frijole", "poroto", "caraota", or "habichuela".

Over time, much of the new content created for each localised edition will find its way into the others. This will be feasible once the information is delivered mostly by way of the Internet, which has unlimited storage capacity.

It's an exciting prospect.

But when international versions of Encarta eventually go up on the Internet, our policy of presenting "local, educated reality" will be called into question. Some readers will get upset about content that may fly in the face of their reality.

A Korean reader may gain access to Japanese Encarta and note that the East Sea is called the Sea of Japan. Some French readers may be offended by how much media is devoted to the English article on the Battle of Waterloo, in which Napoleon was finally defeated.

In the long run, exposing people to worldwide perspectives should be healthy.

Americans will benefit from a better understanding of Asian or European views of important cultural and scientific events, and vice versa.

One of the challenges of presenting history is its inability to be captured by a single interpretation. The goal, therefore, must be to find neutral ground and present opposing points of view where appropriate.

Truth must not be a victim of this process.

For example, it would be wrong if the different versions of Encarta provided dramatically different accounts of Waterloo. As it happens, the text of the accounts is almost identical in the US, British, German and French editions of the encyclopaedia. Differences are subtle, but they matter.

For the record, Swan did invent the light before Edison, although their efforts were independent. But Edison turned it into a commercial success.

And Bell invented the electric telephone, after Meucci conceived of a simpler mechanical device that allowed remote conversations over relatively short distances.

At least, that's reality as I understand it.

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