Wikipedia: J’accuse

By Helen Buyniski

Wikipedia is one of the most popular websites in the world. It’s free, it’s educational, and it’s democratic – what’s not to like? The average user has no reason to think the material it publishes is anything but true, and it has become the go-to authority for anyone looking to quickly educate themselves on a topic. Qualifications and expertise are beside the point – this is an open-source repository of all human knowledge, and surely the cream rises to the top; if information is wrong, surely editors are standing by to correct the record.

But as Andrew Lewis said, “If you’re not paying for something, you’re not the customer; you’re the product being sold.” Our in-depth investigation has found that everything we’ve been led to believe about Wikipedia is a lie. Wikipedia serves as a warning that if something sounds too good to be true, it isn’t true. Scratch the surface of the “free encyclopedia anyone can edit” and you find a finely-honed propaganda machine manipulated by experts and used to destroy the reputations of those who dare question the status quo.

The casual user sees the “edit” button next to an entry and assumes all users can make changes on an equal footing. In reality, many areas of the encyclopedia are tightly controlled by ruling cliques operating with the blessing of Jimmy Wales, the co-founder and self-styled “benevolent dictator” of Wikipedia. The experience of trying to correct information about oneself on Wikipedia is akin to being trapped in a Kafka novel – enclosed by an impenetrable thicket of unevenly-enforced rules, subject to the whims of powerful groups that officially do not exist, helpless to stop millions of Wikipedia users from happening across false and even libelous information about yourself or your work. For those trapped in Wikipedia’s internet gulag, there is no escape – not even deletion. Wikipedia, Wales gloats, does not believe in the right to be forgotten.

While Wales has said he considers his role akin to that of a constitutional monarch – largely ceremonial but ultimately powerless – he has the ability to override the actions of any other user and has deployed these godlike powers to shape the narrative. Favoritism, rules enforced unevenly, pay-for-play editing, ideological hit squads, hundreds of factions conspiring to various degrees of secrecy to game the system – all this goes on with Wales’ blessing. A case can be made that the Wikimedia Foundation has violated its charter as a non-profit and stripped itself of the immunity conferred by section 230 of the Communications Decency Act by involving itself editorially in the content it hosts, by choosing which editors are allowed a platform, and by choosing when and where to enforce its rules.

J’ACCUSE

Jimmy Wales did not create Wikipedia, though he has edited his biographical article more than half a dozen times to give the impression that he did. Larry Sanger, whom Wales attempted to airbrush out of history, left Wikipedia in disgust soon after its launch: “Wikipedia never solved the problem of how to organize itself in a way that didn’t lead to mob rule. On the one hand, it isn’t a mob at all. It’s
highly organized and structured and there’s a lot of rules...But on the other hand, the way that the community is organized isn’t codified or decided upon in any type of constitutional way. So there might be some people who selectively apply rules according to positions that other people take on their pet issues. And that’s inherently unfair."4 The inmates have taken over the asylum, and they are running it with the blessing of Wales himself.

Wales may not have founded Wikipedia, but as its public face he has influenced the character of the site more than anyone else. It is his face users see during the fundraising campaigns that bring in far more cash than the site requires to operate – $89 million last year5 – fueling the growth of an unaccountable bureaucracy, top-secret projects hidden from the Wikipedia rank and file, and an increasingly detached sense of responsibility for the very real harms caused by its contents. Wikipedia has allowed itself to be weaponized to do the dirty work of the ruling class, and anything that deviates from the establishment line is fair game to be smeared, attacked, and destroyed.

Wikipedia’s elite operates in secrecy. In general, the more a user or group on Wikipedia protests that there is no “cabal” of powerful editors running the show, the more likely they are to be members of it. Wales himself joked about forming a “cabal” to enforce policy back in September 2001 when the site was just getting off the ground.6 His idea became the Arbitration Committee, which some have likened to Wikipedia’s “supreme court.” Skilled in navigating the dense thicket of rules that has grown up around Wikipedia, ArbCom and the hundreds of administrators who form the next layer of bureaucracy are able to control what remains on the encyclopedia and what (or who) is deleted. If these powers were wielded fairly, their influence would be welcome – but the rules are instead used as a cudgel to enforce ideological conformity.

Wikipedia isn’t just dismissive of expertise – it’s actively hostile to experts. While one of the site’s many policies discourages editors from removing something just because they dislike it (WP:IDONTLIKEIT), Wales and the ruling don’t-call-it-a-cabal have made an exception for themselves. From the beginning, Wales surrounded himself with a cadre of admirers willing to do his bidding – editing his biography when his own self-editing was exposed (and then editing it again to remove a paragraph about the self-editing),7 or attacking his enemies when they ask difficult questions on his talk page – and these internet hitmen became Wikipedia’s ruling class – shaping narratives made to order and serving them up as more real than reality.

ABUSE OF NONPROFIT STATUS

The IRS forbids 501(c)(3) organizations like the Wikimedia Foundation from participating in political campaigns “on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office,” a ban which extends to “contributions to political campaign funds or public statements of position (verbal or written) made on behalf of the organization in favor of or in opposition to any candidate for public office.” IRS policy clearly states that “violating this prohibition may result in denial or revocation of tax-exempt status and the imposition of certain excise taxes.” The policy further explains that “voter education or registration activities with evidence of bias that (a) would favor one candidate over another; (b) oppose a candidate in some manner; or (c) have the effect of favoring a candidate or group of candidates, will constitute prohibited participation or intervention.”8

The Wikimedia Foundation has dipped its toe into political waters on several occasions. Management is aware of the perils of getting politically involved – one of the first major Wikipedia scandals broke in February 2006 when it was discovered that US Congressional staff were scrubbing the biographies of their politicians – removing broken campaign promises,9 scandals, and
other undesirable details and adding “glowing” tributes and favorable information. At the same
time, negative information was appended to the biographies of their opponents, and some ambitious
staffers were replacing their candidates’ biographies wholesale with staff-authored versions.
Wikipedia responded initially by banning Congressional IP addresses, lest the site appear to be
complicit in the political self-promotion, which would have torpedoed their nonprofit status.

When Google search results returned “Nazism” as the ideology of the California Republican Party
just a week before that state’s primaries earlier this year, Google blamed Wikipedia, explaining that
the Google “knowledge box” that contained the offending term is often populated with Wikipedia
text. The “vandalism” had remained on the party’s Wikipedia page for six days before it was
corrected, hidden in a “piped link” where the link text and “alt text” read differently; meanwhile, other
edits were reverted within a few minutes, suggesting this one was allowed to persist, deliberately
hidden so it would only appear in Google search results. Whether or not it was deliberate, it is not
the first time Wikipedia has appeared to promote the neoliberal wing of the Democratic Party.

Such apparent political bias makes more sense in light of the fact that the Wikimedia Foundation
contracted the Minassian Group, run by Clinton Foundation Chief Communications Officer Craig
Minassian, to train Wikimedia’s own C-level employees, directors and managers in media strategy
for the year 2014-2015. Minassian was further tasked with conducting a “communications audit” in
2016. Some editors among the Wikipedia rank and file were unhappy about having their territory
politicized, particularly given how much of Wikimedia’s money was going to Minassian — $436,104
in 2015 and $406,957 in 2016. While the details of Minassian’s activities are not public, the group
did issue a report detailing its audit findings, which primarily consisted of parsing media coverage by
subject, country, publication, and author and ranking outlets in terms of prestige. Wikipedia was
advised to focus on portraying itself as trustworthy and neutral in the media even while “seeking out
and dispelling controversial issues.” The audit recommended concentrating on building a rapport
with “friendly” journalists writing for what Wikipedia’s editors would call “reliable sources.” Minassian has a history of planting stories favorable to the Clinton Foundation in
“friendly” media, as WikiLeaks revealed in its Podesta emails dump, which included a message from
Craig Minassian himself boasting of favorable coverage he had secured for the foundation on the
Colbert Report.

Wikipedia editor SashiRolls linked the Minassian hire to the arrival of a crew of militant editors on the
Clinton Foundation article who kept it scrupulously clean of any mention of the billions of dollars the
Foundation took in for victims of the Haitian earthquake but never distributed to victims, opting to
construct a lucrative industrial park in an undamaged area of the island instead. Clinton’s own
Wikipedia article is similarly spotless, bearing only a sanitized summary of her “email controversy”
and no mention at all of the revelations from WikiLeaks’ DNC and personal email document dumps.
No mention is made of the invasion of Libya on false pretenses or the fallout from that invasion —
indeed, reality is directly contradicted with a mystifying sentence reading “there was a trend of
women around the world finding more opportunities and in some cases feeling safer, as the result
of Clinton’s actions and visibility,” sourced to a book called The Hillary Doctrine. The article is
“protected” — frozen so that only high-level administrators can make changes — and includes the
option to listen to it as audio, indicating it will stay frozen in that state.

The efforts of a clique of ideologically-motivated editors to whitewash political entries are of
particular interest given the deployment of such teams on other social media sites like Facebook,
Reddit, Instagram, and Twitter during the 2016 election. Clinton strategist and fundraiser David
Brock’s Correct the Record (CTR) superPAC spent at least $1 million during the election to “push
back against” negative posts about Clinton as part of a program called “Barrier Breakers,” and it’s
unlikely that such an operation would have overlooked Wikipedia, which other social media sites
often use as a fact-checking tool. Brock has come under scrutiny before for bending campaign
finance rules – superPACs aren’t supposed to participate in individual elections, and Media Matters for America, the organization for which he is best known, is a 501(c)(3) and therefore barred from conducting political activity on behalf of any candidate.22 much like Wikimedia. A former CTR contractor estimated the group’s expenditures at $5-6 million as of August 2016 in a post on 4chan in which he encouraged others to sign up for easy cash, explaining that CTR employees were given high-ranked and backdated accounts on Reddit and Twitter so as to more easily blend into the discussion.23 Infiltrating Wikipedia is even easier – editors can change usernames and sometimes choose to leave their history with a previous username behind, especially if it was associated with disciplinary sanctions, as ideologically-motivated editors’ often are. Any Wikipedia editor who attempts to look into this sort of infiltration can find themselves indefinitely banned from the site, as SashiRolls found when he tried to blow the whistle on Sagecandor, an editor who racked up hundreds of edits on articles related to Clinton’s 2016 campaign around the time of the election – 904 edits to “fake news websites,” 631 edits to “Russian interference in the 2016 election.”24 Sagecandor, implying that SashiRolls was part of a Kremlin disinformation campaign,25 had him hauled before Wikipedia’s disciplinary committee, where he was accused of “wiki-hounding” and indefinitely banned from editing. Sagecandor and his allies continued to smear Sashi while he was prohibited from responding, until another administrator found incontrovertible proof Sagecandor was in fact a “sockpuppet” of a previously banned user – vindicating SashiRolls, but too late, as he remains banned.26

“Charitable organizations” like Wikimedia are also barred from operating for the benefit of “private interests,” with no part of a group’s “net earnings” accruing “to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual.”27 Yet Wales used his Wikimedia credit card so much that he was relieved of it in 2006, after it was revealed that he was billing $1,300 steak dinners and other outsize expenses to the “charity.”28 At one point he was on the hook for $30,000 in expenses billed to the Foundation for which he could not show receipts; he reportedly reached an agreement with the Foundation’s lawyer to pay less than a third of that. More recently, Wales took the results of Minassian’s audit, which the Wikimedia Foundation paid for, and used it as the business plan for WikiTribune, pitched as a scrupulously neutral news platform helmed by “friendly” journalists and supported by an army of volunteer editors and fact-checkers. The professional journalists would be funded by reader subscriptions, while the volunteers would operate much in the manner of Wikipedia itself. WikiTribune’s mission? To combat “fake news.”

In 2011, the XKCD web comic coined the term “citogenesis” to describe the process by which a piece of nonfactual information is written into Wikipedia, used in stories by “real” journalists with poor research hygiene, and then re-cited in the original Wikipedia article (using the “reliable” source that found the information on Wikipedia). It’s impossible to calculate how common a phenomenon this is, but in January 2015, as ArbCom churned through a complex disciplinary case involving dozens of editors on both sides of the GamerGate controversy, the Guardian (on whose Board Wales sat until 2017) reported the proceedings had ended in a ban on five feminist editors. The story fit the prevailing media narrative concerning GamerGate – that the internet was full of sexism and misogyny, that some form of online affirmative action was needed to increase female representation in gaming, coding, even Wikipedia – and numerous other outlets reposted the Guardian story without fact-checking it. At least one Wikipedia editor emailed the original author, to no avail. With all these reliable sources discussing the results of the GamerGate ArbCom case, a Wikipedia article on “ArbitrationGate” was published to reflect the media’s version of reality. Protests that its content was false fell on deaf ears: certainly there were no reliable sources claiming the case hadn’t been closed – Wikipedia is not a reliable source, even about itself.29 Like a similar case in which author Philip Roth was told he was not a reliable source for information about his own books, the GamerGate affair laid bare the absurdity of Wikipedia’s policy on reliable sources. Yet Wales envisioned the Wikipedia model as the answer to “fake news,” and told any interviewer who would listen that WikiTribune would save the endangered Fact.
The Wikimedia Foundation already has a news subsidiary – WikiNews – that boasts few users but operates within the strictures of the nonprofit. For Wales to title his new venture WikiTribune suggests he deliberately sought to capitalize on the brand confusion engendered by the name. Last month, WikiTribune announced it was switching to an all-volunteer model, bringing the company even closer to direct competition with WikiNews in a way that is at least unethical if not illegal (Wales is both a trustee of the Wikimedia Foundation, of which WikiNews is a subsidiary, and CEO of WikiTribune). It is also worth asking what will happen to subscribers' donations now that WikiTribune is switching to a volunteer-only model. Now that readers are not paying writers' salaries, they cannot expect to have any say in what topics are covered, even though this was an initial selling point in WikiTribune’s subscription-based business model. Wales never planned to offer subscribers real input into the site’s editorial process anyway, according to a Reddit Ask Me Anything he held in 2017: “if 10,000 advocates of Pizzagate sign up to have us investigate Pizzagate, they might be disappointed with the results.”30 And pay-for-play journalism would indeed have taken Wikipedia’s flaws to a terrifying new level. But Wales did convince the initial group of subscribers to join WikiTribune with the implied promise that a cadre of cryptocurrency enthusiasts could direct their subscription dollars to hiring a reporter to write in-depth stories on Bitcoin.31 Was he lying? Where does Bitcoin end and Pizzagate begin? According to a note posted on WikiTribune’s website, the firing of the journalists was only a temporary step – with an eye toward hiring more "community-minded" journalists in the future.32 Apparently, the volunteers didn’t like being bossed around by the experts, a problem which has been endemic to Wikipedia since the very beginning, and which eventually caused co-founder Larry Sanger to throw up his hands and leave. Wikipedia’s oligarchy depends on maintaining the illusion of democracy, but it took less than a year for the first admins to self-appoint, and the ruling power structure has only calcified since then.

QUID PRO QUO PAID EDITING

Wikipedia policy is made less for effect than for the sake of appearances, a problem which becomes clear when one examines the conflict of interest problem. Paid editing has been a thorny moral issue for Wikipedians since the site’s early days, which were marred by scandal after scandal breaking to Wales’ neverending chagrin. In 2009, he finally allowed a policy change to permit paid editing. The new rules didn’t permit an outright free-for-all, of course – that would look even worse than the scandal parade – but allowed editors employed by third parties to edit to their hearts’ content, provided they disclosed any possible conflicts of interest on their user page. The policy has enough loopholes that major PR firms like Bell Pottinger, which has repeatedly been caught with its hands in the Wikipedia cookie jar on behalf of clients like South Africa’s Oakbay Investments and Paramount Group, can portray their clients in a favorable light without their edits being reverted. In general, as with any propaganda outlet, the bigger the lie, the more effective it is.

The entire structure of Wikipedia depends on user anonymity, so this policy of disclosing conflicts of interest has always depended on an honor system. Even if an editor registered under their real name and was known to work for some group, it would be a simple matter for them to create another username and commence editing. Wales’ own perspective shifts on the matter have been so frequent it’s hard to tell where he stands on the matter, but given what he permits under his own roof – his wife, Katherine Garvey, works for Freud Communications, which has edited its own Wikipedia entry along with those of clients for years – it’s safe to say his conflict with paid editors isn’t philosophical. Indeed, he was personally accused of editing in exchange for “donations” to the Wikimedia Foundation in 2006, when software developer Jeff Merkey claimed the Wikipedia founder had offered to cleanse his biographical article for an annual $5,000 donation to the Foundation. Wales denied everything, but Merkey’s talk page showed he had in fact blanked the entry and warned other editors to “be extra careful here to be courteous and assume good faith,” adding a
layer of editorial protection to prevent unregistered users from altering the text. Merkey claimed he’d only gone public after being banned by ArbCom in retaliation for stopping his yearly donation. Meanwhile, it’s worth a look at Wales’ exact denial: “I would never offer, nor accept any offer, whereby a donation would buy someone special editorial treatment in the encyclopedia.”33 Maybe it’s not special at all – the Foundation’s donor list includes a rogue’s gallery of corporate heavies like Pfizer, Goldman Sachs, Boeing, Bank of America, and GE, in addition to preposterously wealthy individuals like George Soros, David Koch, and Mark Zuckerberg. None of these names have ever been dragged through the mud on the “people’s encyclopedia,” and there’s no reason to think they’re supporting Wales’ do-gooder impulses out of their own sense of social duty – time and time again, they’ve made it clear they have none. For Wales, the problem is not quid pro quo, but subtlety. Sites like Wiki-PR and MyWikiBiz, with their whiff of crass commercialism, spoil the illusion of the perfectly neutral encyclopedia even as they offer nothing individual editors don’t provide under the table on freelancing sites like Fiverr.

POLITICAL MANIPULATION

Companies and individuals are far from the only entities interested in rewriting history, and Wales’ own biographical revisionism is small potatoes next to the ambitions of some of Wikipedia’s editors, but even seemingly inconsequential changes can have butterfly-effect-like impact. Wales learned his foreign policy approach from Tony Blair, his wife’s former employer, and correspondingly sees no moral conflict in selling favorable coverage to the world’s most brutal regimes while mouthing platitudes about freedom through knowledge. Wales personally groomed the Wikipedia pages of an executive at the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, admitting on the article’s talk page that he had been “informally advising” the group on its internet strategy as he oversaw the removal of two scandals from the woman’s biography. When an editor took Wales’ “informal advisory” role and inserted it into the Foundation’s article, Wales removed it himself, conflict of interest be damned. He continued to massage the Blairs’ articles and they returned the favor with a photo op, cutting a cake for Wikipedia’s 10th anniversary.34 By the time Wales married his third wife, Blair’s former diary secretary – a wedding both Blairs attended – Wales was banning Wikipedia users who mentioned his friendship with Blair from his talk page. What went wrong?35

While Wales was buffing out the spots on Blair’s reputation, Blair was doing the same for some of the worst human rights violators of modern times. In April 2016, leaked emails revealed that Nursultan Nazarbayev, the dictator of Kazakhstan, had paid Blair $29.1 million to whitewash the crimes of the Central Asian dictatorship over the previous five years. As the tin-pot dictatorship dropped eight spots on the World Press Freedom Index and 18 places on the Corruption Perceptions Index, Blair helped Nazarbayev stonewall an international investigation into the massacre of 15 protesters during an oil strike in Zhanaozen and touted the country as “a remarkable success story.”36 Wales followed Blair to Kazakhstan in 2011, awarding the first-ever “Wikipedian of the Year” prize to Rauan Kenzhekhanuly for his work in essentially facilitating the takeover of the Kazakh language Wikipedia by a group allied with (and funded by) the ruling family. Wales’ pleas that Kenzhekhanuly’s WikiBilim organization was “not political” rang hollow, as a cursory examination revealed that Kenzhekhanuly was both a former government official and a former employee of the state TV channel and that WikiBilim had received hundreds of thousands of dollars in financing from the Kazakh sovereign wealth fund. In May 2011, Wikimedia Foundation trustee Samuel Klein asked WikiBilim staff how best to automate the transfer of all 15 volumes of the government-backed Kazakh encyclopedia into Kazakh Wikipedia.37 The discussion revealed several Kazakh government officials among WikiBilim’s “active community members,” and the Kazakh-language Wikipedia dutifully morphed into the state-sanctioned version of history. By the end of 2011, WikiBilim was described in Creative Commons documents as “a non-profit organization which also operates as the local representative of Wikimedia. WikiBilim in turn is supported by the Government of Kazakhstan and personally by the Prime-Minister Mr. Karim Masimov.”38
With Kazakh Wikipedia safely in the hands of the local Ministry of Truth, Wales began criticizing the Kazakh regime on the website for his Jimmy Wales Foundation. It's unclear when the relationship soured between Wales and the regime. He was still claiming WikiBilim was apolitical in December 2012, when he closed a discussion on his talk page after he was confronted with incontrovertible evidence of WikiBilim's links to the regime. In 2014, Kenzhekanuly was named deputy governor of the Kyzylorda region of Kazakhstan, and in an April 2015 Reddit “Ask Me Anything,” Wales lamented his lack of foresight in naming him Wikipedian of the Year, saying he wouldn’t do it again. He even seemed to turn on his former mentor Blair: “Tony Blair absolutely should be slammed for taking money from Kazakhstan. I condemn it without reservation.”

The very existence of the Jimmy Wales Foundation is evidence of Wales’ moral flexibility. In December 2014, he was awarded the newly-minted “Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Award,” half a million dollars from the United Arab Emirates. Given the UAE’s abysmal human rights record, Wikipedians urged him to refuse the award. Instead, Wales opted to have his cake and eat it too, taking the money (the Foundation’s Wikipedia page says he “was not allowed to give it back,” citing an article which says nothing of the sort) and using it to start a ‘human rights foundation’ which, despite its stated mission of fighting for freedom of expression in repressive regimes, has done nothing since hiring Israeli human rights lawyer Orit Kopel to repost articles condemning a selection of repressive regimes. Not a single article denounces the abysmal state of press freedom in the UAE. Nor does the Foundation call out Israel, whose snipers deliberately shot journalists covering the Palestinian March of Return this summer. Palestinian journalists, activists, and ordinary social media users are increasingly prosecuted for “incitement” for merely “liking” Facebook posts that may be entirely devoid of political content. Since October 2015, over 280 social media users have been arrested for “online incitement to violence,” and many influential Palestinian journalists’ accounts have been unilaterally shut down. Such repression would seem like a situation tailor-made for Wales’ Foundation – yet he and Kopel are silent. Wales received the $1 million Dan David prize from Israel in 2015, but his loyalty was purchased long before that. Perhaps he sees the closeness of the relationship between Wikipedia and the Israeli government as something to emulate – the chairman and spokesman of Wikimedia Israel, Itzik Edri, who for two years also sat on the global WMF’s funds dissemination committee, also manages PR for former Israeli president Shimon Peres (who was interviewed by WikiNews in 2004). Lest his propaganda efforts be in any doubt, Edri received the 2014 Roaring Lion Award from the Israeli Public Relations Association for his work on Wikipedia’s tenth anniversary campaign. He also worked directly with Tzipi Livni, then-chairperson of Israel’s Hatnua party (now Zionist Union) and current Knesset opposition leader.

Israel was on the cutting edge of Wikipolitics, having burrowed into the editorial ranks of the site long before tin-pot dictators like Nazarbayev and his Azerbaijani counterpart Aliyev (who sponsored a “WikiDays” initiative in 2014 to “protect interests of Azerbaijan in Wikipedia and prevent distortion of information about Azerbaijan”) thought of using it for state propaganda purposes. An April 2008 exposé revealed that the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA) had been teaching agents how to rewrite history on Wikipedia for years, instructing them to avoid alerting other editors to their mission by sticking to neutral content for a few months before getting to work on Israel-related articles. They were taught how to game Wikipedia’s ever-growing system of rules to get unfriendly edits reverted and unfriendly editors banned, told to form alliances with non-affiliated Wikipedians, and encouraged to work towards admin status in order to help their fellow agents. All collaboration occurred offline in a private Google group called “Isra-pedia.” When the scandal came to light, it was duly written up in CAMERA’s Wikipedia entry, only to be erased by a user working from the offices of the US Department of Justice. An admin blocked all DoJ IP addresses for several days while other users implicated in the CAMERA edits were topic-banned from editing articles relating to Arab-Israeli conflict, and one user was banned entirely, but such obstacles are easily overcome on a site where anonymity is paramount. Any users patient enough to
make hundreds of neutral edits to gain the community’s trust before embarking on a Zionist crusade to rewrite history are patient enough to repeat the process.

In 2010, two more groups began publicly offering classes in “Zionist editing” – My Israel and the Yesha Council. Yesha Council was formed in the 1970s to promote Jewish settlements in the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza Strip – settlements that flagrantly violate international law and which are notorious for taking land by force. None of this is in their Wikipedia article. Instead, we are treated to the words of Ayelet Shaked, now the Israeli minister of justice, who organized Yesha’s Wikipedia project: it was definitely “not a Zionist conspiracy to take over Wikipedia.” When the extent of these Zionist editing cells within Wikipedia was brought to his attention, Wales merely slapped token protection on the “Israel” article, claiming the three groups’ work had amounted to essentially nothing. Like Shaked, he is forever reassuring Wikipedians there is no ruling cabal even as packs of roving administrators vote en bloc on political matters. Yesha has since expanded to Facebook and YouTube, claiming 12,000 members in 2010.51 Act.IL, a smartphone app co-developed by Israeli intelligence agencies, followed in its footsteps, launching in 2013 to gamify “hasbara,” the Hebrew term for propaganda. The app offers users a chance to score “points” by completing quick “missions” – edit a Wikipedia article, post a Tweet, “like” a post – creating the illusion of thousands of independent pro-Zionist actors all working toward a common public relations goal. This practice has been duplicated in recent years by non-Israeli groups and has resulted in many controversial accounts being “deplatformed” from social media after redefining non-mainstream political speech as “hate.” Twitter accounts like SleepingGiants specialize in a form of mass-reporting known as “brigading” which leads to their targets having their social media accounts suspended whether or not they are actually guilty of any terms of service violations.

The ultimate dystopian use of Wikipedia may come from Google, whose Jigsaw subsidiary developed a program called Conversation AI to root out “hate speech” and online harassment before it can proliferate on social media and in comments sections. One AI tool, called Detox, was fed 14 years of Wikipedia comments sections in order to “teach” it to recognize patterns of “abusive behavior.” Faced with a hopelessly heterogenous data set – 100,000 comments from Wikipedia talk pages, evaluated for personal attack content by 4,000 people – researchers claimed the algorithm was able to distinguish personal attacks from benign comments as well as a three-person team. They then ran 63 million comments through the algorithm and called the results science. The results (which any Wikipedian would happily have volunteered) indicated that over half of abusive comments came from registered users, putting the notion of “anonymous trolls” – so vital to Google and other social media platforms’ agenda of expunging anonymity from the web – to rest.52 While commenters do not retain copyright on their words once posted on Wikipedia, it’s not unreasonable to think that editors might not want their words fed to some unaccountable AI database operated by a tech conglomerate that has expressed marked hostility toward the concept of freedom of speech in the past and is actively working to censor users’ internet experience in the US and abroad. Editor retention is a very real problem for Wikipedia, where just one percent of users make 77% of the edits.53 Wikipedia is a reflection of the society that spawned it, further distorted through the image of the man who made himself its public face.

SHUTTING DOWN SCHOLARLY INQUIRY/SECTION 230

Wikipedia’s stated mission of open access to knowledge is itself false, if the short-lived Wikiversity Ethics project was any indication. When a group of users attempted to create a project called “The Ethics of Breaching Experiments” in early 2010 – essentially an experiment meant to test Wikipedia’s defenses against vandalism and other rule violations – Wales used his site-wide moderating powers to delete the project entirely and ban the associated users. Wales, who had never before shown any interest in Wikiversity, was thrown off guard by the backlash to his actions – unlike Wikipedia, where he is only semi-ironically revered as the “god-king,” Wikiversity harbored
several users banned from the encyclopedia for “ethical breaches” like those described in the project, none of whom appreciated his barging into their virtual classroom. When users protested his unilateral suppression of free inquiry – the ostensible mission of the Wikimedia Foundation itself – Wales threatened to shut down Wikiversity entirely. Hundreds of users in return voted to strip Wales of his founding privileges, condemning him for betraying the stated mission of the project. He finally backed down, unbanning the wrongthinkers and self-limiting his admin powers, but not before telling them that he had “the full support of the Wikimedia Foundation” and could shut them down whenever he liked. Technically, this isn’t even true – Wikiversity is owned by its contributors, not the Wikimedia Foundation, and while it is hosted on Foundation servers, it is only by the agreement of its members that it agrees to advance Wikimedia’s mission. When the self-styled “benevolent dictator” of Wikipedia shuts down a semi-autonomous project for doing what it was supposed to do – Wikiversity was launched to encourage the kind of “original research” barred from Wikipedia pages – the site is broken beyond repair. Such behavior would appear to violate section 230 as well, since it represents deliberate curation of content on Wales’ part.

Wales himself has admitted Wikipedia is not merely a neutral platform of the sort protected by section 230. “People get frustrated when they thought it was all about voting. But we’re writing an encyclopedia here; it’s not an open democratic experiment.” Like the US government, Wikipedia offers its users the illusion of participation in a democratic system, but when they stray beyond the accepted behavioral parameters, enforcers are waiting to restore order. Touting this system as the best of all possible worlds, he explains that formerly neutral platforms actually have a duty to “build better software to give communities better control, so that your best voices come to the front, and the people who aren’t there for constructive reasons are marginalized and asked to leave.” Such policies are in flagrant violation of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which protects sites like Wikipedia from lawsuits stemming from the content available on their platforms, but Wales may feel that living in London he does not have to abide by US laws. Unfortunately, the Wikimedia Foundation is still based in Silicon Valley, and Wikipedia – like Facebook and Twitter and the rest of the social media sites that have come under fire for their increasing censorship of users – must choose whether exercising editorial oversight is worth jettisoning those legal protections. Given the number of people who have been casually libeled by Wikipedia and its editors, it might want to think twice about throwing section 230 to the wind.

LIBEL

As an open-source site with tens of thousands of contributors, Wikipedia should not have a ‘point of view,’ and indeed it officially does not. Articles are supposed to be written from a Neutral Point of View (NPOV) and there are further policies in place to protect living people from slander. Once strongly enforced, these are now ignored, as malicious actors have developed an alternate channel of rules to circumvent them. Entire sections of Wikipedia – alternative medicine, nutrition, progressive political movements and activism – have become reputational prisons, where indelible scarlet letters are branded on the persons associated with them. Alternative healing is shackled with the “pseudoscience” tag, allowing admins to punish anyone making unsanctioned changes to these pages with a block or a ban; politically-sensitive pages are also booby-trapped with administrative sanctions, chilling any attempts to correct false information. Classifying a person or topic as “FRINGE” invokes a set of policies largely exempting editors from the rules surrounding the NPOV rule, and ideologically-motivated editors have wasted no time in corralling their victims into this internet ghetto.

Wikipedia does not require editors to display some familiarity with a topic before editing. Even – especially! – when they don’t understand the terminology or even the concepts in an article, editors are encouraged to jump right in by groups like Susan Gerbic’s Guerrilla Skeptics on Wikipedia. The so-called Scientific Skeptic movement has become extremely powerful on Wikipedia, to the point
that they have been able to convince ordinary editors that personal attack sites like Stephen Barrett’s QuackWatch, written by individuals with no expertise beyond a massive axe to grind, are “reliable sources” for Biographies of Living Persons, which according to Wikipedia’s own rules require a higher standard of reliability to avoid libeling their subjects. Wales declared open season on alternative medicine in 2014, rejecting a petition that called for Wikipedia to treat such topics with the respect offered by the scientific community and dismissing entire fields of healing as “lunatic charlatans,” but the Skeptics had infiltrated Wikipedia long before. Through years of “meatpuppeting” efforts – bringing in backup from outside Wikipedia to support one’s viewpoint in editorial or administrative disputes – the webmaster for QuackWatch’s email list, Paul Lee, was able to attain a quorum to have his mentor’s page declared a Reliable Source. He canvassed Skeptic email lists, message boards devoted to “debunking” chiropractic, and the now-defunct SkepticWiki in order to amass an army of Skeptic editors to shift the official Wikipedia point of view.

The extent of Lee’s interactions with Wales are not known, though Lee made numerous supportive posts on Wales’ talk page during this time. Somehow, Wales’ stated policy morphed from “editors who don’t stop to think that reverting someone who is trying to remove libel about themselves is a horribly stupid thing to do…. Real people are involved, and they can be hurt by your words. We are not tabloid journalism, we are an encyclopedia” (July 2006) to “What we won’t do is pretend that the work of lunatic charlatans is the equivalent of “true scientific discourse.” (March 2014). Wales has never been tolerant of alternative healing modalities – he believes homeopathy should be illegal – but Lee, Gerbic, and the other Skeptics’ efforts seem to have emboldened him to abandon his pretense of neutrality concerning the “lunatic charlatans” he clearly disdains. Were it merely a matter of personal preference, Wales would be entitled to his beliefs, but when they become policy, superseding the rights of individuals not to be libeled on public platforms, they are problematic.

In a Vanity Fair interview released just last week, Wales told a new version of the ever-evolving Wikipedia founding myth in which he was moved to launch the encyclopedia after his daughter was born with a rare lung defect. In this retelling, he brought her to an expert doctor – the top in his field – who wanted to try an unorthodox treatment. The treatment was successful, and Wales decided then and there to create an encyclopedia so that this doctor’s knowledge – a “miracle cure,” in his words – could be available for the benefit of everyone. This isn’t the first time Wales has told this story – he shared it with a credulous Forbes India reporter in 2009, wiping a tear from his eye as he describes his realization that right then and there, holding his now-healthy baby in his arms, that “no one other than this doctor would ever know about this whole thing” if the knowledge wasn’t preserved somehow, perhaps forgetting that doctors share their findings with others in their profession as a matter of course. Given Wales’ legendary antipathy toward alternative medicine, “untested cures,” and anything else that is not “conclusively proven,” it’s unlikely he would have submitted his daughter for such a procedure, and if she had actually been saved by some maverick physician, his disdain for alternative practitioners would be inexplicable. The use of the phrase “miracle cure” is a dog-whistle to the Skeptics – no reputable alternative medicine practitioner describes their work as a “miracle cure,” and Wales is aware of this.

Wikipedia’s ruling class have made it clear that they set themselves to be above the site’s rules just as they set themselves above the law. Not only is Wales allowed to revise his own biography, rewriting history to order, but those he disdains – progressive political activists, alternative healing practitioners, anyone outside of the neoliberal establishment that has welcomed him with open arms – are fair game for thousands of anonymous editors to smear as they see fit. History is rewritten to order to suit Wales’ and his allies’ version of history, and all those whose reputations are destroyed in the process are just collateral damage. Wales and his Skeptic allies think nothing of the millions of people who could have been helped by alternative medicine but were discouraged from seeking treatment because of something they saw on Wikipedia. There is no way to calculate the harm done
in this manner, but it is surely massive, and should weigh heavily on the consciences of those editors who think they are doing a service by assassinating the character of alternative health practitioners.

Wikipedia’s insistence on anonymity facilitates its use as a platform for attacks both ideologically and personally motivated. There is no way to tell if an editor has knowledge of the subject they are editing or if they are motivated by malice, financial gain, or other factors conducive to producing dishonest coverage of a topic. Conflict of interest, as we have seen, is more the rule than the exception on Wikipedia, where the only rule regarding paid editing seems to be “don’t get caught.”

EXAMPLES

John Pilger is an Australian journalist and award-winning documentary filmmaker. His 1979 documentary Year Zero, filmed after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, inspired viewers to raise substantial donations for the UK’s first relief shipment to Cambodia, purchasing much-needed medicines, food, and clothes. Pilger worked as a war correspondent for the Daily Mirror in Vietnam, Biafra, Bangladesh, and Cambodia. He has also made several documentaries about indigenous Australians and exposed the 1998 legislation that deprived them of their common-law rights. His documentary on the Indonesian occupation of East Timor, Death of a Nation, scored record ratings and contributed to the massive international outcry that culminated in Indonesian withdrawal from the province in 2000. The audience response to his films has been cited as proof that humanity has not yet succumbed to “compassion fatigue.” Yet Wikipedia calls his work “full of falsehoods,” quoting conservative journalist Oliver Kamm, who is not an authority on journalism, international conflicts, or documentary filmmaking. Unfortunately, Wikipedia’s libels are beginning to have a real-world effect: Pilger has stated that “my written work is no longer welcome” in mainstream publications, a chilling thought given his stellar track record. His last column was dropped in 2015 from the Guardian, whose Board includes such luminaries as Jimmy Wales.

Rupert Sheldrake is a biologist and author best known for the concept of morphic resonance, which posits that “self-organizing systems inherit a memory from previous similar systems.” Organisms and groups develop or change along teleological “paths” worn by their predecessors, and patterns are imposed on otherwise random or indeterminate activity according to the previous and contemporaneous iterations of that system. The theory radically reimagines everything from memory (memories no longer have to be stored inside the brain in a fixed location) to the notion of a collective unconscious (members of a species have access to the sum total of their knowledge). Sheldrake has written 13 books and 85 scientific papers. He has a PhD in biochemistry from Cambridge University. As a Fellow of the Royal Society, he discovered the chemiosmotic model of polar auxin transport in plants (auxin is a plant hormone that influences cell differentiation). His Wikipedia bio focuses almost exclusively on negative responses to his work without giving a proper explanation of that work. But then, Sheldrake is a vocal critic of what he calls the “dogmatic materialism” endemic to much of current science, which he likens to religion. His outspokenness on this front has made him the enemy of organized Skepticism, and the outcry they orchestrated following his TEDxWhitechapel talk in January 2013 both spilled into and fed off of his Wikipedia page.

Guy McPherson is an author and professor emeritus of conservation biology and natural resources at the University of Arizona, where he has taught for 20 years. He is the leading authority on abrupt climate change leading to near term human extinction, having coined the term “Near-Term Extinction” to designate the possibility of human extinction before the year 2030. McPherson became a tenured full professor before the age of 40 and is among the most accomplished faculty members at the University. His works include Walking Away from Empire, Going Dark, and Letters to a Young Academic. McPherson is also one of the most slandered scientists in the climate change
field, and Wikipedia has not hesitated to jump on the bandwagon, taking a *New York Times* quote that describes him as an “apocalyptic ecologist” far enough out of context to imply he’s some sort of cult leader with an "End of Days following," then shoehorning in a quote from science blogger (and unreliable source, according to the Wikipedia rule which bars blogs and personal websites from being used as sources for the biographical articles of living persons) Michael Tobis, who accuses him of climate denialism “of a different stripe,” whatever that means – even though McPherson’s whole thesis is that mainstream climate science is itself denying the reality of humanity’s impending extinction.65

Sharyl Attkisson is an author and television journalist who currently hosts the public affairs program *Full Measure with Sharyl Attkisson* on channels owned by the Sinclair Broadcasting Group. Her book *Stonewalled* was a *New York Times* e-book bestseller. Attkisson began her journalism career on a PBS affiliate in Gainesville, Florida, and worked at local stations in West Palm Beach, Columbus, and Tampa before moving to CNN. She moved to CBS in 1993 and spent 21 years there, working as an investigative correspondent on the channel’s Washington DC bureau. From 1996 to 2001, she also hosted a medical news program on PBS. Attkisson has won Emmy awards for her reporting on the American Red Cross (2002), the Troubled Asset Relief Program (2009), and the BATF’s "Fast and Furious" program (2012). Wikipedia drags in the ubiquitous vaccine defender Dr. Paul Offit to criticize Attkisson’s reporting as “damning by association”66 because of a piece she aired on vaccines. Several other awards she received are also omitted, while the better part of a page is devoted to making her claims of being hacked for surveillance purposes seem less than credible.

Jeremy Corbyn is a UK politician currently serving as Leader of the Labour Party and Leader of the Opposition. A Member of Parliament since 1983, he identifies as a Democratic Socialist. Corbyn opposes military intervention and austerity cuts to public services and supports renationalizing the UK’s public utilities, including its railway network. He has proposed the Bank of England issue funds for large-scale public spending such as housing, energy, and transportation projects, calling the policy “People’s Quantitative Easing” to contrast it with existing quantitative easing policies that attempt to stimulate the economy by buying commercial banks’ assets. He has been a strong campaigner for nuclear disarmament and active in the anti-war movement since his youth. Corbyn’s public support of the Palestinian cause has led to predictable allegations of anti-Semitism perpetuated by the Israeli lobby despite his widespread support among British Jews, and such allegations have metastasized to consume a third of his Wikipedia biography – certainly more space than his actual political views – and spawned several articles of their own.

Vandana Shiva is an Indian environmental activist, eco-feminist, and author who promotes seed freedom and water rights. She has brought global awareness to the destructive effects of GMO farming in her native India, where Monsanto seeds have largely supplanted natural crops and thus must be purchased year after year, leaving farmers so hopelessly in debt that many commit suicide. She exposed genetically modified “golden rice” as a fraud with negligible health benefits and fought against the patenting of living organisms. Shiva began her activist work in the aftermath of the Union Carbide leak in Bhopal. She was also an early voice warning the public about the carcinogenic effects of glyphosate. Beloit College, honoring her with its Weissberg Chair in International Studies, called her a "one-woman movement for peace, sustainability, and social justice."67 Wikipedia opts to focus on criticism of her work, giving half a page to a single article written in response to a New Yorker piece about her.

Craig Murray is a former UK ambassador to Uzbekistan turned whistleblower and human rights activist. While working for the UK Foreign Office in Samarkand, he informed his superiors that the Uzbek regime was torturing thousands of dissidents every year, employing such techniques as rape, asphyxiation, pulling out fingernails, and immersion in boiling liquids. Because the regime had just
permitted the US military to move into a military base near the Afghan’s border to facilitate the hunt for Osama bin Laden – a privilege it was paying for with half a billion dollars in annual aid payments – it enjoyed a privileged status with regard to international human rights law; Murray was outraged at the “conspiracy of silence” perpetrated by his fellow diplomats, and spoke out against the regime’s abuses at an October 2002 human rights conference. He was subsequently drummed out of the Foreign Office with a series of fictional and trumped-up charges. While much of the worst material in his Wikipedia article has been removed – the editor responsible was banned from editing topics related to contemporary British politics for six months after several of his victims brought his misdeeds to media attention – the article is also missing any reference to Murray’s achievements before becoming Uzbek ambassador, including his roles brokering a peace deal in Sierra Leone, supervising Ghana’s first democratic election, and negotiating the UN’s convention on the law of the sea. The main “Craig Murray” page was even set up to redirect to the biographical article of an ice hockey player before it was fixed.

Deepak Chopra is an author and speaker known for bringing Ayurvedic medicine to a mainstream audience. He is board certified in internal medicine and endocrinology and focuses on mind-body spiritual healing through multiple modalities, aiming to integrate Ayurveda with quantum mechanics to create “quantum healing,” linking shifts in consciousness to shifts in biology. Chopra runs a spa retreat featuring meditation, yoga, massage, and Ayurvedic meals. Because he was one of the first practitioners attacked by Richard Dawkins on his “Enemies of Reason” television series, he has been hounded by the Skeptics who idolize Dawkins. They flock to Chopra’s Wikipedia page to pay homage, and as a result it is cluttered with derogatory phrases in quotation marks, linked to blogger and oncologist David Gorski, who appears to take great joy in verbosely mocking alternative medicine practitioners.

Susan Sarandon is an Academy Award-winning actress with dozens of film and TV credits to her name, including *Thelma and Louise*, *The Lovely Bones*, *The Hunger*, and *Cloud Atlas*. Reading her Wikipedia page, however, you would have no idea she was also an impassioned political activist. Sarandon most recently made appearances at multiple rallies for Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential campaign. Entire paragraphs detailing her history of activism for third party candidates like Sanders, Jill Stein, and Ralph Nader, against the war in Iraq and other imperialist conflicts, for economic justice with Occupy Wall Street, and against mass incarceration have been removed, with no substantial explanation given for their deletion. Does Wikipedia think actresses should confine their work to the screen, or just shut up and look pretty?

These are just a few examples of the type of reputational attacks found on Wikipedia – some quite subtle, some lying by omission, some giving undue weight to minor incidents in a figure’s life or giving space to “opposition voices” when no such courtesy is afforded voices who disagree with establishment dogma. They are not limited to politicians, scientists, journalists, or activists. There are as many ways to smear a person on Wikipedia as there are victims of Wiki smears. Because Wikipedia is among the first results to appear in an online search, being smeared on the site can have very destructive real-life consequences. Wikipedia’s victims have no recourse to a higher authority – section 230 protects the site from lawsuits, and individual editors hide behind their usernames. The Wikimedia Foundation receives hundreds of requests every year from people requesting their biographical entries be taken down, and takes pride in rejecting every single one.

FINAL NOTE:

Wikipedia is trusted by more people than the news media and the government, yet its articles are written by anonymous editors who could very easily be working on behalf of special interests to control the narrative. Manipulating reality through Wikipedia is easy. The blind trust users place in the site is wholly unwarranted, and the examples we have given are only a tiny fraction of the
falsehoods and deliberate manipulation it contains. As George Orwell says, he who controls the past controls the future, and he who controls the present controls the past. Wikipedia controls the past, or at the very least the internet’s idea of the past, and as it becomes more influential, used as a “fact-checking” authority by sites like Google and Facebook, it increasingly controls the present. We must think long and hard about whether we want the kind of future a Wikipedia would give us. Wikipedia may seem too big to fail, having grown in size and power to the point that it can take on governments, but this is precisely why it must fail. We cannot allow the future of human knowledge to be controlled by a group of unaccountable anonymous editors with no understanding of the material, their motivations unknown, their backers unseen. This is the recipe for a totalitarian nightmare.

Time and again, the actions of Wikipedia’s ruling class reveal that their primary concern is how the site appears to observers. Wikipedia’s own reputation is dependent on how it is perceived by the millions of people who read its articles every day. If public opinion takes a nosedive, so does its traffic, and so do its donations. Now that it is Wikipedia’s turn for its reputation to hang in the balance, we will see how forgiving its victims are.


30 Bell, Emily. “Wikitribune venture will not address journalism’s underlying issues.” The Guardian. 30 Apr 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/apr/30/wikitribune-experiment-will-not-address-journalism’s-underlying-issues


38 Wikipediocracy, op.cit.


47 “EI exclusive: a pro-Israel group’s plan to rewrite history on Wikipedia.” Electronic Intifada. 21 Apr 2008. https://electronicintifada.net/content/ei-exclusive-pro-israel-groups-plan-rewrite-history-wikipedia/7472


58 http://mail.wikimedia.org/pipermail/wikienl/2006-May/046726.html

59 “Jimmy Wales’s response.”


