



## London PR firm rewrites Wikipedia for governments and billionaires

Founded by Keir Starmer's communications chief, Portland helps rich clients 'protect their reputation' – with a shady, off-the-books service

Twenty-five years after it was founded, Wikipedia stands as an unrivalled achievement. Not only is it the single largest collection of information in human history, it has also built a stellar reputation for reliability in a digital world awash with lies and deception.

For this reason, new AI tools have begun to carry the site's contents far and wide. Chatbots and AI-generated search summaries – which are rapidly transforming the way people get their information – both use Wikipedia as a key source.

Now, we can reveal Wikipedia has been subject to shady, paid-for edits ordered by partners at an elite London PR firm with links to Downing Street. And the clients who benefited from this "wikilaundering" are some of the world's richest and most powerful people.

The firm in question is Portland Communications, whose founder Tim Allan is now the director of communications for Keir Starmer. And it has been busted once already for this practice, which is in breach of the British PR professionals' code of conduct.

But after the firm was exposed, former employees told us it simply started hiring middlemen instead. As one of them put it: "No one said, 'We should stop doing this.' The question was how we could keep doing it without getting caught."

Portland's subcontractors have polished the public image of Qatar by burying references to critical reporting ahead of the 2022 World Cup, according to the firm's insiders. They have also obscured mentions of a major terrorist-financing case involving Qatari businessmen; scrubbed evidence that a billion-dollar Gates-funded project failed in its mission; and promoted one side of Libya's post-Gaddafi government over the other.

Often, however, their changes were more subtle: burying bad press under descriptions of a client's philanthropic work or swapping out critical news references with something more positive.

### How Wikipedia works

- Hide

Anyone can edit Wikipedia. You don't even need to set up an account. But all editors must abide by rules put in place to protect it from manipulation. Automated scripts scan the site for suspicious edits, and a critical mass of contributors and volunteer editors work to add and refine its contents. Wikipedia's terms of use prohibit paid contributions without disclosure and it has other policies on neutrality, sourcing and conflicts of interest.

The site's reputation as a dependable and objective information source is well earned. A 2019 [study](#) in the journal *Nature* showed that the most politically contentious articles on Wikipedia also tended to be pretty balanced. To put it simply: it is hard to publish misinformation on Wikipedia.

"Small Wikipedia edits punch above their weight," explained Alberto Fittarelli, a senior researcher at the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab. "Professionals who try to manipulate the platform know that small, incremental changes are likely to stick for longer. These kinds of edits make narratives seem credible precisely because they are hardly noticeable. Once that enters the information stream, it becomes really hard to claw it back."

With the rich and powerful ever more eager for their pages to cast them in the best possible light, the demand for Wikipedia editing has never been higher. And that demand is being met by a thriving cottage industry of illicit editors.

Portland declined to comment on any of our findings.

### The man at the centre

Radek Kotlarek, a web consultant who lives on the Welsh coast, is an unremarkable-looking man with friendly features and a bushy beard. Like many in his field, Kotlarek's expertise lies in SEO – search engine optimisation – and the company he founded, Web3 Consulting, was fairly low-profile until it was dissolved last year.

His only real excursion into public life was in 2021, when he was arrested for breaking lockdown rules by taking his wife and son out for an ice cream.

But we can reveal Kotlarek was in fact a key figure in Portland's secret wikilaundering business. He specialises in "dark hat" Wikipedia editing: pay-for-play changes that violate both the website's rules and the British PR professional association's guidelines for ethical conduct. According to seven Portland insiders we spoke to, Kotlarek's services were used by partners at the firm for about a decade.

Radek Kotlarek is at the heart of Portland's outsourced wikilaundering operation

All PR sources have signed strict non-disclosure agreements that come with serious consequences if breached. As a result, the 14 industry insiders who spoke to us for this story have been kept anonymous. But because there is a public record of every Wikipedia edit, we were able to corroborate some of their stories by examining the changes made to certain pages at certain times.

Our analysis led us to a network of 26 "sockpuppets" – multiple accounts orchestrated by a single person – that was eventually banned from Wikipedia under suspicion of paid editing. We linked that network to Web3 Consulting, Kotlarek's company.

Kotlarek did not respond to multiple requests for comment during our reporting of this story.

Portland hasn't always outsourced this work. Until the early 2010s, it did its wikilaundering in-house. According to former employees, the firm's partners would dispatch junior staff around London and New York, instructing them to move from cafe to cafe and edit clients' pages from different computers. (One telltale sign of wikilaundering is persistent edits from a common IP address. Doing it on the move was a form of disguise.)

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Claire reported on misinformation and workers' rights for TBIJ's Big Tech team

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