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LONDON PR FIRM REWRITES WIKIPEDIA FOR GOVERNMENTS AND BILLIONAIRES

Founded by Keir Starmer's former chief, Portland helps rich clients 'protect their reputation' with a study of the book's career

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 benefitted 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.

“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 that Kotlarek was in fact a key figure in Portland's secret wikilaundering business. He specialises in “black 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.

Kolarek 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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Because of Wikipedia's many volunteer editors and stringent sourcing practices, the influence operations that target it must be subtle and more sophisticated than those aimed at other platforms. Web3's techniques fit that bill: its network of sockpuppets used multiple accounts that adopted different personas to make edits look more authentic – at least to the untrained eye.

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“While people are increasingly sceptical of the content they see on social media, Wikipedia remains a point of reference for many. That's why it is attractive to bad actors trying to manipulate it, and why the danger is real.”

The Qatar contract

In December 2010, the tiny Gulf state of Qatar became the centre of huge international attention when it was chosen as the shock host for the 2022 World Cup. Almost immediately, the country's human rights record began to draw intense scrutiny. And as stadium construction projects got underway, reports began to emerge detailing the deaths of migrant workers.

With its reputation in the spotlight, Qatar turned to Portland. In 2013, the firm was handed a lucrative contract with the country, its remit covering “government affairs through to nation branding”.

According to six former Portland employees involved in some of this work between 2013 and 2024, Wikipedia edits were a common request from the Qataris. They said Portland hired subcontractors to target pages detailing Qatar's human rights record, particularly around stadium-building, with pages of prominent politicians also targeted.

TBIJ's analysis confirms several networks of accounts editing pages to raise the prominence of positive coverage of Qatar, as well as hedging negative press or burying it under more favourable material. Many of these changes – some of which Wikipedia editors flagged as suspicious in separate investigations – were performed by accounts outside of the Web3 network.

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Other edits by the Web3 network focussed on the country's business interests, including the removal of references to a case in which two Qatari billionaires were sued in the British high court for allegedly channelling funds to Jabhat al-Nusra, a Syrian terrorist group. The case appears to have collapsed in July 2024 after claimants withdrew some claims (lawyers told the Guardian that their clients had been intimidated by Qatari state operatives). But in October 2019, Web3's network erased all mentions of the case from the page of the men's business.

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And earlier this year, Portland's Qatar contract became the subject of a lawsuit against the firm. In April, Portland and its parent company Omnicom were sued by more than 100 victims of World Cup construction projects, who allege the PR firms helped Qatar hide its human rights record such that they aided human trafficking. They are seeking damages.

‘Constantly putting out fires’

Kotlarek's network got through plenty of work, but it wasn't able to stay under the radar forever. In 2020, Wikipedia editors began investigating suspicious changes performed by a network – which we later linked to Web3 – and blocked a handful of accounts. The site's volunteer investigators busted the entire network in 2024, according to open-source Wikipedia records.

But by that time, the network had been active for almost a decade and had been able to make some considerable changes to the public record.

On the page for the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), a billion-dollar initiative from the Gates Foundation – both known Portland clients – Kotlarek's sockpuppets had changed various key details. First, they changed the date by which the project had aimed to reach its goal of doubling the revenue of 30 million farmers, from 2020 to 2021.

A month later, a different account also run by Web3 restructured the page and deleted the “Evaluation” section entirely. It also removed a reference to a Tufts University study showing that the project had failed to meet its own objectives.

How Kotlarek's network changed the goals of the AGRA project and deleted its Evaluation section altogether

Another raft of changes centred around political fallout in Libya. During the civil war following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's government in 2011, the assets controlled by the country's sovereign wealth fund were frozen by the UN to prevent them being plundered. Portland was reported to be representing one side of the disputed government, which three Portland sources familiar with the contract confirmed to us.

One of the original accounts in Kotlarek's network was pushing narratives favourable to the Tripoli-based government over its Malta-based opposition throughout 2016, during a period of intense fighting in which all sides were accused of committing atrocities.

AGRA confirmed to us that it had hired Portland but said it has “no knowledge of, nor any association with, Web3 Consulting”. It said it is committed to transparency and its policies prohibit any actions that violate the terms of service of external platforms.

The Gates Foundation, the Qatar government and the Libyan sovereign wealth fund did not respond to our requests for comment.

The blocking of Kotlarek's network hasn't stopped the practice more widely. Indeed, new networks have since emerged that also spend a lot of time editing pages of Portland clients. And Portland employees told us the demand for wikilaundering is only likely to increase.

Stephen Harrison, a journalist who has covered Wikipedia extensively, said: “It is incredibly important that the facts are represented accurately because Wikipedia reaches into AI and distributes information throughout the internet.”

What's more, AI-generated summaries are drawing traffic away from the site, which its editors fear could diminish that critical mass of volunteers keeping the platform safe. Investigating and blocking these networks, an exercise in constantly putting out fires, takes time and energy.

“The sock puppet investigators are real heroes,” said Harrison “But [their] investigations are not going to stop this kind of thing. I think there also needs to be more legal action.”

A spokesperson for the Wikimedia Foundation said that it had resources to investigate and take action against firms that violate its policies, though couldn't share details of specific cases.

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By [Claire Wilmot](#)

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How Wikipedia works

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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.”

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Reporter: *Claire Wilmot*
Big Tech editor: *James Clayton*
Deputy editor: *Katie Mark*
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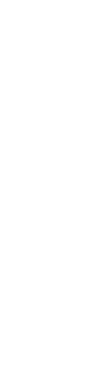
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