

5 Paid with Interest: COI Editing and Its Discontents

William Beutler

Financially motivated editing of encyclopedia articles presents a quandary for Wikipedia, which the author explores from personal experience as a paid editor seeking to work within its guidelines. A brief overview of the controversial history and colorful characters involved suggests that the phenomenon of “paid editing” doesn’t have to remain inscrutable.

Everyone involved with Wikipedia has some kind of interest in what it says. In the popular conception, its volunteer editors are inspired to empower a global audience by compiling information in an accessible format. Practically speaking, though, most Wikipedians participate because the project appeals to their personality or their sense of justice or because there’s an ego boost in deciding what the world knows about their pet subject. Its readers care simply because they want to learn something. Everyone’s interests are appropriately served.

Things are rather different when the motivation is financial. Most contributors consider editing Wikipedia to promote a business to be a morally precarious endeavor. The site’s readers, too, may be alarmed to learn that some edits are made not to benevolently share knowledge with the world but because the writer has a material stake in how the topic is represented. And yet the structure of Wikipedia makes this tension inevitable. The site’s vast influence owes something to the fact that anyone can influence it, so when those described in its virtual pages decide to do exactly that, the result is one of Wikipedia’s most challenging existential dilemmas.

Wikipedia’s favored terminology for this is “conflict of interest,” referred to in shorthand as “COI”—although other terms such as “paid editing” or “paid advocacy” are often used. COI is the subject of an official guideline, numerous information pages giving advice to volunteers and paid editors

alike, and a lengthy article in the encyclopedia itself chronicling the historical highlights and lowlights (mostly the latter).¹ However, none of these resources really explain how COI has evolved over Wikipedia's two decades in existence.

Fortunately, this is a topic for which I have a rare insight: in addition to being a volunteer editor of more than a dozen years, I am also the founder and chief executive of a digital marketing agency that helps clients navigate their conflicts of interest on Wikipedia. From this perspective, I will outline the history of COI as I've witnessed it, attempt to classify its disparate participants, and share my own personal story, which intersects at all points.

Wikipedia's approach to COI has been characterized by uncertainty and reluctance, responsiveness only in the face of crisis, and by occasional advancement when personal initiative meets pent-up frustrations. However, it is still conceivable that assertive steps could be made to harness COI motives for the benefit of Wikipedia's editors and readers alike. To this end, I will identify opportunities for research in this field, which to date scarcely exists.

Origin Story

I first became aware of Wikipedia through the American political blogosphere, which I covered for a news service based in Washington, DC, in the early 2000s. Among bloggers on the left and right, the usefulness of linking to Wikipedia had become an uncommon point of agreement. I soon became fascinated with this audacious effort to impose order on the messy world of knowledge, not to mention the opinionated community responsible for it.

But the reason I finally started editing, prophetically enough, was because my boss asked me to. In 2006 I had abandoned journalism to join a digital public affairs firm, where undoubtedly I brought up Wikipedia the most among my colleagues. The company's chief executive officer had become concerned with the negative slant on a friend's biographical article and wanted to know if something could be done about it. I investigated and decided something could indeed. But I didn't merely snip away the offending passage; instead I placed a note on the discussion page saying I would add a qualifying adjective to put the matter in context, and then I did just

that. This instinct would come to serve me well in a way I couldn't have imagined at the time.

In the months following, I continued making small edits to articles of personal interest. Eventually, I created my first new entry: a biography of Tom Peterson, a retailer and pitchman whose homespun TV advertisements are cherished memories of Oregonians from the 1970s and 1980s. During this time, I began devouring the many policies, guidelines, and essays that explained how Wikipedia made decisions about acceptable and unacceptable content. I found these statutes to be even more captivating than the articles they regulated—it was like discovering the secret rules governing all the knowledge in the universe.

As I gained confidence, my engagement with Wikipedia evolved along two tracks. First, I started attending offline events and making friends in the movement, eventually launching a blog about the community I had come to consider myself a part of.² (Chapter 7 is a portrait of how such relationships can develop.) Second, I recognized the possibilities suggested by my initial experiment. Many of my employer's clients were the subject of Wikipedia entries, and these summaries were seldom faultless. Reading the COI guideline carefully, it was apparent that while self-interested editing was discouraged, it was not outright prohibited. I was aware that others had tried and failed to thread this needle, but I believed my prior experiences with the combative blogging community would help me prevail. In particular, I recognized that "it's better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission" would not apply here.

So I began carefully: I created a secondary account disclosing my employer and relevant client relationships, posted simple edit requests about client issues on discussion pages, and sought out editors willing to make the changes for me. Some ignored me or said no, though frequently enough they would agree and occasionally thank me for being up-front about my COI. Some even granted me "permission" to make the changes myself, pointing to a section of the COI guideline regarding the acceptability of "making uncontroversial edits."³ Although I still usually asked first, in some cases I returned to the original arrangement: first explaining my reasoning and then making the change. On the whole, this worked out surprisingly well—every once in a while I would run into an editor who disagreed, but before long another volunteer would come along and help us find a solution.

By early 2010, I was convinced there was a bigger market for this service than my employer understood. That summer, I turned in a letter of resignation and embarked on a tour of DC public relations (PR) firms, offering up my Wikipedia expertise on a contract basis. I built a roster of clients one meeting at a time until I had enough work to bring on my first employee, with two more being hired by the end of 2011.

At this point, I was still reluctant to discuss how I earned a living with fellow Wikipedians, fearing their disapproval. COI editing remained a controversial topic. Even if tenuously allowed, it certainly wasn't respected, and for very good reasons: the history of COI, up to this point, was largely a series of individuals and organizations getting caught doing something when they should have known better.

A Brief History of Paid Editing

This history can be divided into four distinct time periods.

First came the prehistoric era, 2001–2005, before Wikipedia had attained a critical mass of public awareness. In this period, it was not unheard of for contributors to make self-interested edits, but the stakes were low, and the perception was that they would simply write their own autobiography or maybe an article about their friend's band. This is why one of the project's earliest advisories against COI editing was called "Vanity guidelines."⁴ The signature event of this era was the public embarrassment of Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia's famous cofounder, for editing his own biography in late 2005.⁵ This experience no doubt shaped Wales's views on COI editing, and his pronouncements on the subject soon took on a very disapproving tone, which would last through the following era.

In 2006–2009, as Wikipedia itself became more widely known, its community also realized that COI had far-reaching implications. This era properly begins in early 2006 with the cautionary tale of MyWikiBiz, the first business focused on creating and editing Wikipedia entries for paying clients.⁶ Its founder, Greg Kohs, was soon blocked from editing by Wales himself and would go on to become one of Wikipedia's most obsessive critics. Meanwhile, with the help of a software tool called WikiScanner, editors soon learned anonymous edits were being made by governments, corporations, and institutions around the world, demonstrating that the old saying "everybody's doing it" applied to this all-new context as well.

Wikipedia's internal governance responded with varying degrees of success. A new "COI Noticeboard" helped to identify suspicious patterns of edits, though actual policy changes remained elusive.⁷ The period concludes with the failure of an effort to prohibit paid editing following a long debate in the summer of 2009.⁸ Few Wikipedians were great fans of the practice, but the severity of the harm was not clear to everyone, and concerns about unintended consequences of proposed restrictions prevailed.

Tacit acquiescence and passive avoidance characterized the period covering 2010–2013. Several paid editing controversies arose, only to subside without clear resolution. These included the discoveries of pernicious editing for unsavory clients by the since-shuttered London PR firm Bell Pottinger and the "Gibraltarpedia" scandal, in which prominent editors manipulated site processes to benefit their client, the tourism board of Gibraltar.⁹ Yet another dispute happened to focus on my work and, as I will explain later, this crisis arguably led to the era's two major positive developments—the first being Wales's outspoken support for the idea that while COI contributors should not edit articles directly, they should be able to ask for help and receive it, and the second being the development of new community procedures to facilitate and supervise this practice. But the biggest and most consequential event was the discovery of a vast sock-puppet network associated with a company called Wiki-PR, whose shamelessness and scale of fraudulence caused the firm to become a shorthand for unethical COI engagement.¹⁰

The current era, roughly 2014 to the present, begins with the concurrent though not coordinated public responses to the Wiki-PR controversy by the Wikimedia Foundation (WMF) and concerned members of the PR industry, myself included. In February of that year, I convened a roundtable meeting of Wikipedia editors and digital PR executives at the Donovan House hotel in Washington, DC, and by June we had hammered out an open letter to Wikipedia on behalf of most of the big US agencies. Less than a week later, the WMF announced the first change to its Terms of Use in years, officially requiring editors with a financial COI to disclose these connections. Viewed by the community as a crackdown that banned undisclosed COI editing, it also acknowledged that responsible COI engagement was a thing that could exist. This is not to say COI is no longer controversial—and new efforts to subvert Wikipedia are discovered all the time—however, it has reached a

kind of equilibrium. It's a known issue, less existentially threatening than before.

An Interesting Conflict

In late 2011, well into the third era of COI, I became involved in highly contentious disputes on two unrelated client articles that soon became the focus of a weeks-long argument that would become the catalyst for longer lasting changes.

The first client was a well-known regional restaurant chain, one already the subject of a low-quality entry that was excessively focused on corporate wrongdoing—in my view, contravening established guidelines about representing topics in proportion to overall coverage, known as “due and undue weight.”¹¹ The second was an automobile industry trade association having no article at all. In both cases, I proposed completely new drafts which I had researched, written, and posted to my user space, seeking comment from unconflicted editors.

To my great surprise, the restaurant article rewrite was approved almost immediately and moved into place by a volunteer editor. This happened too quickly, it turned out, as another editor soon reinserted material about the company's numerous controversies and slapped the page with a COI warning tag. Meanwhile, my draft for the auto trade association was given a lukewarm approval, so I took it live by myself, but the following day it too was affixed with multiple warning templates, this time by an editor who hadn't previously participated in the discussion. Here, my failure to describe the association as a “lobby group” came in for particular criticism.

I was stunned—with the restaurant chain, I had followed the hands-off protocol exactly. With the auto group, my position was more tenuous, but I had experienced plenty of success in similar circumstances. My first move was to ask for help from a couple of editors who had assisted me on other client pages. Alas, one started edit warring on the auto group page, repeatedly removing the warning template, which was each time restored by my detractors. This breach of decorum inspired a complaint to Jimmy Wales via his talk page, asking him to voice his disapproval of my work and the actions of the editor ostensibly helping me. Meanwhile, editors avowedly hostile to paid editing commandeered both articles, removing positive

information they considered “puffery” and amplifying critical information I had tried to make less “undue.”

Thus did a three-week period centering around New Year’s 2012 become the worst stretch of my Wikipedia career, as fierce debates about my work raged on both Wales’s talk page (though he remained largely absent) as well as a related thread on a forum for notifying administrators of wayward contributors. I was an active participant, choosing to engage where I thought I could clarify misrepresentations but erred on the side of letting the two sides go at it. I hit refresh constantly, watching with trepidation as new comments appeared. Some editors supported my position, complimenting my written content and willingness to defend myself, while others accused me of being a terrible threat to Wikipedia’s future and asserted their intention to closely inspect every article I had ever worked on. One critic took the step of posting an email address for a third client to Wales’s page, inviting incensed editors to give them a piece of their minds.

The tide began to turn toward the end of the first week of January. The uproar, which had initially focused on my actions specifically, inspired the creation of two new WikiProjects focused on this activity in general. The first, named WikiProject Integrity, sought to watchdog paid advocacy, and another, called WikiProject Cooperation, aimed to create a collaborative space for working through COI issues.¹² I kept a close eye on the former while eagerly embracing the latter. Off-wiki, a dauntless PR executive named Phil Gomes joined the fray, publishing a post on his blog called “An Open Letter to Jimmy Wales and Wikipedia” and shortly thereafter created a Facebook group dedicated to the topic Corporate Representatives for Ethical Wikipedia Engagement (CREWE).¹³ I signed up on the spot, soon becoming an admin and one of its most active members.

What about my clients? By this time, they weren’t any longer. In both cases, our agreements had concluded with the placement of each article. My continued interest was not about specific contractual obligations but about my own sense of responsibility. Fortunately, the initial rancor subsided, and a few editors from the new WikiProject Cooperation helped to reassess both entries. A great deal of work was put into the restaurant article, and eventually it was accorded the highest possible recognition: “Featured Article” status. Meanwhile, I waited for the auto group page to settle down before submitting a compromise draft, which was approved without

further acrimony. One month later, a heretofore uninvolved WikiProject Automobiles editor appeared from nowhere and added just two words: “lobby group.” Since then, the page has remained virtually unchanged for seven years and counting.

A Field Guide to COI Participants

To fully understand COI activity on Wikipedia, we must identify the different types of participants. These categories are broad and their borders porous since everyone has a potential COI, paid or unpaid, with some topics. After all, volunteers too have their own outside relationships and affinities, be they an employer, an ideological cause, or a sports team. Nevertheless, we can usefully split these participants into two camps: those representing Wikipedia’s interests and those representing outside interests.

Let’s begin with the editors responsible for preserving Wikipedia’s integrity, sorted according to their views on COI and degree of interest in the subject.

1. *COI-Neutral Volunteers*. The vast majority think very little about this topic but might stumble across obvious undisclosed paid editing or be asked by a disclosed COI contributor for assistance. Most stay out of it, while some choose to get involved on a case-by-case basis, only to quickly return to their primary editing interests. The first editor to help me on the restaurant article, who quickly backed away from the controversy, fits into this category.
2. *Anti-COI Volunteers*. A relatively small number of Wikipedians think about COI a lot, usually because they are concerned about the risks to Wikipedia’s neutrality posed by outsiders focused exclusively on their own interests or are offended that some editors are compensated for labor they give away freely. The founders of WikiProject Integrity, and those who came after my clients’ articles, belong to this category. Ironically, in recent years it is anti-COI editors who are among the most involved in adjudicating edit requests, likely figuring they will have better judgment than a volunteer who doesn’t fully grasp the troublesome implications of doing favors for financially motivated contributors.
3. *Pro-COI Volunteers*. Effectively zero Wikipedia editors are proponents of COI editing as such. However, from time to time one will stick their neck

out and offer active assistance, but their involvement tends to have a short shelf life, likely owing to the stresses of working with sometimes pushy private interests, not to mention the disapproval of fellow editors. The brave members of WikiProject Cooperation fit here.

Next, let's consider the outsiders looking to influence Wikipedia's content, whether focused on their own interests or acting on behalf of others.

4. *Single-Purpose Accounts*. The least sophisticated actor, and a bit of an outlier in this list, are those who don't know a lot about the site except that it can be edited by anyone and decide to take Wikipedia up on the offer. They are invariably novices who may genuinely not even know there are COI rules and do not spend much time pondering the ethical implications. After all, they are usually focused on a single page, and it's almost always about themselves or their own business. In many cases, their goal is simply to create a page that does not exist, often on subjects that do not meet Wikipedia's eligibility requirements. For most, their involvement with Wikipedia ends in failure, and that's the end of it. But some are irritatingly persistent, and they can waste a lot of volunteers' time.
5. *Self-Interested Organizations*. Of greater concern to Wikipedia's community are the companies, organizations, institutions, governments, and prominent individuals who are either the subject of a Wikipedia entry or who perceive their interests to be affected by the information contained within them and who then resolve to do something about it. They may start by assigning the task to an employee or hiring an outside entity to handle it for them. Their level of sophistication varies widely: some may not take Wikipedia seriously until their typically undisclosed efforts are rebuffed. It is this category which drives the demand for Wikipedia editing services.
6. *Agencies*. As a first resort, some article subjects will turn to the PR firms they already have on retainer. While these companies do not consider Wikipedia a particular focus, as my former employer did not, they may perform the work if their client demands it. Some may assign employees who might then familiarize themselves with Wikipedia's COI rules to figure it out. Whether they actually follow the COI rules, however, is largely a matter of personal or organizational ethics. Unlike the individual editing on one's own behalf, their zeal may be tempered by the fact that it's only one assignment and they know their limitations. Most

companies, contrary to the fears of anti-COI volunteer editors, will give up if it becomes too great a challenge.

7. *Freelancers*. At the opposite end of the scale are the freelancers who have recognized the opportunity that lies in editing Wikipedia for pay and who are notorious in the community for advertising their services on platforms such as Upwork or Fiverr. Few are particularly sophisticated, and they typically represent shallow-pocketed, less-noteworthy clients compared to the agencies. Those who learn enough to make their articles stick and avoid detection may graduate to the next category—but rarely the one after.
8. *Black Hats*. Savviest of all are the search engine optimization and reputation management companies willing to manipulate Wikipedia for their clients in knowing breach of the site's transparency rules. Black hats are the poster children for bad behavior. When detected, like Wiki-PR and its successor firm Status Labs, their accounts are blocked and their names added to a list of known miscreants.¹⁴ So why do they do it? The downside risk is limited by their use of throwaway accounts and offset by the large demand for their services. Even if a project blows up in their face, someone else will be asking for their help soon.
9. *White Hats*. Finally, by far the smallest category of all are those firms offering Wikipedia assistance as a stand-alone service, who disclose their clients on relevant pages and who often (but not always) propose changes for volunteer review instead of editing directly. White hats tend to be led by veterans of the Wikipedia community, and while this does not shield them from criticism, when disagreements arise they are willing to stand by their work. It is this last category to which my firm belongs.

Bright Ideas

Although the controversies around my clients tapered off by the middle of 2012, the wider discussions continued. Most significantly, Wales finally took steps to clarify his thinking around COI. For years he had merely offered strong reprimands to the guilty, but now he exercised his moral authority in the community to make a proactive recommendation, which he called the “bright line” rule.¹⁵ As he said in an interview around this time,

[the] rule is simply that if you are a paid advocate, you should disclose your conflict of interest and never edit article space directly. You are free to enter into a dialogue with the community on talk pages, and to suggest edits or even complete new articles or versions of articles by posting them in your user space.¹⁶

This wasn't necessarily a new concept, but it was the first time he had communicated this position so clearly. Attempts were made to standardize it as a policy or guideline, though approving new rules had proven increasingly difficult over the years and this failed just like the efforts to ban paid editing. Nonetheless, wishing the problem away had conclusively failed, and no competing alternative emerged. Still smarting from the fallout of my own altercations, I decided my company would follow the "bright line" forever after, even if the rule never became official.

WikiProject Cooperation was a lively scene in 2012, but the excitement soon faded. The project was viewed by some as too pro-COI and was never made part of the COI guideline, so when the early participants declined through attrition, it atrophied. Yet the "ask for help" model has lived on another way via the "Edit Request" system. Rather than an organized WikiProject, making an edit request is a multistage process whereby a COI editor includes a template with a talk page message that flags the post on an administrative page collecting all such requests into an organized queue and that volunteer editors may review on their own time.¹⁷ While the process remains relatively obscure, the COI guideline encourages its use, and it has become, like Wales's "bright line" itself, a passable solution.

Notwithstanding the improving conditions, it always rankled how PR engagement on Wikipedia only ever made the news in cases like Wiki-PR or Bell Pottinger, with the resulting stories invariably failing to mention the guideline-compliant option. If one only ever hears about companies getting caught editing anonymously, it doesn't automatically follow that one should instead declare a COI and ask for help—it leads one to either declare Wikipedia off-limits, as many agencies have done, or just try harder not to get caught.

While there will always be some who treat Wikipedia as a system to be gamed, I've long believed these actors represent a minority of PR professionals. What everyone else needed was a signal that there was in fact a way to do right by their clients and Wikipedia at the same time. Likewise, volunteer editors needed to see that there were thoughtful individuals in the assumedly reprobate field of public relations work who were capable

of taking Wikipedia and its policies seriously. Because I kept a foot in both camps, I was in an ideal position to make this happen. At long last, I was going to overcome my reticence and intentionally draw attention to my work.

This was the genesis for the Donovan House hotel meeting and subsequent open letter that became a major event of the fourth era. In late 2013, I started identifying people from both sides of the Wikipedia–PR divide to participate in an open and frank discussion about COI issues. With help from Wikipedia friends and an assist from the CREWE Facebook group, I received commitments from approximately a dozen individuals in total, counting global PR firms, academic institutions, and individual members of the community. I secured a conference room at the Donovan House hotel in Washington, DC, and we set the meeting for February 7, 2014.

The meeting was uncomfortable at first, given the very different initial assumptions among its participants, but was ultimately a success: having a face-to-face conversation helped everyone see that there were more points of agreement than disagreement and reasons to think the pervasive feeling of mutual distrust could be lessened. The most important thing this group could accomplish, we concluded, was for these agencies to collaborate on a statement to release publicly, acknowledging that the industry had thus far failed to treat Wikipedia with proper respect and pledging to do right in the future.

It took some time to arrive at the specific language. Wikipedians involved in the process felt it was important for the statement to read in part as an apology to the community while agency representatives believed they should not be held responsible for the mistakes of others. Despite these differences, we inched closer to a satisfactory version, until finally on June 10 we released a “Statement on Wikipedia from participating communications firms.”¹⁸ It had eleven signatories at launch, including eight of the top ten global PR agencies plus my own much-smaller firm. Word spread quickly via positive news coverage, validating my original aim of changing the conversation, at least for the time being. The WMF made its separate announcement about the updated Terms of Use a week later, which inspired a second round of agencies to join—more than two dozen—over the next few weeks. As of 2019, there are more than forty current signatories to the pledge.

At the time, some concerns were expressed that the statement lacked accountability measures, criticisms I considered reasonable though not

discrediting. But like previous efforts on Wikipedia, the moment passed and the urgency along with it. Eventually, the CREWE Facebook page fell into disuse as well, with only intermittent spikes of interest following newsworthy paid editing controversies, which continue to occur, although less frequently. While the statement and its ensuing publicity has not changed the behavior of all PR agencies, it has inspired more to disclose their identity and post requests for community review. These efforts are infrequent and not always effective, but there is no question that more PR agencies and individual COI editors are following the procedure nonetheless.

According to research by independent Wikipedians, activity on the “Edit Request” queue has increased steadily in recent years, with the biggest spike in new requests occurring in 2018.¹⁹ From 2012 through 2018, the number of requested edits posted to the queue rose in every year save one, and as of summer 2019 it appeared to stay on the same pace.²⁰ The number of open requests has risen and fallen, but sustained efforts have kept the backlog manageable. While this research has been extremely limited and attributing cause and effect may be elusive, I am confident our efforts played an important role.

Conclusion

In the latter eras of Wikipedia’s COI history, the volunteer community and WMF have taken great strides toward confronting the challenges presented by self-interested editing. However, the edit request system remains opaque and poorly understood on both sides of the COI divide. The only way for this to meaningfully improve is for independent researchers to examine the current ecosystem to describe how well, or how poorly, the system actually works in practice. This essay has offered anecdotal evidence, but it is necessarily limited to my own experience.

Many questions are waiting to be asked, including: How do COI contributors find information about how to engage with Wikipedia, and what pathways do they take through the site? Why do volunteer editors choose to get involved with COI topics or to avoid them? What kinds of requests are being made by COI contributors, and what are their outcomes? Are these outcomes consistent with Wikipedia guidelines? How effective is the “Edit Request” system, and the Conflict of Interest Noticeboard for that matter? What opportunities exist to improve these processes? And how

much undisclosed paid editing is there? As of this writing, there has never been a systematic effort to find these answers.

COI will never cease to be a matter of controversy so long as what Wikipedia says continues to matter in the public sphere. A comprehensive review of the current situation would be valuable for editors who want to minimize disruptions, readers who want accurate information, and entities with a financial stake in what the encyclopedia says about them. Whatever one's motive for getting involved with Wikipedia, and whatever one's feelings about COI, understanding the role it plays now and may play in the future should be in everyone's interest.

Notes

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