

## SACRED WIKIPEDIA SPACE ENCROACHED UPON BY PAID-EDITORS: WILL IT BECOME AN ONLINE BILLBOARD?



In its little more than a decade of existence, Wikipedia represented utopian ideals. The site was there for the sole purpose of expanding knowledge and it was open for participation to anyone, without prejudice, as long as their participation meant promotion of information sought. It commenced as the greatest receptacle of knowledge on the Web, that too totally free, but it now seems that those ideals were too good to last and its vastness and reach has compelled it to seek profit-seeking writers. For the last eleven years of its existence its matter has been fuelled by resolute, unpaid editors who kept the site afloat. Today much to their chagrin, they are set to be displaced by profit-seeking professionals. Soraya Field Fiorio is a young consultant who is commissioned to write Wikipedia articles for musicians and writers. The fear is that when people commission writers to write for them and pay them for it, the articles will be more of a promotional package than a realistic analysis of the writer's book or the musician's performance. Fiorio says that she charges \$30 an hour to edit and rewrite an existing article and writes an entirely new article for \$250. Considering that Wikipedia is amongst the most googled sites, publicity seekers will willingly pay for such exposure. Such commercial inroads means that information on the site is no more pure encyclopedic and that readers will start becoming cynical about its content. Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia, expressed his displeasure at paid editing. However, analysts believe that there is a deeper malaise that has seen the new trend making its appearance. The number of voluntary editors was shrinking and those who contribute their time and effort to the reference site were mostly middle- to upper-class white men. The fear is that writers who are paid for their services will also keep their client's interests in mind, but political beliefs and social bents could also influence the site's content. Field Fiorio expressed concern that "There is a lot of misogyny on the site." She said that correcting was an exasperating process. "It's a pain-in-the-ass process to make edits. No matter what you do, there's always something ... the Wikipedia community always has time to flag everything that you do, and I don't know how they have time to do that." The Wikimedia Foundation has expressed concern about the dwindling voluntary editors, calling it an "intractable problem." They say that with the coming in of paid editors, voluntary editors would further drift from the site, since doing something voluntary and gratis loses its charm if there are others who are getting paid for doing the same thing. The foundation fears that this new phenomena could sound the death knell for the site. Wikipedia could become an online billboard if the number of publicists were to surpass voluntary writers and the increasing tapering of voluntary editors' show that valuable contributors are slowly veering away from the site. Receiving payment for writing on the site is not in violation of any of its user-generated policies and as long as the promotional article is based on valid sources and there is no attempt to mislead, it could be no different from a neutral encyclopedic article. But the line separating the two is thin and the fear is that monetary considerations may result in it being breached. If Wikipedia is to be saved from encroachment from commercialization and its sacred space reclaimed, the site should assess why the commissioned writers are successful and why the voluntary editors are not. If the line between the two were narrowed perhaps the site could be saved from a fate that its founders may never have contemplated or foreseen.