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NPR, Morning Edition. "Scanner Tracks Who's Changing What on Wikipedia."
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<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12823729>

Digital Culture

Scanner Tracks Who's Changing What on Wikipedia

Virgil Griffith, a graduate student at the California Institute of Technology, developed the Wikipedia Scanner.
Courtesy Virgil Griffith

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In a Nutshell

Wikipedia is one of the Internet's most popular fact-checking sites. But a new tool shows how the online encyclopedia, which is maintained by its users, is often manipulated by the companies and individuals who are the subjects of its entries.

Wiki Scanning from 'Wired'

- See Who's Editing Wikipedia
- Vote on the Most Shameful Wikipedia Spin Jobs

Morning Edition, August 16, 2007 · You might have suspected it, and ignored it until now in your online life: Wikipedia isn't the most reliable reference. It's just often the first source to come up when you do an online search.

Now a new Web tool offers proof that you shouldn't use Wikipedia to write your school reports or compile biographical facts about your favorite singer (without checking elsewhere as well) because the company or the band you're researching is likely to have enhanced or polished its Wikipedia image.

It isn't illegal. The whole point of the online encyclopedia is that it is collaborative and multi-sourced. Wikipedia calls itself "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit," which is another way of saying it is not fact-checked. Or spin-checked, for that matter.

If you follow the IP address trail, you'll see that often the editors of an entry are "interested parties," not just encyclopedia nerds who want to make sure the facts are straight.

Take these examples:

Someone with an IP address from Wal-Mart made this change:

From:

Wages at Wal-Mart are about 20% less than at other retail stores. Founder Sam Walton once argued that his company should be exempt from the minimum wage.

To:

The average wage at Wal-Mart is almost double the federal minimum wage (Wal-Mart). However, founder Sam Walton once argued that his company should be exempt from the minimum wage.

Someone at the voting machine company Diebold apparently deleted long paragraphs detailing concerns over the integrity of the company's voting machines.

Someone at Dow Chemical Co. eliminated negative passages about environmental disasters involving the company.

The trail to wiki-understanding was forged by Virgil Griffith, a California Institute of Technology grad student. He created a database called the Wikipedia Scanner, a search tool that traces the comments and edits on Wikipedia entries back to their source IP address. The once-anonymous writers behind the entries are no longer quite so anonymous.

In an interview with Renee Montagne, *Wired* magazine Senior Editor Nicholas Thompson predicts that the tool will eventually improve Wikipedia. Companies, celebrities and government agencies won't have as much confidence about making brazenly self-promotional or history-altering changes—if anyone can look them up easily, he says.

Of course, a would-be editor can always just go to the nearest WiFi hotspot or create a Web proxy to mask the company's IP address, and make the changes incognito.

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