

**THE MEDIA TODAY**

# The Right Takes Aim at Wikipedia

Disputes around edits are nothing new, but the rise of partisanship has added fuel to the fire.

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**M**ight Wikipedia, the ever-evolving online compendium of human knowledge, become the latest target in the new administration's crackdown on public sources of information? Last week, Elon Musk lashed out at the nonprofit after his Wikipedia page was updated with a description of his controversial hand gesture during Donald Trump's Inauguration Day celebrations. (Many observers perceived it as a Nazi salute; Jon Allsop wrote about the episode in [this newsletter](#).) "Since legacy media propaganda is considered a 'valid' source by Wikipedia, it naturally simply becomes an extension of legacy media propaganda!" Musk wrote on X, urging his followers not to donate to the site. In the past month, several tech and venture capitalists have expressed similar frustrations. Aravind Srinivas, the CEO of the artificial intelligence company Perplexity, announced his intention to support anyone who could build an "unbiased" alternative using his AI-powered search engine—a statement that raised eyebrows, given that Srinivas has described Perplexity's chatbot as being "almost like Wikipedia and ChatGPT had a kid."

Wikipedia has been a fundamental part of how people use the internet for over two decades and is consistently ranked as one of the most visited websites in the world. As of [2021](#), there were nearly a hundred and forty thousand active editors, the vast majority of whom are volunteers. While anyone can edit a Wikipedia page, the site has strict editing and sourcing policies to prevent misinformation from flourishing; pages about

politically sensitive topics like the Israel-Palestine conflict or the Russia-Ukraine war are subject to extended-confirmed protection, meaning that only Wikipedia editors who have had an account for over thirty days and have made over five hundred edits can directly touch them. That's not to say that Wikipedia is bulletproof—far from it. (The site even has its own standalone pages about [“ideological bias on Wikipedia”](#) and suffers from a pretty drastic gender imbalance among its volunteer editors, [90 percent of whom are men.](#))

Musk, however, appears to be attacking one imperfect content-moderation system while praising another imperfect one—the difference being that the latter is built into the platform that he owns. Indeed, the development of Community Notes—now the sole fact-checking system in place on X, which relies on anonymous volunteer contributors to identify misleading information—was partly inspired by Wikipedia's collaborative approach: both rely on the notion that a crowd can make better estimations than a single or a few highly knowledgeable individuals. Musk [claims](#) that Community Notes can circumvent the sort of biases that Wikipedia might have because it requires people with historically different points of view to agree in order for Notes to be shown to the public. But, according to the nonprofit Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), that same design choice allows polarizing posts that are incorrect or misleading to escape moderation. “The problem is that for a Community Note to be shown, it requires consensus, and on polarizing issues, that consensus is rarely reached,” the nonprofit wrote in an [analysis](#). (Musk sued the CCDH in 2023 after it

published a report alleging that X financially benefits from toxic content on the platform; a judge later dismissed the lawsuit.)

In an interview with New York magazine last year, Jimmy Wales, the cofounder of Wikipedia, was asked whether he agreed with the criticism that his site is too left-leaning and resistant to conservative sources. “It is something I look at, focus on, and think about,” Wales responded. “But whenever I try to find problematic examples, it’s pretty hard.” Wikipedia’s internal policies require that content be written from a “Neutral Point of View”—also known as the “describe the controversy” approach—meaning that editors shouldn’t take sides but should *explain* the sides without editorial bias. Wikipedia’s update on Musk’s salute is a case in point: the description includes Musk’s physical arm movement and how it was viewed by some as a Nazi gesture, but also notes that Musk denied such intent. Molly White, a journalist who wrote about the political right’s attacks on Wikipedia earlier this year, has argued that Musk’s obsession with the encyclopedia isn’t actually about improving the quality of information but gaining control. “His gripes about the community-written encyclopedia expose something far more significant,” White wrote: “the growing efforts by America’s most powerful right-wing figures to rewrite and control the flow of information.”

While disputes around Wikipedia edits are nothing new, the rise of partisanship mixed with lower trust in journalism has added fuel to the fire. According to leaked documents obtained by The Forward, the Heritage Foundation—the conservative think tank

that oversaw the development of Project 2025, a controversial pre-election blueprint for a second Trump term—is planning to identify and target Wikipedia editors it claims are “abusing their power” by publishing content that the group considers to be anti-Semitic; Heritage reportedly intends to identify the editors using facial recognition software and a database of hacked usernames and passwords. (*The Forward* notes that it is unclear what specific instances of anti-Semitism the Heritage Foundation is referring to, but that Jewish organizations have raised concerns about recent edits to Wikipedia pages related to Israel and the war in Gaza; a Heritage spokesperson declined to answer *The Forward*’s questions.) Meanwhile, *404 Media* has reported that authorities in Russia have replaced Wikipedia with a more “trustworthy” state-sponsored clone that conveniently edits out things that could make the Russian government look bad. For instance, the clone describes Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader (and sometime journalist) who died in prison last year, as a “video blogger” known for “involvement in extremist activity or terrorism.”

The attacks on Wikipedia are happening in parallel with Trump’s broader threats to mainstream media, universities, scientists, and government agencies. According to *The Guardian*, Trump’s education department plans to control classroom curricula and ban certain teachings about race and sexuality; the administration has further attempted to pause federal financial assistance to universities as it tries to uproot diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (a federal judge blocked the freeze Wednesday, reports the *Washington Post*). Trump

has also threatened to throw journalists in jail and revoke broadcast licenses from television networks. Wales has stated on X that his site isn't "going anywhere" and that people who want to improve it are welcome: he wrote, referring to Musk, "I hope his campaign to defund us results in lots of donations from people who care about the truth."

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- On Monday, the Office of Management and Budget issued a sweeping memo freezing much federal spending, sparking mass confusion as to what services would and wouldn't be affected; after a judge temporarily blocked the order, the White House rescinded it—but Karoline Leavitt, the press secretary, then tweeted that a "federal funding freeze" had *not* been rescinded, leading to more confusion, Leavitt's post being read into a court appeal as evidence ("We can't cross-examine the tweet," a judge said), and another adverse ruling for the administration. Trump and his allies blamed the confusion on the media. This was, of course, as cynical as it was predictable, but even some Trump critics argued that the coverage could have been clearer; writing in his newsletter, *Garbage Day*, Ryan Broderick cast it as "an abject failure for America's corporate media."

- Yesterday, Meta, the owner of Facebook and Instagram, agreed to settle a lawsuit that Trump brought against the company in 2021 after its platforms suspended his accounts following the insurrection at the Capitol; Meta will not admit any wrongdoing, but will hand over twenty-five million dollars, the bulk of which will go to a fund for Trump’s future presidential library. The settlement was legally striking since a judge already threw out a similar Trump lawsuit against Twitter (now known as X) and the Meta case faced “slim chances of success,” as the *Wall Street Journal* put it—but it did appear consistent with Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s recent moves to curry favor with Trump. The Democratic senator Elizabeth Warren blasted the settlement as “a bribe” and “pay to play.”
- After Trump won the election, many observers speculated that the mainstream media would not see the sort of “Trump bump” in readership, subscriptions, and donations that followed his first victory, in 2016, but *Semafor*’s Max Tani reported earlier this week that a number of Trump-critical outlets—including *The Guardian*, *The Bulwark*, *The Atlantic*, and various Substacks—have recently started to see notable growth in these areas. Meanwhile, MSNBC, which entered what Tani calls the “ratings doldrums” post-election, has shown signs of recovery, aided by more regular appearances from star host Rachel Maddow—though it still has work to do. The *Washington Post*’s Jeremy Barr has more.
- *User Mag*’s Taylor Lorenz spoke with Candace Owens, the right-wing podcaster and influencer,



who is launching “a sprawling multi-platform women-focused media brand” called “Club Candace.” In the past, “women’s media was dominated by print magazines that doled out fitness tips, marriage advice, and housekeeping guidance,” but the dawn of the internet ushered in “a new era of feminist media,” Lorenz writes. Owens “sees herself as the face of the pendulum swinging back. She champions traditional values and ‘anti-feminist’ ideology on platforms adapted for the digital age.”

- And *The Atlantic*’s Ashley Parker reports that “gulag humor is now everywhere” in Washington, with Beltway insiders (including some journalists) taking to quipping about the possibility of the new administration locking them up. “For a lot of people, it’s a joke that is a thinly disguised flex—it’s joking about how important you are,” Tommy Vietor, the *Pod Save America* host, told Parker. “Then every once in a while someone makes that joke to someone who is actually scared or has hired a lawyer, and it’s not so funny.”

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