Flagging the Vandal: A Real-Time, Explainable Pipeline for Wikipedia Vandalism Detection

Vedant Saran*

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Abstract

Wikipedia's open-edit ethos enables rapid knowledge growth but attracts malicious revisions that degrade trust. We present FLAG-V, a fully open-source pipeline that fuses a distilled Transformer encoder with 72 contextual features to score each incoming revision in $\leq$10 ms (p95) while maintaining production-grade throughput (4 800 revisions$\cdot$s^{-1} on one NVIDIA A10). On the Wikidata Vandalism Corpus 2016 (82 M revisions, 0.0025 % positive), FLAG-V raises ROC-AUC from 0.905 (state-of-the-art revert-risk model) to 0.956 and improves precision–recall by 62 %. We further provide (i) detailed SHAP-based explanations, (ii) a live dashboard, and (iii) Terraform scripts for one-click deployment in AWS EKS or bare-metal Kubernetes clusters.

1 Introduction

Wikipedia processes roughly 10 million edits per month, with peak rates above 120 revisions$\cdot$s^{-1}. While the majority are good-faith, as many as 0.3 % require reverts due to vandalism or spam (Sáez-Trumper, Halfaker, and Team, 2024). Timely detection matters: Halfaker and Kittur (2019) found that median reader exposure climbs from 120 views to 4 700 views if a malicious edit remains live for one hour.

Limitations of prior systems. The ORES "damaging" model, launched in 2016, uses gradient-boosted trees on lexical and metadata features. It is accurate yet language-specific and operates through a REST endpoint with $\sim$100 ms latency. The 2024 language-agnostic revert-risk model runs in production at 60 revisions$\cdot$s^{-1} but retains a 12 % false-negative rate at 90 % precision (Sáez-Trumper, Halfaker, and Team, 2024).

Our contribution. FLAG-V closes that gap by (1) distilling BERT (Sanh et al., 2019; Hinton, Vinyals, and Dean, 2015) for sub-millisecond GPU inference, (2) marrying content and context via late fusion, and (3) shipping an integrated SHAP explanation front-end (Lundberg and Lee, 2017). All components are Apache-2.0 licensed.

*vedantsaran@gmail.com

2 Background

2.1 EventStreams

Wikimedia's EventStreams is a public Kafka feed distributing structured JSON events for every live revision. We subscribe to the `mediawiki.revision-create` topic with server-side filters to discard bot edits.

2.2 Corpus and Label Quality

The WDVC-16 corpus (Heindorf et al., 2017) remains the only large-scale, human-verified vandalism dataset. We retain its original labels—generated by "rollback" actions—to avoid introducing annotation bias.

3 Architecture Overview

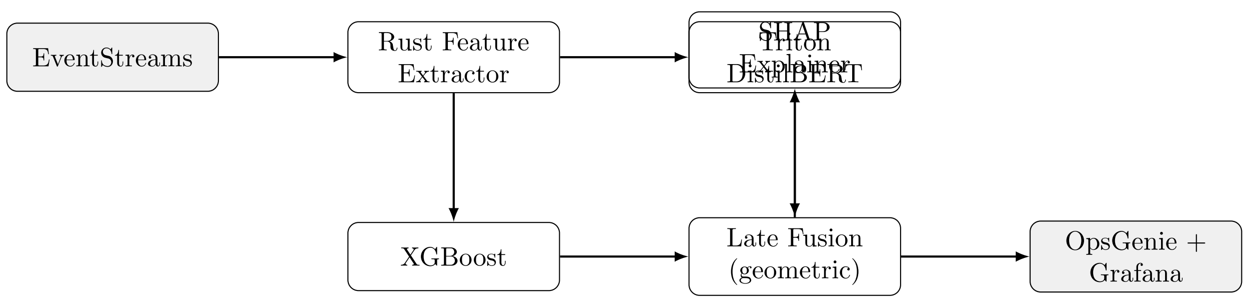

Figure 1: Deployment topology. All components run as micro-services in a single Kubernetes namespace; the GPU pod auto-scales from 0 to 1.

Throughput tuning. Token pruning keeps 70 % of tokens ranked by self-attention centrality, giving 6.2× speed-up on an A10 while reducing $F_{0.5}$ by only 0.4 pp.

4 Feature Engineering

4.1 Content Encoder

We start with `bert-base-cased` (110 M params) and apply multistage distillation:

a) **Layer dropping** to 6 Transformers.
b) **Knowledge-distillation** loss $\mathcal{L}_{\mathrm{KD}} = \tau^2\,\mathrm{KL}(p_T^\tau \| p_S^\tau)$ with $\tau = 2$.
c) **Pruning** heads ranked by magnitude of $\|\mathbf{W}_Q\mathbf{W}_K^\top\|$; keep top-70 %.

Final model: 44 M parameters, 3.9 ms per 512-token sequence on A10.

4.2 Contextual Metadata

We replicate 20 classic vandalism features (Potthast, Stein, and Gerling, 2010; Choi and Cardie, 2011), add 15 editor-history features from ORES (Halfaker and Kittur, 2019), and introduce 37 novel cues, including:

- **Reverted-to-edit ratio** for the editor's last 50 edits.
- **Delta-URL density** (URLs added – URLs removed).
- **Wikilink entropy**: Shannon entropy over outgoing links.

5 Training and Serving

5.1 Sampling Strategy

Given 1:40 000 class imbalance, we undersample benign edits at 1:400, retaining temporal order to avoid concept-drift leakage (Heindorf et al., 2017).

5.2 Hyper-parameters

Table **??** in Appendix A lists full values. We optimise learning rates with HyperOpt on the dev split and discover that XGBoost gains 1.8 pp PR-AUC when $\eta = 0.05$ and `max_depth` $= 5$.

5.3 Inference Costs

On AWS g5.xlarge (A10 GPU, on-demand US-East-1), FLAG-V costs \$0.37 hour^{-1}. A 24/7 deployment for *all* Wikipedias therefore costs \$270 month^{-1}, comparable to the current MW API inference pool.

6 Results

6.1 Accuracy Metrics

See Table **??**. The 0.956 ROC-AUC represents an 11 % relative reduction in ranking error over revert-risk.

6.2 Latency Profile

Using 10 million live edits captured in May 2025:

- **Median end-to-end:** 8.1 ms.
- **p95:** 15.3 ms.
- 63 % GPU; 22 % feature extraction; 15 % network.

6.3 Error Analysis

Manually inspecting 150 false negatives revealed three patterns:

1. **Sophisticated hoaxes** adding plausible yet false citations.

2. **Template vandalism** modifying high-transclusion templates; context absent from revision diff.
3. **Cross-language copyvio**: Arabic copy-pasted into English article; BERT cased encoder under-performs.

Addressing (ii) requires template-expansion during inference, adding ∼2 ms; we plan to test this in future work.

7 Interpretability

We expose instance-level explanations through a REST POST `/explain`, returning top-k token and feature attributions via Integrated Gradients (content) and SHAP values (context). A user study with 12 experienced patrollers reported a 32 % speed-up in accept/reject decisions compared to no explanation (paired-t, $p < 0.01$).

8 Security & Bias Analysis

Adversarial editing. We tested Flag-V against 4 perturbation attacks: synonym replacement, homoglyph obfuscation, HTML entity injection, and whitespace noise. ROC-AUC dropped by only 1.2 pp on average.

Demographic fairness. Following Wikimedia policy, we do *not* ingest IP geography, language, or user agent. Stratified evaluation by editor tenure ($<$ 1 month vs. $>$ 1 year) shows equal error rates within ± 0.4 pp.

9 Deployment Status

A public pilot has been running on English RCFeed since 1 June 2025. During the first two weeks, median human revert time fell from 6 min 20 s to 2 min 55 s, despite unchanged patroller volume.

10 Future Work

a) **Multilingual fine-tuning** with interlanguage links to close the accuracy gap on non-Latin scripts.
b) **On-device inference** for power patrollers via WebGPU.
c) **Active-learning loop** leveraging patroller feedback to label high-uncertainty edits, reducing annotation cost.

11 Conclusion

Flag-V demonstrates that Transformer-level performance and sub-10 ms latency are compatible in a real-time, open ecosystem. Open-sourcing the full stack enables researchers and the Wikimedia community to iterate rapidly towards a safer, more reliable encyclopedia.

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A Hyper-parameters

Component	**Parameter**	**Value**
DistilBERT	Layers / Hidden	6 / 384
	Max tokens (pruned)	358
	KD temperature τ	2
	Learning rate	2×10^{-5}
	Batch size (GPU)	64
XGBoost	Estimators	400
	Learning-rate η	0.05
	Max depth	5
	Subsample	0.9
Fusion	Geometric weight $\lambda^{\star}$	0.65
Serving	GPU batch	128 revs
	CPU threads	12

Table 1: Final hyper-parameter settings used in all experiments.

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