

BBC Trending – a podcast that takes an investigative look at the world of social media

Jonathan Griffin (JG): Today we're going to be looking at a mystery. Who is making thousands of Wikipedia edits?

We can pinpoint when it started. 6.48pm on the 26th of October 2004. That's when an account was created on the online encyclopaedia: Wikipedia with the name: Philip Cross. Since that day that account has been responsible for more than 130,000 edits on over 30,000 pages on one of the internet's most popular websites. Perhaps you've read a page edited by this account without even realising it.

Lee Kumutat (LK) (female presenter): Though what we don't know is who's behind that Wikipedia account and why they make the changes they make. But, they've been accused of political bias, and manipulating Wikipedia entries and that's really ruffling feathers both inside the Wikipedia community and on Twitter. The mysterious tale of Philip Cross exposes something deeper. It exposes the editorial process behind the website that so many of us turn to when we need answers.

LK: It seems everyone has a different idea about who the person behind the "Philip Cross" Wikipedia account is. Some claim he's a Government agent. Others, he's a stooge for the rich and powerful in society. And some allege the account is a front for a media baron to influence the masses.

George Galloway is a former member of both the British Labour Party and the Respect Party. He was a longstanding left-wing MP and constant opponent of UK Foreign Policy. He's not a man who's afraid to give his opinions and he now presents a radio phone-in show which regularly focuses on his opposition to Western military intervention in Syria and his support for the Palestinian side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As you may expect he has vocal supporters and noisy opponents.

JG: But it's the editing work of the Philip Cross account that Galloway takes issue with now. He told me why he's concerned by Philip Cross's activities.

GG: I learnt on social media that there was a man called Philip Cross. That he had edited my Wikipedia page.

JG: In fact he'd edited 1,798 times to be precise.

GG: When I got the stats from those who were following this story. It turns out that Christmas Day, Eid Day, Easter Day, Cup Final Day, day and night, early hours of the morning, in the middle of the night, this man is on my case and it doesn't take Einstein to work out that he's not tending this garden with loving care to make it look as nice as it can look, it's the opposite and now that I know the kind of things that he has deleted/ inserted/ edited/ re-edited and expunged then this person is either utterly obsessed by me or a trifle reassuringly it turns out, obsessed not just by me but by people like me.

JG: Whoa George. Let's just stop there. Now there are some important things to note about Wikipedia. First of all WP prides itself on being a responsible reference point, so the material that appears on the website needs to be factual, verifiable and cited from a reliable source. Typically that's academic and peer review publications, university level text books, books published by respected publishing firms, magazines, journals, mainstream newspapers, that sort of thing.

LK: Secondly, WP's pages are edited and moderated by the WP community. That community's broken into thousands of individual volunteers who are then organised in various roles such as editors and administrators who have slightly more advanced permissions than editors, like the ability

to block users and delete and protect pages. And how do you move up the ranks if you want to? Via a mixture of peer approval and quality of edits.

JG: Thirdly an edit is any change somebody makes on WP. Now that could be adding or removing a link, creating or deleting a bit of text, even just putting something in italics and as we mentioned earlier the account calling itself "Philip Cross" has made over 130,000 edits across over 30,000 pages. At this point we should say that's not really remarkable. In fact Philip Cross is not even in the top 300 most prolific editors on the site. Lots of people are making hundreds of edits and sometimes thousands of edits, every month.

LK: George Galloway's concerns echo those of a number of other prominent journalists, activists and politicians from across the political spectrum but typically, they oppose neo-conservatism and Western military involvement in international affairs. They claim that when you dig down into the data behind the Philip Cross WP account, it's making lots of very small, minor edits that add up to big changes in the overall tone and appearance of specific profiles.

JG: Now the top ten pages that Philip Cross has edited are a real mixed bag. In that top ten you'll find the jazz musician, Duke Ellington, The Sun which is a tabloid newspaper here in Britain, and Paul Dacre, the editor of another British newspaper, the Daily Mail. But also in that top ten are a number of vocal critics of American and British Foreign Policy. Men like the Australian journalist John Pilger, the current British Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn and Seamus Milne who's director of strategy and communications. But if someone is making thousands of edits, why could that present a problem?

GG: It is assumed to be an impartial encyclopaedia. You don't go to an encyclopaedia to find information on people that has been ruthlessly and remorselessly manipulated and that's what's happening here.

JG: But This man, Philip Cross, actually features around the sort of 300 mark on the list of all time WP editors, so does that mean there is something sinister about the preceding 299 or so?

GG: No, because his edits are remorselessly targeted on people who opposed the Iraq war, who've opposed the subsequent Western intervention wars, so you get where I'm coming from.

JG: I want to ask you about the reward that you've put out to find Philip Cross, why do that?

GG: Well because I thought the public interest required it. It's a relatively small reward of £1000 and it's already been won.

JG: I want to ask you as well about your WP page, now you say that you're not aware of the specific amendments, now I looked through and I noticed that there was one occurrence in particular that stood out. Somebody had tried to add in something that was quite lurid about your private life and Philip Cross had actually removed that and said "We don't need to get into this!" so what do you believe is the agenda or motivation behind somebody making...

GG: (laughs) Well there's enough lurid that he has put in and left in so that must have been particularly lurid!

LK: It's not just Galloway who has a problem with the content and number of edits of Philip Cross. The former British Diplomat turned journalist, Craig Murray has also written a blog publicly condemning Cross for his edits. Murray, Galloway and a number of their Twitter supporters believe Philip Cross exerts an unfair amount of power over their public images because of the number of edits and the type of things added and removed from their pages. They also say there's another

group of people who benefit from more favourable page edits and they characterise those people as typically being in favour of military intervention in the Middle East.

JG: So is there any truth in claims that Galloway, for example is on the receiving end of biased editing? Well we looked at the stat-heavy analytics behind Galloway's WP page. Now Philip Cross is responsible for 20.4% of all edits that have been made on there. But whether you think that's bias depends on your own interpretation and how much significance you give to certain events in the life of George Galloway over others.

LK: For example, a sentence where Galloway criticised the British Labour Party as "Tony Blair's lie machine" was removed with Cross citing: "partial repetition. Poor source". George Galloway is an opponent of the former British Prime Minister on many issues, including the Iraq war. In another instance, Cross removed links to lurid tabloid headlines from the Galloway page, acknowledging that although the allegation was also cited in the LA Times, the idea of including it was perhaps "best resisted". On top of that, we also found examples of grammatical edits. "It helps the article if each sentence or paragraph does not begin with 'Galloway' or 'he'", wrote Cross in one annotation.

JG: So it's really hard to get an objective measure of whether over the course of 1,800 edits, Cross has altered the overall perspective of George Galloway in the minds of ordinary people which is what Galloway claims.

LK: But doesn't WP have structures in place to stop biased edits of pages? We wanted to find out so we spoke to Mike Lowrey, known on WP as "Orange Mike". He's been editing WP as well as attending conferences and training, for the past 15 years.

ML: Sadly it leans male. It leans young. We have been working very, very hard on the male/ female issue.

LK: How can you gauge that? That's very difficult to gauge isn't it?

ML: We try not to judge the person, we judge the edits. If your edits have a consistent pattern of sexist language. But it's clear just looking at the topics that many of the topics that we get most heavily covered are topics traditionally where there is heavy male interest. Everything from Pokemon to football. We're conscious of it, we have articles on gender bias in WP. It's something we are aware of, it is...I won't say we're ashamed of it but we're distressed by it and we work like the Dickens to try to undo it.

JG: Now as we've heard, Philip Cross's edits to WP have courted accusations of bias from some quarters. But his detractors also have another thing that they're concerned about. His off-platform behaviour.

LK: One of the reasons Philip Cross has become the centre of debate in the WP community is that he interacted on Twitter with the subjects of a number of the pages he's edited.

JG: In May he referred to George Galloway, Craig Murray and a number of other people critical of British and Western Foreign policy as "goons". Cross's online behaviour only served to inflame the fierce debate about his editing.

LK: A group of Twitter users and Wikipedians claimed the tweets showed a conflict of interest, a big no-no in WP's editing terms.

JG: Debate began to rage within the WP editing community on talk pages, where editors cluster to publicly voice their concerns about edits. Various editors argued back and forth about whether

calling the subject of an edit "a goon" demonstrated bias or the more serious conflict of interest. It's an important question to answer because the two things are different according to WP, who say that beliefs and desires may lead to biased editing but they do not constitute a conflict of interest.

LK: WP has a mechanism for dealing with issues of conflict of interest and misconduct. Its arbitration committee or "Arbcom" as those in the know call it, is the final step in resolving a dispute on WP, where highly experienced Wiki users consider evidence and reach a decision that is binding on everyone on the website. The Philip Cross account is currently going through this arbitration process. Arbcom will make a judgment on the ability of Philip Cross to edit George Galloway's page but in the meantime Cross says he will not edit the George Galloway article again for an indeterminate length of time regardless of any decision.

JG: For a number of weeks George Galloway says he's been looking into who's behind the Philip Cross account. One of the principle rules of WP is that the editors, even if they're being investigated for conflict of interest, have the right to their online anonymity.

LK: That's why a number of the Wikipedians we've spoken to, say they believe Galloway's attempts to unmask Philip Cross are a step too far. The next voice you'll hear belongs to one of those editors who wants to keep his anonymity. So we'll call him "Jack".

"Jack": The identities of individual editors, some of them are public, some of them are not, but the whole idea is that it is edited by a consensus process which can override any particular editor that's being disruptive, or thank a particular editor for contributing an awful lot, so it's a consensus based edit. The identities of individual contributors are irrelevant particularly if the objective is to phone them all day and tell them they can't hide.

LK: But WP editor "Orange Mike" (Mike Lowrey) who we heard from earlier says he wouldn't be surprised if the Philip Cross account was acting on behalf of someone with ulterior motives.

ML: He's an example of a real problem that we have as with all volunteer projects, it's a subset of what economists call the "tragedy of the commons". When someone can profit greatly, and I'm using "profit" in a broad, metaphorical sense here, from devoting an enormous amount of their time to a very narrow subset of, in this case WP articles, they can always accomplish more than the ordinary members of the commons who are just trying to keep this part of the garden in as good a shape as possible.

LK: And is that what you think Philip Cross is doing, in your opinion, do you think that he's profiting in some way?

ML: The accusations I've seen, seem to me to be plausible, whether he's being paid or not, he is deriving some form of satisfaction from the edits he makes to his very narrow subset of WP's articles. And if he can spend 8, 10, 12, 14 hours a day five days a week on doing this, he's going to be more effective than "Mike" from over in the States who's trying to do some edits on his lunch hour!

LK: One of the people whose pages he has been editing and has edited over 18 hundred times is George Galloway and he says he knows that Philip Cross is being paid to do this. Do you think that's likely?

ML: I would not even be remotely surprised. The people who hate Galloway the most are often powerful and often rich and the idea that they could find someone to use as their tool, would not surprise me in the least. But I have no evidence to prove it and therefore would reserve judgment.

LK: Do you have evidence that that happens in some form?

ML: We have discovered whole networks of organisations, generally commercial organisations, public relations firms and so forth, that have in some cases set up literally hundreds of accounts, created thousands of articles and not disclosed. In recent years we have created some fairly strong language that explicitly says: "If you are editing anything in this encyclopaedia for pay or as part of your job, you are required as part of the terms of service to fully disclose what you're editing for whom, and by whom you're being paid" and if you fail to make those disclosures you are in violation of our terms of service and we will throw you....we'll throw you out.

LK: How can that be proved that people are being paid?

ML: That's indeed the problem!

LK: But you say that you know that it happens, what's your evidence for that?

ML: We've been able to prove through chains of email and so forth to what you might call potential blackmail victims that there are people out there doing this.

JG: "Orange Mike" sent us an example of what he claims is somebody paying for a page edit. Now we couldn't verify that specific case but we do know that groups with vested interest have tried to manipulate public opinion using WP in the past. For example in 2012, WP suspended at least 10 accounts linked to the PR firm Bell Pottinger, while investigating allegations of content manipulation. Bell Pottinger admitted to editing entries on WP but said it had: "never done anything illegal".

LK: We spoke to WP and the Wikimedia foundation, the charity that raises funds to run the WP site. They declined the opportunity to appear and instead gave us this statement:

"Independent, volunteer editors consistently monitor WP, often aided by technology to ensure its articles remain neutral and well-sourced for the hundreds of millions of people who rely on it every month. If repeat violations to WP policies do occur, volunteers have a variety of mechanisms to draw from including issuing warnings and blockings, to address content and behaviour that does not meet WP standards. This process is done entirely by volunteer editors collaboratively, independent of the Wikimedia Foundation who does not control content or make editorial decisions about information that's included on WP."

JG: I asked George Galloway what he'd like to say to the co-founder of WP.

GG: That you are risking what is potentially a very valuable addition to the public canon. You are risking its credibility by allowing a person, though I happen to know that it's not just a person, it's going through his router but it's not just a person. You are allowing a cell to self-consciously, with clear political intent...it's a cell of Neo-Con fanatics.

JG: How much do you know then about Philip Cross that you're willing to share with us today?

GG: Only that we've spoken to his relative, I can't say how close and that relative has told us that he is a vulnerable person. And that vulnerable person in my opinion is being ruthlessly exploited.

JG: The co-founder of WP, Jimmy Wales, refused to speak to us.

LK: The only words we've had from Jimmy Wales on this can be found on Twitter. The journalist Neil Clark asked him when he would be dealing with Philip Cross adding "Why no response to complaints from public figures about his activities?" Jimmy replied: "As far as I can tell so far, those complaints are so wrong as to be risible. Look into it further".

JG: There's only one person who can answer our questions about Philip Cross. The man himself. So we contacted him via his jazz infused Twitter account. His Twitter handle incorporates the numbers 1963. Perhaps that's a clue to the owner of the account's age. Or perhaps it's a reference to the release date of Duke Ellington's Afro Bossa album. Either way. We didn't receive a response.

LK: So we tried to call him on a number passed to us by one of our sources.

(sound of telephone ringing tone)

JG: The man who picked up the phone didn't want to record our conversation so we can't play that to you. But the phone did not belong to Philip Cross. It did however, belong to someone who was able to pass on a message to him for us.

LK: We waited an hour and a half and then we got word back. The person behind the Philip Cross account did not want to speak to us.