Pro-Israel group's plan to rewrite history on Wikipedia

A pro-Israel pressure group is orchestrating a secret, long-term campaign to infiltrate the popular online encyclopedia Wikipedia to rewrite Palestinian history, pass off crude propaganda as fact, and take over Wikipedia administrative structures to ensure these changes go either undetected or unchallenged.

A series of emails by members and associates of the pro-Israel group CAMERA (Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America), provided to The Electronic Intifada (EI), indicate the group is engaged in what one activist termed a "war" on Wikipedia.

A 13 March action alert signed by Gilead Ini, a "Senior Research Analyst" at CAMERA, calls for "volunteers who can work as 'editors' to ensure" that Israel-related articles on Wikipedia are "free of bias and error, and include necessary facts and context." However, subsequent communications indicate that the group not only wanted to keep the effort secret from the media, the public, and Wikipedia administrators, but that the material they intended to introduce included discredited claims that could smear Palestinians and Muslims and conceal Israel's true history.

With over two million articles in English on every topic imaginable, Wikipedia has become a primary reference source for Internet users around the world and a model for collaboratively produced projects. Openness and good faith are among Wikipedia's core principles. Any person in the world can write or edit articles, but Wikipedia has strict guidelines and procedures for accountability intended to ensure quality control and prevent vandalism, plagiarism or distortion. It is because of these safeguards that articles on key elements of the Palestine-Israel conflict have generally remained well-referenced, useful and objective. The CAMERA plan detailed in the e-mails obtained by EI appears intended to circumvent these controls.

In the past, CAMERA has gained notoriety for its tactic of accusing virtually anyone who does not toe a right-wing pro-Israel line of bias. The group has even accused editors and reporters of the Israeli daily *Haaretz* of being "extreme" and participating in "radical anti-Israel activity." Jeffrey Dvorkin, the former ombudsman of National Public Radio (NPR), frequently criticized by CAMERA for an alleged pro-Palestinian bias, wrote on the web publication Salon in February 2008 that "as a consequence of its campaign against NPR, CAMERA acted as the enabler for some seriously disturbed people," citing persistent telephone threats he received in the wake of CAMERA campaigns.

Need for stealth and secrecy

Throughout the documents EI obtained, CAMERA operatives stress the need for stealth and

secrecy. In his initial action alert, Ini requests that recipients "not forward it to members of the news media." In a 17 March follow-up email sent to volunteers, Ini explains that he wants to make the orchestrated effort appear to be the work of unaffiliated individuals. Thus he advises that "There is no need to advertise the fact that we have these group discussions."

Anticipating possible objections to CAMERA's scheme, Ini conjectures that "Anti-Israel editors will seize on anything to try to discredit people who attempt to challenge their problematic assertions, and will be all too happy to pretend, and announce, that a 'Zionist' cabal (the same one that controls the banks and Hollywood?) is trying to hijack Wikipedia."

But stealth and misrepresentation are presented as the keys to success. Ini suggests that after volunteers sign up as editors for Wikipedia they should "avoid editing Israel-related articles for a short period of time." This strategy is intended to "avoid the appearance of being one-topic editors," thus attracting unwanted attention.

Ini counsels that volunteers "might also want to avoid, for obvious reasons, picking a user name that marks you as pro-Israel, or that lets people know your real name." To further conceal the identity of CAMERA-organized editors, Ini warns, "don't forget to always log in before making [edits]. If you make changes while not logged in, Wikipedia will record your computer's IP address" — a number that allows identification of the location of a computer connected to the Internet.

A veteran Wikipedia editor, known as "Zeq," who according to the emails is colluding with CAMERA, also provided advice to CAMERA volunteers on how they could disguise their agenda. In a 20 March email often in misspelled English, Zeq writes, "You don't want to be previced [sic] as a 'CAMERA' defender' on wikipedia [sic] that is for sure." One strategy to avoid that is to "edit articles at random, make friends not enemies — we will need them later on. This is a marathon not a sprint."

Zeq also identifies, in a 25 March email, another Wikipedia editor, "Jayjg," whom he views as an effective and independent pro-Israel advocate. Zeq instructs CAMERA operatives to work with and learn from Jayjg, but not to reveal the existence of their group even to him fearing "it would place him in a bind" since "[h]e is very loyal to the wikipedia [sic] system" and might object to CAMERA's underhanded tactics.

"Uninvolved administrators"

The emphasis on secrecy is apparently not only to aid the undetected editing of articles, but also to facilitate CAMERA's takeover of key administrator positions in Wikipedia.

For Zeq a key goal is to have CAMERA operatives elected as administrators — senior editors who can override the decisions of others when controversies arise. When disputes arise about hotly contested topics, such as Israel and Palestine, often only an "uninvolved administrator" — one who is considered neutral because he or she has not edited or written articles on the topic — can arbitrate.

Hence, Zeq advises in a 21 March email that "One or more of you who want to take this route should stay away from any Israel realted [sic] articles for one month until they [sic] interact in a positive way with 100 wikipedia [sic] editors who would be used later to vote you as an administrator."

Once these CAMERA operatives have successfully infiltrated as "neutral" editors, they could then exercise their privileges to assert their own political agenda.

In addition, Zeq suggests making deliberately provocative edits to Palestine-related articles. He hopes that editors he assumes are Palestinian will delete these changes, and then CAMERA operatives could report them to administrators so they could be sanctioned and have their editing privileges suspended.

Passing propaganda as fact

Gilead Ini's 17 March email provides specific advice on how to pass off pro-Israel propaganda or opinion as fact meeting Wikipedia's strict guidelines:

> "So, for example, imagine that you get rid of or modify a problematic sentence in an article alleging that 'Palestinian [sic] become suicide bombers to respond to Israel's oppressive policies.' You should, in parallel leave a comment on that article's discussion page (either after or before making the change). Avoid defending the edit by arguing that 'Israel's policies aren't 'oppression,' they are defensive. And anyway Palestinians obviously become suicide bombers for other reasons for example hate education!' Instead, describe how this sentence violates Wikipedia's policies and guidelines. One of the core principles is that assertions should adhere to a Neutral Point of View, usually abbreviated NPOV. (The opposite of NPOV is POV, or Point of View, which is basically another way of saying subjective statement, or opinion.) So it would be best to note on the discussion page that 'This sentence violates Wikipedia's NPOV policy, since the description of Israel's policies as 'oppressive' is an opinion. In addition, it is often noted by Middle East experts that one of the reasons Palestinians decide to become suicide bombers is hate education and glorification of martyrdom in Palestinian society ...'"

In fact, there have been numerous studies debunking claims about Palestinian "hate education," or "glorification of martyrdom" causing suicide bombings (such as *Dying to Win* by University of Chicago political scientist Robert Pape) though this claim remains a favorite canard of pro-Israel activists seeking to distract attention from the effects of Israel's occupation and other well-documented and systematic human rights abuses in fueling violence.

Zeq specifically names articles targeted for this kind of treatment including those on the 1948 Palestinian Exodus, Causes of the 1948 Palestinian exodus, Hamas, Hizballah, Arab citizens of Israel, anti-Zionism, al-Nakba, the Palestinian people, and the Palestinian right of return.

Interestingly the CAMERA editors also target the article on the early Islamic period concept of *Dhimmi*, a protected status for non-Muslims which historically allowed Jews to thrive in Muslim-ruled lands while other Jews were being persecuted in Christian Europe. Pro-Israel activists have often tried to portray the concept of *Dhimmi* as akin to the Nuremberg laws in order to denigrate Muslim culture and justify ahistorical Zionist claims that Jews could never live safely in majority Muslim countries.

Also among the emails is a discussion about how to alter the article on the massacre of Palestinian civilians in the village of Deir Yassin by Zionist militiamen on 9 April 1948. Unable to debunk the facts of the massacre outright, the CAMERA activists hunt for quotes from "reputable historians" who can cast doubt on it. Their strategy is not dissimilar from

those who attempt to present evolution, or global climate change as "controversial" regardless of the weight of the scientific evidence, simply because the facts do not accord with their belief system.

Zeq has already made extensive edits to the Wikipedia article on Rachel Corrie, the American peace activist murdered by an Israeli soldier in the occupied Gaza Strip on 16 March 2003. As a result of these and other edits Zeq has himself been a controversial figure among Wikipedia editors, suggesting his own stealth tactics may not be working.

"We will go to war"

Zeq, however, counsels CAMERA operatives to be patient and lie low until they build up their strength. "We will go to war after we have build our army, equiped it trained [sic]," he wrote on 9 April. "So please if you want to win this war help us build ou[r] army. let's not just rush in and achieve nothing, or abit more than nothing [sic]."

Update 22 April 2008

A plan by the pro-Israel pressure group CAMERA to skew the online encyclopedia Wikipedia in a pro-Israel direction appears to have collapsed after it was exposed by EI.

On 21 April, EI published emails and action alerts posted by CAMERA staff and collaborators on a closed listserv instructing would-be editors how to game the Wikipedia system so they could impose their hard-line pro-Israel agenda undetected.

Following EI's report, Gilead Ini a CAMERA staffer and Wikipedia editor informed members of the group that, "Because member of this group [sic] affiliated with the anti-Israel propaganda cite [sic] Electronic Intifada decided to share the content of our discussions, I will be temporarily or permanently closing access to the group, in hopes that members' personal contact information will not be made public."

Meanwhile, Wikipedia administrators issued a ban on Zeq, the editor who was helping CAMERA to groom new editors to subvert Wikipedia's quality control process. Zeq has been prohibited from editing Israel-Palestine related articles and administrators were debating further action. Based on the evidence in the emails released by EI, Wikipedia administrators accused Zeq of violating fundamental Wikipedia principles and guidelines. In response, Zeq alleged that the accusations were merely the result of a "conspiracy" which he termed "The (e-mail) protocols of the elder of CAMERA [sic]." Zeq even alleged that The EI itself "may have created the story or created the group or spoofed e-mails."

Today EI publishes additional emails that further expose the CAMERA plan. These emails also reveal that while Zeq is willing to accuse others of prejudice he may hold some himself. In one email he commends an editor whom he considers to be "anti-Islamic." And, in an echo of the kind of anti-Semitic thinking that CAMERA sees everywhere, Zeq alleges that "the other side" — an apparent reference to Palestinians and Muslims — "is orgenized well, they control wkipedia [sic]."

Information obtained by EI indicates that while Gilead Ini claimed that more than 50 volunteers had come forward to participate in CAMERA's plan, and the group had set its sights on creating dozens of new editors and administrators over a long period of time, fewer than a dozen were active at the time EI exposed the scheme. Because the effort was apparently in its early stages, only a handful had become active as Wikipedia editors.

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