

Wikipedia to seek proof of credentials

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Following revelations that a high-ranking member of Wikipedia's bureaucracy used his cloak of anonymity to lie about being a professor of religion, the free Internet encyclopedia plans to ask contributors who claim such credentials to identify themselves.

Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales said in interviews by phone and instant message Wednesday from Japan that contributors still would be able to remain anonymous. But he said they should only be allowed to cite some professional expertise in a subject if those credentials have been verified.

"We always prefer to give a positive incentive rather than absolute prohibition, so that people can contribute without a lot of hassle," Wales wrote.

Wales suggested such a plan two years ago, but the idea suddenly gained currency after the recent discovery that a prolific Wikipedia contributor who wrote under the pen name "Essjay" and claimed to be a professor of theology turned out to be a 24-year-old college dropout, Ryan Jordan.

Jordan's fraud came to light last week when The New Yorker published an editor's note stating that a 2006 Wikipedia profile in the magazine had erroneously described Essjay's purported academic resume. The New Yorker said a Wikipedia higher-up had vouched for Essjay to the author of the piece, Stacy Schiff, but that neither knew Essjay's real identity.

In addition to contributing thousands of articles to the sprawling Web encyclopedia, Jordan had recently been promoted to arbitrator, a position for trusted members of the community. Arbitrators can overrule an edit made by another volunteer or block people who abuse the site.

Jordan also was hired in January by Wikia Inc., a for-profit venture run by Wales. He has since been dismissed.

Jordan has not returned an e-mail seeking comment from The Associated Press. But in a note on his Wikipedia "user page" before it was officially "retired," he apologized for any harm he caused Wikipedia.

"It was, quite honestly, my impression that it was well known that I was not who I claimed to be, and that in the absence of any confirmation, no respectable (sic) publication would print it," he wrote.

Wikipedia is full of anonymous contributors like Essjay, whose user page also once proclaimed: "My Wikipedia motto is 'Lux et Veritas' (Light and Truth) and I believe more individuals should contribute with an intention to bring light to the community and truth to the encyclopedia."

The anonymity of the site is a frequent cause of mischief — from juvenile vandalism of entries to the infamous case involving journalist John Seigenthaler Sr., who was incorrectly described as a suspect in the Kennedy assassinations. And that has raised concerns about the credibility of the site.

But anonymity is also considered one of the main forces behind Wikipedia's astonishing growth, to nearly 1.7 million articles in English and millions more in dozens of other languages. Wales has said he is an "anti-credentialist" — because anonymity puts a reader's attention on the substance of what people have written rather than who they are.

Wales said Wednesday that belief is unchanged. But, he said, if people want to claim expertise on Wikipedia, they ought to be prompted to prove it. If they don't want to give their real names, they shouldn't be allowed to tout credentials. Had that policy been in place, Wales said, Jordan probably would not have gotten away with claiming a Ph.D. in religion.

"It's always inappropriate to try to win an argument by flashing your credentials," Wales said, "and even more so if those credentials are inaccurate."

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