

A Citizens' Struggle: combatting disinformation by self-organised online communities. Perspectives from Ukraine



WIKIMEDIA
УКРАЇНА

ISD

Institute
for Strategic
Dialogue



WIKIMEDIA
DEUTSCHLAND

Quick introduction into how Wikipedia works & protects itself



Who is who in the wiki movement

Wikipedia: biggest encyclopedia ever, one of world's top-10 websites.

- Exists since 2001, in Ukrainian since 2004, over 300 languages
- Written and managed by a self-organised community of volunteers
- Based on online collaboration and collective decision-making

Wikimedia Ukraine: NGO supporting (but not managing) Wikipedia

- Exists since 2009, one of 38 similar organisations worldwide
- Incorporated in Ukraine, 100+ volunteers and small paid staff.



Who can edit?

Almost everybody.

Wikipedia is written by volunteers, for most people it's a hobby or a way of self-expression.

Most editors are not experts (some are, but that's not required).

Most of them deeply care about the project.



How can you trust Wikipedia?

Of course, Wikipedia is not perfect and is not 100% never wrong. But:

- It has a broad set of rules to ensure it's actually an encyclopedia;
- A broad community enforces (and maintains) these rules;
- Wikipedia is based on reliable sources which are displayed in articles;
- Everybody can edit: most fakes are deleted almost immediately.



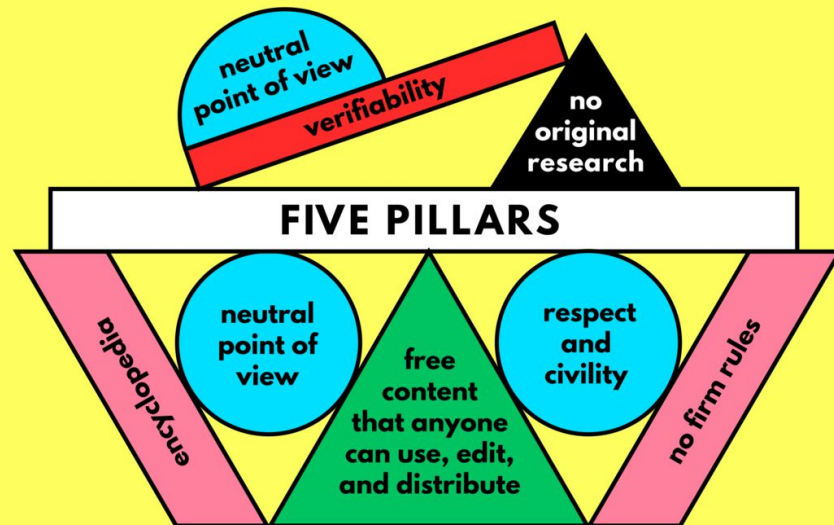
Sets of rules

Wikipedia requires reliable sources and neutral point of view.

All information should be confirmed by a reliable source.

No opinion or view should be given an undue weight, and only notable viewpoints should be mentioned.

Own theories or conclusions not accepted unless published in a peer-reviewed source.



Broad community behind Wikipedia

Thousands of people create and maintain Ukrainian Wikipedia content:

- >9500 people a month make at least one edit, >1000 regulars. Any of them can edit (almost any) article or participate in a discussion.
- >500 reviewers and rollbackers have tools to review articles.
- 48 administrators can delete or protect articles or (un)block users.
- Technical tools: watchlist notifications, robots, automated filters...



Reliable sources in articles

- Any reader can see what sources were used in a given article.
 - If all sources are unreliable, article may be deleted.
- Information without sources may be removed (and regularly is).
- Known disinformation websites or sources lacking quality review are explicitly banned and cannot be used on Wikipedia.
- Secondary sources (e.g. analysis, evaluation) are strongly preferred to primary (e.g. someone's diary or speech), especially for living people.



Editing in practice

Most articles can be edited by anyone, registered or not.

A destructive edit can be auto rejected if it matches a pattern.

Even if it passes, it is usually labelled for review by humans.

The more popular the topic is, the more people watch it and the faster they will notice and remove.



Версія за 16:19, 24 лютого 2022 (ред.)

[REDACTED] (обговорення)

(Мітки: Редагування з

мобільного пристрою,

Редагування через мобільну

версію)

← Попереднє редагування

Рядок 1:

```
[[Файл:Flag of Russia.svg|border|right|120px]]
```

Версія за 16:21, 24 лютого 2022 (ред.) (скасувати)

Леонід Панасюк (обговорення

| внесок)

(Скасування редагування №

34728032 користувача

[REDACTED] (обговорення))

(Мітки: Скасування, Посилання на сторінки неоднозначності)

Наступне редагування →

Рядок 1:

```
+ {{Інші значення|Одеса (значення)}}Одеса}}
```

```
+ {{Місто України
```

```
+ | назва = Одеса
```

```
+ | прапор =
```

Ukrainian Wikipedia community during the war



Background on the war

- Russia first invaded Ukraine in 2014, but February 2022 marked a completely new stage of the war – an open, all-out invasion that profoundly affected the whole country & Europe more broadly.
- Almost 1.5 years in, Ukraine lives in wartime conditions. In non-frontline regions life normalised in some ways (people are going about daily lives; shops and cafes are operating) but is still profoundly affected (e.g. in May Kyiv suffered from almost nightly missile & drone attacks)



Wikipedia as a source of information

- With the war's start, readers were desperately looking for information – from general context to recipes of a Molotov cocktail
- Audiences for news media immediately skyrocketed – and Wikipedia readership also grew

106,877,169 user views in UkWiki in April 2022, second highest month in history at the time. The leader – the article about Russia's invasion itself – raked in 3 million views in less than six months, an absolute record for UkWiki



Community capacity

Increased readership put a strain on the volunteer community – at the very time when Wikipedia was of the least interest to many of the volunteers affected by the war

User activity decreased sharply at the beginning (108,237 user edits in UkWiki in March 2022 – 40% decrease year-over-year). Then the situation has mostly increased as life normalised for many people, but it's been unstable ever since (e.g. major power blackouts affected Ukraine in late fall & winter, impacting capacity for editing & other work)



Community resiliency

That said, the community has been more resilient than one might have feared:

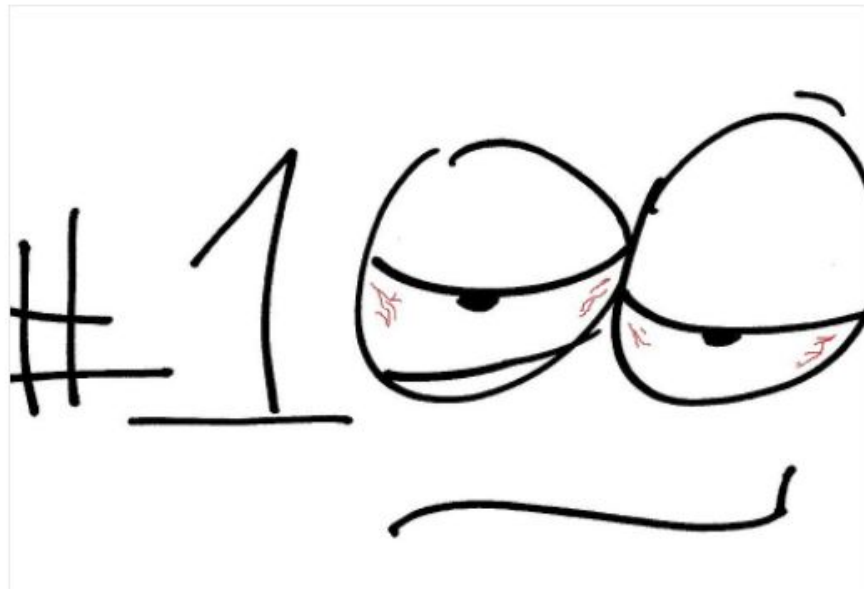
- many people have continued to volunteer for Wikipedia while in wartorn Ukraine as a way to be useful and keep mental sanity;
- Ukrainians living abroad doubled down on their activity;
- different avenues of coordinated response emerged.





Editing Wikipedia from a bomb shelter in Kharkiv, Ukraine – Viacheslav Mamon's story

30 August 2022 by Anton Protsiuk



New article on Wikipedia every day – completing the #100wikidays challenge during the war

22 June 2022 by Anton Protsiuk

(Some of the) responses

- **Fast-tracked decision making among the volunteer community** – e.g. temporary administrators under a simplified procedure
- **Support from the international volunteer community** – e.g. global administrators helping fight destructive edits



(Some of the) responses

- **Institutional support:**

- Wikimedia Foundation – overall support + tech maintenance
- Wikimedia Ukraine – working with specific community members to help with specific needs
- other Wikimedia organizations from Europe & beyond



So, UkWiki didn't fall victim to rampant disinformation, did it?

It didn't.

Existing structures and barriers, community resilience, institutional support have helped keep Ukrainian Wikipedia up and running.

That said, there're many long-term challenges, especially now that we're in the war of attrition & Russia's almost daily attacks on Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities affect lives of millions of Ukrainians.



Remaining risks

- Direct government meddling (most notable cases are from China; Russia has been less interested / capable so far)
- The fast rise of widely available generative AI unlocking new tools that could help malicious actors overwhelm the community
- Additional risk for the Ukrainian community – burnout / lack of capacity as people are in the second year of an all-out war

Russian (dis)information war: An introduction



Status quo: Where do we find the Russian (dis)information war?

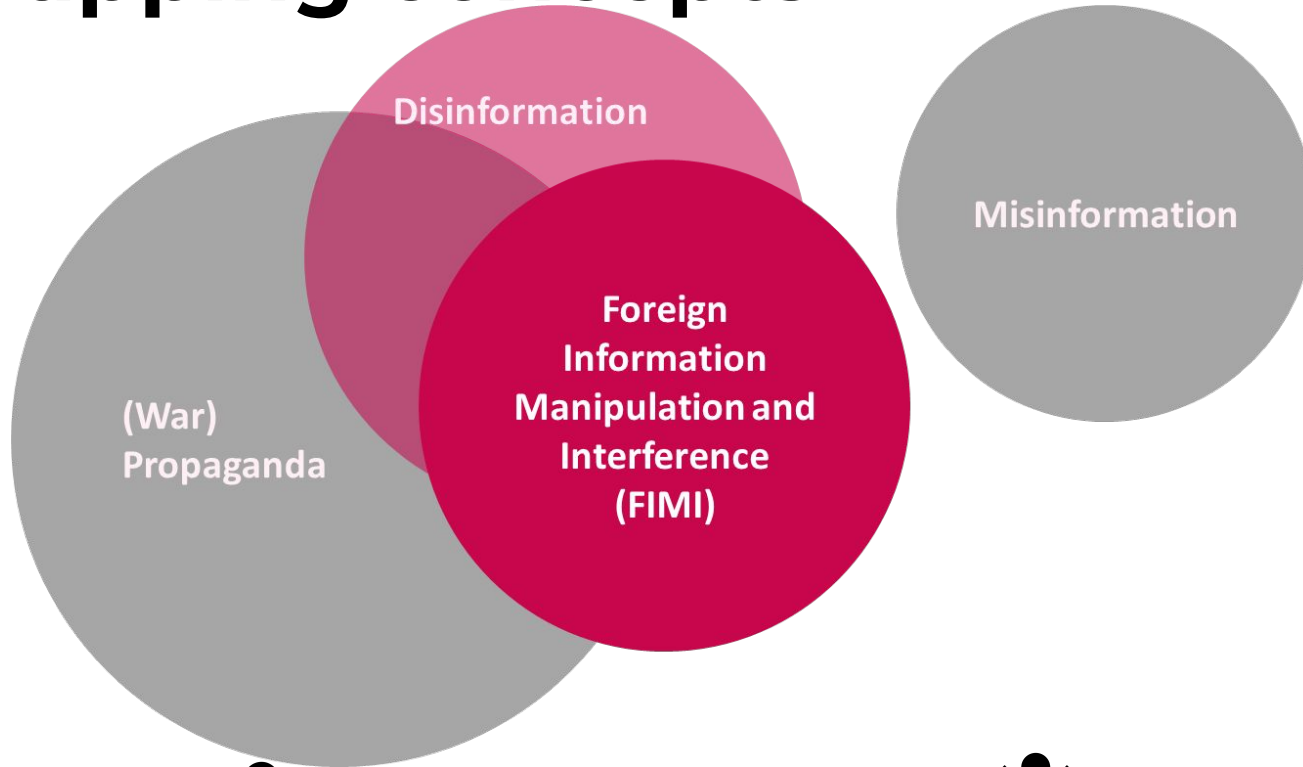


Leonhard Lenz, public domain



English translation: "We thank everyone, including our compatriots in Germany, who laid flowers at the Russian tank. From now on, this will stand for the fight against neo-Nazism in Ukraine."

Overlapping concepts



The largest FIMI campaign since the beginning of the war

Techniques

- In Aug 2022 an investigation by t-online supported by ISD uncovered more than 30 websites impersonating German media outlets
- The sites were deceptively real but there were strong indications for Russian origin (e.g. Russian-language file names, linguistic errors)
- Hundreds of sock puppet accounts on FB shared links to these websites/articles in their own feeds or in comment sections



The largest FIMI campaign since the beginning of the war

Risks and outlook

- Viewed in isolation, the effect of each piece of content is almost insignificant. But together: Potential to fuel mistrust and distract
- There is evidence that belief in Russian propaganda narratives in the German population increased during 2022
- AI was already used to create profile pictures. Generative AI may in future make impersonation cheaper and more persuasive

Looking back: COVID-19 as accelerator for Russian state media

- Intransparent news sites like *Anonymousnews* included both pro-Russian and COVID-19-related articles (e.g. by Joseph Mercola)
- ISD report found that 2/3 of the 100 most viewed RT DE YouTube videos from March to July 2021 were COVID-19-related
- The top 50 FB groups sharing links to these videos were mainly associated with anti-vaxxers, conspiracy ideologists, and populists



What can we as the digital society do?

Use
monitoring
standards

Develop
new
research
tools

Demand
data access
to niche
platforms

Support
systemic
regulation

Expand
news
literacy

Amplify
democratic
voices



Thank you!

Mykola Kozlenko / mykola.kozlenko@wikimedia.org.ua

Anton Protsiuk / anton.protsiuk@wikimedia.org.ua

Mauritius Dorn / md@isdglobal.org



WIKIMEDIA
УКРАЇНА

ISD

Institute
for Strategic
Dialogue



WIKIMEDIA
DEUTSCHLAND