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MANIPULATION OF WIKIPEDIA FOR SELLING FALSE DREAMS: PROMOTIONAL TACTICS OF AN UNSCRUPULOUS BUSINESS SCHOOL

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The power of Internet is being leveraged by a number of unscrupulous actors to spread misinformation and distortions with malafide intentions. Internet is increasingly being used to market products and services with adverts proliferating the popular search engines and web sites. Online advertising has become the mainstay for commercial operations of many companies, institutes and organisations. Like the mainstream advertising operations, most of the companies doing web based advertising gloss over their products without caveats, conditions and limits. A gullible consumer, under a priori assumptions, gets swayed by the glossy images and tall claims. Even the cautious, discerning and resolute individuals can be brought under the spell by the power of all pervasive and omniscient advertising. The lack of a regulating central authority for checking the veracity of claims made in the adverts has fuelled the burgeoning growth of many deceitful entities. The onus lies with individuals to check and judge veracity of claims made in such advertising campaigns.

The popularity of Wikipedia, 'the free [encyclopaedia](#)', is largely attributable to collaborative contributions made by [the people who use it](#). In Wikipedia, thousands of changes are made per hour which adds to the coherence, dynamism and content of Wikipedia. The cardinal principle, guiding the growth of Wikipedia, of permitting [anyone to edit its](#) contents, add material and correct errors, is not without caveat. In some particular



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circumstances, because of a specifically identified likelihood of damage if editing is left open, a restrictive mechanism has been put in place. Administrators at Wikipedia, commonly known as 'Admins' or 'SysOps' are editors who can perform certain special actions on the Wikipedia, including the ability to [block](#) and unblock user accounts and IP addresses from editing, [protect](#) pages from editing, [delete](#) and [undelete](#) pages, [rename](#) pages without restriction and use certain other [tools](#). The Wikipedia has an Arbitration Committee (ArbCom) for conducting the [Wikipedia arbitration process](#) and has been authorised to impose [binding solutions](#) to disputes between editors and administrators.

In February this year, in an unprecedented move ArbCom expelled "Wifione" from Wikipedia. The Wifione was a Wikipedia "administrator" account which was handled by persons, whose identity is yet to be established, on charges of manipulating the Wikipedia site of an Indian business school by deleting links to various media reports accusing IIPM of making false claims about its academic credentials, being unaccredited and offering degrees not recognised in India and abroad. In an ingenious advertising method, the Indian Institute of Planning and Management (IIPM) used Wikipedia page as a primary marketing tool for four years. In September last year, the High Court of Delhi ruled that credentials and promises made by IIPM were misleading and the school was not accredited to confer any degrees.¹ The incident demonstrates how Wikipedia can be manipulated by unscrupulous companies, cashing on the gullibility of those who believe in the credibility of the website. The Wifione account, which was active since 2009, has now been banned indefinitely by the Arbitration Committee of Wikipedia. The Wifione association with Wikipedia and subsequent ascendance to an "administrator" was part of a cleverly devised strategy. Initially, Wifione offered to do mundane drudgery for the Wikipedia and made repeated claims about work assigned by Wikipedia of highly inspirational value. Wifione's helpfulness eventually bore fruit and the account was promoted to an "Administrator." However, as admin, its primary function appeared to be to monitor IIPM's Wikipedia page



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and according to the Arbitration Committee, it used its influence to remove remarks which projected the IIPM in a bad light.

The credentials flouted by IIPM through Blitzkrieg advertising to lend credence to its deceptive practices and affiliations took a beating when a series of news articles, law suits and reports questioned tall claims made by it. The claims of links to a Belgian business school called IMI Belgium and the University of Buckingham in Britain were found to be false. It is not accredited by any of the Educational governing body of India.² In its September ruling, the Delhi High Court ordered IIPM to stop making false claims in its advertising and to post the court ruling on its website, making it clear that it had no authority to confer degrees of any kind. After the High Court ruling and negative publicity, it became harder to lure gullible students through conventional marketing. That was when IIPM's Wikipedia page became the major source of advertising. The credibility of Wikipedia so scrupulously cultivated by its founder, lends a kind of legitimacy to some of IIPM's claims. Though it has never been conclusively proved that Wifone was a proxy of IIPM, Wifone removed many of the articles from various sources which were damaging to IIPM reputation. The IIPM's Wikipedia page also offered a hyperlink to a newspaper article in praise of IIPM. It turned out that linked article in the newspaper was an advertisement cleverly camouflaged to appear as a news article.

This is not Wikipedia's first brush with controversy. The Wikimedia Foundation which owns Wikipedia had fired its employee Sarah Stierch in January last year. Sarah Stierch was accused of editing Wikipedia at the behest of a Texas-based PR firm client after accepting monetary remunerations. This controversy came in the wake of accusations of "sock puppetry"- the creation of bogus accounts allegedly used to edit Wikipedia contents on behalf of paying clients.³ Sock puppets or fake identities are used to eulogise, defend or support a person or organisation, often to skew opinions under the shroud of anonymity to evade suspension or ban. Unlike a pseudonym, a sock puppet poses as an independent



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third-party unaffiliated with the puppeteer who has created him/her to garner support for his cause.⁴

Wikimedia Foundation publically expressed its disappointment on the issues of allegations of fraud committed by IIPM and Wifione. It viewed the whole incident as a tremendous violation of the trust and good faith of its editors and readers. Wikimedia Foundation reaffirmed its commitment to support its editors and administrators in serving as a vigilant defence against such incidents. Some expert argued that judging the accuracy and veracity of a claim made about a particular business in Wikipedia is difficult, unless somebody is equipped with in depth knowledge of that industry. Some have even commented that project has grown to gargantuan proportion beyond the capability of its current editorial Staff at Wikipedia foundation.

The flaws in Wikipedia make majority of people vulnerable to nefarious designs of unscrupulous companies. The lack of understanding of how Wikipedia is created and information is added to its repertoire, coupled with its very high ranking in any search engine results, makes it a lucrative adverting venue enticing people to believe Wikipedia contents on face value. Though Wikipedia has reiterated that it will put in stronger regulating mechanism to prevent its misuse, there is a need for Wikipedia to holistically reevaluate its functioning and redraw a roadmap that restores the faith of people in credibility of its content.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])



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End Notes

¹ Gary Cameron, "[Manipulating Wikipedia to Promote a Bogus Business School.](#)" Newsweek, March 2015, available online at <http://www.newsweek.com>, accessed on 12 April 2015

² Abhinav Garg, "IIPM barred from offering MBA, BBA," The Times of India, September 27, 2014,

available online at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/news/IIPM-barred-from-offering-MBA-BBA/articleshow/43584776.cms>, accessed on 12 April 2015

³ Sandhya Soman, "Wiki-paid-y a?," The Times of India, January 12, 2014, available online at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/stoi/deep-focus/Wiki-paid-y_a/articleshow/28695840.cms?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=referral%20, accessed on 12 April 2015

⁴ Ibid.
