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MAY 2020 ANTI-SEMITISM

Jew-Tagging @ Wikipedia

Why is the online encyclopedia so interested?

by **Edward Kosner**

I’VE HAD A [WIKIPEDIA ENTRY](#) FOR YEARS AND NEVER (WELL, hardly ever) look at it. It’s a straightforward account of my career as a journalist and editor with a couple of paragraphs about my early life and education and the requisite accounting of marriage, children, and grandchildren. As far as I know, the entry had never been fiddled with since it was originally published in the open-sourced encyclopedia that, along with Google, is the modern resource of choice for checking each other out. Then, not long ago, I clicked on my page and suddenly read that I was a Jew.

Right there in the first sentence of the Early Life section, the entry now reported that I “was born to a Jewish family.” I’m a proud if non-observant Jew, but my religious origin had never been mentioned in the many articles that have been written about me over the years. The exception is a snarky review of my memoir, *It’s News to Me*, in the *New York Times Book Review* back in 2006. The reviewer called me a “ham-eating Jew” because I’d mentioned that my American-born and fiercely assimilationist mother had occasionally served us a slab of grilled ham from Safeway topped with a slice of pineapple—that midcentury delicacy “Ham Steak Hawaiian.”

I felt that the introduction of my religion in Wikipedia was intrusive since I’d edited topical magazines like *Newsweek* and *New York*, not Jewish-oriented ones like, say, *Commentary*. I’d written and edited stories about the Arab-Israeli conflict, of course, but never from a sectarian point of view. Besides, I rarely if ever came across religious affiliation noted in Wikipedia biographies of other secular journalists and writers. So I set about stripping the reference from my entry, only to find that I’d been barred by Wikipedia from editing my own biography.

One of my sons is a member of the West Coast digerati, and I put him to work finding out what had happened and fixing it. He promptly reported that a volunteer Wikipedia “editor” had been inserting Jewish origin in the entries of prominent journalists and writers, but that he, too, was unable to delete the intrusion in my page. I decided we’d done all we could and dropped the matter. Then I came across a solicitation from Wikipedia to seeking a contribution to support its operations. It turned out to be a key to the cloaked world of the digital reference trove that contains, by one count, over 46 million articles in more than 300 languages. I simply replied to the fundraising pitch that I’d be much more inclined to contribute had Wikipedia made it possible to deal with my problem, which I described. *Shazam!* I quickly got an email from one of the 250,000 volunteer Wiki editors.

Wikipedia’s labyrinthine processes can seem impenetrable to the uninitiated. The site was founded in 2001 by two cyber visionaries: Larry Sanger and Jimmy Wales, expanding on a concept by Richard Stallman (who is described in his own Wikipedia entry as “of Jewish heritage”). The tax-exempt Wikimedia Foundation finances Wikipedia, but it’s a strictly-hands-off parent. The content is controlled by contributors around the world who post entries about everything and everybody, which in turn are “edited” by others. These interventions are scrutinized and often re-edited by other registered volunteer gatekeepers. Refinements are constantly being made. Wikipedia has stringent rules about the tone, content, and sourcing of material. Specialists can be skeptical about the trustworthiness of Wikipedia entries, but most folks accept the material, at least for first-take information about subjects. It’s a good, quick way to learn more about who’s applying for a job, inviting you to dinner, or where John Belushi went or didn’t go to university. (He went to a community college in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, according to his Wikipedia entry.)

Whatever its weaknesses, Wikipedia is a marvel of the digital world, itself a paragon of human ingenuity. Anyone with a hand-held computer—a smartphone—can communicate with anyone else with any kind of online computer practically anywhere on the globe, including face-to-face virtual chatting. This miraculous ability is now so commonplace that nobody even thinks twice about it anymore. With a couple of clicks, you can access the vast majority of published information in the store of human knowledge, including Wikipedia entries on just about anything. The downside of all this is that the malevolent, incompetent, wrong-headed, careless, and demented can work all sorts of digital mischief until or unless somebody catches them, as the 21st century has already amply shown.

My new best Wikifriend’s user name was “Coffee,” and he’s a conscientious editor. He politely informed me that it was appropriate to introduce my faith into my entry because it was “covered in a reliable source,” a Wikipedia standard for inclusion. That turned out to be the *Times Book Review’s* “ham-eating Jew” reference. Other Jewish professionals may not have had their religion listed because there was no such source for the citation. I had been kept from editing the insertion because Wikipedia protocols blocked removing properly sourced material. “I know that’s not the answer you were looking for,” he conceded.

He was right. It’s possible, I wrote back, that the “editor” who introduced Jewish identity into my and many other entries was so proud of the Jewish contribution to journalism and literature that he wanted the world to know about all these accomplished Jews. But, given the recent spate of overt anti-Semitism here and in Europe, it was certainly plausible that the intruder was trying to stigmatize Jewish “notables,” in the Wikipedia term of art. It seemed to me possible that Wikipedia was naively invoking a valid standard—reliable citation—to enable its material to be doctored by a stealth anti-Semite.

Ten days later, Coffee replied: “I have taken the description off...your article and am now in the process of combing through the thousands of edits made by this user to remove other violations. We determined that even though a reliable source covered your upbringing it was not enough to support the claim in your article. This was based on it not being of due weight to your notability, and because there is not a consensus of sources covering you in such a way. I’m applying this standard to every article...that this person edited and will likely have to look at others than just [those that] this editor has added as well (as this seems to be a rather big issue”).

In two weeks, he’d found more than 250 intrusions he considered inappropriate in entries of not-previously-identified Jewish “notables” and 1,142 in Wikipedia’s lists of Jews in 32 fields. These lists include everyone from cartoonists (43, including Jules Feiffer, Rube Goldberg, and Al Hirschfeld) to poets (28, including Allen Ginsberg, Emma Lazarus, and Delmore Schwartz). And there were hundreds more articles to vet. Most of the “Jew-tagging” had been in articles about notables in media and writing, but Jews in finance and retail were involved, too. Reviewing “tens of thousands” of interventions by one “editor,” Coffee found that he or she had added religious descriptors almost exclusively for Jews. Besides that “editor,” there was at least one other active Jew-tagger. These intrusions had been going on for a while but had intensified lately.

The principal “editor” had the username Patapasco913. Googling “Patapasco,” I learned that it was a river in Maryland and that 913 East Patapasco Avenue was the Baltimore address of an African-American evangelical church. I called the church to ask whether the Wikipedia user had any connection with it. The man who answered the phone said no, but that he had been asked the same question five or six years ago by a caller who said Patapasco913 “wrote a lot about Jewish activities.” So this editor has obviously been at it for years. It’s impossible to know whether the second intruder was cooperating with Patapasco913 or operating on his or her own.

Still curious, I found my way to one of the countless online Wikipedia forums where both experienced and fresh volunteer editors gather to hash over their actions. There were complaints here that Coffee, however well-intentioned, had overdone his removal of Jewish identity from entries and especially those lists identified because of inadequate sourcing. The back-and-forth on the forum was so dense and inviolated that it made the Talmud seem like a Harry Potter novel. But it was plain that these Wikipedia editors—and I’m sure thousands of their colleagues—had no clear idea of whether to treat American Jews as followers of a religion, an ethnic group, or a nationality. Were they hyphenates like, say, Korean Americans, or Americans who were also Jews, or just Jews? This was predictable given Wikipedia’s own language in its article entitled “Jews.” The entry begins:

“Jews...are an ethnoreligious group and a nation, originating from Israelites and Hebrews of historical Israel and Judah. Jewish ethnicity, nationhood, and religion are strongly interrelated as Judaism is the ethnic religion of the Jewish people...” At another point it reads: “Judaism shares some of the characteristics of a nation, an ethnicity, and a culture, making the definition of who is a Jew vary very slightly depending on whether a religious or national approach to identity is used.”

Wikipedia’s inconsistency in registering the Jewish identity of subjects was obvious in the individual entries for some of the 73 people on its list of prominent Jews in journalism. Some of their bios identified them as Jews, but some didn’t, which seemed odd since they were on the master list.

That prompted me to check the Wikipedia entries of prominent Gentile journalists and writers to see how their religious affiliations were described. My friend Peter Hamill’s entry reports that his parents were Irish immigrants, but it doesn’t mention that he was raised a Roman Catholic. The late Jimmy Breslin listed his Irish-American persona in his columns and famously in a Piel’s beer commercial, but there’s no mention of his ethnicity or religion in the appropriate portion of his Wikipedia entry. William F. Buckley’s Roman Catholicism was a conspicuous element in his career as a polemicist, editor, and public intellectual, but it goes unmentioned until midway in his entry in a specific section on his religious views. I’d always assumed that Gloria Steinem was a Jew, but her Wikipedia entry points out that while her father was Jewish, her mother was born Presbyterian. If you read the Wikipedia bio of Nicolle Wallace, the MSNBC talking head, you’ll learn that she’s “of Greek descent” but not the religion she was born into.

I thought it would be useful to compare Wikipedia’s approach with the way the *New York Times* handles the question of Jewish identification in its obituaries. The *Times* style book orders that the religion of a person in the news should be mentioned only when it is pertinent and its pertinence is clear to the reader. “It’s subjective, like most other decisions,” says a *Times* staffer, “and open to a lot of second-guessing, but the general rule is not to mention religion unless there’s a reason to because of the person’s profession, accomplishments, experiences.” That sounds judicious and commonsensical.

In the past, the *Times* has had its own fascination with Jews in out-of-the-way places. The press critic Jack Shafer—the same guy who called me a “ham-eating Jew” in that book review—has highlighted what he called “Jewspotting” by the paper. “Yes, Miky, There Are Rabbis in Montana” read the headline in one December 2009 story. Others recorded the paucity of Jews in, among other places, Hawaii, Baghdad, Bahrain, and Burma. Around the paper, he reported, such pieces were known as “Jews on the Moon” or “Jews on Mars” stories. And, of course, there’s an old tradition of “Our Famous Brethren” pieces in the Jewish press.

A spokeswoman for the Wikimedia Foundation made clear to me that the site’s guidelines for entries on living subjects have been developed by its army of volunteer editors. This standard is fair and commonsensical, too: “Categories regarding religious beliefs (or lack of such) or sexual orientation should not be used unless the subject has publicly self-identified with the belief (or lack of such) or religion in question, and the subject’s beliefs or sexual orientation are relevant to their public life or notability, according to reliable published sources.”

In other words, my man Coffee followed the guidelines in deleting the “Jew-tagging” in my and those other entries after I complained. But, plainly, these guidelines don’t enforce themselves; volunteer editors have to recognize or be made aware of violations before they can be corrected.

The Anti-Defamation League said it was “aware” of some instances of Jew-tagging on Wikipedia but has been assured by the parent Wikimedia Foundation that Patapasco913’s intrusions had no malicious intent. So I asked the foundation how it had reached that conclusion. It turned out that Patapasco913 has been a volunteer editor for nine years and has made an astounding 98,000 “edits,” but the pattern of the work did not support suspicion of malignity. A glance at the internal Wikipedia page where Patapasco’s interventions are discussed shows that he’s been busy contributing entries and editing others not only for Jews, but for Roman Catholics and people with Muslim names, among others. And there have been a number of complaints from other editors about his work, especially involving Jewish subjects. Whatever the industrious Patapasco913’s motivation, the ease with which he Jew-tagged so many entries and lists shows how permeable the Wikipedia membrane can be.

The episode has prompted the Wikipedians to try to draw up fresh, even-more-stringent guidelines for the introduction of Jewish religion, heritage, ethnicity, nationality, or whatever you call it into the entries of living people. I suggested to them that the *Times’* standard for obituaries might be a good place to start. In an age of befuddling identity politics, it appears that the Wikipedians could use its own tech-savvy, update of Maimonides’s *Guide for the Perplexed*.

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Edward Kosner, who edited *New York* and the *New York Daily News*, among other publications, is the author of *It’s News to Me*, a memoir.

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