

International

Wikipedia's editor 'warriors' fight lies, bigotry and Nazis

Volunteers battle false COVID death reports, 'fake' info

WASHINGTON: False COVID death reports, a vast gender gap, Nazi "fan fiction": These are some of the perils an international crowd of volunteers battle across Wikipedia's tens of millions of online entries. The world's largest internet encyclopedia is often the first result to pop up when users ask the internet a question—and thus a massively influential source of free information but which also reflects humanity's faults.



Other dark spots in human history

With entries that can in theory be written by anyone with an internet connection—in some 300 languages—it comes down to editing by mostly anonymous volunteers to police the site. "I always carry my laptop along wherever I go, to edit Wikipedia," said Alaa Najjar, who is based in the Middle East, but asked that specific details about his identity be omitted to protect his privacy.

"It is an addiction, as my friends say. I prefer to say it's my passion," he told AFP by email. Najjar said he

contributes to almost 500 entries a week, and as a medical doctor he has been busy fighting a flood of false information unleashed during the pandemic. Among the strains of misinformation that surfaced on Wikipedia, he has spotted false reports COVID-19 had killed notable people and inaccurate boosting of some nations' death and case numbers.

"I reviewed hundreds of articles during the COVID-19 pandemic, and rejected many misleading or erroneous amendments," said Najjar, who got the platform's top honor in 2021 for his work. The 20-year-old encyclopedia—which even has an article devoted to its own controversies—has received positive accolades in recent years for its fact-checking capacities. Though it's a sprawling platform, the site does not seek to make money and so avoids the profit-over-safety criticism that has battered Facebook, for example.

Instead, Wikipedia has volunteers who are deeply invested in the site's stated mission of providing access to a written compendium of all branches of human knowledge. Of course, it can be a thankless job to kick dubious reports off the platform. "One particular editor called me a 'vandal' for removing unsourced information," said Ksenia Coffman, who has battled what she termed "fan fiction" about World War II on Wikipedia, including how Nazis and German generals were depicted.

A strand of writing that ignores historical context regarding war-time atrocities such as the Holocaust, and



WASHINGTON: Ksenia Coffman stands for a portrait in San Jose, California. The world's largest online encyclopedia is often the first result to pop up when people ask the internet a question - and thus a massively impactful source of free information but which also reflects humanity's faults. — AFP

instead romanticizes German forces, has influenced a subculture that has found its way to the platform. "Why am I getting pushback when I am trying to correct this to remove these unsourced globs of text that just glorify these supposed Nazi war heroes?" asked Coffman, who lives in California but grew up in the

Soviet Union and contributes around 200 edits per month. She said the pushback from the subculture's believers as well as from editors who didn't like to be challenged was a "tactical mistake" by her detractors that in fact motivated her to stick around and take on the issue.

And other dark spots in human history have a way of popping up on Wikipedia, too. Women have been less well-covered than men in published written works in general, which creates a barrier to women appearing in equal numbers to men in Wikipedia's articles. The platform requires reliable, published sources from news outlets or academia to underpin an article, noted Dublin-based volunteer editor Rebecca O'Neill. "Wikipedia is an uncomfortable mirror to show the world because it reflects back all of the systemic knowledge gaps that we have," she said, adding that she puts in about 40 minutes per day on the platform.

In 2015 it became clear that only 15 percent of English language biographies on the platform were about women, sparking an effort to try to balance out the disparity. Six years later, the figure has risen to over 19 percent, said O'Neill. Last year she was writing Wikipedia articles at the clip of one per day, and in the ratio of 19 biographies on women for every one she did about a man. "I as an individual can offer something, I'm just going to set aside the time and just do it and not turn it over too much in my head," she added. "It's something I can do." — AFP



ABBOTSFORD: This aerial handout image shows flooding on the Sumas Prairie in Abbotsford, Canada. — AFP

One dead in mudslides that cut off Vancouver

OTTAWA: Police said at least one person has died in torrential rains that trapped motorists in mudslides, forced thousands to evacuate their homes and cut off Vancouver from the rest of Canada. Search and rescue teams recovered the body of a woman from a mudslide near Lillooet, 250 kilometers north of Vancouver, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police said.

Staff Sergeant Janelle Shoihet added that investigators have received two missing person reports, but that they believe "there may have been other occupied vehicles that were lost in the slide." "The total number of people and vehicles unaccounted for has not been confirmed," she said. The rains had let up by late Tuesday afternoon. But mudslides, rocks and debris washed out several highways leading to Vancouver,

trapping hundreds of motorists who were rescued by military helicopters by nightfall on Monday.

Local television showed video footage of the Trans Canada highway—which connects the coastal city to the rest of the country—inundated. A bridge was also washed out. Other routes have also been closed, according to Drive BC, which said on Twitter: "Highways are closed until further notice." As a result, motorists wanting to travel to or from Vancouver would have to travel south to the United States and back up into Canada. Anyone taking this circuitous route, however, would have to show proof of a negative COVID-19 test upon re-entry into Canada.

Landslides also cut off rail traffic to and from Vancouver—one of Canada's busiest freight sea ports. "Both CN and CP Rail indicate that no rail traffic is currently able to transit between Kamloops and Vancouver," a port spokesperson said. In Ottawa, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his government is "watching closely" the evolving situation in British Columbia. He was to speak with the province's premier, John Horgan, later in the day to see what federal help might be needed. "We'll be there to help in any way, shape or form," he told reporters. — AFP



NAIROBI: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left) and Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Foreign Affairs Ambassador Raychelle Omamo speak at a press conference after their bilateral meeting at the Serena Hotel in Nairobi yesterday. — AFP

Blinken warns on democracy at start of Africa tour

NAIROBI: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday urged Africans to watch out for rising threats to democracy as he began a three-nation tour of the continent where he is also seeking momentum to end Ethiopia's year-long war. Blinken, who will also visit Nigeria and Senegal, wants to demonstrate a new US commitment to Africa with a focus on democracy, climate change and COVID-19 at a time when China is making steady inroads into the continent.

The top US diplomat spoke for an hour and a half with Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta at a meeting that was originally scheduled for 10 minutes. Kenyatta paid a surprise trip to Addis Ababa on Sunday in the hope of pushing peace efforts, adding to a flurry of international diplomatic activity over the conflict. Blinken also held talks with civil society leaders and asked for ideas on how to stop the "bad actors" who test democratic institutions and threaten a free media.

"We have seen over the last decade or so what some call a democratic recession," he said. "We have seen the same challenges here that we see in many parts of the world—misinformation, political violence, voter intimidat-

tion, voter bribery." President Joe Biden has vowed to pay attention to Africa and draw a distinction with his predecessor Donald Trump, who made no secret of his lack of interest in the continent. Kenya's Foreign Minister Raychelle Omamo called on Blinken to seek concrete progress, especially on security concerns.

"There are important signposts to erect so that the whole world knows that the US is indeed back and interested in the advancement of our continent," she said. In his remarks to civil society, Blinken acknowledged that threats to democracy also existed in the United States, where a mob loyal to Trump attacked the US Capitol on January 6 in a bid to overturn the election result. "The United States is hardly immune from this challenge," Blinken said. "We've seen how fragile our own democracy can be."

Ethiopia has been a close US ally but the United States has been dismayed by curbs on aid delivery into the northern Tigray region, where hundreds of thousands of people face famine-like conditions. Diplomatic efforts to try to end the war have gathered pace in the face of fears that rebel fighters who have pushed south from Tigray could march on the capital Addis Ababa. Kenyatta, who has taken a leadership role in diplomatic efforts on Ethiopia, was the first African leader invited to the White House by Biden. Kenya's last election in 2017 was marred by deadly violence, although Kenyatta and his former opponent Raila Odinga have since made peace. However, Amnesty International warned that the signs were not good for the country's next presidential and parliamentary polls in August 2022. — AFP

Migrant crisis could last for years, Poland warns

SOKOLKA: Poland warned yesterday that the crisis on the Belarusian border could last for months or even years, a day after Polish forces used tear gas and water cannon to deter stone-throwing migrants. Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak said there had been further attempts at crossing the border during the night, in the latest escalation of a months-long standoff on the EU's eastern border.

Thousands of migrants, mainly from the Middle East, are staying on the border in what the West says is a crisis engineered by Belarus to try to divide the EU and hit back against sanctions. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and his main ally, Russian President Vladimir Putin, have rejected the accusations and criticised the EU for not taking in the migrants.

"We have to prepare for the fact that the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border will not be resolved quickly. We have to prepare for months or even years," Blaszczak told Poland's Radio Jedynka. Blaszczak said attempts to cross the border had continued during the night, adding that migrants had used the same "method of attacking the Polish border" as seen on Tuesday at the Bruzgi-Kuznica border crossing. "The public attention focused on what happened in Kuznica, while smaller groups of migrants tried to break through the Polish border in other sections, also at night," he said.

Flying bans

The border guard service said it had detected 161 illegal crossings attempts on Tuesday, including "two forceful attempts". Polish police said nine officers, a border guard and a soldier were hurt during Tuesday's clashes - though no officers were still in hospital yesterday. Belarus and Russia condemned the use of tear gas and water cannon, which came a day after the EU and US said they were expanding sanctions against Belarus. The West has accused Belarus of luring thousands of migrants, many from Iraq and Syria, with the promise of an easy crossing into the EU and then forcing them to stay at the border.

Eastern EU members Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have all refused to take the migrants, leaving many stranded for weeks in forested borderlands. Following pressure from the EU, several airlines have said they will now stop transporting would-be migrants to Belarus. Iraq has also said it will start voluntary repatriations of its citizens from Belarus this week and the EU border agency Frontex is working with the Polish and Iraqi authorities on arranging charter flights from Poland as well.

'Extremely dangerous'

Lukashenko, who has crushed opposition to his rule over nearly three decades in power, discussed the crisis with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Monday. It was his first phone call with a Western leader since he suppressed mass protests against his rule last year. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov yesterday welcomed the talks saying it was "very important that contact has been made between representatives of the EU and the leadership of Belarus". But Polish government spokesman Piotr Muller the conversation was "not a good step" and appeared to be "an acceptance of his choice", referring to Lukashenko.

Aid groups say at least 11 migrants have died on both sides of the border since the crisis began in the summer and have called for a humanitarian response to the crisis. Visiting areas near the border on the Polish side, the Council of Europe human rights commissioner Dunja Mijatovic on Tuesday said the situation was "extremely dangerous". "We need to find a way to de-escalate, to make sure the focus is really to stop the suffering," she told reporters. — AFP



WASHINGTON: US First Lady Dr Jill Biden delivers remarks at the 2021 Tribal Nations Summit at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building 21 in Washington, DC. — AFP

In her quiet way, Jill Biden reinvents role of US first lady

WASHINGTON: Jill Biden promotes COVID vaccines and takes part in political rallies—but only when her college professor schedule allows. In her quiet way, Jill Biden is reinventing the traditional role of the First Lady of the United States. Attending a former governor's funeral last week, President Joe Biden had to apologize for his wife's absence. "The reason Jill is not with me today is she's teaching today, fulltime as a professor at Northern Virginia Community College," the president said.

The announcement in September that the first lady was resuming face-to-face instruction at her college made headlines in the American press. Never before had a presidential spouse had a professional career outside the White House. Jill Biden, now 70, married Joe Biden in 1977, when he was a widowed senator with two young boys. The couple later had a daughter together.

A member of the national teachers' union with a doctorate degree in education, Jill Biden continued teaching while her husband served as vice president under Barack Obama. Like most educators in the United States, she taught remotely during the coronavirus pandemic, before returning to in-person instruction this fall. She now teaches English and writing two days a week. When she is not in the classroom, the slim, blond-haired Biden can be seen by the president's side at private and public events, but also, more and more often, alone on stage.

Vaccination

The first lady is traveling around the country urging Americans to get vaccinated against COVID-19 and ever since vaccines were approved for teenagers and younger kids—to also immunize their children. She has also campaigned in support of a Democratic candidate in a local election, attended the Tokyo Olympics and was seen in a cafe with Brigitte Macron, the French president's wife, as Washington was caught in a diplomatic crisis with Paris.

"She certainly has been sort of picking up the pace of her public appearances lately," said Tammy Vigil, associate professor of media science at Boston University's College of Communication. "In the modern era, it's extremely expected of first ladies that they become more and more publicly active." Jackie Kennedy sought to preserve America's cultural heritage and famously redecorated the White House. Nancy Reagan campaigned against drug use. And Michelle Obama launched a major movement promoting healthy eating and exercise among American children.

By contrast, Michelle Obama's successor Melania Trump "got into a lot of trouble because she wasn't as active as she should be in terms of public service," Vigil said. Unlike Michelle Obama, who faced openly racist and sexist attacks, Jill Biden has so far been largely spared aggression—even in today's tense political climate. That said, she still came under considerable scrutiny. Earlier this year CNN published a column on its website urging her to exhibit more "restraint" in her fashion choices, after she was seen wearing a black leather skirt and patterned black tights. — AFP