

Student hoaxes world's media on Wikipedia

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Phony quote appears in obituaries for French composer Maurice Jarre

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AP Associated Press

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DUBLIN — When Dublin university student Shane Fitzgerald posted a poetic but phony quote on Wikipedia, he said he was testing how our globalized, increasingly Internet-dependent media was upholding accuracy and accountability in an age of instant news.

His report card: Wikipedia passed. Journalism flunked.

The sociology major's made-up quote — which he added to the Wikipedia page of Maurice Jarre hours after the French composer's death March 28 — flew straight on to dozens of U.S. blogs and newspaper Web sites in Britain, Australia and India.

They used the fabricated material, Fitzgerald said, even though administrators at the free online encyclopedia quickly caught the quote's



Shane Fitzgerald's obituary-friendly quote — which he added to the Wikipedia page of Maurice Jarre hours after the French composer's death March 28 — flew straight on to dozens of U.S. blogs and newspaper Web sites in Britain, Australia and India.

Fionn Kidney / AP

lack of attribution and removed it, but not quickly enough to keep some journalists from cutting and pasting it first.

A full month went by and nobody noticed the editorial fraud. So Fitzgerald told several media outlets in an e-mail and the corrections began.

"I was really shocked at the results from the experiment," Fitzgerald, 22, said Monday in an interview a week after one newspaper at fault, The Guardian of Britain, became the first to admit its obituarist lifted material straight from Wikipedia.

"I am 100 percent convinced that if I hadn't come forward, that quote would have gone down in history as something Maurice Jarre said, instead of something I made up," he said. "It would have become another example where, once anything is printed enough times in the media without challenge, it becomes fact."

So far, The Guardian is the only publication to make a public mea culpa, while others have eliminated or amended their online obituaries without any reference to the original version — or in a few cases, still are citing Fitzgerald's florid prose weeks after he pointed out its true origin.

"One could say my life itself has been one long soundtrack," Fitzgerald's fake Jarre quote read. "Music was my life, music brought me to life, and music is how I will be remembered long after I leave this life. When I die there will be a final waltz playing in my head that only I can hear."

Fitzgerald said one of his University College Dublin classes was exploring how quickly information was transmitted around the globe. His private concern was that, under pressure to produce news instantly, media outlets were increasingly relying on Internet sources — none more ubiquitous than the publicly edited Wikipedia.

When he saw British 24-hour news channels reporting the death of the triple Oscar-winning composer, Fitzgerald sensed what he called "a golden opportunity" for an experiment on media use of Wikipedia.

He said it took him less than 15 minutes to fabricate and place a quote calculated to appeal to

obituary writers without distorting Jarre's actual life experiences.

If anything, Fitzgerald said, he expected newspapers to avoid his quote because it had no link to a source — and even might trigger alarms as "too good to be true." But many blogs and several newspapers used the quotes at the start or finish of their obituaries.

Wikipedia spokesman Jay Walsh said he appreciated the Dublin student's point, and said he agreed it was "distressing so see how quickly journalists would descend on that information without double-checking it."

"We always tell people: If you see that quote on Wikipedia, find it somewhere else too. He's identified a flaw," Walsh said in a telephone interview from Wikipedia's San Francisco base.

But Walsh said there were more responsible ways to measure journalists' use of Wikipedia than through well-timed sabotage of one of the site's 12 million listings. "Our network of volunteer editors do thankless work trying to provide the highest-quality information. They will be rightly perturbed and irritated about this," he said.

Fitzgerald stressed that Wikipedia's system requiring about 1,500 volunteer "administrators" and the wider public to spot bogus additions did its job, removing the quote three times within minutes or hours. It was journalists eager for a quick, pithy quote that was the problem.

He said the Guardian was the only publication to respond to him in detail and with remorse at its own editorial failing. Others, he said, treated him as a vandal.

"The moral of this story is not that journalists should avoid Wikipedia, but that they shouldn't use information they find there if it can't be traced back to a reliable primary source," said the readers' editor at the Guardian, Siobhain Butterworth, in the May 4 column that revealed Fitzgerald as the quote author.

Walsh said this was the first time to his knowledge that an academic researcher had placed false information on a Wikipedia listing specifically to test how the media would handle it.

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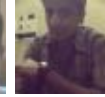
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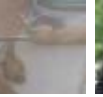
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