# Distortion on Hebrew Wikipedia & What It Can Teach Us about Small Wikipedias

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## Abstract

This project examines religion- and nationalism-driven distortions on Hebrew Wikipedia, with two aims: to expose the intentional manipulations besetting this specific Wikipedia, and - the more generalizable aim - to shed light on the systemic weaknesses of small Wikipedias as a whole, that make them vulnerable to disinformation.

## Introduction

- Although Wikipedia profoundly shapes what people think and know, there is little in-depth research on how Wikipedians author information or *dis*information. I have designed a methodology for conducting in-depth content analysis of Wikipedia, especially its back pages, and will apply this methodology to research distortion on Hebrew Wikipedia.
- For several years, a number of editors have published fringe views that prize religious fundamentalism and nationalism over historical veracity. To give an example, a group of editors rewrote the history of archeological sites in Israel to match Biblical stories. In another case, editors writing about the West Bank changed mentions of "Israeli occupation" to "Israeli rule" and "settlements" to "villages." These editors flout scholarly consensus to impose a far-right ideology.
  Such distortions happen on a vast scale across numerous articles. Some editors work independently, while others do so with the backing of political parties.
- I will identify such distortions, juxtaposing article content with scholarship. By mining hundreds of back pages, I will trace errors (misinformation) and intentional falsifications (disinformation).
- This research contributes to Wikimedia projects because it uncovers not only key problems in Hebrew Wikipedia, but also how small Wikipedias, more generally, enable disinformation. Small Wikipedias (with fewer than 400,000 articles) function differently from the English Wikipedia (with close to 7 million articles). Small Wikipedias have fewer editors and administrators, weaker arbitration mechanisms, and sparser policies (eg. lighter Conflict of Interest restrictions).
- Finally, I will make concrete recommendations for systemic changes needed to make small Wikipedias better safeguards of knowledge.

**Start date**: June 1, 2024
**End date:** June 30, 2025.

## Related work

- This project advances Wikipedia-focused research, which has come a long way in recent years. I engage with Heather Ford's *Writing the Revolution*, which debunked the "mirror thesis," a widespread idea that

Wikipedia reflects the world around us, its biases and inequities simply mirroring those of real life.

- I will further debunk the mirror thesis by showing that Wikipedia's content does not just distill preexisting knowledge; it creates reality. That is, editors wield tremendous power in elevating certain narratives over others. My methodology enables us to uncover how this occurs.
- Serving as the model for my proposed research is the 2023 article I co-authored on the intentional distortion of Holocaust history on Wikipedia. This was the first major attempt to analyze disinformation in an entire topic area on Wikipedia. We scrutinized 25 public-facing articles and nearly 300 back pages.
- This methodology, tested and proven in our by-now widely known article, will serve me in my next research project, on Hebrew Wikipedia. Far from just echoing my previous research, however, this new project will yield compelling generalizable conclusions on foreign-language Wikipedias.

## Methods

- My methodology excavates behind-the-scenes content to uncover how falsehoods make their way into Wikipedia and stay there. I discover who inserted them, who opposed them, and how falsifying editors won out. I analyze hundreds of diffs (displays of difference between versions of the same Wikipedia page) [Fig. 1] and dozens of back pages, including Talk Pages [Fig. 2], noticeboards, and arbitration logs; I interview Wikipedia editors and generate quantitative data through Wikipedia's statistical suites, particularly X-Tools [Fig. 3].
- For this project, I will start by reading several dozen Hebrew Wikipedia pages on religion and politics in Israel; I will then look at history logs [Fig. 4] and identify key editors, both those pursuing evidence-based writing and those pushing belief-based convictions. I will contact the former group of editors (I expect about a dozen) and - with IRB approval - invite them to be interviewed.

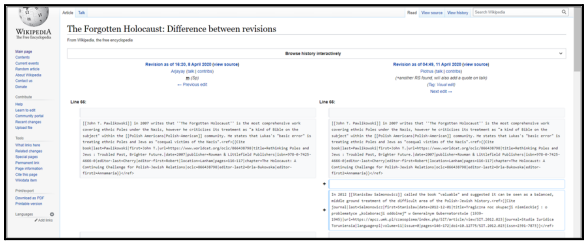


Fig. 1: A "diff" displaying the difference between versions of the same Wikipedia article.

Fig. 2: A Talk Page, where editors discuss article content.

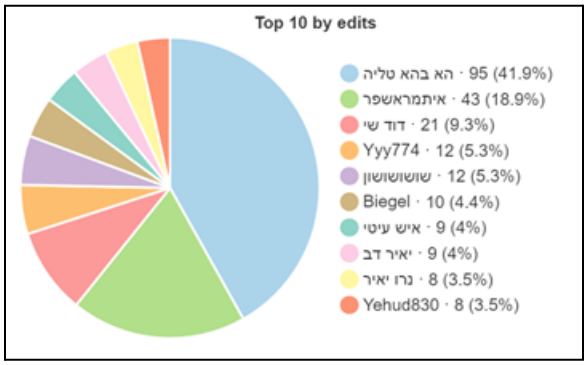


Fig. 3: The XTools suite reveals an article's most prolific editors.

Fig. 4: A "History Log," listing all changes ever made to any given Wikipedia page.

## Expected output

- Publications to increase the public's awareness of problems in Hebrew Wikipedia specifically and in smaller Wikipedias more generally. An **open-access article** in a peer-reviewed journal, will engage scholars and the general public while an op-ed in an Israeli newspaper (Haaretz or Ynet) and an American newspaper (Wired or Slate) will captivate the general public.
- Presentation at the Hebrew Wikipedia annual summer gathering in Tel Aviv. See Community Impact Plan.
- Presentations at public and academic venues.

## Risks

Risk: one or more of the Wikipedians I interview don't want to go on record.
Mitigation: I interview them on background, using public domain data on Wikipedia to substantiate their statements.

## Community impact plan

I will present my findings to Hebrew Wikipedians at their annual Tel Aviv symposium, to open a conversation about overcoming disinformation.
I believe I will impact the community because I've done it before; my 2023 article prompted a fruitful Arbitration Committee investigation and cleanup of many articles.

## Evaluation

I will measure the article's reach through the number of views (shared by the publisher), coverage by the press, and how Wikipedia editors use it to effect change in articles. The more people access and cite the essay, the more evidence I will have of its impact.

## Budget

$50,000: personnel (Dr. Klein summer salary, student research assistant, fringe benefits - $34,500). Consultant ($5000). Open access publication fees ($4,000). Overhead ($6,500, capped at 15%).

## Prior contributions

- My most important contribution is the aforementioned article I co-authored. This 60-page article went viral within days, garnering thousands of views and media coverage in a dozen countries, including an op-ed I wrote. With over 50,000 views, its online visibility is in the top 5% of 25 million research outputs, and it is under contract for translation into Polish and Hebrew.
- I have presented this work at over a dozen public and academic venues.

## References


- Heather Ford, *Writing the Revolution: Wikipedia and the Survival of Facts in the Digital Age* (MIT Press 2022).