

Wikipedia's Strange Certainty about Edward Hooper, Brian Martin, and the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis

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"To me, the line in the sand that divides science from what's not science is—the way I think about it is, what makes me a scientist is—that I would much rather have questions I can't answer than answers I can't question." –Max Tegmark, Professor, Department of Physics, MIT (expanding a quote from Richard Feynman).

"If you thought that science was certain - well, that is just an error on your part." –Richard Feynman, Nobel Prize in Physics, 1965.

Abstract: The Wikipedia editors and administrators who control the Brian Martin (social scientist) and Edward Hooper Wikipedia pages, and also the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis Wikipedia page, differ from Tegmark and Feynman, and other philosophers of science. These editors and administrators prefer answers that cannot be questioned. They promote certainty and the suppression of contrary evidence. They put Wikipedia on the wrong side of the line that divides science from pseudoscience. This brief paper reports on some of the factors that allow biased editorial control to undermine science and biography at Wikipedia.

I. Some background.

I have never met either Edward Hooper or Brian Martin. I have read much of their published work, I have seen Hooper on camera in the *Origin of Aids* movie, and I have communicated with each of them individually. Martin posted a paper I wrote called "A Strange Case of Certainty" at the Suppression of Dissent website he administers, <http://www.bmartin.cc/dissent/>.

Hooper has commented on my paper and has linked to it on his website, www.aidsorigins.com.

My Strange Case of Certainty paper used the origin of Aids debate as a case study making the point that institutional interests can powerfully influence the flow of ideas.

It was an odd chance that got me interested in the origin of Aids. I saw a box of books called *The River*, by Edward Hooper, being unpacked and shelved at my local bookstore in 1999. Thinking that it would be about water rights issues, a subject that was of interest to me, I looked through a copy. Turned out it wasn't what I was interested in, but it was so well written, and so thoroughly documented, that I bought it anyway.

The River is an investigation of how a chimpanzee virus jumped species to humans to cause the Aids pandemic. The conclusions of *The River* supported what has come to be known as the OPV/AIDS hypothesis.

The OPV/AIDS hypothesis proposes that the Aids pandemic originated from the Wistar Institute's experimental oral polio vaccine called CHAT that was administered in Africa in the late 1950s. It is alleged, with supporting evidence, that batches of CHAT were prepared locally in Africa using tissue cultures made from sacrificed caged chimpanzees that were part of Wistar's vaccine program. Wistar denies this use of chimpanzee tissues, but claims that records that might help their case have been lost.

An alternative theory, the bushmeat hypothesis, supported by Wistar and the medical industry, proposes that Africans started the pandemic by killing and eating wild chimpanzees.

At first the debate about the origin of Aids was covered by the news media. But then the media reporting about the debate became one sided. Many "final" claimed refutations of the OPV/AIDS hypothesis were offered over the years since 1992 or earlier by Wistar and its supporters. These were generally accepted by the media without questioning why every few years new final claims were necessary.

I found Hooper's website for a different view. The reason for the series of refutations was that one after another they were not holding up. It became obvious that institutional interests were successfully controlling the public debate.

My Strange Case of Certainty paper takes no position on the outcome of the origin of Aids debate. The debate is unresolved, and it is not my purview to resolve it. My interest is in how institutional interest in suppressing the debate has been effective in foreclosing public discussion of the issue.

One section of Strange Case of Certainty analyzed the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis page at Wikipedia, finding it a travesty of errors and spin.

Each Wikipedia page (or article—the terms page and article seem to be interchangeable at Wikipedia) has a tab labeled Talk which accesses edit histories and discussions. The history gets archived, although it is not clear whether all deletions and discussions remain accessible. The OPV/AIDS Hypothesis Talk archive for years past revealed that much of my factual criticism was not new to the editors and administrators of the Wikipedia page.

My Strange Case of Certainty is now being discussed on the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis Talk page. But, although the many errors have again come to the attention of the active Wikipedia editors and administrators, it seems unlikely that this attention will result in any substantive change to the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis page. The archive shows a consistent policy of ignoring the substance of criticism over the past many years.

I recently received an email from Edward Hooper asking me to look into what is going on at Wikipedia regarding references both to him and to Brian Martin. Hooper had been alerted by a third party that he and Martin should be prepared for some sort of new campaign against them at Wikipedia.

II. What I have found.

A. Wikipedia editing.

I do use Wikipedia. It is a convenient free source for information. The day I began this essay I was also writing about the Bronte sisters (18th century English novelists) and wanted to say something about their early deaths. Wikipedia is reasonably vague given the state of medicine at the time, but suggests the three sisters died of tuberculosis, possibly complicated by typhoid fever. I accepted that as sufficiently reliable and non-controversial, and I used it in my text.

I began with the idea that entries such as on the Bronte sisters would be reliable because of the absence of institutional interests vested in the outcome of the postings. After all, the sisters' books are out of copyright and can be read without charge over the internet. Checking the edit history of the Bronte page disabused me of my confidence.

The Bronte family Wikipedia page cites to a 1995 biography by Juliet Barker for the tuberculosis cause of death. In the associated Talk page the editors request information about a *Scientific American* story on tuberculosis as their cause of death. There was no followup. In 2012 an editor requested that the page be "semi-protected due to the recent multiple attempts of vandalism from

unregistered users". An anonymous editor, Brownbearwolf, on February 19, 2015, argued on the Talk page that two of the sisters were suicides.

Wikipedia relies on mostly anonymous editors for its quality control. The Talk pages are full of much nonsense, bickering, and power plays, even when the subject is as innocuous as 18th century literature.

Lawyers know that there are many ways to obscure facts. One is with stonewalling and suppression. Another is to overwhelm with volume. Wikipedia's transparency is overwhelming. There are over 5 million Wikipedia subject articles, each with its own Talk pages and archives.

Wikipedia presently has over 30,000 editors, about 1300 of whom have additional powers and are called administrators. Around 5500 of the regular editors, as well as the administrators, have what are called rollback powers. There are also small numbers of Wikipedia editors called bureaucrats and Wikimedia global editors called stewards, each with additional powers and somewhat vague duties.

Wikipedia protocols are extensive, flexible, much subject to debate and revision, and uncertain in effect. Undermining the protocols is the directive, "If a rule prevents you from improving or maintaining Wikipedia, ignore it."

Wikipedia is one of the internet sites owned and facilitated by the Wikimedia Foundation, a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit organization. The Foundation has control over the Wikipedia software, and has provided software, Huggle, Winkle, and Rollback among them, that enables administrators and experienced editors with rollback power to quickly monitor and reverse page edits. The full scope of Wikimedia oversight of Wikipedia is not clear.

Wikipedia is also governed by a plethora of committees. Much of Wikipedia governance is duplicative (or more) with contrary positions frequently argued or posted on governance issues. There is also very extensive commentary and criticism outside of Wikipedia, much of it also reposted or discussed on Wikipedia pages.

An investigation of Wikipedia could become a bottomless never ending project. What I write herein can be documented using Wikipedia sources, but some of it can also be contradicted from other Wikipedia sources. I have given up on footnoting the present paper; readers with questions are advised to check for themselves—everything written here has been found using internet searches.

Wikipedia's anonymous editing and administrating is open to abuse. Paid editors are supposed to declare payments and conflicts of interest. It is sus-

pected that there is much more paid editing than is disclosed. Disclosure is self monitored, except in cases where there has been public exposure. An internet search for "paid editing at Wikipedia" produced over 10 million hits, including recent articles at *Time* and *The Atlantic*.

Many critics conclude that paid editing at Wikipedia is common. Most editing is done by anonymous users with such tags as Guy, SmithBlue, Seabreezes1, Gongwool, Harrald88, and Mastcell. Other editors are identified only by an IP address.

When some editors have been identified as having made hundreds of edits over short periods of time, paid editing has been suspected. Especially when those editors have industry connections and their point of view has favored their employers.

Powerful editors and administrators (power editors) are able to effectively control Wikipedia pages they are interested in using their enhanced editing powers, their insider knowledge, their rollback powers, and their selective use of protocols.

The use of Wikipedia protocols on reliable sources is especially interesting, and explains much about Wikipedia power editor control. Sometimes a protocol is cited that only peer reviewed articles can be used. Sometime a protocol requiring only secondary sources is cited. Original research is barred, except when it is not.

An example from the analysis of the Wikipedia OPV/AIDS Hypothesis page in my Strange Case of Certainty paper is illustrative. I criticized Wikipedia for relying on secondary sources making claims about a scientific paper rather than using the paper itself. The original paper did not support all of the claims being made about it. Why not use the original source? I asked. It appears that the secondary claims were preferred over the more moderate claims in the original because they better supported the point of view of Wikipedia power editors.

The Talk page and archive for the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis page shows that various editors brought up factual deficiencies in the page and argued for changes. Suggested changes were rejected on the grounds of being original research not backed by secondary sources.

One editor, Harald88, consistently argued for a more balanced presentation of Hooper and the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis, noting the supposed Wikipedia policy of neutral point of view. He was not successful.

Harald88 retired from editing in September 2013, stating, “This user is tired of silly drama on Wikipedia.”

My Strange Case of Certainty paper has been discussed in Talk, but will not be cited because it is not peer reviewed (a flexible term easily abused—my paper has been reviewed by experts, but not by outside referees), but a recent textbook, *Tools for Critical Thinking in Biology*, by Stephen H. Jenkins, Oxford: 2015, is regarded as an ideal source in Wikipedia Talk. Although it also has not gone through outside referees, it is regarded as a secondary (or tertiary) source and therefore accepted without further analysis as reliable.

Jenkins is not only cited for the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis page, the textbook is quoted in a footnote to the Brian Martin (social scientist) Wikipedia page for its erroneous conclusion that Martin has been promoting the OPV/AIDS hypothesis.

The OPV/AIDS Hypothesis page and the Brian Martin and Edward Hooper Wikipedia pages have all come under the attention of an overlapping set of editors and administrators. These editors and administrators evince strong medical industry biases. They are clearly determined that Wikipedia shall not in any way undermine public confidence in vaccination.

B. The Wikipedia Brian Martin (social scientist) page.

Brian Martin is a professor of social science at the University of Wollongong in Australia. He has a distinguished career and an extensive academic publishing history. He maintains a very useful website on the Suppression of Dissent. He is not popular with those who wish to suppress dissent.

The Brian Martin Wikipedia page was once nominated for deletion, but Talk states that after discussion the decision in 2010 was to keep it. Martin has his Talk defenders, who point out among other things that Martin has consistently maintained neutrality on vaccination issues and the OPV/AIDS hypothesis.

One of Martin’s defenders has been SmithBlue, with support from Seabreezes and sometimes Bibby. An ardent adversary has been GongWool, supported by Guy, an administrator. Gong Wool Station is an historic location in Australia, about 400 miles from Wollongong University. GongWool’s pseudonym seems an unlikely coincidence. GongWool has suggested that SmithBlue has a personal interest in his proposed edits, but GongWool may be the one on a personal campaign.

Guy, the administrator, has threatened to have SmithBlue barred from editing.

The Wikipedia editing of the Martin page has proceeded this way: Newspaper articles (secondary sources) have made allegations about Martin opposing vaccination and supporting the OPV/AIDS hypothesis. The allegations are made the basis of the Martin page. SmithBlue submits that nothing in Martin's writing supports this view, and he cites possible violations of the Wikipedia protocol for biographies of living persons.

SmithBlue's edits are rejected on the grounds that they violate protocols against original research or because they are based on primary rather than secondary sources.

References to Martin's papers have been redacted from the Brian Martin (social scientist) Wikipedia page on grounds that they are primary sources and original research, and also on the claim that the Brian Martin page is about Martin himself, not his work.

Would it not be odd to find the Bronte family page redacting all reference to the Bronte sisters' novels? How is the Brian Martin page different?

If, as it is easy to surmise, the Brian Martin (social scientist) Wikipedia page has evolved solely as a personal attack on Martin, as the editing history indicates, then it must violate the reasonable biography of living persons protocol. But this doesn't seem to matter. Even adding "(social scientist)" after Martin's name was subject to debate which included opinions about what would best diminish his status.

What kind of biography other than a personal attack would bar references to the person's actual work?

C. Wikipedia on Edward Hooper and the OPV/AIDS hypothesis, Wikipedia reliable sources, and Wikipedia reliability.

Edward Hooper is a science writer who has specialized in researching and reporting on the origin of Aids. He is the author of *The River* and many followup articles on the origin of Aids. He has refused to be suppressed on that subject, and is not popular with those who wish to suppress the origin of Aids debate.

The Hooper Wikipedia page seems to have disappeared. It had been nominated for deletion when last viewed. Deletion may be a good thing given the biased editing.

The Wikipedia OPV/AIDS Hypothesis page promotes the proposition that the OPV/AIDS hypothesis has been “refuted”. It does this by accepting without question denials and claims by interested parties as reported in their own primary sources, or in preferred secondary sources, and by failing to withdraw claimed refutations that have been effectively rebutted. Examples are given in my Strange Case of Certainty paper.

Unequivocal examples of Wikipedia's continued reliance on disproved refutations include the supposed death of David Carr from Aids in 1959, and the testing of samples of Wistar's CHAT vaccine. Both of these were espoused by Wistar as final proofs in its defense against the OPV/AIDS hypothesis, the first in 1992, the second in 2000. Neither claimed proof has withstood scrutiny.

David Carr was later shown not to have died of Aids. The tested CHAT vaccine samples were shown not to have been African samples. Yet these self-serving claims of final proof put forth by Wistar have been maintained intact on the Wikipedia OPV/AIDS Hypothesis page.

I have looked further into the Wikipedia OPV/AIDS Hypothesis page. Following the page's Talk tab takes one to current discussions, and from there one can jump to the archive. The current Talk seems to be about my claim of errors in the first paragraph of the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis page. The archive shows that what I say in Strange Case of Certainty has been said over and over by many others over the years. The Wikipedia page is heartily criticized in Talk. Among the critical comments are the following:

"Description of the Hypothesis is entirely MISSING" – "Absurd Bias" – "factually incorrect" – "most beautiful of smokescreens" – "Cherry picking" – "inappropriate guidelines" – "Extremely Biased Premise" – "edit war" – "arguments published in Nature are bullshit". And there are lots of comments about the inaccurate treatment of both Hooper and Martin. Editor comments make specific charges of error, argue for changes, and cite to Wikipedia protocols.

The problem is that the power editors refuse to respond with any changes on the published Wikipedia page.

If the Edward Hooper Wikipedia page resurfaces it can be expected to be an even more virulent attack piece supported by secondary sources like the Jenkins textbook, and to exclude reference to Hooper's actual work.

It is doubtful that secondary sources that oppose the views of the Wikipedia power editors would pass their scrutiny. The protocols are flexible enough to allow this control.

Secondary sources are generally preferred at Wikipedia for reliability. Established news organizations are highly regarded as sources. Self-published material is not to be used, with certain exceptions, and self-generated content is generally unacceptable. Wikipedia has this interesting statement about reliable sources:

Reputable tertiary sources, such as lower-level textbooks, almanacs, and encyclopedias, may be cited. However, although Wikipedia articles are tertiary sources, Wikipedia employs no systematic mechanism for fact checking or accuracy. Thus, Wikipedia articles (and Wikipedia mirrors) are not reliable sources for any purpose. Because Wikipedia forbids original research, there is nothing reliable in it that is not citable with something else.

Primary sources are often difficult to use appropriately. Although they can be both reliable and useful in certain situations, they must be used with caution in order to avoid original research. Although specific facts may be taken from primary sources, secondary sources that present the same material are preferred. Large blocks of material based purely on primary sources should be avoided. All interpretive claims, analyses, or synthetic claims about primary sources must be referenced to a secondary source, rather than original analysis of the primary-source material by Wikipedia editors.

(The above quotation has been copied from:
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Identifying_reliable_sources.)

The quoted statement that Wikipedia has no systematic mechanism for fact checking and that Wikipedia articles are not reliable sources for any purpose could be seen as an example of self referential contradiction known as the liar's paradox. But in this instance it may be taken as fair warning. Citation to secondary and tertiary sources is no guarantee of accuracy. Selective citation can facilitate distortion, manipulation and abuse.

Most sources are combinations of original, secondary and tertiary material, but the protocols don't establish criteria distinguishing original, secondary and tertiary material in a text, giving power editors a free hand in what they will allow on any given Wikipedia page. The OPV/AIDS Hypothesis page continues to cite to old, outdated secondary sources, and also to original work containing claims that have been disproven. (I address more of this in my Strange Case of Certainty paper.)

One of the reported worries about Wikipedia is that search engines like Google and Apple Siri very often report Wikipedia results as facts. One writer has noted with some alarm that, through Google, Wikipedia is consulted for medical information, even by doctors, more often than internet medical sites like WebMD.

Reliability does not appear to be the point of the Wikipedia pages on the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis or the Brian Martin (social scientist) and the formerly extant Edward Hooper page. The Jenkins textbook by itself gives the administrators and editors a secondary (or tertiary) source to rely on to maintain their conclusions in the face of any alternative editing attempts.

This is despite the fact that some of the Jenkins textbook that most appeals to the power editors is actually primary analysis by Jenkins. It also ignores the fact that the Jenkins textbook betrays confusion about the difference between theoretical arguments and empirical proof.

(The Jenkins textbook further undermines its authority by relying on an admittedly fictional account by non-scientist David Quammen.)

As noted in my Strange Case of Certainty paper, and contrary to what Jenkins writes, it is acknowledged by members of what Jenkins calls the Worobey group that they do not have data for empirical proof of their theory; their claims are based on assumptions they make and on theoretical analysis of limited available data.

(The Worobey group published a paper 2008 showing that if the bushmeat theory of the origin of Aids is assumed to be valid, the crossover from chimpanzees to humans probably occurred in the early 20th century. If the OPV/AIDS hypothesis is assumed to be valid the crossover took place in the late 1950s. Neither theory disproves the other; that is not how theories work in science.)

The analytical weaknesses and factual errors in the Jenkins textbook will not deter reliance on it where it supports the point of view of the Wikipedia power editors.

Here is what one editor posted on the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis Talk page last year: "In 2008 this article alone taught me that Wikipedia is worthless for any information that is remotely controversial. Power editors such as Tim Vickers and MastCell have total content control."

(Unsigned comment submitted by an anonymous editor identified as being sent from: 2602:306:3201:4F0:A59C:AB1B:36DC:22Ed.)

There are other similar comments over a long period of time. A Google search found 58 "professionals" named Tim Vickers, but there is one Tim Vickers with a page at commons.wikimedia.org. His listed category is Biochemistry with a PhD from Dundee University, Scotland. He has his picture with his cat posted; he looks very young. Vickers seems to be immune to all the criticism of the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis page, if, indeed, he along with the anonymous MastCell (a type of white blood cell), who is very active in the editing history, have been the powers in control of what is posted.

Mastcell's influence is apparent on the OPV/AIDS Hypothesis Talk page and archives.

Mastcell is a rather controversial editor, suspected of being David H. Gorski, a surgical oncologist. According to wikichecker.com Mastcell (who became an editor in 2006) did 500 edits between August 18, 2015 and March 24, 2016 alone, averaging more than two edits a day including weekends. It has been suggested that he is being paid by the pharmaceutical industry to help manage its Wikipedia profile.

Mastcell's Wiki/User page does not identify him, but lists three "recommended reading"[s], one being a paper by a Gorski DH, of which he says, "Couldn't have said it better myself."

Here is what the Wikipedia Sucks! blog says about Mastcell (it also references another editor going by Mathsci whom I have not seen active in the Talk archives I have accessed):

The Doctor: David H. Gorski, M.D., Ph.D.

This guy is well-known in the "anti-vaccination" crowd (i.e, the parents of young children terrified that their vaccinated children will become autistic); he used the name Orac online for years, in fact he still uses it to blog. He runs a website called Science-Based Medicine where he and other medical doctors rant about what a threat not-immunizing children is; his personal page on that site is shot through with disclaimers and flimsy financial statements (but he will admit to writing for pay), but the bottom is an overblown "the people on Google are trying to destroy me" rant complete with hidden links making himself out to be the aggrieved party, even though a few paragraphs above he said he got involved in "refuting pseudoscience" on a lark; he has been on the Inter-

net since the 1990s, and yet he has never figured out that people will act like crazed Berserker Vikings online if their precious personal beliefs are attacked, especially if it has to do with their young children. It should be noted that his personal page hasn't changed a lick since 2011.

As with Mathsci, Dr. Gorski became MastCell in 2006, the year before Wikipedia began imploding thanks to the Essjay scandal and Durova's (Lise Broer) "cyberstalking" secret email list, among other fiascoes. He wrote about cancer drugs like desatinib (aka BMS-354825 and "Sprycel") and vinblastine ("Velban"), which gave many the suspicion that MastCell was doing paid editing on Wikipedia for the drug companies, which is an accusation made by his many anti-vaxxer enemies. One of his first edits was to the article on Matthias Rath, a German doctor whose "cancer cure" uses "micronutrients"; MastCell accused him of being an AIDS denialist on top of slamming his system. As with Mathsci, MastCell has his own sockpuppet Jinkinson (popped into being, January 2013) who wrote a BLP of Dr. Gorski in March 2013 using hard-to-find references. He was made an Administrator in 2007, the RfA begun by Durova. Notice that the only dissenter, Wooyi, was browbeaten into supporting Dr. Gorski's appointment. Following in the golem-like footsteps of Mathsci, MastCell has one true redeeming feature: he wants disclaimers at the top of medical articles at Wikipedia. Nobody else at Wikiproject Medicine agrees, so any gibberish can be passed off as medical knowledge on medical pages. Aside from that, he supports all the scumbags Mathsci hung out with so it's like replacing the White Spy with the Black Spy from Antonio Prohías' Spy vs. Spy cartoons, except that he isn't as much of a thuggish goon like Ernst Kaltenbrunner-like Mathsci. . . .

Sock puppets are additional anonymous tags used by some editors seeking to comment on their own work or to enhance their Wikipedia reputations. The use of sock puppets is a violation of Wikipedia protocols. (Interested readers can internet search the Essjay scandal for more information about Wikipedia editing.)

III. Conclusions.

One conclusion is that there is not much to be gained from further interaction with Wikipedia on the subjects of this essay. Wikipedia by its own standards is not an authoritative source of information. Its usefulness is limited to being a starting point for research.

But it is inevitable and unavoidable that the public will use Wikipedia for casual information and will not look further into its reliance on secondary sources as interpreted by its sometimes self-interested editors.

Wikipedia reliability is already widely criticized on the internet and in mainstream media. A few more voices added to the criticism will not be effective. Nor will attempts to edit Wikipedia be able to make headway against the points of view of devoted power editors.

Wikipedia has evolved policies and protocols that keep it functioning. This is actually a remarkable achievement. I have occasionally, and with no regrets, made small financial contributions to help keep Wikipedia running. And I will continue to use it. But I will not rely on Wikipedia information without further checking.

On controversial issues Wikipedia can only be expected to lag behind rather than lead public discussion. On issues like the origin of Aids debate, where institutional interests are intensely involved, Wikipedia can only be expected to reflect those institutional interests. Any headway against those interests would have to be gained elsewhere.