

PR firm covertly edits the Wikipedia entries of its celebrity clients

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How a big Hollywood firm altered Naomi Campbell's entry

Recently, Wiki Strategies was informed about the Wikipedia exploits of public relations firm Sunshine Sachs. Since Wikipedia's editing history is preserved for all to see, we asked freelance journalist Jack Craver to dig into it. He found no disclosure of the Wikipedia accounts clearly employed by Sunshine Sachs, and found many edits that were clearly biased in favor of the firm's clients. Here, we present his detailed analysis of one of their clients' biographies. – [Pete Forsyth](#), Principal, Wiki Strategies

Sunshine Sachs, a leading U.S. public relations firm representing corporations and A-list celebrities, has been using Wikipedia to promote its clients. Edits by its staff include furtive removal and downplaying of well-sourced information, as well as addition of promotional material. It's impossible to know the extent of the the firm's promotional work, but we've uncovered a number of edits that Sunshine associates made on behalf of clients, from obscure startup companies to big stars such as Mia Farrow and Naomi Campbell.

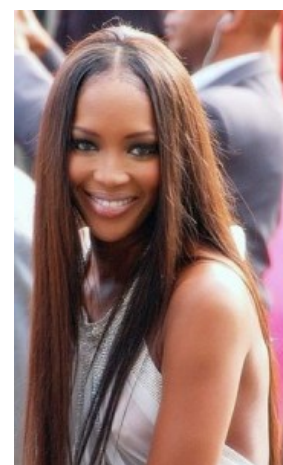
Many of the edits Sunshine employees have made are innocuous – even helpful. They dutifully updated information regarding their clients' careers, including new films or albums, often supported by solid references. They rewrote poorly-worded sentences and repaired broken links to references.

But much of their work clearly violated Wikipedia standards. They deleted or sought to minimize unflattering information about their clients – even when supported by multiple references. Moreover, Sunshine Sachs personnel didn't disclose their relationships with the people or companies whose articles they altered. The most recent edits are direct violations of Wikipedia's Terms of Use, which have required disclosure of paid editing since July 2014.

One user, who identifies as “Alexdltb,” has made edits since 2012 to articles about a number of Sunshine Sachs clients. His efforts include Farrow, Campbell, singer Sarah Brightman, journalist Mark Leibovich and, most recently, Levo, a web startup. Alexdltb seems to refer to Sunshine employee Alexander de la Torre Bueno, who indeed identifies Leibovich as a former client on his LinkedIn page. However, on his user account page, Alexdltb does not disclose his firm's relationships with its clients. The only information on the user page is: “This page will document my draft work.”

The changes Alexdltb made to Naomi Campbell's biography constitute perhaps the clearest example of how he used Wikipedia to further his clients' interests. After adding two updates about the veteran model's career, Alexdltb worked to downplay less flattering aspects of her life and work: her multiple convictions for assault and her unsuccessful ventures in music, fiction writing and business.

In [his first major edit to Campbell's biography](#), Alexdltb deleted a reference to the negative reviews of Campbell's



Model Naomi Campbell in 2008.
Photo CC BY-SA 3.0, Georges Biard.

1994 ghostwritten novel, “Swan.” He deleted the last three words of the following sentence: “Her novel ‘Swan’, about a supermodel dealing with blackmail, was released in 1994 *to poor reviews*.” In the same edit, Alexdltb deleted a clause that referred to Campbell’s 1994 album, *Babywoman*, as “*a critical and commercial failure*.” Alexdltb also deleted the words “*ill-fated*” from a sentence regarding an unsuccessful restaurant chain Campbell had invested in.

Alexdltb justified the edits thus: “I removed a number of opinionated comments in Campbells (sic) Wikipedia entry. Many of these comment reference articles which are also opinion rather than editorial pieces.”

Indeed, literary and music criticism is a form of opinion. The fact that Campbell’s album and book were critical failures is based on the overwhelmingly negative *opinions* they elicited from critics. But the comments Alexdltb was deleting weren’t supported simply by stand-alone reviews; they were articles from established publications that referenced the critical consensus.

The 2007 *New York Times* article supporting the contention that her book was a critical failure not only called the book “truly awful;” it also reported that the novel had received poor reviews, and had won *Seventeen* magazine’s Super-Cheesy Award.

Similarly, Alexdltb [deleted a quote](#) attributed to Campbell, in which the model justified hiring a ghostwriter for the novel because she “*just did not have the time to sit down and write a book*.” Alexdltb said he made the change because the reference cited for the quote was “not an authentic editorial source.”

This edit highlights the difference between a dispassionate Wikipedia editor and hired gun: if Alexdltb were truly interested in solid references, he could have simply Googled the quote and found immediate confirmation of its authenticity from media outlets like [The Guardian](#), [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#), and [The Daily Mail](#) – any of which he could have added as a reference.

The claim that Campbell’s album “Baby Woman” was a critical and commercial failure was supported by a [2006 article by the Independent](#), which summarized a *Q Magazine* list of the 50 worst albums of all time. Better references than the *Independent* to support the album’s critical failure exist and are not difficult to find. For instance, [a 2014 retrospective review in the Guardian](#) begins by asking, “was Baby Woman really so bad?” and a [1996 New York Times commentary](#) noted that *Seventeen* “had reviewed her record as a comedy.”

Instead, Alexdltb simply deleted the comment and the reference.

Alexdltb’s removal of the term “*ill-fated*” from the description of the failed restaurant chain backed by Campbell was also problematic. Try googling the “Fashion Cafe” and you will immediately [find articles](#) that detail the chain’s failure in 1998 as well as [the subsequent prosecution](#) of the restaurant founders for fraud.

In another instance, Alexdltb sought to remove any mention of Campbell’s notorious legal troubles from the lead section of her biography.

Here’s what he removed from the bottom of the introductory section: “*Her personal life is widely reported, particularly her relationships with prominent men—including boxer Mike Tyson and actor Robert De Niro—and several highly-publicised convictions for assault*.”

Explaining the deletion for the benefit of other Wikipedians, Alexdltb wrote that “[The information, about Campbell’s controversial relationships, that I removed is reported throughout the document and does not belong in the exposition as it relates to her personal life, not her identity as a public figure.](#)”

But Wikipedia’s [guideline on lead sections](#) is explicit, stating: “The lead should be able to stand alone as a concise overview. It should define the topic, establish context, explain why the topic is notable, and summarize the most important points, *including any prominent controversies.*” (Emphasis added.)

Alexdltb’s efforts on the Naomi Campbell biography reflect just one example of Sunshine Sachs’ covert efforts to bend Wikipedia’s coverage toward their clients’ interests. Alexdltb also deleted substantiated facts, or added promotional material, to biographies of Mark Leibovich, Mia Farrow, Sarah Brightman, and other Sunshine Sachs clients; and other Wikipedia users, such as Orangegrad and Blue56349, also appear to have a singular interest in promoting the interests of the firm’s clients.



About Jack Craver

Jack Craver is a freelance reporter and blogger based in Austin, TX. He got his start in journalism as a student at the University of Wisconsin, where he started a popular campus political blog, [The Sconz](#). He later spent two-and-a-half years as a political reporter at the [Capital Times](#). After spending a year in Normandy, where he taught English and wrote a column for the [local paper](#) in French, he has moved to Austin and is working on a variety of reporting and research ventures. He blogs about politics and media at [JackCraver.com](#).
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