

Bell Pottinger's wicked Wiki ways

Controversial London public relations firm Bell Pottinger seems to have side-stepped Wikipedia regulations and has been able to edit entries about the Gutpa family, leaked emails show.



Ajay and Atul Gupta.

Image: [Muntu Vilakazi/Gallo Images](#)

In February last year, the firm's manager of the Gupta account, Victoria Geogheghan, emailed a draft of "new content for the Gupta family's Wikipedia page" to a Gmail account called "Team Media".

This email account was apparently created by Bell Pottinger for the Gupta company Oakbay.

It appears that the PR firm wanted an Oakbay employee to edit the Wikipedia page; rather than Bell Pottinger who has been flagged by Wikipedia for unethical behaviour.

The email reads: "Attached is the final version of the Wikipedia content. Please can we have a call at 9.15am tomorrow to brief one of your digital team on how to upload the content? We want to be transparent about the new content we are uploading so need to flag that it is an Oakbay employee editing the Wikipedia entry."

Bell Pottinger, which is increasingly coming under fire for its dealings with the Gupta family, last week announced the axing of four employees, including the manager of the Oakbay account.

In announcing the firings, Bell Pottinger said: "Much of what has been alleged about our work is, we believe, not true - but enough of it is to be of deep concern "

"At various points throughout the tenure of the Oakbay account senior management have been misled about what has been done," the firm said on Thursday.

The firm would not confirm the names of those fired and it is not known if Geogheghan was one of them.

An analysis of the Gupta family's Wikipedia page history shows that the page was created by a user named "Discott" a few days before Geogheghan's email was sent.

Then, on February 23 last year, 11 days after Geogheghan emailed the draft, the page was edited by a user named "OakbayRep".

This user made more edits in July last year.

The user made significant additions to the page. These dealt with topics including Eskom, allegations of influencing ministerial appointments, Duduzane Zuma (President Jacob Zuma's son) and the family's return to South Africa.

OakbayRep's proposed additions match exactly what Bell Pottinger's draft suggested: more details on Oakbay's mining operations, Zuma's response to allegations surrounding Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene's dismissal and Mineral Resources Minister Mosebenzi Zwane's response to allegations surrounding the family's purchase of Optimum colliery through its company, Tegeta.

A Google search for the Gupta family produces that same Wikipedia page as a third search result. Bell Pottinger's suggested edits are still in place.

In 2012, 10 user accounts linked to Bell Pottinger were stopped from making edits to Wikipedia pages after an investigation by British journalists revealed the firm's evasion of ethical guidelines set out by Wiki founder, Jimmy Wales.

He was quoted by the BBC at the time as saying he was "highly critical of their ethics" and began an investigation into what appeared to be the firm's manipulation of Wikipedia content.

This was after the Bureau of Investigative Journalists caught Bell Pottinger executives on hidden a camera bragging about, among other things, having a team that "sorts" Wikipedia pages.

In December 2011, Bell Pottinger executives were caught out by journalists who secretly filmed and recorded them boasting about their political influence over the British prime minister and their proficiency at "dark arts".

Company executives claimed to have the ability to manipulate Google results to "drown out" adverse coverage and have a team that could "sort" negative Wikipedia content for its clients.

This means that a search for articles written exposing wrongdoing by a Bell Pottinger client would be listed lower among the Google results and the Wikipedia page would paint a rosier picture.

Wales did not respond to questions sent to him by The Times last week regarding Wikipedia's current stance on Bell Pottinger.

Bell Pottinger did not respond to questions sent last week, despite saying it would.



Bell Pottinger issues apology statement

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Source: The Times

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