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## Wikipedia censors reporter kidnapping

Founder Jimmy Wales authorises cover-up

by Duncan Geere published on 29 June 2009

7 months ago, New York Times and Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter David Rohde was kidnapped by the Taliban, along with his interpreter and his driver.

The paper was worried - it knew that the first thing his captors would do was Google him to work out if he was "of value" as a bargaining chip, placing his life in considerably more danger.

The paper's executive editor immediately phoned other broadcasters and publications, explained the situation, and asked them not to report on his kidnapping. Keeping the information off the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, however, was more difficult.

Three days after the kidnapping took place, an unnamed editor changed the reporter's page to include the fact of his kidnapping. An NYT staffer changed it back, and it was promptly added again, citing an Afghan news agency's report.

The Times then phoned up Jimmy Wales, controversial founder of Wikipedia, and explained the situation. Wales authorised an editing block on the page for 3 days, conducted by another administrator. When that expired, it was blocked again, for 2 weeks - the start of a long cat and mouse game.

"We were really helped by the fact that it hadn't appeared in a place we would regard as a reliable source. I would have had a really hard time with it if it had", said Wales.

Although no-one would doubt Wales' motives in removing the ability for users to edit the page on David Rohde, many have commented that doing so runs completely against Wikipedia's perpetual search for truth and accuracy. The fact that anyone can edit the site is arguably its key



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strength.

Wales said, on the subject: "We had no idea who it was. There was no way to reach out quietly and say - Dude, stop and think about this". That may reflect a problem with Wikipedia's ideals of global, uncensored participation.

On 27 June, Rohde and his translator Tahir Ludin, were able to escape their captors and make it back to safety. The New York Times made a public announcement, and the user reposted the information, saying: "Is that enough proof you f\*\*\*ing retards? I was right. You were WRONG. :P".

Clearly, saving someone's life is motive enough to bend the rules of the site, but where is the line drawn on the Internet? Who judges what news is dangerous enough to keep it under wraps? This incident raises a lot of questions about the nature of information on the web.