



Alex Hern

Dispatches from the front line of the internet



Chelsea Manning gets put back in the closet by Wikipedia

Admins reverted last week's move, arguing that it lacked consensus.

BY ALEX HERN | PUBLISHED 04 SEPTEMBER 2013 11:56

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The [Wikipedia page](#) for Wikileaks leaker Chelsea Manning has been reverted back to its original location under the headline "Bradley Manning", following continued protest from a collection of editors on the site after last week's redirection.

Last week [we reported on what went on behind the scenes](#) on the site, but since then, a panel of administrators [decided to revert the move](#), arguing that there was "a clear absence of consensus for the page to be moved".

The admins are keen to stress that the reversion is not, technically, *moving the page back to "Bradley Manning"* so much as it is *undoing the move from "Bradley Manning"*. The difference is ostensibly that the former would require consensus that Bradley Manning is a better title than Chelsea Manning, while the latter merely requires a lack of consensus that Chelsea Manning is a better title than Bradley Manning. In addition, the article itself still refers to Manning as "Chelsea" and uses the female

alk:Bradley Manning

n Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia



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The top of the "Bradley Manning" talk page on Wikipedia. Photograph: Wikipedia

pronoun.

That distinction hasn't gone down particularly well in the wider world, where fact that a group of people held a vote on whether or not to call a trans woman by her preferred name, and then lost that vote, is seen as yet more evidence of a painful lack of diversity of experience amongst active Wikipedia editors. In 2010, [a survey](#) found that 13 per cent of contributors worldwide were female (another 0.6 per cent gave their gender as "other"). [A second survey in 2011](#) found that fewer than 1 per cent of editors in self-identified as trans, but this may well be skewed by a number of trans editors identifying as male or female for the purposes of the survey.

Sue Gardner, the executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation, the charity which runs Wikipedia, wrote (in her capacity as a Wikipedia editor) [comparing the reversion](#) to the collective ability of editors to defer to the experts when Pluto was declared to be not a planet. In that case, there were few if any saying that "common sense" dictates that Pluto should be called a planet until every other media organisation started calling it a dwarf planet.

[Gardner writes:](#)



The same is true for transgender issues. A number of editors have made truly ignorant comments over the past week or so, comparing Chelsea Manning to someone who woke up one morning believing herself to be a dog, a cat, a Vulcan, Jesus Christ, a golden retriever, a genius, a black person, a Martian, a dolphin, Minnie Mouse, a broomstick or a banana. In saying those things, they revealed themselves to be people who've never thought seriously about trans issues — who have never read a single first-person account of growing up transgendered, or a scholarly study or medical text, or maybe even the Wikipedia article itself. That in itself is perfectly okay: different things are interesting to different people, and I for one know nothing about trigonometry or antisemitism in the 19th century or how a planet is determined to actually be a planet. But I don't deny that there is stuff on those topics worth knowing, nor do I mock the knowledge of others, nor accuse them of bias

and POV-pushing.

One of the most uncomfortable views held by many in the Wikipedia community is the idea that people who actually are trans not only have no greater expertise in discussing trans issues, but are actually "biased" as a result. Indeed, private correspondence I received after previous pieces on the issue even resulted in one editor attempting to out two others as trans in order to discredit them (thankfully, both the editors concerned were already out, making the emailer not just a transphobe, but a stupid transphobe).

The panel of admins set a 30 day hold on the page, but after that there is the chance that it will be moved for good if the total mass of sources – including sources published before Manning's name change – reflects her new name. In the meantime, however, the article has been referred to [the site's Arbitration Committee](#), which acts as a sort of Supreme Court for Wikipedia. That's no magic bullet: even if "ArbCom" does decide to take the case, it will be a month before they report back. But it's the best chance yet for Wikipedia's editing community to take some time for the introspection it apparently needs.

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Michelle Gould · 9 days ago
 This is a travesty. They could have simply solved the cataloging by linking Brady Manning links to the Chelsea proper Title. This is very upsetting and reminds me of the Little Black Sambo controversy of the 50s/60s although it was not just a title.. Simply get it right both the arbitrators and legal team. This is a disgrace.
 13 ^ | 1 v Reply Share >

hdb · 9 days ago
 It is amazing how little critical attention the media gives to Wikipedia which is generally lionised. There are actually many, many controversial topics which the Wikipedia way of doing things just can't cope with. Nobody ever seems to mention that Jimmy Wales credits Ayn Rand's bizarre 'objectivism' as one of the main influences on his outlook.
 7 ^ | v Reply Share >

Angela Kennedy → hdb · 9 days ago
 I wholly agree. Wikipedia is a very unreliable source with adverse real-world effects, with highly problematic ways of doing things that are generally ignored in the world media, with some highly suspect ideologies informing the whole thing. 'Lionized' is an apt term for how wikipedia is treated, unfortunately.
 2 ^ | v Reply Share >

gerryq → Angela Kennedy · 6 days ago
 From the point of view of an encyclopaedia as a repository of significant fact, the name and pronoun by which they choose to denote Manning is merely a stylistic choice, and fundamentally irrelevant to their purpose.
 2 ^ | v Reply Share >

 [redgrouper](#) → [Angela Kennedy](#) · 6 days ago

Wikipedia has been found to be extremely accurate compared with other information sources. I disagree that it is lionised. Most academics hate it. This is because it threatens the power base of their elite class to decide what is and what is not correct.

2 ^ | 1 v Reply Share ›

 [StudioOneSoul](#) → [redgrouper](#) · 4 days ago

Perhaps most academics "hate it" because they are in a position to know just exactly how inaccurate Wikipedia is in their areas of expertise. That "elite class" you seem to dislike is comprised of people who have taken significant amounts of time to study a subject in depth and with academic rigour. As a group, they may be slow to change their views, but in the long term that is a good thing, not a defect.

2 ^ | v Reply Share ›

 [redgrouper](#) → [StudioOneSoul](#) · 4 days ago

I think it is worth mentioning that I am an academic myself at a new University. However, I have interspersed this with working in the field of social care as a manager and project manager. I have been shocked at just how misrepresented many aspects of social care management are in the social sciences literature. Marxist analysis is represented as fact by many academics in the social sciences and a balanced perspective is hard to find. In addition to political bias there is the fact that much research on subjects such as mental illness is funded by drug companies and there are few opportunities for service users to comment with their perspectives on mental health treatment.

Despite being an academic I do not subscribe to a view that that makes a special kind of person. The way that academic literature is edited and distributed is elitist and must change to reflect the 21st century.

^ | v Reply Share ›

 [redgrouper](#) → [redgrouper](#) · 4 days ago

Just to add- the article which George Osborne based his economic policy on was found to be based on inaccurate data only when a student was given access to the original data. This does not normally happen. If all academic papers were placed free on the Internet and all the original data was also published - academics all round the world could review and rate papers and researchers everywhere could generate new knowledge using the data. Existing academic publishing limits access to published research. Peer review leads to unconventional viewpoints being discriminated against and provides no protection against academic fraud as there is no checking of original data. An academic article is peer reviewed by 2 people and accessed by about half a dozen on average. Wikipedia can be peer reviewed and accessed by everyone in the world who owns a computer and can be added to or corrected almost in real time. The slow pace you boast about is not fit for the modern electronic age and an academic peer reviewer is little better than a theatre critic.

^ | v Reply Share ›

 [redgrouper](#) → [hdb](#) · 6 days ago

Virtually anybody in the world can contribute to wikipedia in some way if they own a computer. Thus, people on medication can contribute to articles on psychiatric medication, discuss them etc. This is not possible in any other type of academic literature or a traditional encyclopaedia. What type of controversial topic do you think cannot be heralded by Wikipedia?

I don't know very much about Ayn Rand. I tend to shy away from any extreme political viewpoints on any dimension. However, I think we can say that Wikipedia demonstrates some of the most positive aspects of libertarian policy- that is that groups of ordinary people can individually make decisions or contribute to something without direction from authority which fulfills a public good. You any not always like Wikipedia 's decisions but you have a much better chance of influencing them than any other academic publication or encyclopaedia.

Wales has stated that he tries to avoid inflicting his philosophies on other people. I doubt if many people on the right or left would have this degree of restraint if they held his position. Certainly not Rupert Murdoch or many in education who have views on the left.

^ | v Reply Share ›

 [oldak](#) · 10 days ago

You're mis-attributing this move to transphobia.

Many people edit Wikipedia because they like organising information, and Wikipedia culture is obsessed with attribution and citation. The validity and authority of sources becomes very important. I think this move comes down to placing Chelsea Manning's legal/documentation name and gender above her self-identification, because the former is more readily sourced. It reflects a concern for detail at the cost of a more sensitive decision. It is the wrong decision, but it doesn't come out of transphobia, just an inflexible approach to certain editorial principles that leads to their misapplication.

12 ^ | 4 v Reply Share ›

[Andrea Vanness](#) → oldak · 10 days ago

How come Charlie Sheen is not under Carlos Estevez?
What about Lady Gaga's page?

It is transphobia, plain and simple, and to further that point of view, just read the comments they left that not only displayed their ignorance but that they were unwilling to even learn about the subject.

21 ^ | v Reply Share >

[oladk](#) → [Andrea Vanness](#) · 9 days ago

Fair point, re stage names, but I don't think that refutes my point. I think the article should be under "Chelsea Manning", and I don't wish to defend the decision to move it. It is certainly the case that some participants expressed transphobic views and are transphobic, but it is incorrect to state that Wikipedia editors as a whole are transphobic.

5 ^ | v Reply Share >

[David Gerard](#) → [oladk](#) · 9 days ago

I'll concur with that.

(btw readers, I'm one of the two people who moved it to "Chelsea Manning" in the first place. I'm currently trying to work through the process on-wiki. Lots of people of generally good will who don't know a thing about the issue and resent being told this *argh*. And lots of good people who are utterly bloody horrified and trying to get this set right.)

9 ^ | v Reply Share >

[whs1954](#) → [Andrea Vanness](#) · 8 days ago

Charlie Sheen is known by the world as Charlie Sheen. Lady Gaga is known by the world as Lady Gaga. Bradley Manning is known by the world as the Bradley Manning who leaked a load of sensitive information to Wikileaks, not as the poseur who has decided in the last couple of months since being put into prison that he's a woman all of a sudden.

4 ^ | 1 v Reply Share >

[valeriekeefe](#) → [whs1954](#) · 19 hours ago

Wow, you really do want to pretend that she hadn't been spending the last few years trying to come out. That iconic picture of her in the blonde wig is not from the last couple of months, but something she sent to her superior officer years ago.

The only identification-of-convenience she ever adopted was a cis one during her trial in an attempt to not let cissexism derail support for her defense.

^ | v Reply Share >

[Alex Hern](#) → oldak · 9 days ago

I've only attributed one thing to transphobia, and that's the editor who attempted to out people to me.

14 ^ | v Reply Share >

[oladk](#) → [Alex Hern](#) · 9 days ago

Perhaps my first sentence should have been "You're misrepresenting this move as a reflection of a community bias against transgender people", which was my reading of the article.

2 ^ | v Reply Share >

[David Gerard](#) → [oladk](#) · 9 days ago

450 opinions in a poll is a *lot* on Wikipedia. Sadly, I feel that the ignorance-to-bigotry on display may well reflect the general Wikipedia editor base as well as anything could be said to, and in turn the more general populace. But I'd hope we could do rather better.

7 ^ | v Reply Share >

[David Gerard](#) → [oladk](#) · 10 days ago

The move count excluded the loudest transphobes, but included people who thought dogs were a reasonable comparison, and people who questioned that transgender even exists or is a thing (and never mind the scientific, legal and medical consensus that it is). You can say that's more ignorance than malice, but ignorant transphobia is still transphobia, just as ignorant racism is still racism - "transphobia" is the correct word for the phenomenon. The question of mens rea is not the issue here.

12 ^ | v Reply Share >

[StudioOneSoul](#) → [oladk](#) · 9 days ago

Sadly, Wikipedia has a great surplus of obsessive and inflexible editors. What it lacks is editors with perspective and empathy. You

make it sound like the "details" or "the rules" are the problem here, which is not the case. The problem is the makeup of the Wikipedia "community" which has made this particular interpretation of the rules. Next month, when they change their mind in the face of overwhelming pressure, the rules will be exactly the same.

8 ^ | v Reply Share ›

David Gerard → oldak · 9 days ago

I do agree that the real problem is how to get people who think of themselves as good people and of good will, but are at best horrendously ignorant of the issues (and outraged when we suggested they might not know everything they need to to make a decision on the issue), to understand and concur, and that in practical terms we can't skip this step.

8 ^ | v Reply Share ›

oldak → David Gerard · 9 days ago

This is one of the problems with the kind of democratic processes that Wikipedia uses to reach editorial decisions (these processes are a wonderful innovation, but they are not without flaws): if a significant minority of participants hold ill-thought-out views, those views have a good chance of figuring into the outcome.

5 ^ | v Reply Share ›

oldak → David Gerard · 9 days ago

This is one of the problems of the kind of democratic processes that Wikipedia uses to reach a consensus (I like these processes in general, but they are not without flaws.): if a significant minority of voters hold an unpleasant view, that view has a good chance of figuring into the outcome.

2 ^ | v Reply Share ›

redgrouper → oldak · 6 days ago

I am afraid you have just revealed one of the greatest flaws of the thinking of a great many people on the left in the U.K. They think that democracy is an inconvenience if it does not make decisions which accord with its own progressive views. And of the public have not caught up with their thinking then they need to be forceably educated

2 ^ | v Reply Share ›

Daniëlle Zana · 8 days ago

I put my words of protest against this discrimination, and it got deleted violently...

3 ^ | v Reply Share ›

redgrouper → Daniëlle Zana · 6 days ago

It is not the responsibility of an encyclopaedia to make its listing decisions on a political basis or advocate for people. For example, an encyclopaedia entry about Guantanamo Bay should contain the information that people are not held there under ordinary legal processes but it should not take a political stance on this even if the editorial staff are sympathetic to these people. The New Statesman represents a U.K. Left wing perspective. Wikipedia should have a politically neutral stance. Your request to them is both political and emotive albeit heartfelt for the right reasons and one which I would support on a personal level.

I am sure that there will be a leftpedia somewhere which reflects progressive views but Wikipedia should not try to become this. It should represent all views without favour and where possible focus on facts as they stand now.

2 ^ | v Reply Share ›

Daniëlle Zana → redgrouper · 5 days ago

discriminating someone directly or indirectly publicly is not being neutral but biased on the fundamentals of ignorance and stupidity, that flushes science down the toilet, which is the same as editing a page that the Earth is flat and not spherical. One of the reasons of politics and human rights failing is because science is not applied only policy and ignorant ideologies of encapsulated assumptions and presumptions.

3 ^ | v Reply Share ›

redgrouper → Daniëlle Zana · 5 days ago

If I were to decide to change my name gender and appearance today and turned up at an airport without having first gone through a legal and social process to change my documentation and social identity I would be refused the right to board a plane. Similarly if I phoned my bank up and asked to withdraw money under a new name without having gone through a process of filling out documents then I would be refused my cash. Neither of these would be discrimination but would just be security checks. If I wanted to change my gender I would have to go through a process of changing my lifestyle and negotiating a change of identity with my employer, my friends, my wife, my doctor, my family etc. then presumably I would undergo hormonal treatment. Bradley cannot go through these processes because she is in prison and there is no objective scientific reason for saying she has changed gender as she

process because she is in prison and there is no objective scientific reason for saying she has changed gender as she still presumably has male chromosomes. Therefore. Other than her statement of intent there is no social or physical basis for saying she has changed gender.

I am happy to Manning a she because I am a fairly liberal person who has no emotional stake in Bradley's life. The U.S. army clearly has other ideas. Bradley will have to negotiate her change in gender with the institutions and people whom she has a relationship with just like you or I would have to do and this does not happen overnight for anyone. Gender identities are not fixed in our society or any other- witness the fafini in Samoa for example. However, any social identity within society exists as result of consensus and negotiation with other members of society.

In Samoa a boy can be brought up to have the fafini identity. However, he can refuse to go along with this and he will not be thought of as having the identity until he established in it.

~~I can decide I want to change now but I will not have changed in any meaningful way until my new identity has been~~

see more

1 ^ | 1 v Reply Share >



valeriekeefe → redgrouper · 19 hours ago

"If I were to decide to change my name gender and appearance today and turned up at an airport without having first gone through a legal and social process to change my documentation and social identity I would be refused the right to board a plane"

Nope.

^ | v Reply Share >



redgrouper → valeriekeefe · 16 hours ago

So why is there a photo on my passport?

^ | v Reply Share >



Daniëlle Zana → redgrouper · 4 days ago

why dont you do humanity a favour and learn about transsexuality including the struggles of Thai transsexuals with stupid pieces of paper called legal documents...

^ | v Reply Share >



redgrouper → Daniëlle Zana · 4 days ago

Actually I do support people who are transsexual and I am happy to call Manning a she. However, I am standing up for the rights of an encyclopaedia to list it's entries on the basis of their not unreasonable judgement.

Saying that people have to go through legal processes to change their gender is not any comment on whether this is fair of just. It is a comment on where things stand.

I support gay marriage but that does not mean I would have advocated describing gay couples as married in an encyclopaedia just because they declared themselves to be so in advance of a legal process to do so. It is actually going to be very difficult for Chelsea Manning to begin a life as a woman in her present imprisoned conditions. I think it is better from a human rights point of view to highlight this rather than to indulge in a fantasy that the whole world has accepted this change and is helping to make the transition possible. On a similar note, I would like to see the prisoners of Guantanamo Bay released but pretending that they are free men is not going to help this.

The point of an encyclopaedia is to reflect the facts accurately, not as people would like them to be.

For your information I have dedicated my working life to helping people in social care work and fully support transsexual people to live the life that they want to.

However, you have chosen to misinterpret what I have said as somehow being against human rights. Sadly, your comments reflect a trend in British liberal thought that the way to achieve liberal objectives is principally through the use of politically correct language and that failure to adhere strictly to these codes is somehow evidence of discrimination.

see more

1 ^ | v Reply Share >



Daniëlle Zana → redgrouper · 3 days ago

You say, but you dont act what you preach -_-

^ | v Reply Share >



jack_k1 · 9 days ago

- 1) Gender Identity Disorder is still classified as a mental illness.
- 2) Manning has not legally changed her name yet.

12 ^ | 7 v Reply Share >

 David Gerard → jack_k1 · 9 days ago

1. is irrelevant. 2. is simply factually incorrect - a public declaration counts as a change of name. There's degrees of legality of a name, and it really isn't the simple cutoff you assume it is. There's a popular online encyclopedia with a detailed article called "Legal name" with lots of citations as to its sources, if only I could remember its legal name.

15 ^ | v Reply Share >

 redgrouper → David Gerard · 6 days ago

Really. So if I change my name and gender and appearance now- and then try and get on a plane the airport authorities won't mind that my passport is wrong? My bank will be happy to hand over my cash to a person with a different name to the one listed on my bank account and a different gender without getting a series of letters? Everyone I know and my employer will instantly respect my decision?

People who change gender go through a long series of social and legal processes before the world agrees that they are now a different person. Just changing our name does not fix this in a flash.

1 ^ | v Reply Share >

 valeriekeefe → redgrouper · 19 hours ago

"My bank will be happy to hand over my cash to a person with a different name to the one listed on my bank account and a different gender without getting a series of letters?"

My bank seems okay with it. I still get service, despite not looking like my ID photo anymore.

^ | v Reply Share >

 redgrouper → valeriekeefe · 16 hours ago

You must have a very liberal bank. My wife's bank won't let her pay a cheque into her bank account if it has the shortened version of her name on it.

^ | v Reply Share >

 Guest → David Gerard · 8 days ago

<http://www.icd10data.com/ICD10...>

^ | 1 v Reply Share >

 Helen → jack_k1 · 9 days ago

And so was being gay it took a long time to remove that from the DSM and step by step gender dysphoria is being slowly relinquished by psychiatrists in the same way.

The fact you say Gender Identity Disorder shows your understanding is not that of a recent DSM edition.

7 ^ | v Reply Share >

 Angela Kennedy → Helen · 9 days ago

Yes. And watching the whole thing unfold on those talk pages made me feel like I was in the 1950's.

4 ^ | v Reply Share >

 jack_k1 → Helen · 8 days ago

<http://tinyurl.com/mwkd2b>

^ | v Reply Share >

 Dominique Storni · 9 days ago

WIKI ... helping naysayers make wikipedia irrelevant, one botch at a time.

4 ^ | 1 v Reply Share >

 redgrouper · 6 days ago

It is not the purpose of an encyclopaedia page to make moral or political judgements about whether or not someone has changed their gender. If Ali was a friend of manning I would be quite happy to call her Chelsea. However, if I was talking about the case casually to some other people in relation to the ethics of data leakage I would probably say Bradley- simply because a lot of people will not have heard about or understand the situation around Mannings decision on changing gender. Manning is famous as a male officer who leaked sensitive information. If she subsequently goes on to be a famous female writer or actor then that is how she will be known and many people will forget to not have heard about her former identity.

Supporting Manning's decision to be known as a woman is a compassionate, fair, and progressive thing to do. However, not everyone accents that manning is now female. The pentagon do not and she is currently in their custody

accepts that Manning is not female. The Pentagon do not and she is currently in their custody.

Most people searching for info on Manning will be more likely to look up Bradley than Chelsea. The Times continued to refer to Mumbai as Bombay for years simply because readers were more likely to understand which city they were talking about. This was not a political decision but merely one about clarity and disseminating information efficiently. Indexing Manning under Bradley does not imply any judgement about her gender either. If Manning was a long deceased artist who had been famous as a man and then changed gender after returning to obscurity then she would be listed under the name she was famous as.

2 ^ | 1 v Reply Share >

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