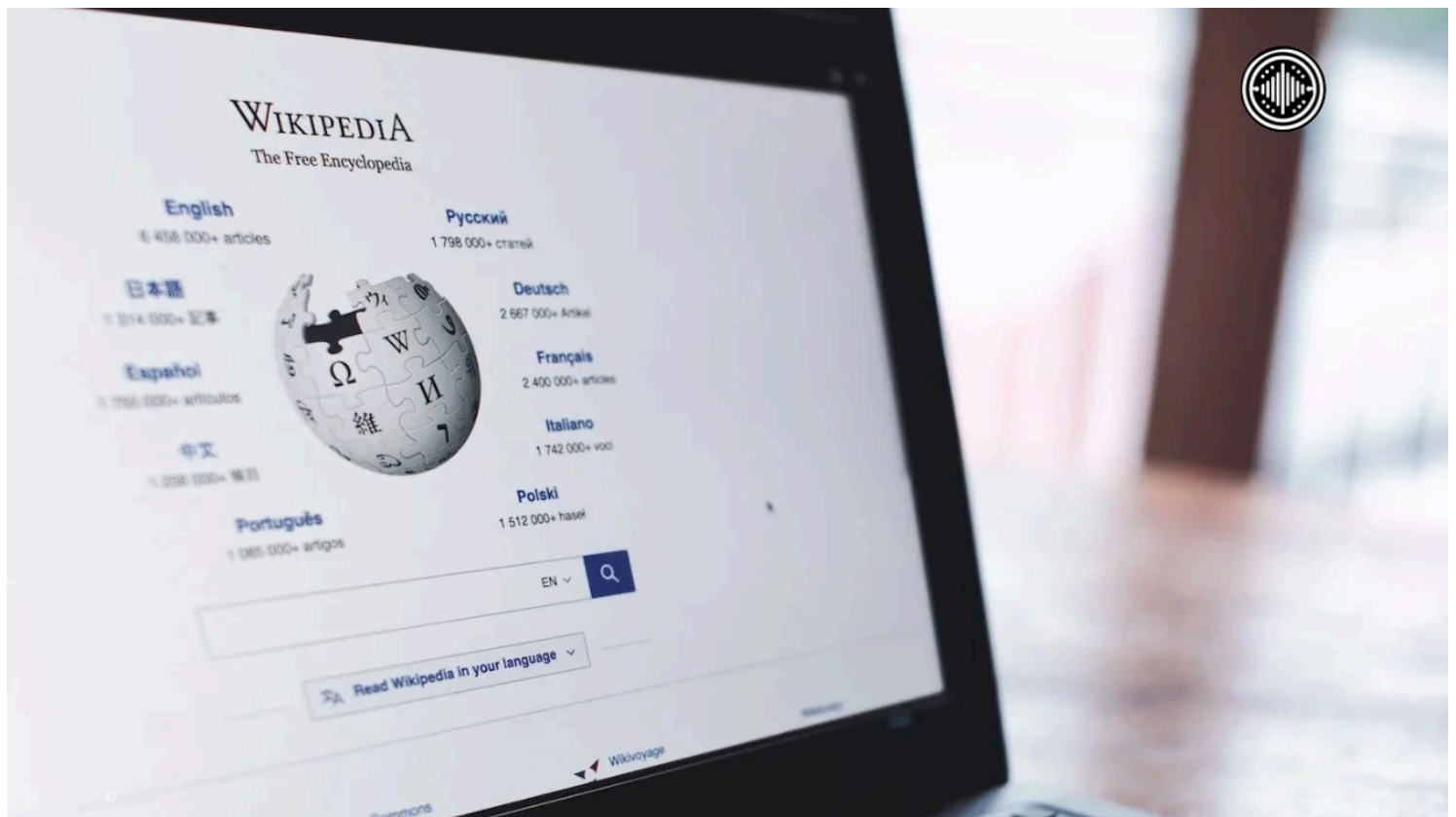


Wikipedia Challenges UK Online Safety Act to Protect Anonymous Contributors

July 23, 2025

— Categories: Human Rights



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On Tuesday, the Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit organisation behind Wikipedia, launched a legal challenge against the British government in the High Court of Justice in London. The lawsuit targets the Online Safety Act 2023, which the Foundation argues threatens the privacy and safety of Wikipedia's anonymous contributors by requiring identity verification. The hearings, which began on Tuesday, continued into Wednesday, with a ruling expected in the coming months.

The Online Safety Act aims to curb harmful online content, such as sexual abuse, racism, bullying, and fraud, primarily targeting major social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and X. However, Wikipedia, which sees around 15 billion monthly page views and has over 60 million articles edited by volunteers, is considered a “Category 1” service under the Act due to its user reach. The Foundation contends that Wikipedia, a public-interest platform driven by volunteers, should not be subject to rules designed for profit-driven tech giants.

A key concern is the Act’s requirement for platforms to verify the identities of contributors. Wikipedia’s model relies on minimal data collection to protect its volunteers, many of whom contribute anonymously to avoid risks such as data breaches, stalking, lawsuits, or persecution by authoritarian The Foundation warns that any requirement to verify contributor identities could discourage participation and threaten the multilingual, volunteer-led model essential to Wikipedia’s neutrality.

In a recent statement, the Wikimedia Foundation emphasised the unique role of its volunteers: “These volunteers set and enforce policies to ensure that information on the platform is fact-based, neutral, and attributed to reliable sources. Over the last 25 years, this human-centred content moderation model has established Wikipedia as an unparalleled resource for reliable information.”

Barbora Bukovská, law and policy director at Article 19, a London-based free speech advocacy group, echoed these concerns in an email to Courthouse News: “Public interest, volunteer-driven platforms like Wikipedia should be exempted from rules designed to rein in the truly high-risk commercial platforms of Big Tech.” She added that anonymity is critical for contributors in countries where expressing certain views could lead to reprisals. “The lack of anonymity could scare people off from contributing, which would be a huge loss for free and open knowledge,” Bukovská noted.

Stephen LaPorte, a lawyer for Wikipedia, underscored the case’s broader implications: “The High Court can set a global precedent for protecting online projects like Wikipedia that serve the public interest. Wikipedia is the backbone of knowledge on the internet, and we trust the court will safeguard this vital encyclopedic resource from rules crafted for the internet’s riskiest commercial sites.”

This case represents the first known legal challenge specifically addressing how the Online Safety Act applies to large non-profit platforms like Wikipedia. Wikipedia also highlighted

the involvement of a UK-based contributor, known only as “Zzuuzz,” as a co-plaintiff, underscoring the personal stakes for individual volunteers. Failure to comply with the Act could lead to fines of up to £18 million or 10% of a service’s global revenue, and Ofcom has powers to block access in serious breaches.

Critics of the Act, including Bukovská, argue that its complexity and incoherence pose a broader threat to online freedom of expression and privacy. The Labour government’s Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, responsible for the Act, has yet to comment publicly on the lawsuit, as has the government’s legal department.

Wikipedia’s challenge highlights a broader tension between regulating harmful online content and preserving the open, collaborative nature of platforms like Wikipedia. As the case unfolds, it could redefine how public-interest platforms operate under the UK’s regulatory framework, with potential ripple effects globally.