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Democracy, High School, and the Guillotine: How Wikipedia Deletes the Unworthy.

That humiliating image of a chubby awkward boy being picked to play in the game just because the team needed one more player has become a clichéd anecdote. Seen over and over in Hollywood movies and peppering the pages of self-help books, this type of story captures the triumphs and failures of personal growth. But, in the past, it was the pressures of childhood of trying to fit in at school—navigating various cliques, hierarchies and social situations—that could lead one to feel like an outcast or underachiever. Once it was the playground or the high school dance that was the setting for rejection—that was until we wanted to be a part of Wikipedia. The Wikipedia commons has arguably become the grown up’s outlet for communal social exile. Yet, unlike high school, where a person might be bullied or rejected by a small group of classmates, Wikipedia deletes what it does not think is worthy of record, metaphorically decapitating the outcasts. Though the guise of democracy Wikipedia deletes an extensive record of digital identities from their service daily. The persons in charge of this deletion are amongst us, they are editors who scroll Wikis looking for offenders who lack importance/prestige. Like historical kings who executed multitudes, we can publicly witness hundreds of Wikis being deleted before our eyes. Welcome to the digital guillotine.

In a 2007 Slate Magazine article, Timothy Noah chronicled his own profile deletion by the Wikipedia commons. In February 2007 Wikipedia sent Noah a warning, notifying him of his impeding digital demise. Upon further notice Noah found out that he was not alone. In fact Noah was about to join a long list of deletions that included a host of figures, some seemingly important and some not. Some of these were, “Anthony Stevens (‘internationally respected Jungian analyst, psychiatrist, and author’), *Final Approach* (‘romantic comedy anime series’), *Secprof* (‘well known security consulting

company in Finland'), and about 400 other topics.”¹ Noah describes how he had found out that he was included on Wikipedia when he was warned that his Wiki, the Wikipedia record created for him by a former student, was in the process of being challenged and deleted. The reason was that Noah was not “notable” enough.

Wikipedia describes what it means to be notable as: “If a topic has received significant coverage in reliable sources that are independent of the subject, it is presumed to satisfy the inclusion criteria for a stand-alone article or stand-alone list.”² Furthermore, in order to ascertain the sources for background documentation Wikipedia needs “verifiable” evidence that would prove the validity of the entry’s substance, weight, and presence. “The evidence must show the topic has gained significant independent coverage or recognition, and that this was not a mere short-term interest, nor a result of promotional activity or indiscriminate publicity, nor is the topic unsuitable for any other reason. Sources of evidence include recognized peer reviewed publications, credible and authoritative books, reputable media sources, and other reliable sources generally.”³

While Wikipedia has an elaborate process to judge the notable, as Noah alludes to in his article, what is deemed notable is somewhat artificial and is done so by a group known as the sysops. “I’ve been placed under a microscope and, on the basis of careful and dispassionate analysis, excluded from the most comprehensive encyclopedia ever devised. Ouch!... Wikipedia’s attempt to define who or what is notable is so rococo that it even has elaborate notability criteria for porn stars. (A former *Playboy* Playmate of the Month is notable; a hot girlfriend to a famous rock star is not.)”⁴ These “sysops,” the term used to describe system operators, are administrative editors that have access to the “tools” of Wikipedia’s content. Sysops have the ability to “protect, delete, and restore pages, move pages over redirects, hide and delete page revisions, and block other editors.”⁵ While it is the responsibility of the sysops to seek out and tag possible violators, Wikipedia prides itself on the democracy behind the decisions, even the

¹ Noah, Timothy

² Wikipedia contributors, "Wikipedia:Notability,"

³ Wikipedia contributors, "Wikipedia:Notability,"

⁴ Noah, Timothy

⁵ Wikipedia contributors, "Wikipedia:Administrators,"

decision by a group to delete an entry. Yet, it is the sysops that Wikipedia rests its validity as an academic encyclopedia.

For a scholar researching and writing academic accounts on a topic, Wikipedia has had all sorts of problems, including justifying the validity of its facts for each entry. In the past when people searched for encyclopedic knowledge they would turn to the book format for facts. One of the concerns for many scholars is that data accessed online (including on Wikipedia) is not a reliable source of information. The reasons for this vary but the main concern is that we, the readers of online text, do not know where the information Wikipedia gives us comes from.

Maryanne Wolf made a similar argument against the Internet in her book *Proust and the Squid*. Through her account of the development of the reading brain, Wolf asks very important questions, but at the same time dismisses the way we comprehend internet text. Wolf feels that Internet readers, those who skim through the page links, comprehend much differently and less successfully than one who reads a novel.

What is being lost and what is being gained for so many young people who have largely replaced books with the multidimensional ‘continuous partial attention’ culture of the Internet? What are the implications of seemingly limitless information for the evolution of the reading brain and for us as a species? Does the rapid, almost instantaneous presentation of expansive information threaten the more time-demanding formation of in-depth knowledge?⁶

In her argument, Wolf recalls the story of Socrates and his distrust for writing. Socrates, according to his student Plato, felt that writing produced laziness in memory because once an individual wrote something down they did not need to try to memorize it. Socrates argued that with a reliance on writing, the mind would change drastically, causing the individual to lose deep thought, which was critical for the mental knowledge. Wolf criticizes Socrates for his attitude against writing and at the same time takes the same position against the Internet.

Socrates’ perspective on the pursuit of information in our culture haunts me every day as I watch my two sons use the Internet to finish a homework assignment, and they tell me they ‘know all about it.’ As I observe them, I feel an unsettling kinship with Socrates’ futile battles so long ago. I cannot help thinking that we

⁶ Wolfe, Maryanne. 22

have lost as much control as Socrates feared 2,500 years ago over what, how, and how deeply the next generation learns.⁷

Factual information on Wikipedia is shared, therefore, it must be false, in other words. This is a dramatic way of challenging the validity of Wikipedia's factual content, but it is not far off the mark for many scholars. The unusual fact about Wikipedia's process is that they announce on their front page that anyone can add or change their content, their facts, that they are, "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit."⁸ But, this is not the case. In fact only a few have the ability to edit Wikipedia's content. This responsibility falls to a Wikipedia editor, the sysops. When a change is put forth to Wikipedia the editor has final say in the outcome. Take for example if I were to go the Disney Corporation Wiki and at the top of the page enter that the company is a capitalist's devil. I am sure that addition would not last long. Go ahead, try it and let me know how long your words stay attached to the page. What is an important question to ask concerning Wikipedia, and one that is step with the doubts on Wikipedia's trustworthiness, is what knowledge do the editors have in order to weigh between what is good and what is bad information for an entry? This is a good question and needs a little bit of uncovering. (This is a possible question I would like to focus on for my final paper, maybe.) Even though we might not know what background and expertise the people deleting our digital selves from everlasting fame have, we do know that it is a group who judges us.

In order for a deletion to happen, a sysops puts the selected Wiki up to a group consensus. Then, a community of administrators, or editors, argues on the topic's significance. This process is a type of digital trial where the page is put on a large list that includes other possible pages up for deletion. There may be hundreds of pages up for deletion at a time. Once a page is up for discussion the administrators have the power to argue for its inclusion or deletion.

Consensus discussion has a particular form: editors try to *persuade others*, using *reasons* based in policy, sources, and common sense. The goal of a consensus discussion is to reach an agreement about article content, one which may not satisfy anyone completely but which all editors involved recognize as a

⁷ Wolfe, Maryanne. 77

⁸ Wikipedia Contributors, "Wikipedia,"

reasonable exposition of the topic...It is useful to remember that consensus is an ongoing process on Wikipedia. It is often better to accept a less-than-perfect compromise - with the understanding that the article is gradually improving - than to try to fight to implement a particular 'perfect' version immediately.⁹

On April 6, 2011 two rather strange Wikipedia deletions were publicly scrutinized. Among entries for radio broadcast SportstalkCleveland, musician Tumblewoof, the film Viola by director Diju Viswanath, Lucky's Chocolates, and many others, were two for Irish city mayors, Declan McDonnel and Padraig Conneely. Both of these entries have been selected for deletion because, in each case, the person has been deemed not notable enough. It was suggested that mayors of towns in Ireland are not as important or "notable" as mayors of American towns, so the Wiki pages were flagged and the sysops showdown began. Speaking about the Irish Politician Padraig Conneely the administrator, *Lincolnite*, made the initial complaint on both Irish politicians. Declan McDonnel's entry was too similar to Conneely's so the below argument took place on Conneely's entry. *Lincolnite* began.

The question is whether the term "mayor" in WP:POLITICIAN, [Wikipedia category for those in political positions] is intended to encompass ceremonial mayors who have little (if any) executive power. Based on the remainder of WP:POLITICIAN, I would have thought that it clearly doesn't. Ceremonial mayors are not limited to Ireland, incidentally. They're common in the UK and in some US states also (many medium-sized California cities, for example, operate on the city manager model and rotate the mayoralty among council members on an annual basis).¹⁰

After *Lincolnite*'s statement against the recognized notability of Irish Mayors, another editor, *RashersTierney*, suggests that in fact the Irish Presidency would fall in the same bracket if *Lincolnite* were to advocate that "ceremonial" positions do not count. "The Irish Presidency is mainly ceremonial in nature, as was the office of Governor-General of the Irish Free State. The fact that an office is mainly ceremonial does not preclude it from carrying formal status." *Lincolnite* retorts with the argument that common sense implies that the Irish President and the Governor-General of the Irish Free State are notable because of their high positions and that the city Mayor is not as recognized.

RashersTierney comes back at *Lincolnite* with his own "Oh, no you didn't," this time

⁹ Wikipedia Contributors, "Wikipedia:Consensus,"

¹⁰ Wikipedia Contributors, "Wikipedia:Articles for deletion,"

looking to the rules of what is in fact a WP:POLITICIAN. What *RashersTierney* did next is what anyone in a community group, governing board, or even third grade would do. *RashersTierney* suggested a second time that the argument should be considered by the review of the guidelines. *Lincolnite* retorts with a lengthy statement from his understanding of the guidelines.

Actually, the guidelines make very clear that some city mayors should be considered notable and others not. Being a mayor doesn't confer notability per WP:POLITICIAN. The second prong of WP:P says the following are notable: "Major local political figures who have received significant press coverage. Generally speaking, mayors of cities of at least regional importance are likely to meet this criterion." The words "generally speaking" clearly don't imply that a mayor of a regionally important city is automatically notable. In summary, some city mayors are notable (i.e. those that are "major local political figures who have received significant press coverage") and some are not (i.e. those that haven't).¹¹

Sadly, *RashersTierney* does not see that he is not going to win this debate and continues for another post. *Lincolnite*, the sysops, is unmoving. What is mostly disturbing is not *Lincolnite*'s dislike for Irish mayors, or *RashersTierney* support for the little entry, but that only two editors commenced discussion on the deletion of this person from the online encyclopedia. What would happen if only one person found something wrong with an identity and no one came in to help. What would happen if you did not have a best friend to stand up for you against the tyranny of Wikipedia administrators. I have this vision that the biggest bully in my school, his name was Biscuit – no lie—is now sitting in front of his computer screen canceling people out just for the fun of it.

So, did Noah's Wiki get deleted? No. Once he had written on his Wikipedia experience in Slate Magazine his shackles were released and he walked away from the guillotine. As for the Irish Mayors, Padraig Conneely and Declan McDonnel, both Wikipedia lives wait in the balance. The sysops are still carrying on the argument. I have no idea if Maryanne Wolf has come to terms with the possibilities of the Internet, I doubt she has. But, none-the-less, what we see in this little battle of unworthy Wikis is that there is a line of truth, a line of factual integrity. But, just like the texts we find with false information and ideological viewpoints Wikipedia's opinionated skew is frightening.

¹¹ Wikipedia Contributors, "Wikipedia:Articles for deletion,"

A final word from Wikipedia

When editors have a particularly difficult time reaching a consensus, there are a number of processes available for consensus-building (Third opinions [a means to request an outside opinion in a dispute between two editors], requests for comments [an informal, lightweight process for requesting outside input], informal mediation at the Mediation [a bunch of volunteers providing unofficial, informal mediation for disputes on Wikipedia], and even some more extreme processes that will take authoritative steps to end the dispute (administrator intervention, formal mediation, and arbitration [matters handled by a panel of experienced users])). Keep in mind, however, that administrators are primarily concerned with policy and editor behavior and will not decide content issues authoritatively. They may block editors for behaviors that interfere with the consensus process (such as edit warring, socking, or lack of civility). They may also make decisions about whether edits are or are not allowable under policy, but will not usually go beyond such actions.¹²

¹² Wikipedia Contributors, "Wikipedia:Consensus,"

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