

On Minor Threat, Wikipedia.org, Beauty, Data Visualization, Abortion, and the Dalai Lama

I've been spending some time in odd places this summer, and so, for my first ever column in print, I thought I'd write about them. I spent a couple of days in Wikipedia.org, and about a week at Flickr.com. There was that wild 3-day fling in blogspot.com, also, wow, I almost forgot about that one.

I was originally going to write about Nike and Minor Threat, and how the Evil Empire of Nike and their 4-year-old third-world-country workers had attempted to steal the Lawful Good Punk Band Minor Threat's cover art but their singer, Ian, tells me the problem is "a tempest in a teapot" – and that perhaps he'll say more later. It really was a local art firm made of skaters who loved Minor Threat and just so happened to be making a skate party ad for Nike. And so it sounds like lots of human stupidity, and not so much corporate evilness.

So since I can't really write about Nike, I thought about writing about the MFA thesis that I haven't written yet. I'm stuck because I'm supposed to write about Beauty; apparently my "art" addresses it somehow. Now, as a Punk Rocker, I don't want to admit that I Like Beauty. Because of course, Beauty, to me, is other people thinking about really nice-looking plastic flowers, and me thinking about noise feedback in a Sonic Youth song. To me, beauty can be something that makes you want to destroy, something that makes you want to cry, something that makes you want to lay on the ground and smile or sob or sleep. So I looked up Beauty on Wikipedia.org so I could get a good postmodern tongue-in-cheek definition.

It's always a half-joke to look up something on Wikipedia. You're looking up a social definition of something. Wikipedia.org is the free online encyclopedia that can be edited by ANYONE, including YOU. You look up something that you might be an expert in, and if you find some info lacking, you add it. Yes, there are many experts in heated fields such as politics, abortion, and Microsoft (footnote: On The Media for July 8 2005) who disagree and/or vandalize the wikis but studies show the normal lifetime for a vandalized Wikipedia article is 2 minutes; then it is restored by the normal authors to fit within their idea of The Truth.

According to that On The Media episode, a Wikipedia article containing collaborative information about the 7-7-05 London bombing surfaced and grew rapidly and was much more informative than regular media outlets. So Wikipedia is great for indie news. According to my friend Mat and his East Coast friends, we can think of Wikipedia as the new telephone-game-like ever-changing narrative to our world - Remember back when there were cave-men and no printed words? Stories transmitted via word of mouth? Then the strangulation of progress, the prison of the printed word – and now we are free again, ebb and flow of information as stories told around a hot server past midnight, edited continuously, everchanging.

I thought about studies on online collaboration – IBM’s History Flow, a visualization technique for dynamically evolving documents, shows a time-lapse view of the length of the wiki on abortion – complete with the times where it was mostly erased and then completely restored moments afterwards. Ebb and flow. Then I thought about how wikipedia, to me, is like an 'ocean of wisdom.' Then I thought about how nice it was that I thought this on the Dalai Lama’s 70th birthday, because his name also translates to Ocean of Wisdom. Then I spent a couple of hours trying to figure out how to fit that into this article and gave up.

“Beauty: 1. the quality present in a thing or person that gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind, whether arising from sensory manifestations (as shape, color, sound, etc.), a meaningful design or pattern, or something else (as a personality in which high spiritual qualities are manifest). 2. a beautiful person, esp. a woman.” – Wikipedia.org