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How to be open about being closed

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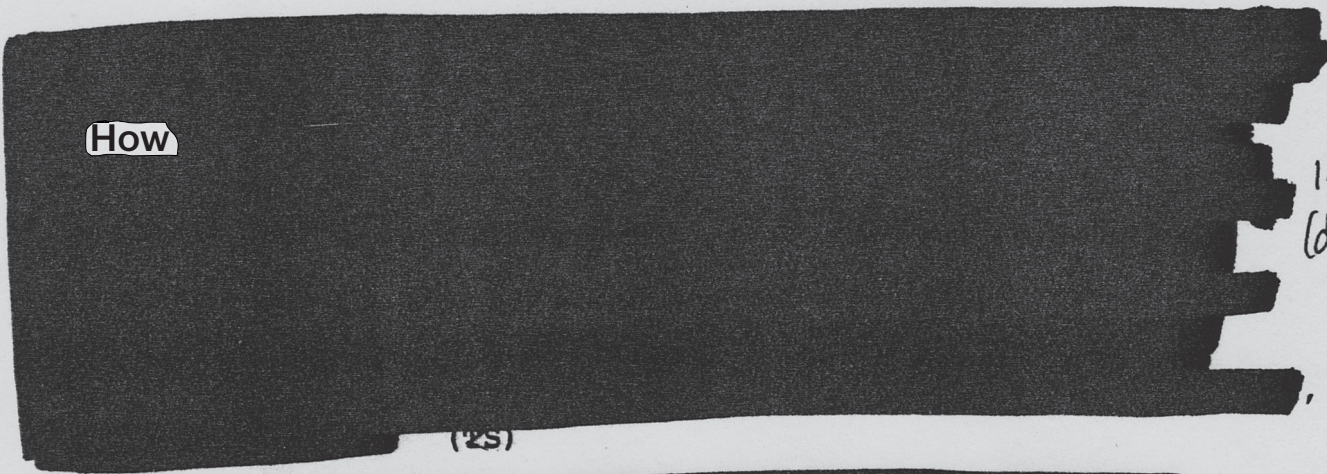
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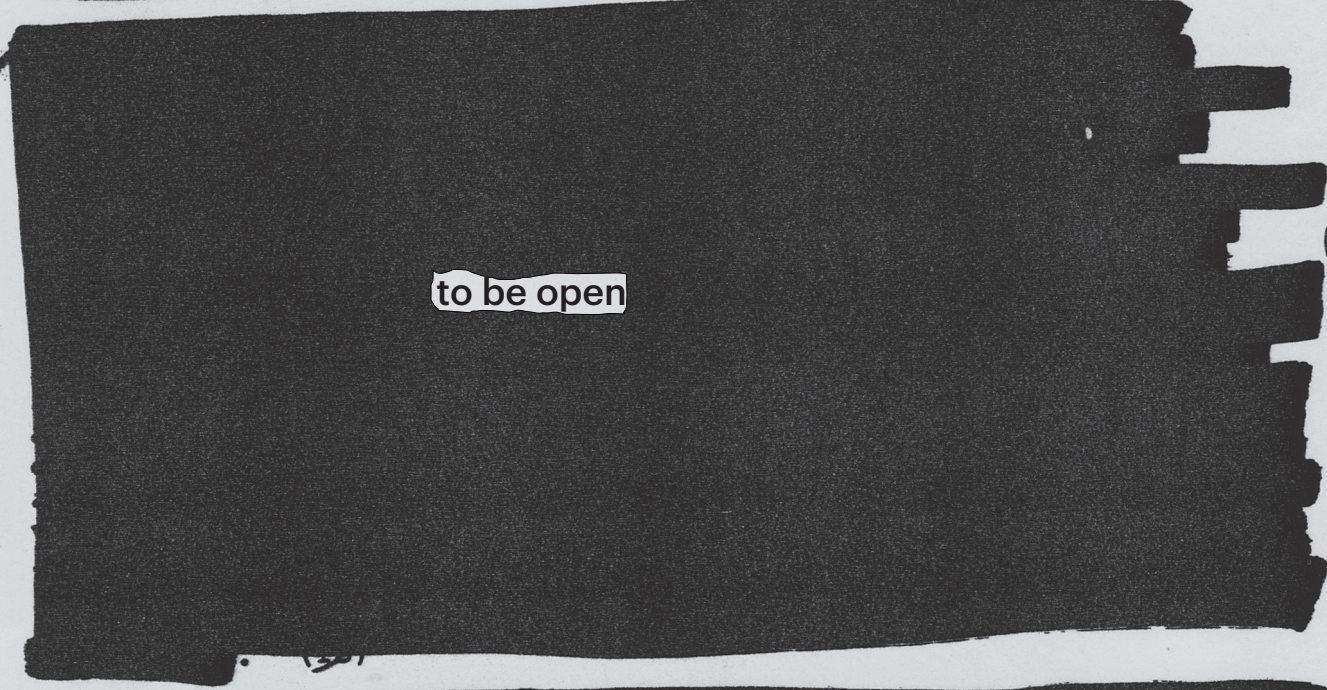
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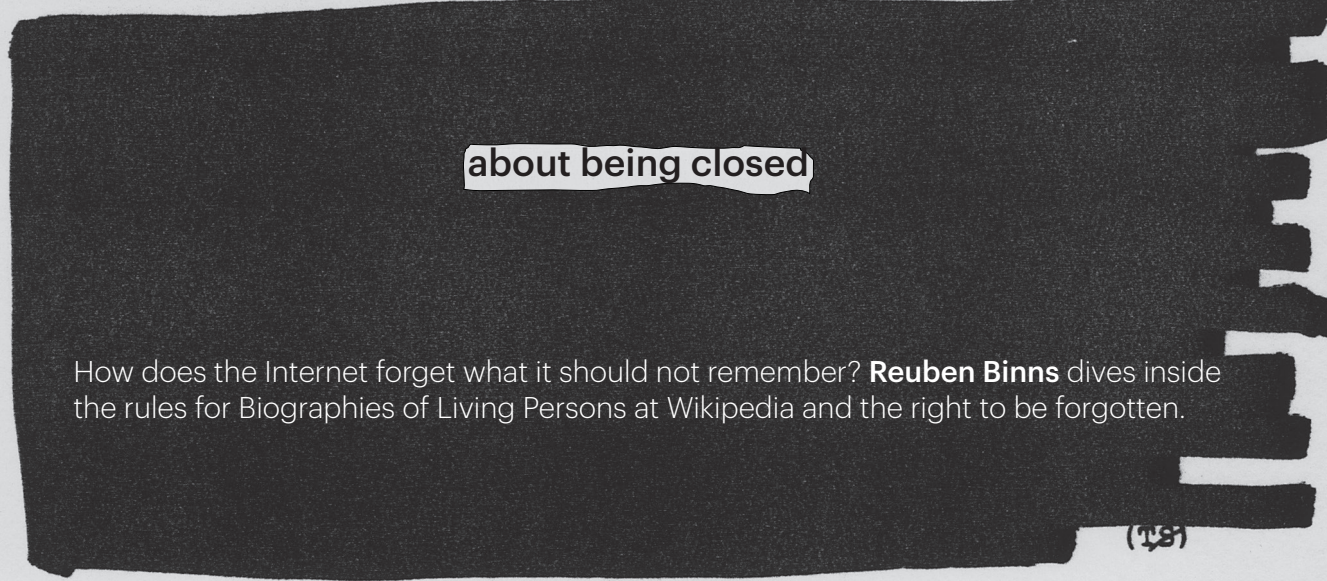
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to be open



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How does the Internet forget what it should not remember? **Reuben Binns** dives inside the rules for Biographies of Living Persons at Wikipedia and the right to be forgotten.

(TS)

I

N THE SUMMER OF 2014, WIKIPEDIA CRE-ated a public list of pages that have been partly hidden from search engines for privacy reasons (Wikimedia Foundation 2015). It includes entries on criminals, famous musicians, and a chess player, all of whom appear to have made requests to Google to have the content de-listed from searches on their name. This “index of the de-indexed” is one of the many curious by-products of the online encyclopedia’s ongoing construction. It encapsulates a peculiar set of contradictions arising out of the project’s concurrent imperatives: to be at once selective and comprehensive; and to both exclude the vast majority of edits while also maintaining its radical openness.

The list, “Notices received from search engines,” comprises links that have been removed from certain search engine results under European data privacy laws. The so-called “Right to Be Forgotten,” established by a European Court of Justice ruling in May 2014, confirmed that European citizens have the right to request the removal of links to certain content about them when their name is entered into a search engine.¹ The right has its legal basis in decades-old data protection laws, but had been unenforced until a Spanish court ruled in favor of an individual who wanted Google to remove a link to a news article detailing his previously unpaid debts. The court agreed that Google would be required to remove the link to the article from search results that were based on the individual’s name. This opened up the floodgates for other individuals to make similar requests under what became known as the “right to be forgotten.”

As many commentators have noted, the phrase “the right to be forgotten” is misleading; the original content isn’t removed, but only becomes harder to find using the individual’s name. In each case the search engine is required to weigh the values of privacy and the public interest before accepting or rejecting a request. If Google’s in-house arbitrators do approve a request to de-list, they notify the website that has been de-listed.

The Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit that operates Wikipedia, compiles such notices in the index. Clearly, publishing a list of pages containing the personal information of subjects who have explicitly attempted to obscure them somewhat undermines the purpose of the right to be forgotten. In this sense, the index of the de-indexed looks like

a retaliatory blow struck by defenders of openness in their battle against censorship and undeserved privacy. Wikimedia’s press release accompanying the index supports this interpretation; it argues that content “should not be hidden from Internet users seeking truthful and relevant information,” and that the ruling “runs counter to the ethos and values of the Wikimedia movement” (Wikimedia 2014). Wikimedia is not alone in making these notifications public; the BBC also maintains a list of affected pages to preserve “the integrity of the BBC’s online archive” (McIntosh 2015).

We could see this simply as a clash between those who think certain information about individuals should be made public and those who don’t. But Wikipedia’s existing processes for handling the deletion and selection of content suggest a more nuanced position. The apparent hostility toward removing information on grounds of privacy belies the measured stance to be found in Wikipedia’s long-established policies. For many years prior to Google Spain, the project has had its own policy on biographies of living persons (BOLP). This includes many admirable principles that echo those laid out in the court decision. Biographies should be based on up-to-date and reputable sources, “relevant to a disinterested article about the subject,” with due regard for privacy. It warns against spreading “titillating claims about people’s lives; the possibility of harm to living subjects must always be considered when exercising editorial judgment” (Wikipedia, 2015). Furthermore, biographies may in some cases be entirely *deleted*, upon request, if the individual concerned is a relatively unknown, non-public figure.

These rules have themselves been developed in the “wiki-way”—through online discussion and consensus building—and aim to balance various criteria, including the public interest, privacy, and freedom of speech. Compare the requirements of the BOLP to the considerations outlined in the Google Spain decision, and they begin to look roughly equivalent (in some cases, the BOLP appears to impose an even stronger imperative to forget). So in addition to the recent list of pages de-indexed by search engines, there is a much older record of changes made by the site’s editors in accordance with its own self-imposed privacy principles outlined in the BOLP. Some recent examples of privacy-motivated deletions that have arisen out of this policy include removing a link between an author’s real name and a suspected pen name; removing contextual information about an individuals’ family members; and removing references from a medical doctor’s biography to rumors that his or her medical license had been revoked.

Given the substantially overlapping criteria between the right to be forgotten and the BOLP policy, why would the Wikimedia Foundation denounce the former while implicitly endorsing the latter? The notion that this controversy is simply

1 Google Spain SL, Google Inc. v Agencia Española de Protección de Datos, Mario Costeja González (2014)

Project page [Talk](#) Not logged in [Talk](#) [Contributions](#) [Create account](#) [Log in](#)

Wikipedia:Articles for deletion/List of songs about masturbation (5th nomination)

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
 < Wikipedia:Articles for deletion

The following discussion is an archived debate of the proposed deletion of the article below. **Please do not modify it.** Subsequent comments should be made on the appropriate discussion page (such as the article's talk page or in a deletion review). No further edits should be made to this page.

The result was **delete**, with no prejudice towards reusing. If anyone plans to re-use, please notify me. --Xury6i 01:20, 25 July 2007 (UTC)

List of songs about masturbation [[edit](#)]

If you came here because someone asked you to, or you read a message on another website, please note that this is **not a majority vote**, but instead a discussion among Wikipedia contributors. Wikipedia has policies and guidelines regarding the encyclopedia's content, and **consensus** (agreement) is gauged based on the merits of the arguments, not by counting votes.

However, you are invited to participate and your opinion is welcome. Remember to **assume good faith** on the part of others and to sign your posts on this page by adding ---- at the end.

Note: Comments by suspected [single purpose accounts](#) or [camouflaged users](#) may be tagged using: {{subst:|<page>|<username>}} or {{subst:|<username>|<username>}}

List of songs about masturbation (edit | talk | history | links | watch | logs | views) – (View log)

I closed the DRV for this article as **relist**. My opinion is **weak delete**, considering that this is a trivia list and per precedent. Sr13 07:58, 19 July 2007 (UTC)

Contents [hide]

- 1 List of songs about masturbation
 - 1.1 Section 1
 - 1.2 Section 2
 - 1.3 Section 3

Section 1 [[edit](#)]

- **Comment** I was the original editor who raised the subject of this AfD on AN/I. There were obvious concerns that although the AfD had (apparently) been listed for 11 days, the AfD was still stuck with no consensus. This was **actually the 6th nomination** of the article, over the last few years the **afds had been raised non-standard ways that made it confusing (eg 2nd nomination and Second-Nomination)**. The AfD appears to have undergone five days on 9th July when it was renamed from 3rd nomination to 4th nomination [see diff] by Zenochocky who didn't amend the AfD day log to take note of the change.
- My questions are >
 - If the AfD had have closed on the due date, would it have been deleted?
 - Would the fact that some editors were unaware that this was the 6th 4th AfD and not the 3rd AfD have swayed them one way or another?

Mike33 - @ 07:55, 19 July 2007 (UTC)

This AfD is now the 7th nomination Mike33 - @ 07:56, 19 July 2007 (UTC)

Comment No, this is the 5th nomination. The two italicized links are redirects and do not actually contain debates. --Coredesat 08:23, 19 July 2007 (UTC)

thanks text amended Mike33 - @ 08:36, 19 July 2007 (UTC)

- **Delete**, Wikipedia is not a collection of trivia, nor is it an indiscriminate collection of information. Also, there are zero reliable sources aside from the actual lyrics, which constitutes *original research*, not to mention that the actual subjects of some of these songs are unverifiable. --Coredesat 08:31, 19 July 2007 (UTC)
 - **Comment** Just re-reading the essay on Listruft, I googled references to masturbation and song in Wikipedia [Google minus User:pages] and there does appear to be a popular theme albeit one that doesn't have a primary article. I think a google scholar search might pull up some interesting related articles [1][2][3][etc.]. If Wikipedia is an educational tool and not just an indiscriminate compendium of "stuff on the web", I think that a scholarly article could be produced from such a list and a lot of delving into other papers which touch upon the subject. Mike33 - @ 08:59, 19 July 2007 (UTC)
- **Keep**, the phrase "as deliberately intended by their lyricists" shows that we can find reliable sources for all entries which satisfy the conditions for inclusion in the list. The lack of these sources *at the moment* does not make the subject unencyclopedic. Remember *Wikipedia is a work in progress* so, rather than delete the list, we should be trying to find sources that verify the validity of each entry's inclusion. D4g0th0u 08:38, 19 July 2007 (UTC)
 - Sources are important, as they show verifiability. The idea of sources possibly existing is not the same as having them now; all of this material should be sourced as it is added, or it is unverified OR, "As deliberately intended by their lyricists" is a claim that is not backed up by sound evidence, and cases to the contrary could be made for any of the songs there. --Coredesat 17:59, 19 July 2007 (UTC)
- **Delete**, trivia, not encyclopedic, and given the sheer number of euphemisms for masturbation, highly impractical. >Radiant< 10:50, 19 July 2007 (UTC)
- **Delete**, per above. It goes against the rules stated here. Lrodrama 10:55, 19 July 2007 (UTC)
 - **Comment** - Using the Rationale from WP:ATS

AN EXAMPLE: From the discussion page for the deleted "Songs about Masturbation" Wikipedia page.

due to disagreement about the balance between openness and privacy is unsatisfactory because the two policies are in broad agreement. One way to explain the disparity may be by paying attention to Wikipedia's commitment to a principle of openness and the role this plays in justifying the entire project.

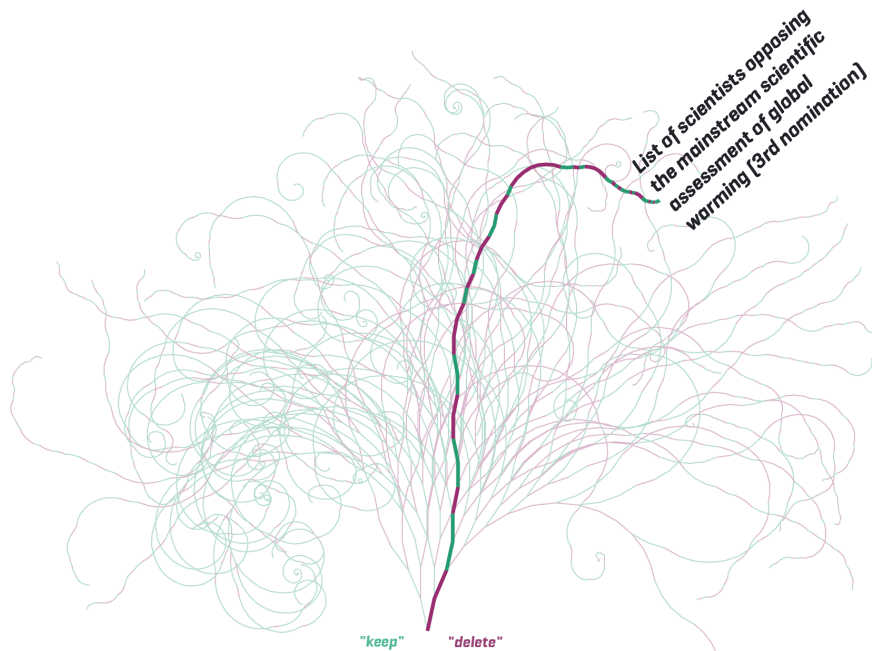
Even if it has its own version of the right to be forgotten, Wikipedia's procedure for "forgetting" is very much its own. Every edit is logged, stored, and debated with reference to the community policies and principles before being approved. Every point of every debate over every edit is also logged, along with the references to the relevant policies. One can therefore find a comprehensive, indelible memory of everything that was ever forgotten, why it was forgotten, who advocated for it, and who objected.

Far from being fundamentally at odds with the idea of forgetting—of closing down material that infringes on individual privacy—the open encyclopedia embraces it. But it manages to reconcile the apparent conflict between open and closed by being open about being closed. This suggests a general strategy by which those working within the open paradigm can feel comfortable within its limitations. If the participation, the policies, the processes, and the end product are all "open," then maybe forgetting need not be seen as an ideological compromise.

The difference between censorship and mere editing is therefore grounded in the community's ability to square its founding principle of openness with some of the new normative considerations it faces. What looks like a substantive conflict between open and closed, public and private, transparency and privacy is dissolved by appeal to a second-order principle of openness, which preserves ideological consistency and editorial sovereignty.

Indeed, publishing indexes of the de-indexed is just one way that the administrative systems and bureaucracy that lie behind Wikipedia's topic pages are subjected to a kind of radical openness. "Talk" pages, where the site's editors deliberate over their activity, have grown faster and are busier than the articles themselves. The "Department Directory" page unveils a bewildering array of governing committees and policy-making processes, from abuse response and counter-vandalism, volunteer recruitment, dispute resolution, and deletion. Every contribution takes place in publicly accessible forums, recorded for posterity in a vast archive of editorial ephemera.² Compare this approach with that of traditionally "closed"—or at least, less open—institutions of government, business, or science. Detailed records of internal activity, if they even exist, are usually hidden by default. Even if the official output—a white paper here, a scientific publication there—is made open, the process behind it is not.

2 In this sense, Wikipedia may be reminiscent of the Cairo Genizah, described elsewhere in this volume by Benjamin Outhwaite. The accumulated background pages of Wikipedia are rather like the "ephemera" of daily Egyptian Jewish culture, "piling up in a stratified manner" as a result of the "the rabbinic prohibition against destroying holy writ."



THE KEPT: The 100 longest Article for Deletion discussions on Wikipedia which did **not** result in deletion of the article (i.e. it was kept, merged, redirected).
FROM [HTTP://NOTABILIA.NET/](http://notabilia.net/)

The project’s commitment to making its inner bureaucracy open and archived is not just an ideological fetish collectively imposed by its community, but perhaps also fundamental to the encyclopedic project. The vast archive of publicly recorded activity serves an important function regarding the encyclopedia’s primary content. Wikipedia’s aim is to amass the “sum total of human knowledge.” This doesn’t mean including everything that anyone has or could ever say—it is not Borges’ “Library of Babel”—as we can see from the record of deletion and the community’s numerous editorial principles. The project legitimizes leaving certain content out by being open about the means and justification for exclusion.

Commercial general encyclopedias never had to justify openly what they’d left out and why (thereby generating significant work for historians interested in their selection criteria). By contrast, Wikipedia’s archive of talk pages exists as a record of what was left out and why. The project navigates the contested space between what is considered “the world’s knowledge” and what is private, sensitive, irrelevant, unimportant, spurious, or sensationalist. The demarcation of these categories is inherently contestable. By facilitating and archiving such contests openly, the project aims to justify its ambitious claims to totality. A total archive of editorial activity is therefore central to the project’s mission to amass the “sum total of human knowledge.” ■

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Wikipedia’s aim is to amass the “sum total of human knowledge.” This doesn’t mean including everything that anyone has or could ever say...

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