

Wikipedia censorship highlights a lingering sting in the tail

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'Scorpions', says Wikipedia, 'are eight-legged venomous arachnids. They have a long body with an extended tail with a sting.' Staff of the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), the self-appointed monitor of 'child sexual abuse content hosted worldwide' and of 'criminally obscene and incitement to racial hatred content hosted in the UK', may well find themselves in rueful agreement about the sting. Except that what they've discovered is that Wikipedia also has one.

Pause for a review of recent events. Among the subjects of interest to contributors to Wikipedia, the online, user-generated encyclopaedia, is the German heavy metal band Scorpions. A learned Wikipedia page (<http://bit.ly/MgzH>) covers their early history, rise to popularity, commercial success and 'later days'.

The page mentions the band's 1976 album, *Virgin Killer*, the cover of which consisted of a striking photograph of a nude, pre-pubescent girl covered by broken glass. Someone reported this image to the IWF, which then implemented its well-oiled procedures for reviewing potentially illegal content.

The IWF concluded the image did indeed constitute illegal content and put the page on the blacklist it maintains for implementation by UK internet service providers. The ISPs, in turn, speedily blocked the page.

At which point all hell broke loose and the IWF, accustomed to dealing mainly with publicity-shy purveyors of filth, found itself under siege from Wikipedians and online libertarians. UK users (who account for 25 per cent of editing activity on Wikipedia) found themselves unable to edit. The story escalated in the media and even reached the dizzying heights of the *Today* programme. It was pointed out the offending album had been on sale for over two decades; had appeared over the years in print and on websites;

and that it was ludicrous to penalise Wikipedia simply on the basis of a complaint.

In the end, sanity prevailed. The IWF rescinded its blacklisting and the page is back. But the IWF's statement insisted that the image in question 'is potentially in breach of the Protection of Children Act 1978'. It has changed its mind after considering 'the contextual issues'.

The Wikimedia Foundation statement was similarly conciliatory. 'We are grateful to the IWF for making this swift decision, and to thousands of internet users from around the world for their outpouring of support', said Sue Gardner, the foundation's executive director. 'Millions of Britons now have access to all of Wikipedia, and volunteers can resume their important editing work.'

Any outbreak of sweetness and light is welcome in these gloomy times, but the episode highlights an issue most of us would prefer not to have to think about: who actually controls the net? And who - if anyone - should control it?

In the early days of the network, a kind of libertarian euphoria led people to suppose that it was beyond control. The internet, we were told in a celebrated aphorism, 'interprets censorship as damage and routes around it'. Experience over the past decade has made us wiser (and perhaps sadder) on that score. It turns out that the internet is rather easy to control if you're a sovereign state (cf. Australia, China, Burma, Zimbabwe) or have access to high-priced lawyers (cf. the music industry, innumerable large corporations, the 'church' of Scientology, etc.) The ease with which the IWF was able to turn off Wikipedia access in the UK was just the latest illustration of the controllability of the network.

Although the IWF may be subject to criticism over the lack of transparency of its decision-making, there's no doubt that it's a serious, well-intentioned, non-statutory body that is doing important work. And it's a not-for-profit enterprise - so it's not in it for the money.

But there is an aggressively for-profit outfit out there which exercises far more control over the internet than the IWF could ever dream of. It's called Google. It owns YouTube, fast becoming the world's main TV channel. In a recent New York Times article on 'Google's Gatekeepers' (<http://bit.ly/lq8h>), Professor Jeffrey Rosen described how Google's staff try to balance freedom of speech and thought on YouTube versus the demands of corporations,

states and ideologies to restrict that freedom. What's striking is the revelation that the Google folks don't like what they have to do - but that at the moment there's nobody else who can do it. How long, one wonders, will that uneasy state of affairs continue? Power, like nature, always abhors a vacuum.

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