

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

Vol. 2, No. 17

Wikiality

Among the internet's most popular sites is Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, which is written entirely by unpaid volunteers. Though praised for "democratizing knowledge" by such luminaries as Stanford University law professor Lawrence Lessig, Wikipedia has more than its fair share of detractors. Last year the site drew unwanted attention when journalist John Seigenthaler exposed gross errors and fabrications in the entry on his life. Numerous scholars have voiced concern that the encyclopedia is an unreliable research tool, and lament students' use of the resource. A paper by a University of California at Merced graduate student revealed many of Wikipedia's flaws, including often-indifferent prose and some serious problems with accuracy.

Yet Wikipedia, it would seem, is here to stay. Cambridge, Massachusetts held the second annual Wikimania 2006 in August (a three-day discussion of the Wikimedia Foundation's various projects). Over the past year, Wikipedia has celebrated several milestones: The English-language version of the encyclopedia recently surpassed one million articles, and the site became one of the Web's 20 most popular destinations.

Regardless of the accuracy of certain articles (and in fairness to Wikipedia, a recent study by the journal *Nature* found Wikipedia's articles on science nearly as accurate as those that appear in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), and separate from the movement advocating free access to information online, political satirist Stephen Colbert has put his finger on the real issue in his coining of the term, "Wikiality."

Colbert is the host of "The Colbert Report" on the Comedy Central television network (a satirical spin-off of "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," and a purposeful spoof on Fox's Bill O'Reilly). An earlier *Serious Times Update* featured another of Colbert's word coinings, "truthiness," which might be a worth a revisit (see link below).

Wikiality, which along with "truthiness" has been named one of the top television buzzwords of the year by the word-trend group Global Language Monitor, is defined as "reality as determined by majority vote," such as when astronomers recently voted Pluto off their list of planets. Colbert notes that any user can log on and make a change on any entry, and if enough users agree, it becomes "true." If only the entire body of knowledge could work this way, offers Colbert, and

through "wikiality," he maintains it can. "Together we can create a reality we can all agree on. The reality we just agreed on."

Colbert's first cultural reflection, "truthiness," suggested that actual facts don't matter. What matters is how you feel, for you as an individual are the final arbiter of truth. In an interview, Colbert said, "Truthiness is sort of what you want to be true, as opposed to what the facts support. Truthiness is a truth larger than the facts that would comprise it – if you cared about facts, which you don't, if you care about truthiness."

"Wikiality" allows you to take your "truthiness" and make it "fact" through majority vote. While obviously the substance of a comedy sketch, there is something afoot here. There have been three major theories of truth throughout the history of western thought: the correspondence theory (a direct correlation between truth and reality), an idea that provides the foundation of evangelical theology; the coherence theory (truth is that which hangs together as a system of thought in superior fashion to other systems of thought); and the pragmatic theory (what is true is what "works"). Taking "truthiness" into the world of "wikiality" allows a new theory of truth to insert itself into our psyche: truth is what the majority take it to be.

So with the democratization of knowledge comes the democratization of truth, resulting in an evolution of the idea that "what is true for you is true for you, and what is true for me is true for me" to "what is true for us is true for us." But not necessarily its corollary, which would be "and what is true for them is true for them." In a world of wikiality, there is no truth outside of what the majority determines. Fifty-one percent become the final arbiter or reality.

A very truthy idea, to be sure, but not a very biblical one.

James Emery White

Sources

"'Wikimania' Participants Give the Online Encyclopedia Mixed Reviews," by Brock Read, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 1, 2006, p. A62.

"Truthiness," James Emery White, *Serious Times Update*, Volume 1, No. 22. Direct link to this Update: <http://www.serious-times.com/pdf/update/1.22.pdf>

"Colbert's 'truthiness' strikes a chord," *USA Today*, Monday, August 28, 2006, p. 1D.

For a direct link to Colbert's take on "wikiality:"

http://www.comedycentral.com/motherload/index.jhtml?ml_video=72347

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