

■ MY WIKI, WIKI WAYS

MEDIA

BY CRAIG COLGAN

Michael Kinsley, the editorial and opinion editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, set out recently to begin the rehabilitation of one ancient corner of the daily newspaper, the very institutional and long-ignored-by-readers editorial page.

The Kinsley Plan included the use of wikis, which are Web sites that allow readers themselves—right through their own Web browsers—to add content to, and even edit, the work of others. Selected *Times* editorials, after being published, would be placed on the “wikitorial” site at *latimes.com*, and readers could simply have at it. The *Times* trumpeted to readers that the move “will empower you.” The first *Times* editorial that became a “wikitorial” focused on Iraq, and right away attracted plenty of partisan, anti-Bush-administration additions and edits.

Jump to the end of the story: The project was pulled two days after it began “because a few readers were flooding the site with inappropriate material,” says a letter to *Times* readers. Pornographic photos were among the offending material.

A *Times* letter to the editor offered analysis of the experiment: “Here is a lesson about the public sphere: Language is delicate, and it takes a great deal more work to clarify matters than it does to obscure them. Instead of inventing a new form of national agora, you have built a virtual mosh pit.” (*agora*: an open space in a town where people gather, especially a marketplace in ancient Greece)

From a blog called *Techdirt.com*: “If anyone can edit the editorial, it can be edited till everyone likes what it says.” From *Slash dot.org*: “Personally, I would love to be able to edit the opinions of others, so long as others don’t get to edit mine.” Hard to argue with that.

But Kinsley is on to something. Across the Internet, efforts are under way that explore a host of new but related methods to involve readers not just in creating

great content, but also in building loyalty, both of which interest daily newspapers quite a bit these days. One larger term for all of this is “collaborative authoring,” which is related to “open-source journalism” and then to “citizen media.” New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen describes on his blog, *PressThink*, the intended result of such efforts: “News turns from a lecture to a conversation.”

One unusual example, not a wiki but apt: Want to find out the real insider stuff



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MICHAEL KINSLEY: The new *Los Angeles Times* editorial page editor gets some credit for trying a new Internet technology, the wiki, even though the experiment was pulled after two days.

about restaurants in Washington? Head to the reader-contribution section of the entertainment corner of *washingtonpost.com*, where experienced foodies detail all sorts of disastrous sagas of snooty service and overpriced, lumpy crab cakes at seemingly hundreds of eateries. Michael Jordan’s restaurant, for instance, came in for some particularly pitiless treatment during its short life.

The best of these salty missives possess a sort of insider, tabloid quality and are somehow fabulously readable. And cer-

tainly useful. This is not journalism, of course. Print newspapers would never touch this stuff. But to many readers, schooled on surfing through miles of Internet “content” everyday, that distinction is extraneous.

Another mass-contributor example is *Wikipedia*, which claims to be the world’s largest wiki. *Wikipedia* is a free-content “encyclopedia” site on which anyone can write, and that anyone can edit. Somehow, *Wikipedia*—called “The Faith-Based Encyclopedia” by some critics—has become a trusted source for mainstream news media. In recent days, it has been listed as a source in *Newsday*, in a chronology of the history of American involvement in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; in *The Cincinnati Inquirer*, in a story about the movie *Jaws*; and in *The Washington Post*, in a story about a speech by Senate Minority Whip Richard Durbin, D-Ill., referencing Nazis and Soviet gulags.

A *Times* editorial the day the wikitorial was posted asked: “Who knows where this will lead? It may lead straight into the dumpster of embarrassing failures.” Give the *Times* credit for investigating unusual technology such as wikis, said Internet journalism pioneer and analyst Jonathan Dube. “Whether that format can work for news sites is hard to know until someone figures it out,” he said.

If *Times* editors want to see success in such interactive ventures, corraling and managing such reader writings and behavior will be crucial, says one who should know. “They will have to learn to trust the community, to make a lot of people system administrators,” Jimmy Wales, a founder of *Wikipedia*, told *National Journal*. “The *L.A. Times* is too tiny of an organization to police a wiki [itself].”

A policed wiki. Doesn’t that defeat the purpose? Regardless, those who snicker at Kinsley’s Folly should listen up. Wales claims more than 1 billion page views a month for *Wikipedia*, and added, “Since *Wikipedia* is more popular than *The New York Times* and the *L.A. Times* combined, who is really the mainstream media today?” ■

The author, a Washington-based writer, can be reached at craigcolgan@earthlink.net.