



GUEST COMMENTARY • DAVID POULSON

# Wising up about Wiki

Wiki naysayer David Poulson reconsiders his assumptions about Wikis and the future of journalism.

Not too long ago and within this very magazine, I questioned technology's impact on environmental journalism. I raised concerns about the credibility and the literary merit of stories created not only by multiple authors, but by robots scanning the Internet. I was troubled.

Now I'm intrigued.

Recently, I helped launch an online experiment in Great Lakes citizen journalism. Anyone can post a story on the Great Lakes Wiki ([www.greatlakeswiki.org](http://www.greatlakeswiki.org)). ANYONE. What's more, others can edit that same story as they argue over how it should be presented. It uses the same technology that powers Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia that is written (and re-written) by anyone.

To get a sense for what a stretch that is for me, consider what I wrote about Wikipedia in *EJ Magazine's* Spring 2005 issue: "Set aside the challenges of writing a graceful entry with multiple fingers in the pie. What does this communal effort mean to trust? How can readers believe articles that can change daily, depending on whom — expert or otherwise — sticks an oar in?"

What changed my mind?

I'm not sure it has changed. But my curiosity was piqued after reading research, chatting with colleagues, mulling my own career in daily newspapering and trying to peer into the future. Technology is driving significant upheavals in journalism. A university journalism center would be silly to ignore it, and I'm willing to consider an expansion of the concept of journalism. Here's why:

■ The pursuit of truth. Studies show that Wikipedia is about as accurate as Encyclopedia Britannica. Sure there are glaring exceptions — even mainstream media has those. But surprisingly, a community of diverse voices dedicated to a thorough understanding of an issue can generate compelling and accurate reports.

■ Journalism isn't just a product. The process is equally important — especially when readers engage in it. When they participate, they can more easily see other points of view. Not only do they add depth and perspective and correct fact errors, they also hold discussions behind the news story as they struggle for accuracy.

■ Journalism helps a community's citizens understand their common interests. Despite efforts by many Great Lakes groups, I'm unconvinced that people on the west shore of Lake Michigan feel a strong sense of community with those on the eastern end of Lake Ontario. Transparent reporting aided by technology can foster community among people separated by geography, but bound by common interest.

■ The creative tools available for conveying a complex topic

like the environment. The deeper I get into this project, the more I'm struck with how it mimics an ecosystem. Stories become linked to each other. The implications of one environmental problem lead to explanations of others. This kind of story-telling is not unlike the web of life that the Web-based Wiki attempts to explain.

■ Traditional journalism may not have enough time, space or interest to cover a story. That doesn't mean it's unimportant. Those involved in overlooked issues should have the opportunity to report them.

I'm most intrigued by how participatory journalism can affect — even improve — mainstream media. Traditional reporters are plenty smart and motivated. But they can't possibly have the knowledge, sources or ideas of their aggregate readership.

It was a bureaucrat scanning the federal register who happened to notice a U.S. Coast Guard proposal for live weapons training on the Great Lakes. That person e-mailed the information to a Sierra Clubber, who posted it on an environmental listserv.

Soon mainstream media picked up the story, hammering questions at the federal agency and discovering maps indicating that the weapons training was slated to take place in the path of a Lake Michigan ferry. The proposal was withdrawn. The public interest was served.

Journalism was committed.

I used to think I was a pretty good reporter, but I have to admit that I never read the federal register for story ideas. Non-traditional media, with the aid of technology, can tap the energy and knowledge of people who do things like that. And traditional media can bring its expertise, credibility and clout to pursue such stories once they are raised.

That's an intriguing nexus.

We face a lot of questions. Can a large and diverse community organized around Great Lakes issues become engaged enough to root out truth, vigilant enough to protect it and fair enough to follow where it leads? Can such an effort avoid abuse by activists and corporate interests? Can scientists and others be convinced that they have a stake in helping get a complex story right?

And if there is a benefit from the "wisdom" of crowds, isn't there also danger from the "lunacy" of crowds?

Shortly after the Great Lakes Wiki launched, someone on an environmental listserv questioned the impact this experiment would have on the reputation of MSU's School of Journalism. The criticism, in part, said: "I was not aware that MSU condones shoddy journalism and biased reporting. Are these not things we should be trying to fix rather than pass off as part and parcel of the trade?"

I can understand that reaction. But I also believe that a university journalism program has an obligation to experiment in an era when journalism is increasingly pressured by consolidation, technology and corporate demands for profit.

The pursuit of truth demands it, particularly for a story as complex and as important as the environment.

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#### Wiki on the Web

Visit the Great Lakes Wiki online at [www.greatlakeswiki.org](http://www.greatlakeswiki.org)