

MEDIA

A Little Sleuthing Unmasks Writer of Wikipedia Prank

By **KATHARINE Q. SEELYE** DEC. 11, 2005

It started as a joke and ended up as a shot heard round the Internet, with the joker losing his job and Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, suffering a blow to its credibility.

A man in Nashville has admitted that, in trying to shock a colleague with a joke, he put false information into a Wikipedia entry about John Seigenthaler Sr., a former editor of *The Tennessean* in Nashville.

Brian Chase, 38, who until Friday was an operations manager at a small delivery company, told Mr. Seigenthaler on Friday that he had written the material suggesting that Mr. Seigenthaler had been involved in the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy. Wikipedia, a nonprofit venture that is the world's biggest encyclopedia, is written and edited by thousands of volunteers.

Mr. Seigenthaler discovered the false entry only recently and wrote about it in an op-ed article in *USA Today*, saying he was especially annoyed that he could not track down the perpetrator because of Internet privacy laws. His plight touched off a debate about the reliability of information on Wikipedia -- and by extension the entire Internet -- and the difficulty in holding Web sites and their users accountable, even when someone is defamed.

In a confessional letter to Mr. Seigenthaler, Mr. Chase said he thought Wikipedia was a "gag" Web site and that he had written the assassination tale to shock a co-worker, who knew of the Seigenthaler family and its illustrious history in

Nashville.

"It had the intended effect," Mr. Chase said of his prank in an interview. But Mr. Chase said that once he became aware last week through news accounts of the damage he had done to Mr. Seigenthaler, he was remorseful and also a little scared of what might happen to him.

Mr. Chase also found that he was slowly being cornered in cyberspace, thanks to the sleuthing efforts of Daniel Brandt, 57, of San Antonio, who makes his living as a book indexer. Mr. Brandt has been a frequent critic of Wikipedia and started an anti-Wikipedia Web site (www.wikipedia-watch.org) in September after reading what he said was a false entry about himself.

Using information in Mr. Seigenthaler's article and some online tools, Mr. Brandt traced the computer used to make the Wikipedia entry to the delivery company in Nashville. Mr. Brandt called the company and told employees there about the Wikipedia problem but was not able to learn anything definitive.

Mr. Brandt then sent an e-mail message to the company, asking for information about its courier services. A response bore the same Internet Protocol address that was left by the creator of the Wikipedia entry, offering further evidence of a connection.

A call by a New York Times reporter to the delivery company on Thursday made employees nervous, Mr. Chase later told Mr. Seigenthaler. On Friday, Mr. Chase hand-delivered a letter to Mr. Seigenthaler's office, confessing what he had done, and later they talked at length.

Mr. Chase told him that the Seigenthaler name had come up at work and that he had popped it into a search engine and was led to Wikipedia, where, he said, he was surprised that anyone could make an entry.

Mr. Chase wrote: "I am truly sorry to have offended you, sir. Whatever fame comes to me from this will be ill-gotten indeed."

Mr. Seigenthaler said Mr. Brandt was "a genius" for tracking down Mr. Chase. He said he "was not after a pound of flesh" and would not take Mr. Chase to court.

Mr. Chase resigned from his job because, he said, he did not want to cause problems for his company. Mr. Seigenthaler urged Mr. Chase's boss to rehire him, but Mr. Chase said that, so far, this had not happened.

Mr. Chase said that as Mr. Brandt and the news media were closing in and he realized how much he had hurt Mr. Seigenthaler, he decided that stepping forward was "the right thing to do."

Mr. Seigenthaler, founder of the First Amendment Center, said that as a longtime advocate of free speech, he found it awkward to be tracking down someone who had exercised that right.

"I still believe in free expression," he said. "What I want is accountability."

Jimmy Wales, who founded Wikipedia, said that the site would make more information about users available to make it easier to lodge complaints. But he portrayed the error as something that fell through the cracks, not a sign of a systemic problem. "We have to continually evaluate whether our controls are enough," he said.