CENTER VALLEY (February 11, 2007) – Four bags of chips, two willing subjects, and a dash of classical Italian opera. That’s all a few recent college graduates needed to take the advertising world by storm with a Super Bowl commercial paralleling a car crash and the crunch of Doritos. They used no computer-generated special effects, no high-priced celebrities, and no professional voiceovers. Instead they just produced their own version of what it means to “live the flavor.”

The success of that commercial extends beyond the proverbial fifteen minutes of fame garnered by outrageous exploits, and it far surpasses the fledgling voyeurism associated with computer sites like MySpace and YouTube. Instead, this amateur ad highlights a cultural development in which heretofore unknowns bring their thoughts, interests, preferences, or visions directly into the public realm. No longer do advertising gurus and marketing experts need to divine what consumers know and want. Now we can show it to ourselves. What began as a contest has turned into a standard, evidence of a new phenomenon of social communications that reflects the Wikiworld in which we live.

Rendered popular by Wikimedia, this communications phenomenon builds on the use of a collaborative, open-source medium that allows anyone and everyone to contribute to a project. In what is now “the largest reference Web site on the Internet,” Wikipedia.org works on the principle that anyone with access to the Internet can provide information by editing, correcting, or supplementing what others have already posted. To-date, this online encyclopedia includes 4.6 million articles produced by 67,000 contributors.

More than just sharing information in a free and fast format, the wiki-phenomenon opens us to a new culture, “a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge.” Admirable on its face, this commitment engages people in ways that extend far beyond their computers.
The Wikiworld seeks to become a one-stop repository of knowledge, with projects that include a Wiktionary, Wikiquotes, Wikibooks, Wikisources (classics), Wikispecies (taxonomy), and Wikinews. In this Wikiworld, we find unique people, including cultural heroes (Jimbo Wales and Larry Sanger), ordinary functionaries (the Wikikgnomes who edit pages), and even villains (the Wikitrolls who spread confusion). In this Wikiworld we discover new realities, like Wikilove and Wikicrime. The Wikiworld has its own sphere of time, with a Wikiday and Wikieternity. And, as should now be obvious, the Wikiworld has its own language, with a slew of neologisms coined for use by inhabitants of this new domain.

Replete with catchy lingo and infused with endless possibilities, this new world stirs our interest, seeks our attention, and beckons us to belong. But enter at your own risk!

With any novelty comes intrigue. Long before the computer age, Aristotle opined that what incites our yearning for knowledge is not fear or pleasure or the lack of something. It is our sense of wonder, our inherent longing to know. The Wikiworld feeds this desire and expands this capacity. With worldwide information “freely used, freely edited, freely copied and freely redistributed,” we now have at our fingertips words and images for anything of interest. With extensive links, we now enjoy a never-ending horizon for learning.

But what one learns in the Wikiworld is not enough, as its creators readily admit. Because the fluidity of this medium renders the knowledge found there incomplete, users are encouraged to check additional sources. And the openness of Wikiknowledge to any and all input comes with no direction; as James Schall reminds us in “The Life of the Mind,” even in the old world of libraries, “stacks of books are nothing if we have no idea how to choose among them.”

And there’s a greater risk. Beyond the toll that surfing and scrolling may take on our physical and social well-being, with Wikistress or Wikipediholism as possible consequences of spending too much time and effort online, learning limited to this medium can leave us bereft of the kinds of knowledge that really matter. To quote the insight of the late John Paul II, the tools of computer technology increase the facility of communications, but “they above all do not favor that delicate exchange which takes place between mind and mind, between heart and heart, and which should characterize any communication at the service of solidarity and love.”

Still, the Wikiworld is here to stay. In it we now live, no longer as mere observers or recipients, but instead as active participants in an ever-evolving realm of knowledge. I only hope that when the Wikiversity becomes the preferred community of learning, this professor will still have a place to work.