Reference Tool On Web Finds Fans, Censors

After Flowering as Forum, Wikipedia Is Blocked Again

By Philip P. Pan
Washington Post Foreign Service
Monday, February 20, 2006; A01

BEIJING -- When access to Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia that anyone can edit, was disrupted across China last October, a lanky chemical engineer named Shi Zhao called his Internet service provider to complain. A technician confirmed what Shi already suspected: Someone in the government had ordered the site blocked again.

Who and why were mysteries, Shi recalled, but the technician promised to pass his complaint on to higher authorities if he put it in writing.

"Wikipedia isn't a Web site for spreading reactionary speech or a pure political commentary site," Shi, 33, wrote a few days later. Yes, it contained entries on sensitive subjects such as Taiwan and the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, but users made sure its articles were objective, he said, and blocking it would only make it harder for people in China to delete "harmful" content.

Shi was hopeful the government would agree. When the site was blocked in 2004, he had submitted a similar letter, and access had been quickly restored. Since then, the Chinese-language edition of Wikipedia had grown, broadening its appeal not only as a reference tool but also as a forum where people across China and the Chinese diaspora could gather, share knowledge and discuss even the most divisive subjects.

But today, four months after Shi submitted his letter, Wikipedia remains blocked.

The government has declined to explain its actions. But its on-again, off-again attempts to disrupt access to the site highlight the Communist Party's deep ambivalence toward the Internet: The party appears at once determined not to be left behind by the global information revolution and fearful of being swept away by it.

Officials tolerated Wikipedia at first, perhaps because it seemed to be exactly what the party had in mind when it began promoting Internet use 11 years ago -- an educational resource that could help China close its technological gap with the West, encourage innovation and boost economic growth.

But as the Chinese Wikipedia flourished, the authorities apparently came to see it as another threat to the party's control of information, and an example of an even more worrying development. The Internet has emerged as a venue for people with shared interests -- or grievances -- to meet, exchange ideas and plan activities without the party's knowledge or approval.

With 111 million people online and 20,000 more joining them every day, the landscape of Chinese cyberspace resembles a vast collection of new and overlapping communities. Although Chinese write less e-
mail than Americans, they embrace the Internet's other communication tools -- bulletin boards and chat rooms, instant-messaging groups and blogs, photo-sharing and social networking sites. A popular feature of the Chinese search engine Baidu lets users chat with others who have entered the same keywords.

Studies suggest this digital interaction is changing the traditional structure of Chinese society, strengthening relations among friends, colleagues and others outside family networks. In a multinational survey, a much larger percentage of Internet users in China than anywhere else said online communication had increased their contact with people who shared their hobbies, professions and political views.

The Communist Party polices these emerging Internet communities with censors and undercover agents, and manages a Web site that it said received nearly a quarter-million anonymous tips about "harmful information" online last year. But the methods the party uses to control speech and behavior in the real world have proved less effective in cyberspace, where people get away with more, and where the government is often a step behind.

When authorities catch up, citizens often have already weakened the party's grip on public life and succeeded in expanding civil society. They have organized charity drives for rural schoolchildren and mobilized students for anti-Japanese protest marches. And they learned to work together to write an encyclopedia.

"Wikipedia is special because other places don't have this kind of discussion, at least not such an intellectual discussion. It's a place where people with different backgrounds interact," said Shi, a prolific contributor to the Chinese Wikipedia. "But that wasn't even our goal. Our goal was just to produce an encyclopedia."

Meeting of Minds

Created by volunteers who write and edit articles in a collaborative process, Wikipedia is the Web's largest reference site, and it boasts editions in more than 200 languages.

The Chinese one, launched in May 2001, was blank for more than a year before Michael Yuan, a graduate student in mathematics at Beijing University, stumbled across it in a Google search. Yuan said he was enchanted by the English edition, and saw it as "an interesting place to study, hold discussions and share the pleasure of learning and writing." When he noticed the Chinese site was empty, he set out to build it.

On Oct. 30, 2002, Yuan created the first entry, a one-sentence definition of "mathematics." He was soon joined by Sheng Jiong, a Shanghai native studying law in Singapore, who wrote on the "People's Republic of China."

In the beginning, the Chinese edition was heavy with science and technology. The Norwegian mathematician Kirsten Nygaard was added before Sun Yat-sen, the father of modern China. But as months passed, people from around the world began to submit articles on a variety of subjects, including wine and cars, history and politics.

In July 2003, a prolific Hong Kong user known online as Lorenzarius sparked one of the site's first political debates with an essay urging people to avoid "China-centrism." He argued, for example, that the war that began when Japan invaded China in 1937 should be called the "Second Sino-Japanese War" instead of the "War of Resistance against Japan," as it is referred to by the party.
Most who responded posted objections, saying that almost all Chinese knew the war by its official name. But they also endorsed his larger point about trying to maintain a neutral point of view in Wikipedia's entries.

A few months later, another debate erupted over how contributors should resolve disputes on the site. Some advocated a system in which only the most active users could vote, but Sheng argued that all users should be treated equally. Lorenzarius concurred, and urged users to try to compromise and seek consensus before resorting to a vote.

To many educated in China, these governing principles of Wikipedia -- objectivity in content, equality among users, the importance of consensus -- were relatively new concepts. Yuan said he consulted the work of philosopher John Rawls and economist Friedrich Hayek to better understand how a free community could organize itself and "produce order from chaos."

"We had heard of these ideas, but they really didn't have much to do with our lives," said Yuan, now a computer programmer. "In school, we were taught an official point of view, not a neutral point of view. And we didn't learn much about how to cooperate with people who had different opinions."

In early 2004, state-run newspapers began writing positive articles about the Chinese Wikipedia, and the coverage fueled further growth. By February, more than 3,000 people had registered as users and there were more than 5,000 entries. By April, the site was getting nearly 100,000 page requests per day. By May, the number of definitions on the site had climbed past 10,000.

Then, on June 3, 2004, people in China who tried to visit Wikipedia saw an error page instead. The government had blocked the site on the eve of the 15th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

**Story of Tiananmen Square**

The entry on the "June 4 Incident" in the Chinese Wikipedia runs nearly 20 pages, but when it first appeared in September 2003, it was just three sentences. Posted by an anonymous user, it said troops seized control of Tiananmen Square after it had become a "base camp for various hostile forces." It did not mention any deaths or student protesters' demands for democracy.

Two months later, people began to edit the article, inserting a phrase about the pro-democracy movement and mentioning that "many city residents" were killed. But the Wikipedia community seemed hesitant. A few people tried to break the silence, adding thousands of words all at once. But others deleted them immediately.

Then, four months before Wikipedia was blocked, Sheng posted a message saying he planned to overhaul the entry. Slowly, he began writing a more detailed and objective account, posting it piece by piece, starting with a chronology of the demonstrations and putting off the more sensitive subject of the massacre for later. Another user noted that foreign news media had reported that more than 1,000 people were killed.

The changes prompted debate even before Sheng finished the project. One user attacked the article as biased, arguing that foreigners had used the students at Tiananmen Square to subvert the Chinese government. Others urged caution because of the political sensitivity of the subject.

"Regarding the June 4 incident, I know very little," one person wrote. "At least for the present stability, I
hope we don't make an issue of this."

Shi Zhao, the chemical engineer and frequent contributor, objected to using the famous photo showing a lone student stopping a column of tanks. "It seems the entire article has very little from China's point of view," he added. "It's basically all the Western point of view. Is this a neutral point of view?"

But after Wikipedia was blocked on the eve of the Tiananmen anniversary, Shi -- who describes himself as a supporter of the Communist Party -- was among the first to call his Internet service provider to complain. He also submitted an appeal.

Then without any explanation, the government restored access to the site.

The 19-day disruption caused Chinese Wikipedia use to drop and prompted hand-wringing in the community that built it. Some suggested that the site practice self-censorship to avoid being blocked again. But most opposed the idea on principle.

"It would have violated our policies, because Wikipedia is independent of any government," Shi said. "We aren't publishing political editorials, just providing information from a neutral point of view."

Instead of backing down, the site attracted more users, and the debates intensified as people tried to hammer out their differences on subjects such as the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement, the one-child policy and even the Chinese Communist Party.

Because users hailed from Taiwan as well as the mainland, the most passionate fights were related to the status of the self-governing island. At one point, there was even talk about splitting the site in two, because residents of Taiwan and the mainland write Chinese with different sets of characters.

Technology bridged that divide. A student wrote a computer program to automatically convert text from one set to the other.

Slowly, a community was consolidating outside the party's purview, one that was learning to settle its own disputes, that crossed borders and tolerated those who contradicted the party's views, and that began organizing get-togethers in the real world as well as cyberspace.

It must have been disturbing to some in the party, which has long sought to dominate all organized social activity in China. In September 2004, the government blocked access to Wikipedia again.

Some blamed the decision on an influx of Internet users who were upset that the censors had shut down a popular university Web site. Others linked it to a message posted by a disgruntled Wikipedian on the losing side of an argument two days earlier.

"I have already called the police, and told them there is a lot of Taiwan independence, Falun Gong and other reactionary content here," the user wrote. "I even gave them many entries as examples. After a few days, they will come for an inspection. You'd better get ready. . . . Ha, ha."

'China's Voice to the World'

To the community's relief, the second block lasted only four days. Then, for more than a year, Wikipedia operated free of any government interference.
The encyclopedia flourished, passing the 40,000-entry mark in September, and the community thrived, growing more stable and mature. Users continued to discuss and write about sensitive subjects, branching into current events, but the rancor of the debates seemed to subside. When newcomers resorted to overheated language, veterans stepped in and cooled things down.

So the government's most recent decision to block Wikipedia was a deep disappointment. Shi Zhao submitted another appeal. Cui Wei, 25, a graduate student at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, wrote one, too.

"By blocking Wikipedia, we lose a chance to present China's voice to the world, allowing evil cults, Taiwan independence forces and others . . . to present a distorted image of China," he said. "We lose a chance to share academic knowledge with the world, and as users, a channel to gain information. . . ."

"Such an act is no different than cutting off our tongues and shutting our eyes and ears. It is closing and locking up the country in the age of the Internet."

As the weeks passed, many concluded Wikipedia had been blocked for good.

In December, a message appeared on a Wikipedia page alleging the site had been "conducting anti-China activities under the flag of being neutral" and accusing its senior users of being "running dogs for American imperialism." Some suspected the note was posted by a government agent.

The number of people using the Chinese Wikipedia site has dropped, but devoted users are finding ways to access it. The community now boasts 45,000 registered users, most from the mainland. Among the site's 56,000 entries is one that explains how to get around the government's firewall.

*Researcher Zhang Jing contributed to this report.*

© 2006 The Washington Post Company
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Li Peng</td>
<td>Describes the former Chinese premier as a “statesman” and provides a résumé of his long career as a Communist party leader.</td>
<td>He played an important role in the decision to crush the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations. &quot;Li Peng's reputation in the Chinese public is relatively low compared to past premiers.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mao Zedong</td>
<td>Mao’s “great contributions to the founding of the Chinese Revolution cannot be erased and are far greater than his errors.”</td>
<td>Appraisals of Mao Zedong are clearly polarized. Supporters believe he led the Chinese people to cast off more than a century of imperialist oppression. Opponents believe he not only was a reprint of an old-style feudal monarch, but wrecked Chinese society, economy and culture on a large scale.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>Lists the island under the heading &quot;Taiwan Province&quot; and says “it has been Chinese territory from ancient times to the present.” Provides little of the island's modern political history and ignores its transition to democracy.</td>
<td>Lists the island under the heading &quot;Taiwan,&quot; and provides more information about how it has governed itself since 1949. Presents the island’s claim to sovereignty as the Republic of China.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Gorges Dam</td>
<td>Describes the world's largest hydroelectric dam in neutral terms but does not offer even a hint of the public opposition to the project.</td>
<td>Notes that the dam has been a subject of controversy “from the moment preparations to build it began” because of environmental concerns and other problems. Half the entry is devoted to the debate over the project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhao Ziyang</td>
<td>Summarizes his career in neutral terms but says only that he was “dismissed from all party and government posts after the political disturbance in the spring and summer of 1989.”</td>
<td>Explains that he was ousted for opposing the crackdown on the Tiananmen protests and includes discussion of his political views and legacy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Chinese Wikipedia

Distribution of Chinese-language Wikipedia members around the world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:** Staff reports, http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki, Introduction to Chinese Wikipedia by Mingli Yuan

**Graphic:** The Washington Post
May 2001 - Chinese Wikipedia launched. It is empty for more than a year.

2002

Michael Yuan, a Beijing University graduate student, designs a homepage. Sheng Jong helps translate files into Chinese.

October 2002 - First entry, definition of "mathematics" created by Michael Yuan.

November 2002 - Second entry on "People's Republic of China" added by Sheng Jong.

2003

July 2003 - One of the first political Wikipedia debates erupts over a message urging people to avoid "China-centrism."

September 2003 - Short entry on Tiananmen Square massacre appears; it later expands to 20 pages.

2004

In early 2004, Chinese newspapers write positive articles about Chinese Wikipedia, helping growth.

June - Site blocked on eve of the 15th anniversary of the Tiananmen incident. Restored 19 days later.

2005

September - Site blocked again; unblocked four days later.

2006

October - Site is blocked again.

December - Note appears accusing Wikipedia of conducting anti-China activities. Some Wikipedia users believe that government agents are responsible.

February - Site remains blocked.

Shi Zhao's latest letter appealing for access to Wikipedia to be restored, written Oct. 21, 2005:

Thank you very much for helping me to overcome the blocking of the Wikipedia Web site. I am one of the members of Wikipedia. Wikipedia is an encyclopedia Web site, made using Wiki technology. It is currently the largest Web site in the world using this kind of technology, and also the fastest growing and largest encyclopedia Web site in the world. We feel great anxiety over the sudden blocking of its Web site.


Wikipedia and its sister projects abide by the GNU Free Documentation License copyright agreement. All Wikipedia content is created by volunteers around the world. We have a strict copyright investigation process to guarantee that our content is original, and will not infringe on copyright.

Wikipedia is an encyclopedia Web site. It is an abstract and a summary of the knowledge of humankind. Our goal is to offer free access to all the knowledge of humankind to every person on the planet. This information is compiled in the format of encyclopedia entries. Its content includes the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Wikipedia's official policy is neutral point of view (NPOV). The guiding principle of editing Wikipedia articles is objective, neutral and unbiased expression of differing academic points of view. Personal views of editors are not allowed to be written into articles.

Wikipedia already has editions in over 100 languages. There are over one million articles in total. English articles are the most numerous, with over 600,000. The Chinese edition was started later. It currently only has 50,000 articles. Wikipedia editors and staff are volunteers from all over the world. Many are Ph.Ds and specialists of various disciplines. The participants in the Chinese edition of Wikipedia are Chinese people from all over the world as well as foreigners engaged in Sinology. We hope that through our efforts we can make Chinese resources on the Internet more plentiful. The management of the Chinese edition is primarily made up of volunteers from mainland China. They have put painstaking effort into maintaining and developing the Chinese edition. However, due to the blocking of the Web site, the managers have unable to perform daily maintenance. This leads to variation in the quality of articles. When people maliciously post
harmful articles, they cannot be corrected and deleted in a timely maner.

Wikipedia is attracting more and more attention. The ever-increasing resources of Wikipedia are used by growing numbers of students, journalists and others who use the Internet to do research. Wikipedia has been quoted thousands of times in all kinds of articles and publications, including news reports, books, dissertations and legal documents. Domestically, China Youth Daily, Southern Metropolis Daily, Computer News, China Computer Education News and New Weekly have all reported on it. Scholars at MIT and elsewhere are currently researching the Wikipedia model. Additionally, Wikipedia this year received a Webby Award, the Oscars of the Internet, for Best Community Web site, as well as the Austria Electronic Arts Center grand prize for electronic art. Wikipedia is currently working with Yahoo! to offer lists of the newest content. According to statistics from Alexa.com (http://www.alexa.com/), Wikipedia is one of the ten most popular reference Web sites on the Internet.

The Chinese edition of Wikipedia is rooted in Chinese culture. Currently there are many articles introducing Chinese culture and history. As the renown of Wikipedia increases, more and more people visit this Web site. Furthermore, many of the articles on Chinese culture in other editions of Wikipedia are translated from articles in the Chinese edition. This makes the Chinese edition of Wikipedia a window through which overseas Chinese and foreigners can learn about China.

Moreover, the Wikipedia format is also a new trial in education. After joining Wikipedia, many students find that it is helpful to their review and grasp of the information they have studied. One participant from Nanjing University once said, "Many Wikipedia articles gather knowledge from multiple sources. This is a great summary of a study topic." While using Wikipedia, we also personally experienced the convenience it brings to study and research. Additionally, because Wikipedia is multilingual, people can improve their abilities in foreign languages through translation of articles.

Wikipedia isn't a Web site for spreading reactionary speech or a pure political commentary site. It is just a encyclopedia Web site that collects knowledge from all academic disciplines and publicizes Chinese culture. Although Wikipedia has articles about Falun Gong, the Taiwan problem, and the 1989 political disturbance, the policies of the Wikipedia community do not allow personal opinions to appear in articles. The nature of the articles is similar to a summary of literature. We just give an impartial introduction to objects and events, just as other encyclopedias do (for example, articles in The Encyclopedia of China).

In June of this year, our Web site was blocked. After our application, we were grateful to relevant departments for resolving the blocking of the Web site. At this time, Wikipedia founder and chair of the Wikimedia Foundation James Wales published an appeal. He said, "We are not in any way a political Web site. We are just an ordinary online encyclopedia that uses neutral policies to write its entries. The articles online were carefully edited and discussed by editors on mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and elsewhere. Wikipedia should not have been blocked, because it neither propagated rumors nor spread religious superstitions. It is neither a gambling Web site nor does it offer pornography or express any political standpoint. "Wales also said he welcomes corrections and editing of our entries from the Chinese government in accordance with our neutral policies. Wales hopes that by 2025 Wikipedia can offer standard reference material to all Chinese people, including newspapers and electronic media.

The closure of Wikipedia may allow some people who harbor evil intentions to use its influence to disseminate rumors, and management will be unable to perform maintenance. We hope that the relevant bureaus will review our request, and at the appropriate time remove the block on Wikipedia and its sister projects.
On Oct. 31, 2005, Cui Wei released the following letter appealing for access to Wikipedia to be restored:

On the night of Oct. 19, I discovered that I could not reach the Chinese Wikipedia page (http://zh.wikipedia.org/). Later, I found that pages of Wikipedia in other languages and other projects of the Wikimedia Foundation were also inaccessible. After consulting with my Internet service provider, I learned that Wikipedia had been blocked. The Internet service provider suggested that I explain the content and use of Wikipedia, and provide an application to unblock it.

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia, with open content and copyright. It has more than 100 versions in different languages. It ranks in the top 50 on the global Web sites list of Alexa. It is among the top three Web sites that provide information. In the search results of Google, Baidu and other search engines, some entries of Wikipedia are ranked relatively high. The content provided by Wikipedia has no substantial difference from a traditional encyclopedia. It includes history, culture, politics, economics, science, technology, medical science and other fields. All the articles objectively introduce a subject, without any illegal, counter-revolutionary or pornographic harmful information. Other projects of the Wikimedia Foundation that have been blocked this time include, Wikibooks, Wikisources, Wikiquote, Wikispecies, Wikinews (no Chinese version) and other projects. All these projects are projects to share knowledge, with open copyright as its basic character. They have nothing to do with harmful information, and nothing about them violates the current laws of our nation.

Wikipedia and its related projects strictly abide by open copyright agreement, and the vast majority of its content has been written on the initiative of volunteers around the world. Part of its content comes from old editions of books whose copyright protection has expired. In addition, there is also open copyright content from some Web sites. Because it strictly abides by the relevant copyright policies, the phenomenon of intellectual property violations doesn't exist at all in Wikipedia and its related projects.

Because of its open content and copyright, Wikipedia has attracted numerous users. From the start of this project in 2002, its ranking on Alexa has been rising continuously. Now, it has already become a prominent and a very important source of information for internet users around the world. Wikipedia not only has won the recognition of ordinary users, but the academic world also increasingly regards Wikipedia as a source of information. I once conducted a search with Wikipedia as a keyword on the China Periodical and Journal Web site, which covers a portion of the Chinese academic periodicals published in China, and found more than ten academic papers as a result. The China Digital Science Library established by the Chinese Academy of Sciences Library, and the Chemistry Portal Web site established by the Institute of Process Engineering at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, both list Wikipedia as an electronic data source.
Web site.

Given the nature, content and influence of Wikipedia and its related projects, I believe the blocking measure against Wikipedia is inappropriate. In an age of increasing economic and information globalization, facing a global knowledge-sharing project with open copyright and content and whose influence is growing daily, the more effective approach is not to reject it at the nation's borders but to actively participate in it. By blocking Wikipedia, we lose a chance to present China's voice to the world, allowing evil cults, Taiwan independence forces and others to control the development of relevant material in the project, and to present a distorted image of China. We lose a chance to share academic knowledge with the world, and as users, a channel to gain information, a channel that is continuously gaining in importance. Such an act is no different that cutting of our tongues and shutting our eyes and ears. It is closing and locking up the country in the age of the Internet. I hope the relevant departments can verify the content and nature of Wikipedia, and stop blocking it as soon as possible.