

Encyclopedia 2.0

Online resources are gaining popularity but also raising concerns over the reliability of the information on them **By Yuan Yuan**

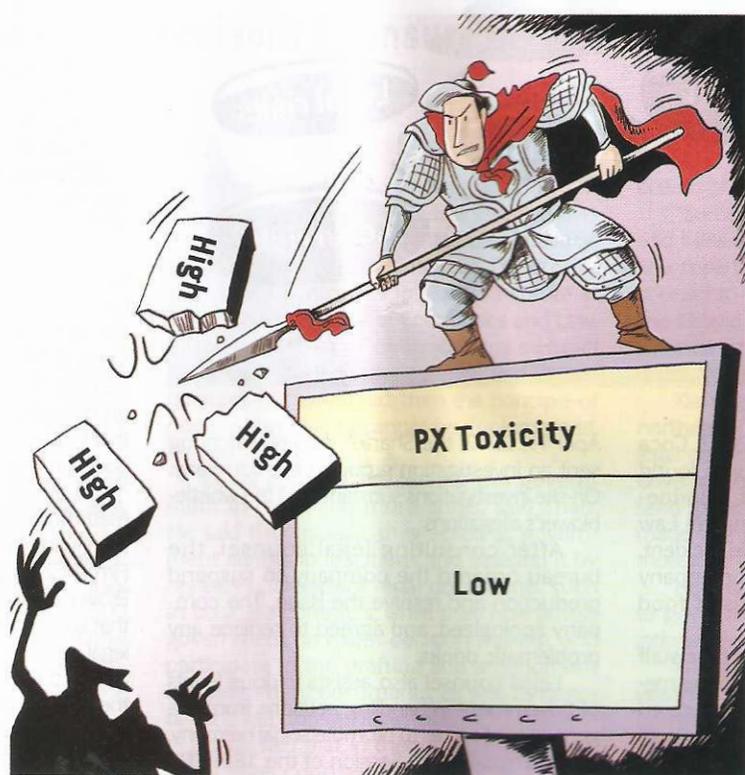
Paraxylene, also known as PX, is an important but controversial chemical product for industrial use, and has become a topic of debate on the back of protests in Maoming, south China's Guangdong Province, over a planned paraxylene plant in late March. Before this, PX projects in China have sparked protests in several cities from Fujian to Yunnan provinces, often resulting in the projects being quashed or moved to more remote areas.

However, a more subtle form of protest was being carried out online when the chemical's entry in Baidu Baike, a popular online encyclopedia modeled after Wikipedia and owned by Chinese search engine Baidu, was changed more than 30 times in one day.

The events began on March 30, when a netizen changed the description of PX's toxicity in the entry from "low" to "high."

This modification caught the attention of students from the Department of Chemical Engineering at China's prestigious Tsinghua University, who reverted the text back to how it was before only two hours later, beginning the hectic back-and-forth battle.

The students argued that the toxicity of PX is not as high as perceived by the general public and hoped that people could have an accurate knowledge of the chemical. They kept an eye on the chemical on Baidu Baike day and night and corrected it whenever it was modified.



After 35 edits to the page, Baidu Baike locked the entry from being changed further and announced its decision to invite experts to write an accurate entry for PX with "authority and accuracy [so as to] help people build a rational understanding [of the chemical]."

In the end, the toxicity of PX was defined as "low."

Reliable sources

The spat on Baidu Baike sparked discussion on the reliability of collaboratively-edited online

encyclopedias.

Founded in April 2006, Baidu Baike uses the slogan "the encyclopedia that everybody can edit." Figures show that more than 4.7 million Internet users have come together to create over 8 million items on Baidu Baike since then. Another online encyclopedia, Hudong Baike, which was set up in 2005 with the vision to be "the world's largest Chinese encyclopedia" has collected over 8.2 million items from more than 7 million "professional volunteers."

The difference here is between common "Internet users" and "professional volunteers." Although any Internet user can create or modify items on either website, Hudong Baike's figure only records the number of users who have registered with their real name and portrait and submitted a certificate that can prove they are a professional in the field of the entries they wish to create or edit. This way, it is

possible to track the creator of most items on Hudong Baike and read about their careers and academic background easily. In contrast, Baidu Baike only allows you to see screen names. In 2007, Baidu Baike formed a group of active users who contribute most actively, though these members still only display their screen names and getting more detailed information on them is not easy.

Regardless, the content on these sites share many similarities and some entries are even identical.

"I think most active users have more time to dedicate and don't just copy and paste," said Zhang Yingying, a college student from Shandong Province who wrote an essay on the differences between online encyclopedias in 2007. "Sometimes, they abuse intellectual property rights by simply copying content from other sources."

Reliable references are a basic requirement of online encyclopedias for people who create or modify any of the items. Only verifiable information from professional essays or official media can be accepted.

"I am still confused of the criteria for something to be considered 'reliable,'" said netizen Xiao Yueming, an active user of Baidu Baike. "Sometimes my edit of an item is rejected because the references I provided were not reliable, while my friend who submitted something with the same references on another item has their edits allowed."

Xiao mentioned the battle over the PX entry as an example. "How could the content be modified more than 30 times within a day?" Xiao asked. "How could the modifications be passed every time?"

On March 7, a woman surnamed Zou from

Changshu, Jiangsu Province, wanted to transfer her money from an online shopping account to a bank account. Zou's daughter checked on Baidu Baike for the online shopping company's official telephone number. The number later turned out to be one used for fraud and Zou was cheated out of 50,000 yuan (\$8,200).

"The monitoring system used by Baidu Baike is not transparent and sometimes the rules are not optimal, which results in mistakes in some of the entries," said He Yujie, a post-graduate student at the School of Information Management of Wuhan University, in his essay *Open Encyclopedia*.

This also affects the enthusiasm of the online users when it comes to creating and modifying the items. A survey made by iResearch.cn, a leading online research consultancy, shows that only 3 percent of users are actively editing items. "It seems to be very complicated and time consuming," a netizen using the screen-name wubingmin commented. "Even when I noticed some mistakes in the content, I would rather not take the time to change it."

Xu Guanning, a professor from Hunan University in central China, said that stable

financial support and healthy profits are needed for the sound operation of an online encyclopedia. "Hudong Baike defines itself as a commercial online encyclopedia. Some companies can make advertisements in items relating to their company information but this while Baidu Baike, on the other hand, claims to be non-profit," said Xu.

Online revolution

Despite the problems, online encyclopedias enjoy great popularity, especially among young people.

"We can access any entry we want with our smartphones. It is very convenient," said Xie Yuhong, a college student from Beijing-based Renmin University of China. "And most of the time we don't require a professional standard. So it does just fine."

Xie said her father bought a physical set of the *China Encyclopedia*, which she keeps on a book shelf at home. "Surely it is going to be of a better quality, but it is too heavy to carry around and the content can't be updated," said Xie.

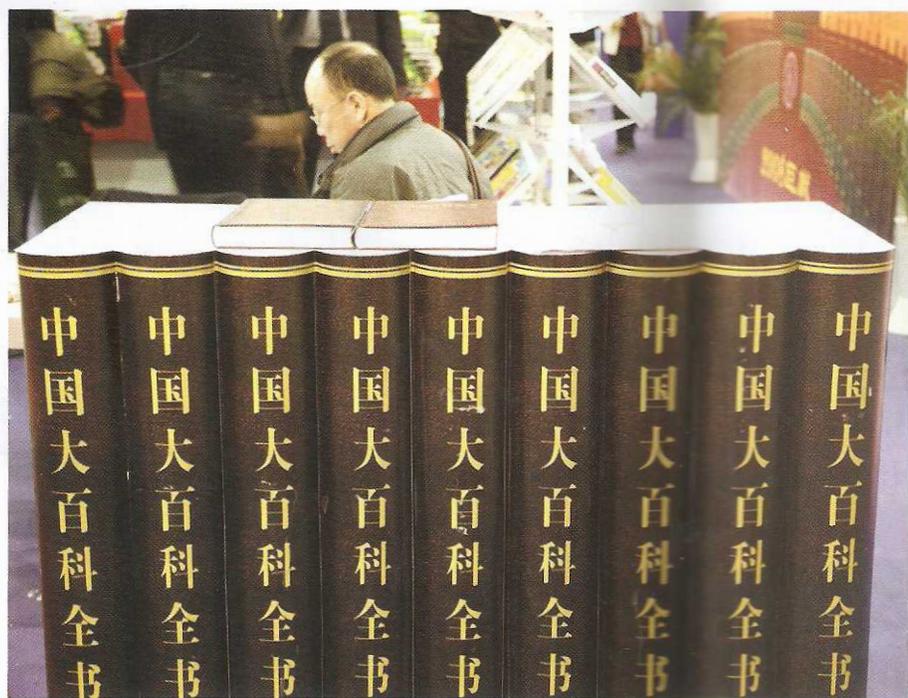
On March 14, 2012, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. announced that they would cease printing physical copies and focus on their online edition. This event regarded as a death knell for the printed encyclopedia.

Ma Rujun, the deputy chief editor of the *China Encyclopedia* revealed that they also plan to focus on their online edition.

The advantage of an online edition, according to Ma, is the combination of authority of their sources. The editing function will not be open to the public, especially professional items, which can only be edited and modified by experts to ensure the reliability of the content.

Kan Kaili, a professor from Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, thought that online encyclopedias will ultimately replace the traditional encyclopedia. "An online encyclopedia is the result of the collective wisdom of Internet users and the advantage of it being open and shared can't be surpassed."

Ma disagreed with Kan. "In China, the printed encyclopedia will not disappear for a long time as for some people, the printed edition means more than just the books, it is more like a precious collection," said Ma. ■



ARCHIVE: The *China Encyclopedia* on display at the Beijing Book Fair