



Statement of the Science Academy about the Ban on Wikipedia in Turkey

Wikipedia is a web site featuring over 30 million images for educational purposes, written content enough to fill 1000 volumes each with 1200 pages and over 4.5 million articles in its English version only, which puts all this information at the service of humanity totally free-of-charge. Wikipedia does not have any shareholders or sponsors, and the data it generates is not employed for commercial purposes. Yet, according to February 2017 data, it ranks 5th among the most visited web-sites in the world.¹ The reason for this is the fact that Wikipedia unconditionally offers “information” to everyone -including people in the remotest corners of the world without internet access, by means of special social responsibility projects. In 2015, when Wikipedia received the prestigious Erasmus Prize, which recognizes those who make an exceptional contribution to culture and society, the reason for this decision was explained as follows:²

“Wikipedia received the Erasmus Prize because it has promoted the dissemination of knowledge through a comprehensive and universally accessible encyclopedia. To achieve that, the initiators of Wikipedia have designed a new and effective democratic platform. The prize specifically recognized Wikipedia as a community — a shared project that involves tens of thousands of volunteers around the world who help shape this initiative. [...] With its worldwide reach and social impact, Wikipedia does justice to the idea of a single yet diverse world. It is a digital reference work available in various languages, undergoing permanent development. Through its open character, Wikipedia highlights how sources of knowledge are not neutral and must always be weighed. With its critical attention to text, sources and the expansion of knowledge, Wikipedia reflects the ideas of Erasmus, the world citizen after whom the prize is named.”

As indicated above, Wikipedia’s contributors are tens of thousands of volunteers who hail from all over the world. Undoubtedly, the effort to create a democratic platform and ensure everyone’s contribution to the formation of a worldwide treasure trove of information can occasionally result in articles lacking the necessary depth and scientific rigor. Wikipedia’s policy is to resolve such problems again by participatory methods open to everyone’s contribution, that is, by holding discussions through other contributors’ corrections / additions to the article in question, and making the necessary changes through a consensus based on evidence. On the other hand, in recent years, an increasing number of universities, libraries, museums and similar institutions support Wikipedia by sharing their resources.³ However, without doubt, there are and will always remain a

¹ <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>

² <http://www.erasmusprijs.org/Prijswinnaars?itemid=6E14E89A-B503-03A7-788280E2CD593D04&mode=detail&lang=en>

³ E.g. <http://freespeechdebate.com/discuss/wikipedia-at-15-the-sum-of-human-knowledge/>

number of inadequate and deficient articles. Nonetheless, these shortcomings cannot be used as a pretext for banning within the boundaries of the Turkish Republic such a comprehensive source of information that strives to forge the shared heritage of humanity.

As the Science Academy has already underlined on many occasions, the Turkish Constitutional Court has very lucidly depicted the limits to expressing and disseminating ideas. For instance, in a ruling dated February 24, 2016, the Court emphasizes the following points:⁴

“The freedom of expression is one of the pillars of a democratic society, and an indispensable condition for individuals’ development and self-realization. The creation of social and political diversity requires the peaceful and free expression of every idea. [...] As frequently stated in numerous rulings by the ECHR, for freedom of expression to fulfill its social and individual functions, not only those “news” or “ideas” considered positive, correct or harmless by the society and state, but also those which may be deemed negative, incorrect or disturbing by the state or some section of the society should be expressed freely, and individuals should be sure that they will not suffer any sanction for such expressions. Freedom of expression is the foundation of diversity, tolerance and open-mindedness, and it is not possible to talk of a “democratic society” in its absence.”

This statement by the Constitutional Court reflects the legal situation valid as of today. The fact that there exists objectionable or even incorrect information on Wikipedia does not constitute a legal pretext for blocking access to this site. Blocking access to such a platform which strives to create an open discussion platform is tantamount to abandoning democratic pluralism. On the other hand, as science shows us, “truths” can be tested through evidence which everyone agrees upon. In fact, the Wikipedia web-site offers means to test information by evidence, and to correct any information deemed to be erroneous. Such a wholesale ban also compromises the principle of proportionality in constitutional law.

Blocking access to an encyclopedia that is used as a reference material at every level of education, and thus severing a channel of access to information deprives our society from information and open debate. Such an approach seriously undermines Turkey’s image in the 21st century.

The Science Academy Board of Directors

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⁴ Constitutional Court, Number of Application: 2013/6152, Decision Date: 24.02.2016, RG 01.04.2016, p. 29671.