Young Khmer pioneers blaze a Wikipedia trail

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Keo Kounila, a blogger and "new media" consultant, tapped into Wikipedia to find information on Keng Vannsak who, among other things,
invented the Khmer typewriter keyboard and was a mentor to the young Pol Pot. She was shocked to find that in the vast expanse of Wikipedia, Vannsak, one of the most famous Khmer intellectuals of the 20th century, was a nonentity.

Now the 24-year-old is one of scores of Cambodian contributors to English Wikipedia and, in the past seven years,
the fledgling Khmer Wikipedia.

When you Google "Keng Vannsak" now, Kounila's Wikipedia article is the
first result that comes up.

For Kounila, getting Cambodian intellectuals and places into Wikipedia is a matter of almost national significance.

Until now there has never been a Khmer- language encyclopedia. Since
1967, Cambodia's main published reference work has been the Chuon Nath
Khmer dictionary.

With so much written knowledge and literature having been destroyed during the Khmer Rouge period, the potential
for both English and Khmer Wikipedia for a generation of young internet users is enormous.

"I started with English Wikipedia first, because I thought other people around the world would need to know more about Khmer," Kounila
says.

"We have a lot of young people who are interested in sharing knowledge, and they can't keep it to themselves."

The birth of Khmer Wikipedia in 2005 is all due to then-20-year-old

Phnom Penh university student Oum Vantharith, who received a message
on his Wikipedia user profile from a non-Khmer user called Jose77:

As you may have guessed already, a significant proportion of regular contributors to this site know little or no Khmer, the message read. We hope you can contribute, no matter what your language skills are.

The suggestion piqued Vantharith's interest. Seven years later, Khmer Wikipedia has more than 5,500 registered users and 10 administrators – all of them volunteers.

With just under 4,000 articles, it is one of the infant versions of this colossal collaborative project, but in the absence of a standard Khmer reference tome like the English-language Encyclopedia
Britannica, the fledgling Khmer Wikipedia team
believes its impact could be significant.

The Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit parent organisation of the encyclopedia and its other wiki-projects, says its mission is "to empower and engage people around the world to collect and develop educational content under a free licence or in the public domain, and to disseminate it effectively and globally."

Initially, Vantharith used the free online encyclopedia for his university assignments, but occasionally he was moved to add to articles on Cambodia-related subjects.

A Khmer-language version of the site seemed a huge undertaking, to put
it mildly, especially given that Khmer Unicode — a standard digital Khmer alphabet — had come into widespread use only a few years before.

For internet users who didn't read English, how would Vantharith even get the word out that there was a Khmer version, let alone convert them to the church of Wiki?

Vantharith took up Jose77's suggestion and began emailing him the Khmer Unicode for the Wikipedia interface: the familiar heading, the content box below it, and the sidebar to the right. They sent the code back and forth until they had a template for a Khmer Wikipedia home page and article.

 "I started getting more involved in the project," says Vanthirith,

who is now 27 and sports a Wikimania – Wikipedia's annual global conference — T-shirt.

"We don't have good resources in our local language. We believe in a free local resource that can benefit everyone."

The Khmer Wikipedia creator is articulate and easy-going, with an infectious enthusiasm for the Wikipedia mission, although being based in Seoul means he can no longer oversee the physical organisation of the Khmer Wikipedia project.

For the first few years, articles were submitted at a glacial rate. Vantharith was too busy "patrolling" the site and editing entries to write unique articles for the encyclopedia himself. After three years, the encyclopedia had clocked up just 500 entries.

By late 2008, however, after Vantharith had extolled the project on social media, contributions spiked and the encyclopedia received 274 new articles in one month.

"Some people don't understand the essence of the movement. Some just
copied their own work into Wikipedia, but then (they) didn't understand that it could be edited by anyone," he says.

Perhaps because it required some knowledge of code to edit, initial contributions were from Khmers writing about computer operating systems and mathematics, or highly specialised fields.

Kounila believes the verification process of English Wikipedia has evolved a lot in just a few years. He cites Barack Obama's page as an example of a reference as well-cited as any published public biography.

"Administrators are not writers; they are scholars and professors — with such people (writing for Wikipedia), these articles are very important. They can change people's opinions," she argues.

In April, 2011, the small community of Khmer Wikipedians held the first off-line meeting at Hacker Space, a not-for-profit computer workspace. Only three attended the first meet-up, including 16-year-old high- school student Tep Sovichet.

Sovichet had already contributed content to Khmer Wikipedia, including articles on Cambodian mammals, open-source software and intestinal diseases. Some of the information he found on native mammals was

from
a book an uncle gave him; for intestinal diseases, his starting point
was a bunch of handwritten notes he found at home.

"Mostly, I focus on articles that are not on Wikipedia," he says. "I
want Khmer people to know about Khmer articles.
At the moment, there's not a lot they can search for in Khmer."

English student and blogger Suon Sopheaktra, 23, buys Khmer history
and biographical books to use as his Khmer Wikipedia sources, but is
wary of intellectual copyright issues. He focuses on "history,
culture, people and literature" and submits his work as Word
documents, for the editors to upload.

Forty wannabe Wikipedians attended the third Khmer Wikipedia meet-
up.
At the same time, Wikipedia streamlined its English-language version
to a Wordpress-style editing system so contributors didn't have to
know code to edit articles.

 "The primary motive is simply the joy of learning and the fact your
work will be read by hundreds of thousands, if not millions. It makes
more sense writing for Wikipedia than an esoteric journal no one has
heard of," Anirudh Singh Bhati, a Phnom-Penh based legal consultant
and Wikipedian, says.

Bhati co-founded Wikimedia India and is one of Wikipedia's 750 active
administrators. Like Sovichet and Vantharith, he hopes Khmer
Wikipedia
will gain enough momentum to start its own Cambodia Wikimedia
chapter,
give it direction and
raise the standard of editing, rather than publish a grab-bag of
subjects and themes.

But the 2011 success of the Khmer Wikipedians has dwindled again,
members say. They hope 2013 will be the year the flow of knowledge
resumes. The relatively small number of Khmer-language internet users
doesn't mean progress on the grand project has to be slow, Bhati
points out.

With 400 million speakers, Hindi Wikipedia ought to have a stronger
presence than the Tamil-language version, Bhati says, but Tamil
Wikipedians are passionate about documenting and have seen the
encyclopedia grow exponentially. He believes Khmers have the same
passion.

"In Cambodia, English is still a second language, so the potential for the Khmer- language Wikipedia to grow is very high.

Also, the people here are very proud of their language . . . I think Khmer Wikipedia has a good future," Bhati says.