

Internet: Google makes pro-restrictions point, emasculates Wikipedia protest

It was the big splash story two days ago. Wikipedia, which is website on which contributors post their opinions and views with limited editorial supervision, is against the imposition of a level of responsibility similar to that applied to newspaper publishers. Google agrees. But there is a behind the scenes issue relating to the control of intellectual property. At the heart of that argument, although rarely expressed, is the issue over who has control over the information and its dissemination. That's where Wikipedia's entire protest fell apart.

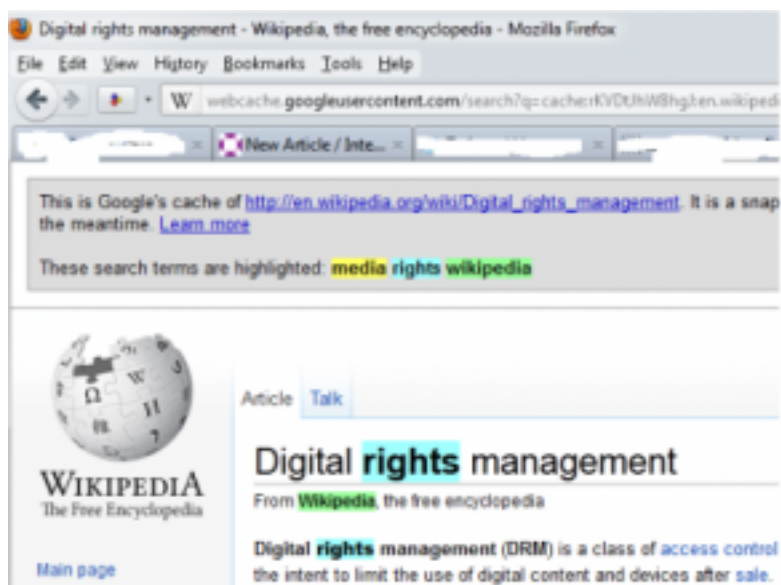
Anyone trying to directly access Wikipedia on 18th January 2012 (in whatever timezone the website defines that day) got a message telling users "For over a decade, we have spent millions of hours building the largest encyclopedia in human history. Right now, the U.S. Congress is considering legislation that could fatally damage the free and open Internet. For 24 hours, to raise awareness, we are blacking out Wikipedia."



For while direct access was unavailable, Wikipedia's pages were fully available online at the click of a mouse button. How? They are present in the preview at search engine Google.Com.



And, even more spectacularly, they were available, in full as html not a graphic, in pages stored by Google.Com in its own servers which it calls its "cache."



The irony will not be lost on those who are pressing for closer controls over intellectual property on the internet. To be clear: Wikipedia is published under the Creative Commons Licence. That means that the content can be re-used by third parties without charge. But rights in it remain with (depending on the terms) the website owner as publisher or the author.

It is a basic right of publishers and authors to withdraw their work from publication. But that didn't happen on 18th January because Google.Com's cache was not cleared or disabled despite the very public announcement from Wikipedia that it intended to black-out.

And so, in a very spectacular way, Google.Com has demonstrated exactly what IP rights holders are saying - that it is essential to place restrictions on internet publishers and republishers so as to return control of intellectual property rights to rights holders.

Google has said that its mission is to "index the world" and it has argued in Court (and in the UK this has been, to a limited extent, accepted) that to do so it must trample on the intellectual property rights of others.

The so-called freedom-of-the-internet argument can, in this context be summarised as "we claim the right to disseminate without restriction any material that any third party or parties post to our websites." The opposing view can be explained more simply and more graphically:

those websites that republish copyright material are doing the electronic equivalent of handling stolen goods.

Wikipedia's statement confuses the question of freedom of knowledge by implying that all knowledge is free. It is not. Those who spend their time, effort and money on producing research (no matter how good or bad it is) should be entitled to profit from it, not to have it stolen and republished either by some oik who appends his own name and claims the credit or by an anonymous contributor to website.

That is the question that is being lost by those who champion "freedom of knowledge."
There may be no objection to copyright material appearing on a webpage: but that should not be without the express consent of the copyright (or other IP) holder and, if demanded, a payment being made.

And Google, has very successfully albeit inadvertently, made (indeed, at the time of writing is still making) that point.