

NYTimes starts Chinese site; microblogs go offline

June 28 2012, by GILLIAN WONG

(AP) — The New York Times started a Chinese-language website Thursday that generated so much interest in China two of its microblog accounts drew thousands of followers and then were apparently taken offline for several hours.

The Times' accounts on microblog sites hosted by two popular Chinese web portals were offline Thursday morning, said Craig Smith, the paper's China managing director. "We are seeking to clarify the situation with those accounts," said Smith, adding that the Chinese site cn.nytimes.com has not been affected and continued to receive "strong traffic."

The paper's Chinese microblog accounts were activated Wednesday, attracting around 10,000 followers on Sina Weibo within a day and several thousand users on other sites. But on Thursday morning, the accounts hosted by Sina and Sohu.com appeared to have been taken down. The account on Tencent, another popular portal, remained active but functions such as commenting and forwarding posts were apparently disabled.

By late afternoon, the Times' Sina microblog site was accessible again.

The Times had no indication its microblogs went offline because of the company or its content, or if a technical problem occurred, Smith later said.

Sina public relations staffer Mao Taotao said the site could be accessed and the company had no reports of problems. A male customer service staffer at Sohu surnamed Wang would not comment on whether the Times' account was offline and would say only that he had passed on the query to the relevant departments.

The Chinese blogosphere lit up with speculation that the Times' microblog sites had been censored.

Bloomberg's English-language site, meanwhile, appeared to be inaccessible from mainland China. Bloomberg spokeswoman Belina Tan said the company was looking into reports of technical difficulties on its China website.

The online outages are an indication of the challenges that foreign news organizations face in trying to reach out to the Chinese audience, for whom the main sources of information remain state-controlled media.

The Times joins the Financial Times, the Wall Street Journal and several other English-language news titans in offering news in Chinese to tap into the huge China market and break the government's controls on information.

Regulations prohibit foreign companies from distributing news directly, and to get around that, the Times, like its predecessors, has located its servers offshore. That tactic also leaves them susceptible to being blocked by censors and thereby jeopardizing their advertising.

The Wall Street Journal began its Chinese offerings a decade ago. While the site has struggled at times, executives have said over the past three years it has thrived, reaching more than 35 million page views a month. After it posted an article in October 2010 about the Nobel Peace Prize being awarded to jailed Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, the site was

blocked for five weeks and lost half its page views, according to a presentation one executive gave a business group.

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