



CHINESE GOVERNMENT CRACKS DOWN ON INTERNET FREE SPEECH

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Last month the People's Republic of China announced new measures that would allow the government to exercise greater control over the Internet use of its citizens.

The new regulations would ban “the spreading of any news with content that is against national security and public interest,” according to *Xinhua*, the official Chinese news agency.

Life in a censored society

Like nearly every communist and totalitarian state in history, China has engaged in media censorship since its inception.

The Chinese constitution contains conflicting articles regarding the people’s right to speak their mind, and the government’s power to control such speech. Article 35 states that Chinese citizens “enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly.”

However, Article 51 states that the rights of the people “may not infringe upon the interests of the state, of society and of the collective,” effectively granting the government unlimited power over the freedom of speech of the entire Chinese population.

Media censorship challenged by Internet

China faces challenges to its censorship regime far greater than those faced by nations like the former Soviet Union and its Cold War allies. Under communist rule, these countries used state-owned television, radio and newspapers to tell the people what the government wanted them to know.

Regulating speech in the era of the Internet is a much different matter. Instead of a printing press or radio tower, citizens need only access to a computer to publish their opinion to the world.

Chinese Internet police cannot possibly monitor the activity of 100 million users, nor do they have the power to influence Web sites that are run from other countries. So the authorities have developed sophisticated tools to control the digital information that Chinese citizens can access.

China uses technology to patrol Internet

User registration has been the backbone of China's recent Internet-control strategies. Registration is intended to neutralize the safety and freedom many users find in the anonymity of the Internet. Students on university discussion sites must register using their real names, and membership to these sites is heavily restricted.

Internet cafes, a common source of Internet access for people who cannot afford a computer, are required to register the names of their customers, who must present state-issued photo ID. The cafes then record all user activity, and store the information for 60 days. Some Internet cafes even have cameras to track customers suspected of using counterfeit or stolen ID cards.

According to a study conducted by the OpenNet Initiative, China employs the most advanced data filtering system in the world. Any Web site featuring information critical of the government, such as those of anti-communist movements or religious organizations, is likely to be blocked.

American media Web sites like CNN and MSNBC are "generally available," but the BBC, a British state-owned news network, was blocked.

Many popular Web portals such as Google and Yahoo have Chinese versions of their pages that voluntarily block certain searches and omit results. Yahoo's Chinese division has even turned over data to the Chinese government that was later used to convict a journalist for discussing government media controls.

To date, according to Reporters Without Borders, 62 Chinese citizens have been imprisoned for unlawful Internet activity.

China is able to exert a much greater level of control over Web portals run from within the country itself. These sites must obtain permission from the government to provide news, and startups must register with the government before they can go online. Offenders can be fined \$3,700 for violations, and may have their Web sites shut down entirely.

China's new policy states that "news" includes "reports and comments on political, economic, military, foreign policy and other social public affairs." The term "reports and comments" refers to virtually anything written in a chat room, Web log, discussion group, or personal Web site.

Inventing ways to get around censors

But no matter how tough the law, or how advanced their technology may be, Chinese authorities are facing an uphill battle. Because a search for the word "democracy" might

be blocked, Chinese bloggers and journalists are using slang terms and code words in their online chat and comments.

By writing "dem_o_crac_y" or "d3m0cr@cy," users easily circumvent government controls, and when the government adapts these controls, users simply invent new code words.

China's huge population includes over 100 million Internet users (a number that has quadrupled since 2001), mostly concentrated in its large and rapidly growing cities. The new restrictions are powerful tools for the government to prosecute violators, but they do not address the problem of adapting to the efforts of millions of individuals determined to speak their minds.

-- *Compiled by Dave Belt for Newshour Extra*

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