China imposes censorship of news reports and Internet chat rooms

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On November 7, the Chinese government announced new restrictions on Web sites offering news reports and requiring chat rooms to use only officially approved topics.

The regulations, published in state-run newspapers, require general portal sites to use news only from state-controlled media. Special permission must be sought to use news from foreign media and strict editorial conditions must be met for sites to generate their own news. The rules say that failure to comply will result in warnings, temporary suspension or permanent shutdown. Only state media will be allowed to set up news sites and even then only with government approval.

Power to grant permission was given to the State Council Information Office, an agency with ties to the ruling Stalinist Communist Party's Propaganda Ministry. The information office will supervise Internet services while the Ministry of Information Industry will be responsible for monitoring content.

The announcement confirms what has been rumoured for over a year and was unwritten government policy for much longer. With no reason to believe that the Chinese authorities would take any different approach to the exchange of information on the Internet than in other walks of life, companies have exercised self-censorship and in some cases opted for more neutral information such as sports and entertainment.

In addition to the suppression of news sites, the government is seeking to prevent the Internet being used as a vehicle for political discussion or dissenting opinion. Building on legislation announced last month, the latest measures order operators of bulletin-board services and chat rooms to use only approved topics for discussion and then monitor what users post. Lists of banned content have been issued previously that include such broad categories as any material that "damages the reputation of China".

Last month's legislation also included a requirement that Internet companies maintain detailed logs of visitors to their sites including the phone numbers and other information. These must be handed to police upon request.

The Chinese government is not the only one to encounter problems with the Internet as the medium for a free exchange of ideas on a world scale. The political elite in Britain and the US also spends much of their time discussing new ways by which to control the Internet. But China is particularly disturbed by the development of the Internet as a forum for global communication.

The Beijing regime owes its existence primarily to the prolonged isolation of the Chinese working class from workers in other countries. Based upon the Stalinist program of building "socialism in one country", Beijing pursued a policy of national isolation. In order to defend their own privileges, it was necessary that the bureaucracy oppose all manifestations of a striving for socialism internationally and barred Chinese workers from contact with outside influences.

The opening up of the Chinese economy to the world market in recent years has carried with it the danger of ending, or at least limiting, the national isolation of the working class. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in relation to the Internet.

From the earliest days of the World Wide Web, the Stalinist rulers of China have been discussing ways to control its penetration into China. In 1996 it ruled that Internet users had to register their accounts with the police and agree not to violate censorship laws. When this proved unenforceable, the government set about the construction of what was dubbed the "Great Wall of

China on the Internet". The plan was to build a massive nationwide Intranet that would prevent people within China from accessing overseas web sites. When this too proved impossible, censorship responsibilities were passed on to the providers.

At every attempt to control the Internet, the Chinese Stalinists are faced with a burning contradiction. The great strength of the Internet lies precisely in the fact that it exists as an international medium. It forms an integral part of the process known as globalisation, in which production, distribution and commerce are carried out on a global scale.

This is the reality of the world market to which the Beijing regime is seeking access. With many Internet companies having accepted large amounts of overseas cash and the demands that the content produced by their financial backers be made available, it is probable that the latest attempts will suffer the same fate as previous legislation. In its bartering to gain entrance to the World Trade Organisation, Beijing has promised to allow foreign companies to own 49 percent of Internet-content providers following admission—with ownership rising to 50 percent two years later.

Much to the frustration of Beijing, the technology itself militates against the control it desires. One little-discussed offshoot of the controversial online music site Napster is the use to which the underlying software can be put if applied to more general file formats as well as mp3 music files. The notion of a peer-to-peer service, with information being stored on several computers around the world rather than a single server makes it much more difficult for government forces to block access.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, even if government forces do find a way to block such services, the next wave of technology will bypass whatever measures are put in place. The *Journal* cites the work of a team led by a former student of Edinburgh University in Scotland that is designing a way of holding data, in which files are broken down into chunks, encoded, and then stored in little pieces on the hard disks of Internet connected computers around the world. One way or another, those among the Chinese population seeking access to the exchange of ideas internationally will find it.

See Also:

The Internet and Computerisation