

China cracks down on Internet cafes and “cyber dissidents”

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A new campaign is underway in China aimed at bringing the use of the Internet under strict state supervision. While the official pretext is the need to control the Internet’s “harmful effects”, particularly among young people, the overriding preoccupation of the Stalinist regime is to clamp down on political dissidents and prevent access to web sites critical of Beijing.

The six-month joint campaign by the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Public Security began in February and is due to finish in August. Some 16,000 “illegal” Internet cafes have been shut down already on the grounds that young people should not be exposed to violence and pornography or be able to organise crimes through the web.

The regime has long accused “unlicensed” cafes of violating regulations and continues to blame the Internet for the mental illness and other social problems among young people. Officials seized on the death of two middle school students from the Chongqing Municipality in March to further justify their campaign. The two were run over by a train when they fell asleep on rail tracks, allegedly after 48 hours of continuous web “surfing”.

The latest measures include a government web site—<http://net.china.cn> or the “Illegal and Harmful Content Reporting Centre”—for people to register complaints about particular sites. Internet providers (ISPs), web sites and related organisations are being urged to sign a “self-discipline” agreement.

China already has far-reaching measures in place to control the country’s rapidly expanding population of web users—estimated at 80 million, the second largest in the world. At the national level, all Internet traffic is routed through government-controlled servers, enabling a degree of official control and supervision, particularly of access to web sites based outside China.

The campaign has targetted allegedly lax regional and local governments. Culture Minister Sun Jiazheng declared in May: “Some unlicensed Internet cafes, especially in some townships, counties and areas joining town and country, still need to be clamped down on, and some local governments

do not impose severe punishment on those cafes who allow the entry of juveniles.”

The most draconian controls were imposed in Shanghai—China’s largest city and the one with the highest level of Internet usage. From June, the city’s 1,325 Internet cafes or bars have been required to install a video camera supposedly to keep out children under age of 16. Each café is also required to install a software program to detect any attempt to browse a banned web site and automatically inform a “remote supervisory centre”. Any violation will result in a fine of 15,000 yuan and, for a second offence, the suspension of the café’s business license. Shanghai is regarded as an experiment that may be extended throughout the country.

The Chinese regime has long required Internet users to obtain an ID card number from the local police in order to login to the Internet and set up filters to prevent access to web sites unfavourable to Beijing. Users who take part in online discussion groups on particular subjects receive an electronic warning that they are legally liable for what they say. Under new regulations, foreigners will be required to login using their passport numbers, making them also subject to official monitoring.

While the campaign is being conducted under the guise of moral protection, Beijing’s real concern is the growing influence of Internet users—“wangmin” or “netizens”—in Internet chat-rooms, bulletin boards and other online venues. A burgeoning discussion is taking place on a range of topics, including politics, which is undermining the previous monopoly enjoyed by the state-run media.

Between 1994 and 2000, more than eight regulations were issued to restrict the Internet and a 30,000 member Internet police was established to enforce their provisions. As quickly as the police shut down “illegal” Internet cafés, thousands more opened up, indicating the enormous interest in the Internet, especially among young people. Despite official efforts to control its use, the Internet is becoming a factor in political life in China.

Email has become a means for voicing complaints. During

the National Peoples Congress session in March, for example, a number of critical messages were sent to the web site of the *People's Daily*, the Communist Party mouthpiece. One of them read: "The lawmakers are too comfortable, too peaceful, too free of stress. Their meetings are all about eating, drinking and sleeping....What kind of representative are they?"

Li Xiguang, a media expert at Beijing's Qinghua University, told Associated Press this month that this type of anonymous complaint frequently comes from internally displaced workers and the unemployed who are hostile to the regime. Millions have lost their jobs over the last decade, or been forced to migrate to the cities to find work, and have no other avenue to express their anger at the deepening social divide between rich and poor.

The very extent of the material available on the web has broadened the political debate. Social evils such as official corruption, child labour, drugs, prostitution, organised crimes, police abuse, as well as other grievances covering every aspect of social life have become widely popular subjects for online discussions. The Iraq war, foreign policy and even philosophy are also subjects of active debate.

Protests, petitions and sometimes even political parties and workers organisations have been set up through the Internet. Critical essays on social and political issues that cannot be published through official channels have found their way onto the Internet.

Liu Xiaobao, a leader of the anti-government demonstrations in May-June 1989, told the *Australian* in May that, despite police surveillance, he participates in online discussions with people all over the country. "[N]ow everybody can do it. It is a platform for producing a new and younger generation of intellectuals," he said.

In November 2002, the prominent dissident Liu Di, a former psychology student in Beijing, was jailed for over one-year for writing essays questioning Beijing's authority. She was freed after an online petition started to gather steam, with more than 1,000 people signing to demand her release.

In 2003, a college student, Sun Zhigang, was beaten to death by police in southern Guangdong province for not having a residential ID card required for internal migrant workers. The case provoked national outrage, which was vented on the Internet, forcing the Chinese government to abolish the regulation under which he was arrested. Various cosmetic regulations were implemented to dampen down the uproar over police abuses.

Beijing is well aware that it is sitting on top of a social time bomb. The economic restructuring measures that have attracted a flood of foreign capital to China in the 1990s have created deepening poverty and social polarisation, on the one hand, and the means to express the growing

discontent through growing access to the Internet, on the other.

Last year, China's IT gross sales income reached \$US226.5 billion—the largest in Asia—and IT made up of 32 percent of the country's foreign trade. China's digital switching capacity now provides 27 million telephone lines and the country has 240 million telephone and mobile users. About 30 percent of Chinese mobile phone users access the Internet via their mobile services. The number of Internet users is expected to reach 111 million by the end of this year.

Even with its extensive Internet controls and police force, China cannot hope to monitor every email and every attempt to provide or access "forbidden" material on the Internet. As well as its current campaign, the Beijing bureaucracy uses more direct methods of repression to curb the use of the Internet for political purposes.

Individuals involved in Internet discussion groups have been picked up and charged with subversion in an effort to intimidate others. The latest victim is Du Daobin, a low-ranking official from Hubei province, who has just been jailed for writing articles arguing for freedom of expression and in defence of democratic rights in Hong Kong. According to the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders, the Chinese government has detained a total of 61 people for expressing views on the web—making China the biggest jailer of "cyber dissidents".

The Stalinist regime is facing a dilemma, however. Its crackdown on Internet users hampers the further development of IT technology, which is now a major spearhead of the economic growth. At the same time, it fears that the continued expansion of the Internet will encourage political discussion and criticism that may facilitate a political movement of the working class to challenge the regime.



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