

# Analysis: China's futile Web clampdown

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An axiom of Communist China's founder Mao Zedong goes, "a single spark can start a prairie fire." Today, the country's leaders fear this is only an Internet click away.

China's national Cabinet and ministry covering the high-tech industry announced new rules Sunday clamping down on Internet-based news sources. The move is an attempt to limit the information available to the country's 100 million Web users at a time when non-governmental organizations and other basic elements of civil society outside the control of the Chinese Communist Party are evolving beyond the rudimentary stages of development.

According to official statistics, there were more than 74,000 incidents of "serious unrest" in China last year, involving protest groups ranging in size from fewer than 10 people to an uprising with 100,000 participants at a hydroelectric project in the mountains near Hanyuan, in Sichuan province.

The protests have been sparked by a wide variety of complaints, but most center on the abuse of power at the local level fueled by inadequate legal mechanisms and channels for those seeking redress. The Internet increasingly has become the medium of choice to publicize these problems.

The Chinese central authorities' greatest ability in maintaining the facade of stability in the face of mounting discontent has been to keep disaffected groups fragmented. The prospect of links being formed,

either by organizations with multiple grievances (including pollution, income disparities, police brutality and corruption) within a province or by common cause (such as compensation rights for land expropriation) across provincial boundaries, terrifies the leadership in Beijing.

The top headline in Monday's Beijing News ran: "The Internet is banned from inciting illegal protests." The new regulations issued by the State Council Information Office and the Ministry of Information Industry on Sunday cover three categories of news dissemination:

- services that provide online news stories;
- services offering bulletin board systems, and
- short message systems sending news content to individual cell phones.

The rules call for Internet service providers to re-register news sites and monitor the content they provide, scanning for items that "endanger state security" or "social order." The Beijing News reported that news cannot encourage "illegal gatherings, associations, marches, demonstrations or crowds."

China Daily, the state-run English-language newspaper -- which is heavily relied upon by non-Chinese readers -- took a different approach. The paper's article said "online news sites that publish stories containing fabricated information, pornography, gambling or violence are facing severe punishments or even shutdown."

The paper also quoted an unidentified spokesman from the information office saying, "We need to better regulate the online news services with the emergence of so many unhealthy news stories that will easily mislead the public."

The State Council Information Office must give its approval before established news organizations can publish stories from other sources, and non-news organizations must also seek permission prior to putting news stories on their sites, the China Daily article said.

In an effort to keep news information compartmentalized the China Daily noted: "Sites by news organizations that only carry their own stories should register at the (State Council's) main office or provincial information offices. The regulation also spells out that media attached to the central government or directly under provincial governments are not allowed to provide any stories to other online news sites without approval."

Earlier this month UPI reported on the case of Shi Tao, a journalist from Hunan in central China who received a 10-year prison sentence for "revealing state secrets" via e-mail. His crime was telling an outside news agency about the official edict barring Chinese media from reporting on commemorations of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre.

Yahoo! cooperated with the Chinese security apparatus leading to Shi's arrest, citing obligations to conform to local laws.

Internet, telecommunications and information-technology industry analysts will be watching to see what the impact of the new ruling will have on companies such as Google, Yahoo! and eBay, all of which are seeking to expand their mainland presence, as well as Chinese firms such as Sohu.com and Baidu.com, which are listed on foreign stock exchanges.

The policy promulgated Sunday illustrates the need for ethical companies to take a stand on the issue of digital human rights. The country's clampdown on freedom in the virtual world rapidly may match its dismal record in the real one.

China's national, provincial and local leaders attempting to strangle the marketplace of ideas might yet learn this comes with a price the market will not bear.

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