

China's 12 billion New Year messages

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Telecom officials in Beijing forecast 12 billion text messages were sent over the weeklong Chinese New Year holiday.

The estimate was made public by China's Ministry of Information Industry on Jan. 29, the first day of "Year of the Dog" or "Spring Festival" celebrations. The ministry estimate runs until Feb. 4, the end of the official seven-day break.

Figures provided by government body are however only a fraction of the real data service surge going on over a 40-day period before, during and after China's biggest holiday, which has been described as combining the West's Christmas and New Year festivities rolled into one big bash.

The idea of seasonal stress takes on a whole new meaning when viewed through the prism of China's multitudes. There are strains on systems motivated by both profit and politics.

Communication during the holiday isn't just about expressing best wishes, but messages noting travel progress. Hundreds of millions of Chinese have hometowns in one city, but work in another.

In mid-December China's State Development and Reform Commission predicted there would be 2.042 billion passenger trips between Jan. 14 and Feb. 22, a projected increase of 3.1 percent over 2005.

The SDRC provided a breakdown of its prediction saying a total of 1.8 billion passengers would travel by road, 144 million took the train and 15

million people went between putative points A and B via plane.

Then again, the MII has the daunting task of figuring out how to maintain a totalitarian regulatory regime in a country that averaged 5 million new mobile-phone subscribers a month in 2005 and claiming 393 million subscribers by year's end.

Data service statistics from the information ministry haven't reached the same level of sophisticated detail -- yet. Short Message Service currently accounts for the bulk of the revenues generated from the digital age geared for the eye rather than the ear.

Ted Dean, managing director at BDA, a Beijing-based technology consultancy, told United Press International that data services are dominated by SMS but that WAP and Java services plus ringback tones (where a caller hears music rather than a ring initiating a call) as well as Interactive Voice Response were "growing very well."

Dean said MMS revenues were taking longer to generate because of a "narrower niche." Nevertheless, SMS is the top dog when it comes to earnings. "It is very significant to China Mobile, contributing about 20 percent of its data services figures," UPI learned.

Costing on average about 0.1 yuan, or just over a penny, the SMS is a cheap and cheerful way to reach out and touch someone for the rough equivalent of one and one-quarter of a U.S. penny.

Chinese sent an average of 25 billion messages per month last year, according to the MII. There were over 304.6 billion short texts transmitted for all of 2005, a figure the flagship government mouthpiece Xinhua trumpeted earlier this week as being 300 times greater than the first billion delivered in a single year a mere half decade ago.

There are few examples more stunning of how China's numbers are numbing than the progression of SMS statistics over the last five years. After breaking the billion mark for the millennium the Chinese sent 1.89 billion messages in 2001; 90 billion in 2002; 137.1 billion in 2003; 217.7 billion in 2004, then 304.6 billion last year.

This, more than the regime's preternatural fear of unfettered information flowing through the internet, is the quiet revolution of communication shaping China's future. Just about one in four Chinese have a cell phone. Whether or not government software has an ability to read, monitor and interdict discontent is highly problematic.

When the inequities of the political system result in people with nothing left to lose rising in desperation, something that happened 74,000 times in 2004 ('05 figures not known), it is only a matter of time before links get built among the disaffected; one in four people in China today can send a message in a bottle.

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