

# China backpedals on filtering software order

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Chinese vendors and shoppers haggle over price for computers at a computer mall in Beijing, China, Tuesday, June 16, 2009. China appeared to cave in to public pressure Tuesday by announcing that computer users are not required to install Internet-filtering software, though it will still come with all PCs sold on the mainland. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

(AP) -- China's authoritarian government has backed away from an order to load Internet-filtering software on every new computer after a major outcry by citizens used to the relative freedom of online life.

Legal challenges, petitions and satirical cartoons had been part of a broad grass-roots effort to scuttle the initiative since it was announced earlier this month.

A Ministry of Industry and Information Technology official told The Associated Press on Tuesday that Chinese computer users are not required to use or install the Green Dam Youth Escort [software](#) - though

the software will still come pre-installed or be included on a compact disc with all PCs sold on the mainland from July 1.

"The use of this software is not compulsory," said the official, who would not give his name as is customary with Chinese officials.

Executives from the company that created the software had said earlier that it was possible to uninstall Green Dam but it was not clear until Tuesday that the government's new regulation would not penalize people who chose not to use it.

The change marked a small victory for a burgeoning anti-censorship movement in China. Internet users in particular have expressed growing frustration with official efforts to monitor and restrict online content. China's Internet has emboldened public opinion and given citizens the tools they need to mobilize around a cause, such as exposing corruption or halting a project believed threatening to public health.

Although the government says the software is aimed at blocking violence and pornography, users who have tried it say it also prohibits visiting sites with discussions of homosexuality, mentions of the banned Falun Gong spiritual group and even images of pigs because the software confuses them with naked human bodies, according to Hong Kong media reports.

Many Chinese Internet users have mercilessly mocked the software, which is already available as a free download.

Creative critics have posted at least a dozen variations of the "Green Dam Girl," imagined as a busty Japanese manga-style cartoon character in an army cap and a mini dress who totes a bucket of soy sauce - considered a disinfectant - for cleaning up dirty Web sites. One such online image has the caption "Big Brother is Watching You" scrawled in

the background.

Petitions and at least one legal challenge have also been launched. Beijing lawyer Li Fangping submitted a request to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology last week demanding a public hearing on the "legitimacy and rationality" of forcing computer makers to include the software with every unit sold. Li said Tuesday he had yet to receive a response from the ministry.

Yang Hengjun, 45, a well-known blogger and novelist based in the southern city of Guangzhou said Chinese parents today are more inclined to demand a free and open Internet over a free but flawed pornography filter.

"On the Internet, we can do many things and we can criticize the government. This was not possible before," he said. "Having used the Internet like this, we are now unable to tolerate having it restricted."

Yang cited the central role of the Internet in exposing and criticizing several recent scandals of particular concern to parents, such as the contamination of infant formula with the industrial chemical melamine and research that showed schools collapsed more easily than other buildings during last year's massive Sichuan earthquake.

"In the last two years, all of the miserable stuff that happened regarding children was all revealed through the Internet, even though some government officials, particularly the local ones, didn't want it to get out," Yang said.

Online forums also helped rally support for Deng Yujiao, a 21-year-old karaoke bar waitress who stabbed a local official to death after he demanded sex from her.

A court ruled Tuesday that Deng acted in self-defense and would face no punishment for the killing. The outpouring of support for the woman on the Internet in recent weeks prompted the local government to take the extraordinary step of pledging that she would receive a fair trial.

China has the world's most extensive system of Web monitoring and censorship and has issued numerous regulations in response to the rise of blogging and other trends. But it remains far more open than the country's tightly controlled print and television media.

Controlling online content has also become increasingly difficult with the explosion of China's Internet population, now the world's largest with 298 million users. Chinese blog authors total 162 million.

Green Dam is the government's most intrusive tool yet because it extends censorship to the user's personal hard drive and can even force non-Internet software like text editors to crash if a blacklisted phrase like Falun Gong is typed.

PC makers will determine if the software is pre-installed on the hard drive or enclosed on a CD and will be required to tell authorities how many computers they have shipped with the software.

Critics have argued that rolling out software in such a pervasive fashion will lead people to greater self-censorship among Chinese net users because they are bound to fear that the program might still be working secretly in the background even after it has been removed.

Tests of Green Dam by independent researchers have also found that the software makes computers more vulnerable to security threats.

Computer scientists at the University of Michigan said in a report last week that the program contained "serious security vulnerabilities due to

programming errors," and recommended users protect themselves by uninstalling Green Dam immediately.

The Michigan report also said that a look at Green Dam's coding seemed to show some of it had been lifted from an American-made filtering program CyberSitter, raising questions about intellectual-property violations related to the software. The maker of that program, Solid Oak Software of Santa Barbara, Calif., plans to seek a court injunction, but acknowledged that it's new legal terrain for the company.

Wen Yunchao, a former journalist who blogs under the name Bei Feng, said many now hope the government will go a step further and scrap its 40 million yuan (\$5.8 million) order for the software.

"When the government uses taxpayers' money, they should think clearly whether it's necessary or not," Wen said. "If you bought something that people don't use, then what's the point of spending all that money?"

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