Mobile phones trump computers among online Chinese

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Mobile phones have overtaken computers as the most popular device for getting online in China, the government said Thursday, as it announced the number of web users had hit 538 million.

China has the world's biggest online population, with nearly four out of 10 of its 1.3 billion people now using the web, according to a report from the state-linked China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC).

Until this year, a majority of Chinese web users accessed the Internet via computers.

But smartphones have allowed more and more rural Chinese to go online in areas not covered by fixed-line networks, the report said. Nearly 52 percent of users who started to use the Internet this year are from the countryside.

"Mobile phones are a cheaper and more convenient way to access the Internet for (residents in) China's vast rural areas and for the enormous migrant population," said the report.

The number of people using mobile phones to go online rose to 388 million in the first half of this year, up 9.2 percent from the end of 2011, while 380 million used computers.

"Smartphones are more and more powerful and there is a new wave of mobile application innovation," the report said.

"Meanwhile, mobile phone prices continued to drop -- the emergence of smartphones under 1,000 yuan ($157) sharply lowered the threshold for using the devices and encouraged average mobile phone users to become mobile web surfers."

The 538 million people online in China was an increase of around five percent from the end of last year.

By the end of June, more than half of China's Internet population -- or 274 million -- used weibos, microblogging services similar to Twitter, which is banned in China.

Beijing regularly blocks Internet postings it deems sensitive under a vast online censorship system known as the Great Firewall of China.

Nonetheless, weibos have become the most popular medium for web users to vent their anger over corruption, scandals and disasters, or alert

others about protests or riots.

This prompted Chinese authorities to announce plans last month to tighten control of the services, including making their users register under their real names.

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