

Chinese messaging service shuts politics accounts

March 14 2014, by Didi Tang

A popular Chinese instant messaging service has removed at least 40 accounts with content about political, economic and legal issues in a possible sign communist authorities are tightening control over discussion of sensitive topics.

The accounts were closed Thursday on WeChat, a service run by TenCent Holdings Ltd. The action came hours after the closing of the eight-day annual session of China's ceremonial legislature.

The accounts that were removed were deemed public, meaning any user of the service could sign up to see them. Such accounts have been used by intellectuals, journalists and activists to comment on politics, law and society, and to post news reports shunned by mainstream media. Some accounts attract hundreds of thousands of followers.

The communist government encourages Internet use for education and business but operates an extensive monitoring system. Operators of social media are required to enforce censorship rules against material deemed subversive or obscene.

The move came two weeks after the ruling Communist Party announced the creation of an Internet security group led by President Xi Jinping.

Wen Yunchao, a researcher and Internet rights activist who lives in New York City, said the timing of the removals might have been planned to avoid having reporters ask about it at the meeting of the National

People's Congress that closed Thursday morning.

"This is the first act by the Internet security group led by Xi," said Wen. "He sees the Internet as a threat to the party and wants to thoroughly disable the Internet's role in politics."

Phone calls Friday to Tencent's press offices in Beijing and at the company's headquarters in the southern city of Shenzhen were not answered.

The rise of [social media](#) in China has given [human rights activists](#), scholars, lawyers and journalists an opportunity to share uncensored information and spread their views in a society in which the ruling party controls all newspapers and broadcasters.

That has led to a rapid evolution of censorship controls. Chinese authorities want to reap the commercial benefits from the spread of microblogs and [instant messaging](#) while preventing their use to circulate criticism of communist rule.

A commentator in Beijing, Zhang Wen, said a notice on his WeChat account told him it was closed after "a large number of users" complained. The notice said its content might violate unspecified "relevant laws and policies."

Zhang opened the account last week and had posted comments about the reformist former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and criticized Beijing's North Korea policy.

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