

# Web marketer stands trial amid China crackdown

August 15 2014, by Louise Watt

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The founder of a web marketing company has pleaded guilty to helping delete Internet posts and spreading false information to make money and gain followers, Chinese media reported Friday, using the case to praise a government crackdown on online expression.

Yang Xiuyu, 41, is accused of making up information to lure followers on Sina Weibo's microblogging site, the official Xinhua News Agency said, adding that the court had yet to announce a sentence.

Yang and one of his employees were arrested last August soon after authorities launched an intensified campaign to clean up rumors, negativity and unruliness from social media—a rare platform for Chinese to express themselves to a large audience in a country where all [traditional media](#) are state-controlled. While critics say the campaign has suppressed criticism of the government and ruling Communist Party, commentaries in state media Friday leapt on Yang's case to argue that a cleanup is needed.

"Unbecoming behavior that is criticized in the real world will not be tolerated in cyber space either," said the Legal Daily.

It is not uncommon in China for companies to pay others to generate online activity publicity for them, help promote their reputations or damage those of their competitors by commenting in forums or creating fictitious followers, for example.

Yang admitted that his Erma Company earned 531,200 yuan (\$86,000) through removing information or releasing [false information](#) online for its clients from 2008 to 2013, the Beijing Chaoyang District Court said on its own microblog late Thursday. Its clients included an international travel agency, a pharmaceutical company and a construction company based in Jiangsu province in China's east, according to the statement which omitted the companies' names.

Yang used a Weibo account to write that a model and her "sugar daddy," an official who didn't exist, had spent 8.88 million yuan (\$1.4 million) chartering a jet to come to London for the 2012 Olympics. Public outrage ensued before it was revealed to have been a publicity stunt for a travel agent. The company had paid Erma 190,000 yuan (\$31,000) because it wanted people to know about its "luxury tour service," the court said on its microblog, adding that the model was in on the plot.

A former employee of Yang's, Qin Zhihui, confessed to spreading rumors about Chinese celebrities and the government at a trial in April and was sentenced to three years' imprisonment, Xinhua said.

In the crackdown launched last summer, authorities also have detained dozens of other people for spreading rumors—including many that critics say were targeted for political reasons in cases that have had a chilling effect on online discourse. Authorities also have created new penalties for people who post libelous information and warned celebrity bloggers to be mindful of what they repost.

Last week, the government announced that only established media companies would be allowed to release political and social news on mobile messaging services.

At the same time, government agencies at all levels have boosted their online presence to control the message in cyberspace.

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