

China has 649 million people online, less are microblogging

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Already the world's largest, China's online population grew last year but drifted away from Twitter-like microblogs, with the number of microblog users falling by 32 million.

The decline shows that Chinese microblogging sites have failed to recover from a major setback in 2013 when a harsh government crackdown on speech chilled discussion on those sites and drove away tens of millions of users. The second-year drop was accompanied by a rapid growth in popularity of newer products, especially the instant messaging service WeChat.

In an annual report released Tuesday, the government-backed China Internet Network Information Center said China's online population reached 649 million last year and that 557 million of them accessed the Internet via mobile devices.

But microblog users dropped by 7.1 percent to 249 million, and Internet companies pulled back investments in microblogging services, the report said.

In comparison, the number of users of mobile instant messaging services grew 17.8 percent to 508 million, the report said.

Dominating this market in China is WeChat, a product of the Internet company Tencent that also allows users to share information among circles of friends, make online payments, play games, or distribute

content in public accounts that can be followed by other users. While Chinese authorities were broadsided by the explosive growth of microblogs before 2012 and felt threatened by their ability to disseminate unfiltered information, they have largely been able to manage discussions on WeChat since its 2011 launch.

Popular foreign social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and video-sharing site YouTube are blocked in China.

Most recently, Beijing has restricted access to Google services and disrupted some virtual private networks that would have allowed users to circumvent controls on banned sites.

Chinese authorities have introduced the concept of "Internet sovereignty" to claim that each country has the right to control online material within its borders.

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