

Chinese authorities put the brakes on a surge in live streaming

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It's becoming a common refrain. A new social networking technology takes China by storm. Its users outsmart the censors, ushering in an era of relative freedom. And then, almost inevitably, the Communist Party begins to feel threatened and shuts it down.

Thus is the story of live-streaming apps. In China, they're largely an anodyne form of entertainment for lonely millennials. They're also massive business. More than 344 million people - about half of China's internet users - have used at least one of China's approximately 150 live-streaming apps. Last year, these apps earned more than \$4.3 billion.

But this month, authorities brought the ax down. Last week, China's media regulator ordered three major Chinese internet platforms to halt their video and audio streaming services, raising users' ire and signaling a new phase of the party's drive to consolidate control over the internet.

"Most of the audiovisual content did not accord with national regulations or the political situation of the times, and its social commentary was propagating negative speech," said the media regulator, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, in a single-sentence edict. The three services - Sina Weibo, IFeng and ACFUN - lacked proper live-streaming licenses, it said.

"Many live-streaming media companies will suffer from this ban," said Chen He Di, 27, an online gaming blogger and live streamer with more

than 200,000 followers on Weibo. "For live streamers, this is devastating, because it could cut off their main - or even only - source of income."

"I admit that a small proportion of live-streaming content is inappropriate and needs to be supervised," he said. "But it's only very tiny proportion."

The ban is in many ways ambiguous. Its timing, and the exact reasons for the government action, remain unclear. Weibo's video content, for example, is hosted by the company Yixia Technology, which does hold a proper license; several live streams on the platform remain uninterrupted. Weibo also has a partnership with the National Football League to stream games.

Authorities may worry about the medium itself, which is more difficult to censor than static text.

"Anything live, the government is frightened by - anything they can't control," said Stanley Rosen, a political science professor and China expert at USC. "By the time they crack down, the damage is done."

Although scores of live-streaming sites are still functioning, the ban could prove highly damaging to the three companies singled out by authorities. Weibo's stock lost 6.1 percent of its value after the ban, knocking \$1 billion off of the company's market capitalization.

The Twitter-like microblog reached stratospheric heights of popularity in 2011 and 2012 as users reveled in its relatively freewheeling political conversations. Yet the Communist Party considered the online forum a hotbed of dissent and in 2013 stifled it with a raft of regulations. (Some functions on WeChat, Tencent's massively popular chat app, have suffered similar blows in recent years).

Last year, Weibo began to promote live-streaming capabilities, spurring renewed interest in the platform. In February, the company, valued at \$11.3 billion, surpassed Twitter's market capitalization.

After last week's ban, Weibo users will need to apply for a license to live stream, the company said in a statement. Weibo vowed to "thoroughly cooperate with relevant state regulations."

Americans tend to use live-streaming platforms such as Facebook Live and Periscope to broadcast and watch events - including protests and other acts of activism. Similar platforms in China have emerged as polished entertainment, especially in small cities and the countryside, where there isn't much else to do.

For its greatest fans - often lonely hearts seeking digital companionship - the service is a cross between a video game and reality television. Live streamers answer questions, offer advice, sing, dance, even eat meals on camera. Viewers can chat with entertainers in real time, and buy them small "gifts," such as a digital flower, a beer, a yacht, a villa, with real money.

Live streamers can exchange the gifts for cash, and the platform takes a large cut of their earnings. Popular live streamers earn thousands of dollars each month, several times the average salary of a recent college graduate.

The medium's success has led to an industry of solo eaters, skimpily-clad seducers, and just about everything else. Entertainers are opting for ever more provocative attempts to stand out in a highly paid, rapidly growing market. Last year, police investigated one live streamer after she ate live eels, mealworms and light bulbs on camera.

Last week's "ban was poised to happen because the content on live-

streaming platforms was becoming increasingly sexualized," said Aynne Kokas, assistant professor of media studies at the University of Virginia, who studies Chinese media. "It served as a platform for an entire industry of virtual girlfriends."

The crackdown started months ago. In April 2016, China's Ministry of Culture announced an investigation into major live-streaming companies. In July, authorities fired or "punished" more than 18,000 live streamers, spurring 20 internet companies to require broadcasters to register their live streams under their legal names, rather than user names or nicknames.

That summer and fall, authorities continued to clamp down. In September, authorities announced a new licensing process; in December, they introduced a formal set of regulations for live-streaming platforms, dictating that they must not "harm national security, damage social stability, disturb societal order, violate the rights of others or broadcast obscene or erotic activities."

This April, the government shut down 18 live-streaming apps "for broadcasting illegal content," according to the official New China News Agency.

The edicts - or at least their guiding philosophy - come from the top. China's president, Xi Jinping, has called for increased regulation of the internet as part of a broader ideological drive to shore up party control.

Officials are acting especially cautious as the country prepares for a major leadership shuffle this fall. Earlier this month, authorities demanded internet companies shutter 60 social media accounts of popular celebrities.

Some of China's biggest internet companies - including Tencent and

Baidu - were told that they must "actively propagate core socialist values," according to a post on the Beijing Cyberspace Administration's official social media account.

A new cybersecurity law, which took effect June 1, carries draconian stipulations about protecting individuals' privacy, potentially further threatening entertainment many sites. It also requires companies to store their data in China.

Live-streaming fans on Weibo were infuriated by the new ban. "There are fewer and fewer fun things to watch online," said one, echoing a common refrain.

"They choke you till you cannot talk," said another. "In the end, only one voice can be heard."

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