

# China adds another layer of surveillance to the Web

*Proponents of the new measure say mandatory controls are necessary to help subdue inflammatory attacks and illegal activity, while critics say the regulation represents an incursion on free speech, individual privacy and the watchdog role of the Internet*

BY JONATHAN ANSFIELD  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, BEIJING

News Web sites in China, complying with secret government orders, are requiring that new users log on under their true identities to post comments, a shift in policy that the country's Internet users and media have fiercely opposed in the past.

Until recently, users could weigh in on news items on many of the affected sites more anonymously, often without registering at all, though the sites were obligated to screen all posts, and the posts could still be traced via Internet protocol addresses.

But early last month, without notification of a change, news portals like Sina, Netease, Sohu and scores of other sites began asking unregistered users to sign in under their real names and identification numbers, said top editors at two of the major portals affected. A Sina staff member also confirmed the change.

The editors said the sites were putting into effect a confidential directive issued in late July by the State Council Information Office, one of the main government bodies responsible for supervising the Internet in China.

The new step is not foolproof, the editors acknowledged. It was possible for a reporter to register successfully on several major sites under falsified names and ID and cell phone numbers.

But the requirement adds a critical new layer of surveillance to mainstream sites in China, which were already heavily policed. Further regulations of the same nature also appeared to be in the pipeline.

And while the authorities called the measure part of a drive to forge greater "social responsibility" and "civility" among users, they moved forward surreptitiously and suppressed reports about it, said the editors and others in the media industry familiar with the measure, who spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid putting their jobs at risk.

Asked why the policy was pushed through unannounced, the chief editor of one site said, "The influence of public opinion on the Net is still too big."

Government Internet regulators have been trying to usher in real-name registration controls since 2003, when they ordered Internet cafes around China to demand that customers show identification, nominally to keep out minors. Last year, lawmakers and regulators began discussing legislation on a more extensive "real name system," as it is known.

But such proposals have aroused heated debate over the purview of the state to restrict China's online community,



China has gone to new lengths to control the activity of its huge population of Internet users.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

which is the largest in the world at about 340 million people and growing.

Proponents, led by officials and state-connected academics in the information security field, argue that mandatory controls are necessary to help subdue inflammatory attacks, misinformation and other illegal activity deemed to endanger social order. They often note registration requirements on large sites in South Korea to support their point.

Critics counter that government regulation represents an incursion on free speech, individual privacy and the watchdog role of the Web in China.

The critics say sites and users should retain the right to discipline themselves.

Given the country's huge population of Internet users and its failure to guarantee freedom of expression, they argue, the case of China is hardly analogous to that of South Korea.

In 2006, Internet users and the news media rebuffed one official proposal to require real-name registration on blog hosting sites. Star bloggers denounced the notion, while ordinary users overwhelmingly rejected it in surveys conducted on sites like Sina.

In another key test of the policy earlier this year, the legislature in Hangzhou, near Shanghai, passed a regulation that would have placed the requirement on users who comment, blog

or play games on sites based there. Amid a popular outcry, however, the city shied away from enforcing the regulation.

Central authorities have gone to new lengths to tame online activity in 2009, a year peppered with politically delicate anniversaries.

Government censors have closed thousands of sites in a continuing war on "vulgarity," closed liberal forums and blogs for spreading "harmful information," blocked access to YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, and cut off Internet service where serious unrest has erupted, notably in the Xinjiang region of the west after deadly clashes between ethnic Uighurs and Han in July.

Increasingly, officials have defended the Web shutdowns on the grounds of national security.

The government recently set off an international furor when it ordered that all computers sold in China come prepackaged with pornography filtering software that authorities could remotely control. Officials were forced to retreat from the order after international companies and trade organizations protested and Chinese hackers showed that the software was designed to block politically offensive content as well.

The authorities had aimed to avoid a similar showdown over the new real-name requirement. "We had no recourse

to challenge it," said the news editor of another portal.

*Ta Kung Pao* (大公报), a Hong Kong-based newspaper loyal to Beijing, first leaked news of the State Council edict in late July. But the report was scrubbed from the paper's Web site within a few days.

Another state newspaper tried to follow up on the *Ta Kung Pao* report soon thereafter, the paper's editors said, but they were forced to abort their article because they were warned that the order was a state secret.

The State Council Information Office had yet to respond to a list of submitted questions about the move.

The new mandate did not appear to affect formerly registered users of the portals. Nor did it affect blog hosts, forums or government news sites like *People's Daily* (人民日报) or Xinhua (新华通讯社).

Whether because it had an impact mainly on rookie users or because of the void of news about it, bloggers in China were unusually slow to recognize the measure. But those who did were critical.

One commentator on the popular forum Tianya wrote, "Not daring to write one's real name, in truth, is a form of self-protection for the weak."

There were signals in the state media in recent weeks that more name registration measures would follow.

An influential advocate of the policy, Fang Bingxing, the president of Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, told a forum last month that the "time was ripe" to roll it out widely to bolster information security, newspapers reported.

A trail of comments on Sina thrashed the report.

Late last month, the Communist Party-run *Guangming Daily* (光明日报) ran a positive story about a city government portal in western China that imposed the requirement on new bloggers, calling it a "forerunner."

Hu Yong, a new media specialist at Peking University, said government-enforced registration requirements carried long-term side effects.

"Netizens will have less trust in the government, and to a certain extent, the development of the industry will be impeded," he said.

From a comparison of the most commented-on articles in July and last month on a number of portals it was hard to determine whether the volume of posts had been affected so far.

But both editors at two of the major portals affected said their sites had shown marked drop-offs.

## [ HEALTH ]

# Medi-dramas give patients unrealistic expectations, say experts

*Exotic diseases and improbable recoveries are all in a day's work for doctors on TV*

BY SARA HUSSEIN  
AFP, WASHINGTON

People love watching television doctors working miracles on patients with mystery ailments or devastating injuries, but these medi-dramas are feeding patients' unrealistic expectations, experts warn. Viewers glued to weekly installments of fictional doctors ordering batteries of diagnostic tests and unorthodox medical treatments can be forgiven for believing that rafts of examinations and aggressive interventions are the norm.

But US experts said hospitals are unable to provide the cure-all solutions found on programs like the rabidly popular *House*, starring British actor Hugh Laurie as the maverick medical genius doctor Gregory House.

Research also suggests aggressively treating some ailments can do more harm than good, they said.



British actor Hugh Laurie accepts the Favorite Male TV Star award for his role in *House* at the 35th annual People's Choice awards in Los Angeles on Jan. 7, 2009.

PHOTO: REUTERS

"The shows do tend to be very activist, very interventionist, very aggressive with their care ... because action is more interesting," said Andrew Holtz, a medical journalist and author of a book on *House*. "You get the pressure to have aggressive medical intervention

that almost always works and that's just unrealistic."

Not only does such treatment often fail to work, Holtz noted, but sometimes it can have side effects that outweigh the benefits.

"People don't see that on television,"

he said, adding that medical dramas contribute to a false conviction that any ailment can be cured.

"People have the belief that if you search hard enough, if you spend enough money, if you find the right doctor, you can get that rescue, that breakthrough, and those things just don't really happen in the real world."

Medical professionals often provide the background material that television writers use to script the unusual illnesses that afflict their unfortunate characters.

Allan Hamilton, a script consultant for the popular medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*, is also the chairman of the surgery department at the University of Arizona Health Services Center.

"They'll say 'we need a disease that looks like a person's going to die, but then there's this one thing that tips them off that they need to do further diagnostic tests.' Or 'we want a patient who is doing really well and everyone's really happy and then something goes dreadfully wrong,'" he said.

"I always joke with the writers, you know, 'this wouldn't really happen or that wouldn't really happen' and then they turn around to me and say, 'yeah,

but this is Hollywood, anything can happen."

As a medical professional, Hamilton is wary of the effects that depicting experimental treatments on television can have on viewers.

"Are we going to suddenly raise people's expectations? ... You do worry about that. People see this and there's a question in their mind, 'well are there people like that that we could find ... is there a *House* that could fix me?'"

Sandra Buffington, director of the University of Southern California's Hollywood, Health and Society program, argues that the power of medical dramas is one that can be harnessed to educate.

Her program receives funding from the US government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to help television writers develop accurate health stories.

"When the drama is compelling, the viewer is completely transported," Buffington said.

"They forget their surroundings, they're completely in the story, they see the characters as family and friends, almost as loved ones ... They are much more receptive and open to learning."

Buffington's program has worked with shows including *Grey's Anatomy* and *ER*, but had one of its greatest successes with a story line about an HIV-positive character on the daytime soap opera *The Bold and Beautiful* that featured information about an HIV/AIDS information hotline.

"The highest peak in callers all year was when we got 5,313 calls in a single day ... the day that Tony told his fiancée Kristen that he was HIV positive."

Buffington acknowledges that the "huge" impact of medical dramas is just as powerful, even when story lines are unrealistic or just plain wrong.

"That's why we're in business, because so much of this information is inaccurate or may be outdated," she said.

For Holtz, the most misleading health information on television comes not from medical dramas, but advertisements for prescription medications.

"Television ads are some of the most crisp and concise storytelling that exists," he said.

"They tell this story that if you come, if you get our product, you will have a life that's full of sunshine and butterflies and romps in the grass. It's just purely fantasy."