

China forced to delay Internet censorship measure

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On June 30, the Chinese government abruptly announced that it had postponed a July 1 deadline for all personal computers sold in China to be installed with government-developed Internet filtering software. While the government claimed that the delay was to allow more time for PC makers to meet the requirement, no new deadline has been announced so far.

The last-minute decision was a setback to Beijing's bureaucratic attempt to further censor the use of the Internet by China's estimated 298 million users. Widespread anger erupted after the plan was announced last month. The government claimed the "Green Dam-Youth Escort" program was to block unhealthy online content such as pornography and violence. However, the software can be used to block any site, including those critical of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime. The program automatically downloads updates of banned content from the developers' servers.

An open letter circulating on Chinese web sites, blogs and online communities, declared war on Beijing: "Hello, Internet censorship institution of the Chinese government. We are the anonymous netizens [Internet users]. We hereby decide from July 1, 2009, we will start a full-scale global attack on all censorship systems you control." Another campaign by the artist Ai Weiwei urged Chinese Internet users to stay offline on July 1 in protest against the government.

The impact was felt by computer retailers, who are reportedly reluctant to install the program on their PCs. One vendor, Mr. Wu, told the *New York Times*: "I personally don't want to install this software, but the

government has asked us to install it for our kids' good. But we can help you uninstall it if you want. It could be easy to erase it completely from your computer."

The Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* cited a prominent blogger, Bei Feng, who warned that the delay was only "a temporary action to prevent loss of face and reputation both at home and at abroad". He insisted that although it was a "victory of public opinion", the delay "reminds us that they may attempt to install similar software, or try to draft other policies to monitor home computers".

The software was developed as Chinese Internet users have become increasingly skilled at evading the already extensive monitoring and censorship system imposed by the police-state regime.

According to the *Financial Times*, a growing number of Chinese police departments are replacing old search engine-based methods with more advanced data mining applications to analyse the huge amount of information on the Internet. Even this is limited, however. Tony Yuan, chief executive of Netnetsec, a Chinese Internet security provider, told the newspaper: "Controlling public networkers is very, very difficult. Bandwidth and traffic are huge, so normally you don't have the computing power."

As a result, the Chinese regime is now targeting computers rather than the network itself. Earlier this year, Beijing had already ordered schools and Internet cafes to install Green Dam on their computers. PCs sold in rural areas as part of the government's economic stimulus subsidies were all bundled with the

program. As a result, the software is already installed on about 10 million PCs.

Chinese authorities blocked the Google search engine and other Google services temporarily on June 24 across the country. A foreign ministry spokesman claimed the site “has spread large amounts of pornographic, lewd and vulgar content, which is in serious violation of Chinese laws and regulations.” The move came after a government threat to shut down foreign search engines failed to stop links to pornographic sites.

Google bowed to the pressure from Beijing in 2005 by setting up a local search engine (Google.cn), after its web site was repeatedly blocked. This time, the company has again prostrated itself before the regime by taking down buttons on Google.cn that allow users to choose domestic or foreign web sites.

Beijing’s real concern has never been pornography. Its free market policies, which have impoverished large sections of the population, have driven millions of women into prostitution. Rather the CCP leadership fears that the deepening economic crisis will produce social and political unrest and that radical and revolutionary ideas will spread via the Internet.

The government was forced to back off, not so much by Internet users, but Western governments and multinational corporations concerned about the vulnerability of the Green Dam program to hacking. A study by the University of Michigan found that the software has “serious security vulnerabilities due to programming errors”, allowing any web site visited by Internet users access to and control over their PCs.

The Obama administration has urged China to revoke the Green Dam requirement on the grounds that it was a “serious barrier to trade” and posed a security risk to computers. The European Union Chamber of Commerce has also urged Beijing to reconsider, saying Green Dam poses “significant questions in relation to security, privacy, system reliability, the free flow of information and user choice”.

On June 26, twenty-two international business

associations including the US Chamber of Commerce and European-American Business Council called on Premier Wen Jiabao to ditch Green Dam. Their concerns were not basic democratic rights, but the potential disruption that might be caused by the poorly-designed software to the infrastructure of the world’s third largest economy.

Several major computer manufacturers have sought to evade the Green Dam requirement. The world’s largest PC maker, Hewlett-Packard, announced that it would consult the US Information Technology Industry Council on the matter. Dell, the world’s second largest, declared that it respected the government’s “stated goal” of blocking pornography, but added it continued to advise customers about the availability of parental control software—an offer that will not satisfy Beijing.

Other corporations have complied seeing it as an opportunity to boost market share. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Acer, the world’s third largest PC maker, has already agreed to pre-install Green Dam for machines to be sold in China. Toshiba has also complied. Sony has even begun selling laptops installed with Green Dam, despite customer complaints about the software.

The fact that the Chinese regime has been forced to go to such lengths does indicate that it fears the development of political discussion and debate. Already Internet users have used the medium as a means of organising campaigns on a series of issues. The latest heavy-handed attempt at censorship will inevitably spawn new means for evading it, particularly as the deepening economic crisis produces rising social and political tensions.



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