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**MEDIA & MARKETING**

## China Tightens Grip on Internet With New Content, Media Rules

**How Can Crackdown Track  
100 Million Internet Users?  
Ban on Word 'Democracy'**

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Can China really control the Internet?

It has launched a new bid to try. In an effort to crack down on the information access and activities of China's 100 million Internet users, the Chinese government is imposing new regulations that will attempt to centralize all China-based Web news and opinion under a state regulator.


The laws would prohibit content that "goes against state security and public interest," likely affecting Chinese bloggers, bulletin boards on popular portal sites, and other independent Chinese-news Web sites.

The announcement of the new laws follows a broader Chinese crackdown on television and other media. The move appears to be aimed at imposing order over news that Beijing doesn't like. In part, that is a response to the rapid development of a vibrant media scene rife with sensationalist, and sometimes inaccurate, news, but it also grants authorities more power to stifle nascent pro-democracy movements.

The government has long maintained theoretical control over all Chinese media, including the Internet. But the new laws, which update regulations issued in 2000, have drawn a line in the sand for China's netizens, imposing fines of up to \$3,700 and the threat of complete closure to Web sites that provide news without government authorization. The laws also change the legal definition of Internet "news," vaguely defined in the past as "news published and republished," to now also include "reports and comments on political, economic, military, foreign policy and other social public affairs."

Such an online crackdown challenges China's emerging sphere of personal opinion blogs, or online diaries, as well as Nasdaq-listed Chinese web portals such as **Sina.com** and **Sohu.com**, which have become centers of often free-ranging discussion among China's urban elite.

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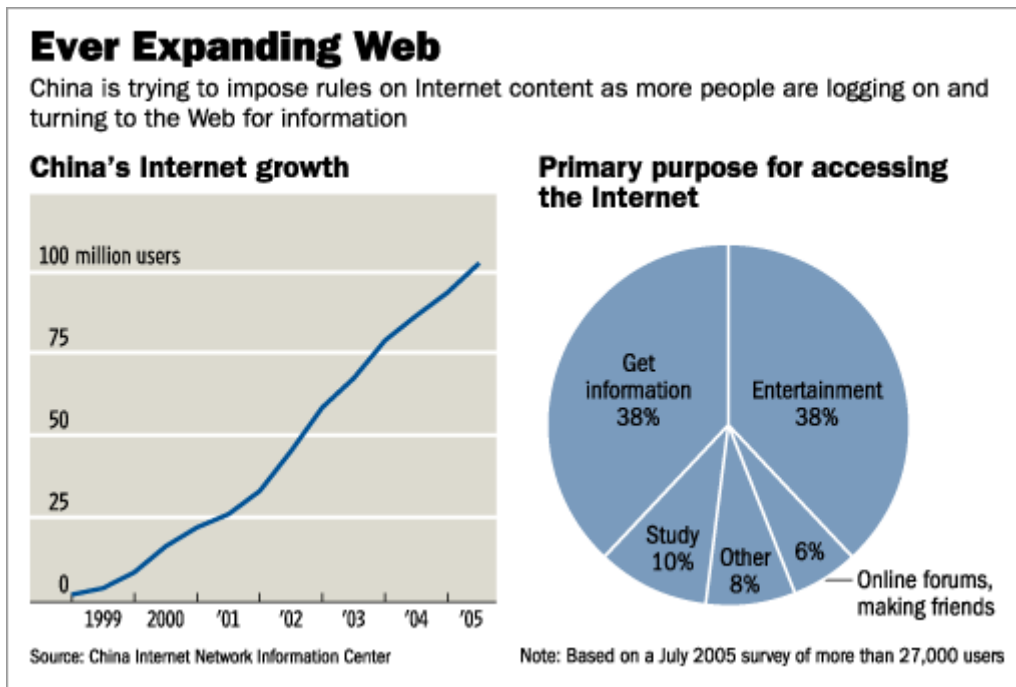
Online debates on everything from China's diplomatic relationship with Japan to the formaldehyde content of Chinese beer often stray far beyond the editorial constraints that Beijing's propaganda officials impose on the country's newspapers, TV stations and radio programs.

However, China's ability to fully control the Internet remains in question. Already, the government blocks access to some Web sites, such as those of foreign newspapers, which contain information it deems subversive or pornographic.

And Beijing has arrested dissidents who blatantly post essays questioning the government. According to the French organization Reporters Without Borders, the number of Chinese imprisoned as a result of Internet activities has jumped to 62 at present from three in 2001, while the number of imprisoned reporters from traditional media has generally held steady. Earlier this month, the Chinese arm of web portal **Yahoo** Inc. provided information to the government that led to the conviction of a Chinese journalist who had written about media restrictions.

Many Chinese Internet users, dismissing what they call government scare tactics, find ways around censorship. The government requires users of cybercafes to register with their state-issued ID cards on each visit, but some users avoid cybercaf registration by paying off owners. In response, the government has installed video cameras in some cafs and shut others.

Bloggers, who are now also required to register with the government, have found ways to host their sites on overseas servers, such as the Shanghai-based blog [Chinaherald.net](http://Chinaherald.net), which is hosted in Santa Monica, California. However, the Chinese government does have the ability to block access to these servers from inside China.



While certain words such as "democracy" are banned in online chat rooms, China's Web users sometimes transmit sensitive information as images, or simply speak in code, inserting special

characters such as underscoring into typing. They also tried using Skype, the free Internet

voice-calling service, although state-owned phone company China Telecom Corp. this month placed some restrictions on the service.

One scholar of Chinese media, who declined to be named out of fear of retribution, says the new rules are just a tougher revision of existing regulations. "The so-called new rules, it isn't new, because most of the contents have actually been published in different areas before," he said. "It doesn't work -- a lot of people know how to break through the restrictions."

Insiders who work for the big portal sites say they are already in regular contact with authorities about forbidden topics, such as the outlawed Falun Gong religious group, which their teams of Web editors pull off bulletin boards.

But the new regulations appear to extend coverage to a much wider set of online content, including the sorts of links and commentary offered by bloggers or the portals and news sites themselves -- services that they currently use to offer a competitive edge over other Web sites.

For example, analysts speculate that blog-driven portal Bokee.com, which plans a Nasdaq listing at the end of 2006, might have to alter its business model because the new rules could make blogging more unattractive. Bokee aims to build China's biggest blogging community and make money selling online ads and cellphone text-messaging services.

Company founder Fang Xingdong said he thought the regulatory changes would have minimal impact. Bokee's bloggers "mainly write about their own lives," he said. "Not that many people comment on news."

Officials at Sina declined to comment. Sohu said the company was still digesting the new rules, but in general welcomes them. "They are good for the development of the Internet in China," spokeswoman Dahlia Wei said.

Bloggers are concerned that any attempts to limit their right to commentary as well as to cut and paste information from other news sources could fundamentally alter the openness that characterizes their community.

The government says it hopes the new rules will make online news more reliable by phasing out small and unauthorized cyber-news publishers. As they have opened to commercialization, the Chinese media have also liberalized in recent years, sometimes scoring journalistic coups such as exposing public-health scandals and corruption. But they also have occasionally spun out of control as some media companies scramble for profits and audiences at any cost. For example, the government harshly criticized unverified stories run by numerous newspapers and Web sites in July about the level of formaldehyde in Chinese beer.

Sina and Sohu didn't allow discussion of the new rules on their bulletin boards yesterday. But Chinese Internet users elsewhere expressed concern about the crackdown. On Yahoo's Chinese site cn.yahoo.com, one wrote: "An extremely ridiculous rule, a rule trampling human rights, a rule against people's will and a rule leading to the darkness."

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