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Chinese Discuss Plan to Tighten Restrictions on Cyberspace

By HOWARD W. FRENCH

SHANGHAI, July 3 — Chinese authorities have announced their intention to step up their efforts to police and control the Internet and other communications technologies, including instant messaging and cellphones.

Speaking at a conference in Beijing last Wednesday, Cai Wu, director of the powerful Information Office of the State Council, or [China's](#) cabinet, said new control measures were needed "because more and more harmful information is being circulated online."

Another senior official who spoke at the same meeting, Wang Xudong, deputy minister of the information industry, said his ministry's next target would be developing technologies to regulate Web logs and search engines.

The potential new regulations, which are still in the discussion stage, are being considered at a time of exploding Internet and cellphone use that has created the freest atmosphere of communication this country has known under Communist rule, despite strenuous government efforts to contain it.

The measures contemplated reportedly include mandatory user registration for cellphones, according to reports from the conference. Now, users can easily buy cellphone cards in stores, obtaining a new telephone number without identifying themselves. Web sites, too, might be subject to registration.

The government's statement of intent is being seen as the beginning of its most ambitious effort yet to rein in high-tech communication. Analysts said the measures, introduced after a proposal to make the news media's unauthorized publication of "sudden events" a punishable offense, indicate an atmosphere of worry within the government about its ability to maintain power.

"Of course we don't want the government to do this," said Zhan Jiang, a professor at the China Youth University of Political Science. "It is related to the earlier announcement about breaking news, and it seems the government is trying to assert more and more control."

Isaac Mao, a popular Chinese blogger, said: "The government has found their political lives under pressure from the media, and they've decided they have to strengthen their power. They are working on a variety of measures, which they will deploy one by one in order to reach their big goal, which is to take full control of things. They don't want people to have any power. That's the big goal of the government."

According to the Media Blue Book, a publication of Tsinghua University in Beijing, China now has 36.8 million Chinese blog sites and 16 million bloggers. According to a company called I-Research, China has 97.1 million search engine users.

Invoking these numbers, Mr. Cai of the Information Office of the State Council said at the meeting, the Sunlight and Green Internet Conference, "How could we not regulate such a huge market?"

It is clear that Chinese authorities see search engines as an important choke point for information on the Internet, and they have won controversial agreements from Microsoft, Google and Yahoo to filter the search engine services they offer in China, screening out words the Chinese authorities deem troublesome.

The arrangements have received widespread criticism outside China, and among bloggers within the country as well. Google executives have expressed discomfort with the filtering agreement.

Whether used for conversations or short messaging, cellphones have played a major role in the wave of social unrest that has swept China in the past two years, allowing people to organize quickly and to spread news of police actions and other developments. The anonymous use of cellphones is a major loophole in the state's effort to monitor communications of all kinds, and the authorities seem determined to close it.

The rumors of new regulation have brought outrage from many Internet users here. "This free and beautiful kingdom created by bloggers finally has to face its anticipated cleansing," wrote a blogger whose online name is Zheng. "In the remote north, in that ancient city which is shrouded by yellow sand and dust, a force has gathered to begin the invasion of the homeland of bloggers," the blog continued, apparently referring to Beijing.

Others, however, say efforts to require registration of blogs and Web sites have been announced in the past but have never gone very far, and they express confidence that technology will allow them to stay one step ahead of the censors. Some are already exchanging tips online about how to frustrate the latest government efforts.

"I have noted the lifespan of new forms on the Internet here has been about one or two years," said Wang Yi, a law professor at Chengdu University and a prominent blogger. "Bulletin boards were very free, and

after one or two years, they were restricted. Then we saw the emergence of personal Web sites, and after one or two years they were restricted. Then we had blogs. After a year or two, they moved to restrict them, too.

"I think the Internet in China will always find a way forward, because of technology and other factors. I am actually very optimistic."

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