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China's Online Censors Work Overtime

To maintain "social stability" during the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic, China is working hard to limit access to the Internet

By Bruce Einhorn

As China gears up to mark the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic on Oct. 1, the country's security watchdogs are on alert for threats to the big celebration. The government is calling for "greater efforts to maintain public order and social stability," the official Xinhua news agency reported on Sept. 28. In Beijing alone, 800,000 people have offered themselves as "safety volunteers," Xinhua reports.

Part of the campaign to ensure a smooth anniversary includes an intensified effort to limit access to China's Internet, say anti-censorship activists outside the country. "They have tried everything they can" to block software that helps people evade censorship, says Bill Xia, president of U.S.-based Dynamic Internet Technology, a company that has developed Freegate, software that enables users to circumvent censors by rerouting traffic through proxy servers. While there's always a high level of censorship in China, says Xia, the campaign ahead of National Day this year is more comprehensive than usual. "This time they have really put a lot of resources to this," he says.

Other censorship foes report similar problems. The Onion Router, or TOR, also uses proxy servers to help users gain access to restricted sites. Some half a million people rely on it daily, according to TOR Executive Director Andrew Lewman, who says China is one of the service's top users. TOR, originally developed for the U.S. Navy, depends on volunteers to run its network and publish addresses to 2,000 "relays" that give people access to servers. "Since Sept. 25 we have seen a number of people saying that TOR has stopped working," says Lewman. More than half of the relays were blocked.

SOME ANTI-CENSORSHIP PROGRESS

The new campaign against services such as Freegate and TOR comes after critics of online censorship in China won a rare victory. On July 1 the government had planned to force all PC vendors to install or provide filtering software called Green Dam, which was meant to limit access to online pornography. But critics said it also restricted access to politically sensitive sites. After an outcry both abroad and at home, Beijing backed down and announced companies would not have to comply with the requirement.

Since then, though, the Chinese government has taken a hard line in the far western region of Xinjiang, where fighting between Muslim Uighurs and Han Chinese in July led to the deaths of 197 people and injuries to 1,700 others. The local government blamed Rebiya Kadeer, an exiled leader of the World Uighur Congress, for the unrest and said she used the Internet to communicate with "secessionists" in the vast region. After the rioting, the government began blocking the Internet in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, and connections are still down, according to the official *China Daily* newspaper.

On Sept. 29, *China Daily* reported on new regulations designed to control use of the Internet throughout Xinjiang.

"Online activities compromising national security, damaging national and social interests, undermining ethnic unity, instigating ethnic succession, and harming social stability will be severely punished," the paper reported.

"THE ELECTRONIC GREAT WALL"

The renewed efforts to limit access to the Internet inside China, as well as recent attacks against foreign journalists, prompted Reporters Without Borders, the international group that advocates for press freedom, to criticize the Chinese government. "The Electronic Great Wall has never been as consolidated as it is now, on the eve of the 1 October anniversary," the group said in a Sept. 29 statement.

That said, Lewman says TOR is staying ahead of the authorities. Although access is difficult, TOR "is [working] and has been," he says. The project's volunteers regularly change the Internet protocol (IP) addresses that people can use to gain access to TOR, he says. "It's in constant churn," Lewman says. "You can block it at one point in time, but by noon 20% of them have already changed IP addresses."

Unlike other regimes, he adds, there are limits to how far the Chinese government will go to control the Internet. During the upheaval following the Iranian presidential election, for instance, "Iran wasn't afraid to block secure Web sites across the board, which breaks e-commerce, access to Gmail, everything," says Lewman. "I don't think China is willing to do that."

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