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China's New PC Policy Injects Big Brother With Steroids



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The Chinese government apparently isn't satisfied with blocking access to Web sites it doesn't like. Now, it's requiring any company that wants to sell PCs in the country to include software that supposedly would filter out pornography and other undesirable content. However, it could also function as spyware, giving the government unparalleled access to its citizens' Web-surfing habits.

China is stepping up the monitoring of its citizens' Internet activity. A new directive requires PC makers selling products in the country to include software that can filter out pornography and other online content the government deems inappropriate.

The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology order, which reportedly has caught PC makers by surprise, is to go into effect starting July 1.

The software is reportedly called "Green Dam"; the "green" represents a foil to the "yellow smut" of the Internet.

Tightening the Screws

The Green Dam directive ratchets up the government's persistent efforts to control the Web its people see.

China already had an extensive system of control, Usha C. V. Haley, an Asia fellow at [Harvard Kennedy School](#) and author of the book, *New Asian Emperors: The Business Strategies of the Overseas Chinese*, told TechNewsWorld. This new directive, "is just another piece to its strategy of control."

Indeed, China is notorious for restricting Internet access within its borders. It has repeatedly

blocked access to Web 2.0 collaborative sites such as [YouTube](#) and [Wikipedia](#) when the content displeased it. In March, for instance, it blocked access to YouTube without explanation. It was widely suspected that it objected to recently uploaded videos of Chinese police beating Tibetan monks during last year's uprising. That was not the first time China darkened the video-sharing site.

It has also blocked access to Wikipedia and [Apple's](#) (Nasdaq: AAPL) iTunes in recent years -- again to keep Chinese-based viewers from viewing politically sensitive materials.

Most recently, it clamped down on the Internet for the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, blocking [Twitter](#), [Flickr](#) and several blogs, according to news reports.

For Chinese citizens, the burden of such monitoring -- accompanied, of course, by fear of reprisal -- is significant, Haley said.

It also places significant pressure on manufacturers that wish to sell within China, she noted. Now, they are confronted with the choice of complying with rules that will abet the government's goals -- or losing access to the market.

The choice is not easy. [Yahoo's](#) (Nasdaq: YHOO) infamous cooperation with the Chinese government in the case of [Wang Xiaoning](#) earned it widespread condemnation. Yahoo provided Chinese authorities with identifying information connected to an email address, thus revealing the identity of the author of anonymous blog postings about the Tiananmen Square massacre. Yahoo's cooperation with the Chinese government resulted in Wang's torture and 10-year jail term, charged human rights organizations.

The new directive "puts manufacturers in between a rock and a hard place," Harvard Kennedy School's Haley said -- not to mention the financial costs associated with compliance.


Easy Workarounds

People who know what they are doing can easily find a workaround to circumvent any software China mandates on PCs, Christopher Ciabarra, president of [Network Intercept](#), told TechNewsWorld.

From a censor's point of view, it is far more efficient to focus resources on controlling and monitoring the Internet, he said. "That they have control over -- they can shut down access to sites they don't like, such as YouTube, while anyone can modify a PC."

Still, not everyone is computer-savvy. Given the potential draconian ramifications that await computer users surfing the wrong sites, implementing this software will surely deter legions away from "subversive" material.

Certainly, this is not just about protecting users from porn, Ciabarra said.

"If the right software is installed on your computer, someone can filter all traffic," he pointed out, and "see everything that you are doing." 

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