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China's Weibo: Censorship getting sophisticated?

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Chinese users of online Twitter-alike Sina Weibo can expect extra restrictions to the service in the wake of allegations of several authorities that users were publishing “false rumours” on the site. These “rumours” include politically sensitive recent domestic political scandals involving deposed Chongqing mayor Bo Xilai and the escape from house arrest of activist Chen Guangcheng, as well as stories regarding the change of leadership in neighbouring North Korea. This new wave of restrictions is but one of many the CCP designs to keep the flow of information in China controlled. But is censorship winning the fight?

The new restrictions to Weibo will see a “points system” introduced that acts very much like the drivers licence management system employed by many countries, including South Africa. Users will start off with a total 80 points, and each recorded infraction will lead to point deductions from the user’s account. Once a user has reached 60 points, a “low credit” warning appears on his or her microblog, which restricts certain features. This can be undone after a two month probation period, after which the full 80 points can be restored for good behaviour. If there are more infractions during the probation period, the user faces expulsion from the site, perhaps permanently.

The topics that will incur points deductions are strikingly familiar to anyone with experience of China’s information and content restrictions, namely, users should not: spread rumours; publish untrue information; attack others with personal insults or libellous comments; oppose the basic principles of China’s constitution; reveal national secrets; threaten China’s honour; promote cults or superstitions; call for illegal protests or mass gatherings. Some of the points would be familiar to users elsewhere; for instance, spreading hate speech is illegal in South Africa, too. Yet, the shades of grey with e.g. ‘threaten China’s honour’ (what exactly does censorship understand by this, anything that does not follow the official line?) or the restriction on religious freedom are obvious tools to limit freedom of speech.

Weibo’s parent company, Sina Corp, reports that the service has somewhere over 300 million users, which is a somewhat intimidating figure – apparently also to the Chinese government. Chinese web users have long been subjected to very strict information control mechanisms tooled by the central government to restrict access to certain information groups and topics. This control extends across censorship of media content, restriction of search protocols online, and also increasingly to the blossoming communities of micro-bloggers that have sprung up across the country.

Sina, and its competitors were recently mandated by the government to make known the identities of every user that employs their respective services, though there was a slow uptake on this from Sina Corp in particular, leading to criticism from the government. The service providers were also ordered to suspend comment functions on several sites to prevent the further spread of gossip with regard to contentious topics. Several search engines suspended topics like “Bo Xilai” from search results, in an effort to control online activity.

But analysts consider these new restrictions will pose few problems to China's numerous net mavericks that regularly thumb their noses at central government's censorship. One commentator, Kerry Brown from London's Chatham House think tank says many users will simply adopt coded references for contentious topics, that will evade the censorship software that Weibo administrators will use to trawl the information streams for users' abusing the rules.¹ Censorship thereby complicates internet use and forces users to avoid certain keywords or create 'proxy terms', but it is unlikely to fully stop online discussions on politically contentious issues.

While the Chinese public's reactions to events of recent months, such as Bo Xilai's disgrace and Chen Guangcheng's escape, have posed challenges to China's censorship, the upcoming transition of leadership in the CCP will create more discussions on the choppy, messy and murky waters of the capital's political community. Politicians – and their censors – will have to confront the imperatives of projecting the party as a unified force both within China's borders, and outside. Even the party's number two, prime minister Wen Jiabao, was subjected to censorship several times in the past few years, most recently in a letter he published in a party journal with the ironic title *Seeking Truth*. His letter addressed party concerns with stamping out government corruption, but was edited heavily before publication. Premier Wen has also been censored by the state propaganda machinery when he has spoken out on the need to reform the political system, such as a high profile interview on America's CNN which was cut from the Chinese broadcast. Chinese media consumers were not provided with these statements, indicating an inner-party strife about 'the right way'.

As China modernises, the official control of information becomes an increasingly difficult task to manage by the party, both from the side of an increasingly tech-savvy population who will find means both technological and semantic to circumvent Beijing's restrictions, and also from the side of the political elites, whose all the more public attempts to shut down conversations about sensitive topics increasingly cast them in a bad light. For some high-ranking cadres, recent high profile scandals like the Bo Xilai saga seem to demand further tightening of the political grip, while reformers such as Wen Jiabao demand more transparency, even if only to thwart corrupt forces within government.

China's domestic politics is a steam cooker as it moves to a new party leadership structure at the end of this year and party careers are at stake, and the heat is steadily rising. Demands from China's online communities (as part of the growing middle class) for access to spaces for political dialogue are heating up at the same time. The ability of this system to deflect China's growing political discourse will increasingly be tested – and it is going to be interesting to see which strategy will prevail: to embrace the will to open dialogue, even if it is critical, or to carry on snuffing out channels where Chinese vent their feelings on their political leaders. 

¹ See BBC news online ("China's Weibo microblog introduces user contracts") of 27 May 2012. <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-18208446>>> [Accessed 28 May]