China's YouTube: Trouble for Beijing

By JODI XU / BEIJING

As far as live television goes, it doesn't get much more compelling. What was supposed to be a stately ceremony inaugurating China Central Television's 2008 Olympics coverage turned into a public spectacle after a popular Beijing newscaster grabbed the mike, interrupting the festivities to accuse her husband, a CCTV anchor, of adultery. For three long minutes, Hu Ziwei regaled an audience of thousands of Chinese and foreign reporters with tales of sports department head Zhang Bin's alleged infidelity, repeatedly asking, "If Chinese have no humane values to present to the world, what is the purpose of the Olympics after all?" Eventually, Hu was bundled off the stage by CCTV handlers, while Zhang made a quick apology. According to Hong Kong-based Phoenix Television, Hu was later jailed on charges of damaging the name of China and the Olympic Games, and will only be released after the Games are over.

The Communist party cadres who control China's airwaves doubtless hoped the story would end there. But a video clip of Hu's Dec. 28 outburst was soon uploaded to the Chinese video-sharing site Tudou.com, as well as a dozen other sites, and instantly became one of the most downloaded Chinese videos on the Internet, with 650,000 views on Tudou alone. (The clip was removed within hours from locally hosted websites, although it is still available on YouTube.)

It wasn't the first time China's video sites have featured content that the authorities would have preferred to keep unseen. In November, an unabridged version of Ang Lee's erotic thriller, Lust, Caution, swamped Chinese websites.

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erotic thriller, *Lust, Caution*, swamped Chinese websites after 22 minutes of graphic sex scenes were cut by China’s State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT). On Jan. 3, after the equally risqué *Lost in Beijing* was banned, online views of the movie hit a record high.

It’s not just salacious film clips that people are watching either: In June, authorities blocked access to an online video apparently showing drunk police officers in Henan province beating up a college girl that had been posted to several major video-sharing websites. And this week, mobile phone videos showing hundreds of people protesting against a proposed extension of Shanghai’s maglev train line have appeared on YouTube as well as on mainland web portal Sina.com.

With an audience estimated at 78 million people, online video is big business in China: Western venture capitalists have poured $120 million into the industry since 2004, according to CCID Consulting, a leading Chinese IT firm. Tudou.com, China’s largest video sharing website, serves more than a billion minutes of video per day, some 30% more than YouTube. “People spent twice as long on Tudou than on YouTube,” says CEO Gary Wang, who founded the company in Shanghai in 2005. “They really get in and get stuff they don’t typically see on TV.”

But regulations issued by SARFT and China’s Ministry of Information Industry (MII) could be putting an end to that free ride — and sending a shot across the bow of sites who host unauthorized content. Starting January 31, 2008, online video posting will be limited to state-owned or state-controlled video providers; clips that contain violence or sex or are considered “detrimental to the nation’s security” will be deleted immediately. The regulation mainly targets content uploaded by amateurs; experts believe TV and film clips will largely remain untouched. But the most controversial section of the new regulations — that all the video providers have to be state-owned or state-controlled — would almost certainly put the future of online providers like Tudou and competitors Youku.com and 56.com in question, as well as threaten Chinese web portals with video sharing features like Sina.com.

Some analysts, however, say that clause violates current laws by ignoring China’s existing Administrative Licensing Legislation, fueling speculation that the ruling may not be fully enforced. “I don’t think the detailed rules will ever be published,” says Zhao Fujun, a researcher on Internet issues for the Shanghai Bar Association. “The government just wants to show its power over the industry.” Indeed, Chinese authorities are in an awkward situation regarding video sharing: while they want to continue to act as gatekeepers for what ordinary Chinese can see and do online, they don’t want to risk alienating the foreign investors who have bet heavily on China’s Internet growth. Still, China’s video-sharing sites are taking the ruling seriously. “The effect of the new regulation is still unclear,” says Tudou CEO Wang, but he adds that whatever the outcome, the company would abide by the law. “The bottom line is for the website not to be shut down.”