Chinese Log On for Retribution

The cyber court of public opinion proves powerful, but its verdicts aren't always just.

By Ching-Ching Ni, Times Staff Writer
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BEIJING — A woman in a leopard-print halter top cuddles a kitten. She puts the little gray tabby on the ground. She lifts her foot and grinds the heel of her sparkly stiletto shoe into the terrified animal's eye and crushes its head. Her work done, she gazes into the distance smiling.

The video images set the Internet on fire in China. Instead of just airing their outrage online, Web users decided to hunt down the kitten killer.

But how do you find a nameless woman in a country of 1.3 billion? Easily. Create a most-wanted poster and distribute it in cyberspace.

Within five days, Internet users around the country had tracked down the location of the crime scene: a park in the northern province of Heilongjiang. They found the name and occupation of the stiletto-wearing woman — she was a nurse — as well as her videographer, a man who worked at a local radio and television bureau.

Then they splattered the pair's personal information on the Internet, including home addresses, e-mails, phone and identity card numbers, free for anyone to use and abuse.

The case attracted so much publicity that local Communist Party officials quickly followed up with their own investigation. Soon after, both the man and woman lost their jobs and were forced to issue a public apology. That is considered strong action against the perpetrators, because there is no law in China against the abuse of domestic animals and the two can't be charged with a crime.

In a society where judicial corruption is rampant and ordinary people have few protections in the court of law, an increasing number of Chinese citizens are turning to the Internet to fill in society's perceived legal and moral blind spots.

That often means taking matters into their own hands by harnessing the power of technology and then leaping beyond cyberspace to play judge and jury.

"In other societies you can turn to the media or the legal system, but in China, neither is credible," said Xiao Qiang, director of the Berkeley China Internet Project at UC Berkeley. "People don't trust the government. They don't have anywhere else to turn, so they go to the Internet."

Although Beijing frequently cracks down on cyberspace activity, censoring search engines such as Google and filtering information, the Internet remains one of the freest platforms on which Chinese citizens can communicate and bond.

The rising popularity of Web justice, sometimes referred to as Internet hunting, is relatively new, but it has the potential to threaten the absolute control of the Communist Party. Digital communities are springing up without the consent of the authorities — and are even forcing officialdom and society to take small steps in their direction.

As empowering as it seems, vigilantism in any form is imperfect. And unlike the kitten killer story, the outcome of the online hunting game is not always clear-cut.
Last winter, college student Chen Yi posted a startling online message. Her mother desperately needed money for a liver transplant. She was willing to sell herself — she was vague about what that entailed — to the highest bidder to save her mother's life.

Immediately, donations poured in from around the country, no strings attached. Even some in the overseas Chinese community pitched in to contribute a total of about $12,500 to the student's personal account.

Then what seemed like a great humanitarian project began to unravel.

Someone with the online name "Blue Lover" claiming to be Chen's classmate, posted personal details about Chen's life that cast doubt over her story. Chen, the posting said, wore expensive clothes and used a fancy cellphone. Did she really need the money?

Not knowing whom to believe, a Netizen called Sun Guoyu launched his own investigation.

According to his findings, Chen's parents were government employees with a low but steady income. Although their health insurance didn't cover all expenses, Sun concluded that the family was not nearly as poor as many others in similar situations. He even questioned whether the mother's operation was necessary.

Within a month of his postings, Chen's mother died and Internet sentiment ricocheted against Sun. Web users began saying his skepticism had helped take the woman's life.

"I've received a lot of unfair attacks," Sun said in a telephone interview. "I feel bad for her. But she did not disclose important financial information to the public. I am more than willing to help people in need. But people who donate money have the right to know the truth."

Such murky outcomes are not uncommon in the witch-hunt world of the Internet in China.

"Web freedom is a very new freedom, and new freedom should come with new responsibilities," said Xiao of Berkeley. "Unfortunately, that process has not been established yet. When anybody can attack anyone else, the Internet is sometimes a mess. It's not always good for justice or truth."

One of the best-known cases this year involved a man who called himself Iron Mustache online. He has been bombarded with harassing e-mails and phone calls, including death threats.

What did he do to deserve this? Adultery, according to Sharp Blade, the Web name of his allegedly cuckolded accuser.

Iron Mustache and Sharp Blade's wife supposedly met through their mutual love for the online game World of Warcraft. When her husband discovered their e-mail exchanges, he began denouncing the alleged affair on a popular Internet bulletin board.

But even Sharp Blade did not expect the avalanche of responses offering to help him track down Iron Mustache, expel him from school and prevent him from ever getting a job.

Despite Iron Mustache's repeated denial of any affair, nobody believed him, nor did anyone demand any evidence that any impropriety actually took place.

"It's true, people who participate in these Web-hunting cases do not always behave rationally — they tend to act as a group and they don't have access to complete information," said Li Jianqiang, a lawyer based in Shandong province. "But these Web users have a right to speak their minds. Trying to stifle them would make things even worse."

If it were not for widespread support from the Internet, even partial justice in many cases would be impossible, said Li, who represents the parents of a 21-year-old found naked and dead in her dormitory in 2003.

The family of Huang Jing believed that her well-connected boyfriend, Jiang Junwu, was guilty of rape and murder. Jiang said Huang had been sick and died of natural causes; authorities believed him and didn't open an investigation.

According to Li, the local police refused to even look into the case. Then the Web hunters stepped in.

They created an online memorial hall to mourn the victim, set up a national donation campaign to preserve her body for future investigations, and started a petition drive calling on the central government to investigate and fire corrupt cops.
Tens of thousands of Web users are said to have followed the case on the Internet, most of them sympathetic to the dead woman. Her boyfriend bore the brunt of attacks, which his family said was unfair because he was innocent.

Finally, officials arrested Jiang and began an investigation. In July, three years after Huang died, a verdict was delivered: not guilty. The court, however, also ordered Jiang to pay the parents of the dead woman about $75,000 in civil damages.

"Even though the outcome of the case is not ideal, the Internet still played a very important role," said Li, the lawyer. "Without the outcry from the Internet, we wouldn't even have a case. The court of public opinion is the only thing that could put pressure on the authorities to at least try to do the right thing."

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