China cracks down on irreverent Websites

Video of a scorned woman's accusations fall under new Internet restrictions

By Barbara Demick, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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BEIJING -- When the wife of a popular sportscaster grabbed the microphone at a pre-Olympics reception and blabbed about her husband's infidelity, the inevitable happened.

An audience member with a cellphone captured the whole embarrassing episode, including the mortified husband trying to hush his wife and security guards fluttering about helplessly, and posted footage worthy of "The Jerry Springer Show" on Tudou.com, a Chinese clone of YouTube.

All sorts of irreverent footage ends up on Tudou and other Chinese video sites -- spoofs of public figures, off-beat animated films, Taiwanese music videos and real-life street scenes that display the spontaneity and edge missing from state-run television.

No doubt that's the reason the Chinese government is striking back. A harsh new law that took effect Friday forbids any content "which damages China's unity and sovereignty; harms ethnic solidarity; promotes superstition; portrays violence, pornography, gambling or terrorism; violates privacy; damages China's culture or traditions." More damaging still is a requirement that firms distributing online video or audio be state-owned. If enforced to the letter, the law could kill the most vibrant media in China today.

"We are still alive and well and in business as of today, but we don't really know what will happen next," Gary Wang, the 34-year-old chief executive officer of Tudou.com, said in a telephone interview Friday. An engineer, Wang founded Tudou (the name means potato) in 2005 with private venture capital. It is the largest such firm in China, by now streaming an estimated 1.3 billion minutes of video.

Chinese censors routinely order content removed from video-sharing sites. And the firms themselves, trying to ward off trouble, assign their in-house staffs to screen videos before they're posted. But it is a losing battle, with thousands of new clips posted daily.

"It is easier to find bad words like "Falun Gong" or "Tibetan independence" in an article than it is to find an exposed nipple," said Kaiser Kuo, director of digital strategy for Ogilvy China. Falun Gong is a spiritual movement that has been banned by the Chinese government.
Among the videos that made it onto the Chinese Internet, albeit briefly, was one last year that showed American college students unfurling a "Free Tibet" banner on Mt. Everest.

Other videos were shot by so-called "citizen journalists" with no tools other than cellphones or cheap digital cameras. Images of students rioting in the central Chinese city of Zhengzhou in June 2006 that were banned from the official media quickly made it onto the Internet. A pyramid scheme in which peasants were defrauded of their savings through investments in ant farms became public in part because of images of protests that were posted on 56.com, another Chinese site.

All of the videos were removed from the online sites within hours, but not before they'd been viewed by tens of thousands of people.

It doesn't take much to offend China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, which, along with the Ministry of Information Industry, regulates the Internet. Besides the obvious taboos, the censors are acutely sensitive to the slightest affront to China's carefully controlled image.

Infidelity is hardly a state secret, yet censors ordered the removal of video footage of the betrayed wife, Hu Ziwei, accusing her husband during the Dec. 28 reception. (The husband also lost his job as a sportscaster for Chinese television.) The footage reportedly received 800,000 hits before being yanked.

Ogilvy's Kuo says the Chinese government may be cracking down simply to protect the monopoly once enjoyed by China Central Television.

"They have got to be concerned. We are seeing a wholesale flight of young urbanites from what has been the major mouthpiece of party propaganda to these instant gratification and incredibly entertaining sites," Kuo said. "They are trying to reinsert themselves."

By the standards of the 21st century, China Central Television's news programming often looks embarrassingly out-of-touch. For example, one recent night, when much of China was paralyzed by a freakish blizzard, the evening news featured 20 minutes of workers applauding and cheering Chinese President Hu Jintao as he toured a coal mine. Video posted on Tudou, in contrast, showed anguished close-ups of people stranded by the snow or jammed into train stations, trying to get home.

"I only watch TV if it's playing on the bus or in the background. You find a more interesting perspective on the Internet," said Bi Songlin, a 25-year-old bank employee who was waiting for a friend last week at an Internet cafe in downtown Beijing.

Another customer at the same Internet cafe, 20-year-old Alan Kwong, said that if the censors squeeze the Chinese video sites out of business, he and others like him will turn to other sites.

"You can always find another way to watch what you want," said Kwong, a hotel employee.

Many of the videos that were removed from Chinese sites are now available on YouTube. Because its servers are not located in China, YouTube will not be directly affected by the new law. But China can block access through what is often called the "Great Chinese Firewall," which restricts people inside the country from accessing certain foreign sites.

Access to YouTube was cut off for two weeks during the 17th Communist Party Congress in October, and the popular Wikipedia site remains off-limits. However, savvy online users can get around the content filters with proxy servers and specially designed Web browsers.

Jia Han of The Times' Beijing Bureau contributed to this report.