China Requires Censoring Software on New PCs

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Published: June 8, 2009

BEIJING — China has issued a sweeping directive requiring all personal computers sold in the country to include sophisticated software that can filter out pornography and other "unhealthy information" from the Internet.

The software, which manufacturers must install on all new PC's starting July 1, allows the government to update computers regularly with an ever-changing list of banned Web sites.

The rules, issued last month, ratchet up Internet restrictions already among the most stringent in the world. China regularly blocks Web sites that discuss the Dalai Lama, the 1989 crackdown on Tiananmen Square protesters, and the Falun Gong, the banned spiritual movement. But free-speech advocates say they fear the new software could make it even more difficult for China's 300 million Internet users to access uncensored news and information.

"This is a very bad thing," said Charles Mok, chairman of the Internet Society, an advocacy group in Hong Kong. "It's like downloading spyware onto your computer, but the government is the spy."

Details of the new regulations, posted Monday on a government Web site, were first reported by The Wall Street Journal.

Called "Green Dam" — green being a foil to the yellow smut of pornography — the software is designed to filter out sexually explicit images and words, according to the company that designed it. Computer experts, however, warn that once installed, the software could be directed to block all manner of content or allow the government to monitor Internet use and collect personal information.

PC makers who serve the Chinese market, among them Dell, Lenovo and Hewlett-Packard, said they were studying the new rules and declined to comment. But privately, industry executives in the United States said they were upset by the new rules, which were issued by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology with no consultation and no advance warning. Beyond the nettlesome issue of abetting...
government censorship, they said six weeks was not enough time to shift production on such a large scale. “Many of us are going to take it in the neck with this mandate,” said one executive. “It has put people into five-alarm mode.”

More than 40 million personal computers were sold last year in China, one of the fastest growing markets in the world. Despite the slowing economy, industry analysts expect that figure to rise by 3 percent this year.

A group of industry representatives met with American officials Monday to express their displeasure with the new rules, said Susan Stevenson, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Embassy in Beijing. “We view any attempt to restrict the free flow of information with great concern,” she said.

Zhang Chenming, whose company, Jinhui Computer System Engineering, helped create Green Dam, said concerns that the software could be used to censor a broad range of content or monitor Internet use were overblown. He insisted that the software, which neutralizes programs designed to override China’s so-called Great Firewall, could simply be deleted or temporarily turned off by the user. “A parent can still use this computer to go to porn,” he said.

Although the directive is somewhat imprecise and suggests that manufacturers can provide the software as a compact disc, it also says that it must be installed on computer hard drives as a backup file.

“The wording may be intentionally vague but the message is clear: we have no choice in the matter,” said one computer executive.

Industry experts and civil libertarians say they are worried the software may simply be a Trojan horse for greater Internet control. The software developers have ties to China’s military and public security agencies, they point out, and that Green Dam boasts that the project has the backing of Li Changchun, the country’s chief propaganda official and a member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party

The software will be provided free, paid for by the government, and according to the official Green Dam website it has already been downloaded 3.2 million times. That number includes thousands of schools that were required to install the software by the end of May. The site claims that Chinese manufacturers, including Lenovo, Inspur and Hedy, have already agreed to install 52 million sets of the software on new computers.

In recent months China has tightened its Internet restrictions, including an “anti-vulgarity” campaign that has closed down thousands of pornographic sites but also shuttered nonsexual sites, including some of the most popular bulletin boards and blog hosts. China already employs more than 30,000 censors and thousands who “guide public opinion” by flooding bulletin boards with comments favorable to the Communist Party.

Last week, as the 20th anniversary of the military crackdown on Tiananmen approached, the government blocked a host of Internet services, including Twitter, Microsoft’s live.com, and Flickr, a photo-sharing site. Youtube has been inaccessible here since March.

This is not the first time that foreign companies have been enlisted in government efforts to police the Internet. Google already blacks out politically sensitive results yielded by its popular search engine, Microsoft allows censors to block content on its blog service and Yahoo was widely criticized for turning over information that was used to jail a
journalist.

Even beyond ethical concerns, those who have tested the new software describe it as technically flawed. One American software engineer said it leads machines to frequently crash. Others worry that it could leave millions of computers vulnerable to hackers. So far, at least, there is no version for the Apple and Linux operating systems.

On Monday, Green Dam’s own website offered a hint of discontent over the filtering software. On the bulletin board section of the site, several users complained that pornographic images slipped through or that their computers had become painfully slow. “It seems pretty lousy so far,” read one posting. “It’s not very powerful, I can’t surf the Internet normally and it’s affecting the operation of other software.”

By Monday night, however, most of the comments had been deleted.