The Click That Broke a Government's Grip

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BEIJING -- The top editors of the China Youth Daily were meeting in a conference room last August when their cell phones started buzzing quietly with text messages. One after another, they discreetly read the notes. Then they traded nervous glances.

Colleagues were informing them that a senior editor in the room, Li Datong, had done something astonishing. Just before the meeting, Li had posted a blistering letter on the newspaper's computer system attacking the Communist Party's propaganda czars and a plan by the editor in chief to dock reporters' pay if their stories upset party officials.

No one told the editor in chief. For 90 minutes, he ran the meeting, oblivious to the political storm that was brewing. Then Li announced what he had done.

The chief editor stammered and rushed back to his office, witnesses recalled. But by then, Li's memo had leaked and was spreading across the Internet in countless e-mails and instant messages. Copies were posted on China's most popular Web forums, and within hours people across the country were sending Li messages of support.

The government's Internet censors scrambled, ordering one Web site after another to delete the letter. But two days later, in an embarrassing retreat, the party bowed to public outrage and scrapped the editor in chief's plan to muzzle his reporters.

The episode illustrated the profound impact of the Internet on political discourse in China, and the challenge that the Web poses to the Communist Party's ability to control news and shape public opinion, key elements to its hold on power. The incident also set the stage for last month's decision to suspend publication of Freezing Point, the pioneering weekly supplement that Li edited for the state-run China Youth Daily.

Eleven years after young Chinese returning from graduate study in the United States persuaded the party to offer Internet access to the public, China is home to one of the largest, fastest-growing and most active populations of Internet users in the world, according to several surveys. With more than 111 million people connected to the Web, China ranks second to the United States.

Although just a fraction of all Chinese go online -- and most who do play games, download music or gossip with friends -- widespread Internet use in the nation's largest cities and among the educated is changing the way Chinese learn about the world and weakening the Communist Party's monopoly on the media. Studies show China's Internet users spend more time online than they do with television and newspapers, and they
are increasingly turning to the Web for news instead of traditional state outlets.

The government has sought to control what people read and write on the Web, employing a bureaucracy of censors and one of the world's most technologically sophisticated system of filters. But the success of those measures has been mixed. As a catalyst that amplifies voices and accelerates events, the Internet presents a formidable challenge to China's authoritarian political system. Again and again, ordinary Chinese have used it to challenge the government, force their opinions to be heard and alter political outcomes.

The influence of the Web has grown over the past two years, even as President Hu Jintao has pursued the country's most severe crackdown on the state media in more than a decade. The party said last week that Freezing Point would resume publishing, but Li and a colleague were fired, making them the latest in a series of editors at state publications to lose their jobs.

With newspapers, magazines and television stations coming under tighter control, journalists and their audiences have sought refuge online. The party's censors have followed, but cyberspace in China remains contested terrain, where the rules are uncertain and an eloquent argument can wield surprising power.

Dueling Views

They clashed from the start, two men named Li with conflicting ideas of what a newspaper should be.

One was the maverick editor Li Datong, 52, a tall man with a scholarly air who had spent his entire career at the China Youth Daily and helped turn the official organ of the Communist Youth League into one of the country's best papers. After the 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, he nearly lost his job for leading journalists in a petition drive seeking freedom of the press.

The other was the new editor in chief, Li Erliang, 50, short in stature and slick in manner, a favorite of the propaganda authorities who made his reputation running the party's official mouthpiece in Tibet. He was an outsider at the Daily, a product of the party apparatus who was sent in to get the paper's feisty staff under control.

One night soon after his arrival in December 2004, the new editor stopped the presses and tore out Li Datong's Freezing Point section because it contained an article criticizing the Chinese education system. The next morning, the chief editor went to Li Datong's office to explain, but Li was furious and refused to talk to him. He just kept writing, banging on his keyboard and ignoring his new boss, colleagues recalled.

Relations between the two men only got worse. The party's propaganda department had targeted Freezing Point in its media crackdown because it often published investigative reports that embarrassed officials, as well as essays on history, society and current events that challenged the party line. Colleagues said Li Erliang, who declined to be interviewed, tried to rein in the section to please his superiors. Li Datong, who spoke out after Freezing Point was suspended, said he fought to protect it.

"The propaganda department wanted to shut us down, and we were under a lot of pressure," he said. "They tried to get rid of our columnists and cut the size of the section and take away reporters, but we resisted."

Then, in August, Li Erliang proposed a point system for awarding bonuses to the paper's staff members. Reporters would receive 100 points if their articles were praised by provincial officials, 120 if praised by the propaganda department and 300 if praised by a member of the Politburo. Points would be deducted if
officials criticized articles. Just one report that upset a party leader could mean loss of a month's salary.

The newsroom simmered with anger, reporters said. But Li Datong saw an opening to fight back. "The plan was just stupid," he said. "A newspaper can evaluate reporters that way, and many do, but it can't be so blatant about it."

Li holed up in his apartment, and two days later, emerged with a 13,000-word letter that denounced the point system, saying it would "enslave and emasculate" the paper, cause circulation to plummet and put the Daily out of business.

He also painted a damning picture of the propaganda apparatus. He described an official who measured photos of two party leaders before publication to make sure neither man would be offended. He wrote about a senior editor who resigned in protest over an obsequious column that compared President Hu's words to "a lighthouse beacon, pointing and illuminating the way for China's students." And he attacked the party's censors, questioning their legitimacy and alleging they favored publishers who showered them with gifts and banquets.

Li saved his harshest words for his new boss. But he crafted his letter carefully, citing the support of generations of party leaders for the paper's journalism and even quoting Karl Marx to make the case that editors should put readers first.

He showed the letter to a few colleagues and to the reporters on his staff. Then, on Aug. 15, at 10:09 a.m., he posted it on the newsroom's computer system. "I hoped it would have an impact," he said. "I never expected what happened next."

System of Censorship

Every Friday morning, executives from a dozen of China's most popular Internet news sites are summoned downtown by the Beijing Municipal Information Office, an agency that reports to the party's propaganda department.

The man who usually runs the meetings, Chen Hua, director of the Internet Propaganda Management Department, declined to be interviewed. But participants say he or one of his colleagues tells the executives what news they should keep off their sites and what items they should highlight in the week ahead.

These firms are private enterprises, and several, including Sina, Sohu and Yahoo! China, are listed on U.S. stock exchanges or have attracted U.S. investment. But because they need licenses to operate in China, they comply with the government's requests.

The meetings are part of a censorship system that includes a blacklist of foreign sites blocked in China and filters that can stop e-mail and make Web pages inaccessible if they contain certain keywords. Several agencies, most notably the police and propaganda authorities, assign personnel to monitor the Web.

The system is far from airtight. Software can help evade filters and provide access to blacklisted sites, and Internet companies often test the censors' limits in order to attract readers and boost profits. If an item isn't stopped by the filters and hasn't been covered in the Friday meetings, the government can be caught off guard.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/18/AR2006021801389_pf.html
That is what happened with Li Datong's letter. Minutes after he posted it, people in the newsroom began copying it and sending it to friends via e-mail and the instant messaging programs used by more than 81 million Chinese.

"We had to move quickly, before they started blocking it," recalled one senior editor, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Pu Zhiqiang, a lawyer and advocate of journalists' rights, said he received a copy at 10:20 a.m., 11 minutes after Li posted the original. He forwarded it to 300 people by e-mail and sent it to others using Microsoft's MSN Messenger program. Then he began posting it on some of the bulletin board sites that have proliferated in China.

At 11:36 a.m., Pu put the memo on a popular forum called Yannan. Then he noticed that someone had posted a copy on another part of the site.

About the same time, the editors' meeting at the China Youth Daily ended and Li Erliang rushed back to his office. Colleagues said he contacted superiors in the propaganda department and the Communist Youth League after reading the memo.

Neither the government's censors nor the editors at the major Web sites had begun deleting the letter, yet. Some editors said they waited because it didn't challenge the party's authority or discuss subjects that were clearly off-limits, such as the Tiananmen Square massacre. At the same time, the official censors either failed to spot the memo or hesitated to act because they were worried that some senior officials might support Li Datong's views, editors said.

As they waited, the letter continued to spread.

At 12:17 p.m., it appeared on an overseas news site run by the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement, and minutes later on others managed by exiled dissidents. These sites are blocked in China, but many people access them using software that slips past the government's firewall.

By 1:30 p.m., a prominent blogger, Li Xinde, had downloaded the memo. He said he sent it using China's top instant messaging service, QQ, to more than 20 chat groups, each with 30 to 40 members. By 2 p.m., the memo had been posted on popular university Web sites.

The document was spreading so fast that many people received multiple copies. A writer in Anhui province said that when he went online to check his e-mail at 2:30 p.m., four friends immediately offered to send him the memo on MSN Messenger. But two copies were already in his inbox, including one that had been sent to 1,000 people.

Race in Cyberspace

It was midafternoon before someone in the party bureaucracy decided Li Datong's letter should be removed from Chinese cyberspace and government officials began calling executives at the major Web sites.

Some said they were contacted by the Beijing Municipal Information Office, others by its national-level counterpart, the State Council Information Office. None reported receiving a formal notice or any legal justification for the decision. As usual, they were just told to delete the offending material.
There are at least 694,000 Web sites in China, according to official statistics, and the party didn't try to contact them all. They called the most popular sites in Beijing first. Hours passed before some smaller bulletin board sites were notified. Forums with national audiences in other cities received calls only at the end of the day.

At a recent news briefing, Liu Zhengrong, a senior Internet affairs official in the State Council Information Office, declined to explain the legal basis for the orders, saying only that many comments about the China Youth Daily remained on the Web.

Even as Li's memo began disappearing from some Web sites, it went up on others the authorities had not contacted. Shortly before 10 p.m., it was posted on the popular Tianya forum. At 11 p.m., it became a featured item on Bokee, China's top blog and portal site.

Almost everywhere the letter appeared, users added hundreds of comments backing the reporters of the China Youth Daily. Inside the newsroom, spirits were buoyed. Some journalists posted notes on the internal computer system supporting Li Datong.

The next morning, officials continued calling Web sites, but readers started posting the memo on sites that had already removed it. Some Web site managers said they tried to drag their feet or leave copies on less prominent pages. One said the memo was viewed 30,000 times before he took it down.

But other Web sites added Li Datong's name to keyword filters used to block sensitive material from being posted.

At 2:15 p.m., Li Erliang distributed a rebuttal on the China Youth Daily's internal network. It was quickly leaked, too, triggering another wave of e-mails and postings.

Authorities were scrambling for a way to end the controversy. A few hours after Blog-City, an overseas blogging site, was blocked, the party announced in a rare retreat that it was ditching Li Erliang's point system.

"It was a breakthrough, and the Internet played a critical role," said Xu Zhiyong, a civil rights lawyer in Beijing. "If something is written well enough, they can't stop it from spreading. People will find a way to read it."

Freezing Point enjoyed a renaissance in the months that followed. Li Erliang appeared chastened, unwilling to risk another fight he might lose, reporters said.

But in January, propaganda officials finally shut down the section. Before doing so, they called executives from all the major Web sites to a special meeting and warned them not to allow any discussion of the action.

The news spread quickly anyway.

*Researcher Jin Ling contributed to this report.*

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