For China's Censors, Electronic Offenders Are the New Frontier

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Washington Post Foreign Service
Monday, September 10, 2007; A01

DANZhou, CHina -- Li Hua was outraged. The public high school where he had been teaching civics for six years was about to be swallowed up by a fancy private institution. The merger had been ordered by local officials, Li suspected, because they had a financial stake in the big new school and wanted to see it flourish.

Following the literary traditions of this little farm town in the center of Hainan Island, just off China's southern rim, Li gave voice to his anger with a bawdy folk song in the distinctive local dialect. Among other things, it said merrily that Danzhou's leaders "sold us like pigs, sold our flesh and sold our doo-doo." One verse took things a step further: It named as main culprits the Danzhou Communist Party secretary, Zhao Zhongshe; the deputy mayor, Wang Yuehua; and the school superintendent, Li Shenghua.

Li's irreverent ditty was folk art of a kind Danzhou officials did not appreciate. On July 27, five days after the lyrics were posted on various Web sites -- including the school system's -- Li was thrown in jail. He was interrogated twice, he recalled, and forced to translate the song into Mandarin Chinese so his jailers could understand it. At noon on the seventh day, he was released, but only after writing a self-criticism about how naughty it was to compose ribald lyrics describing the actions of party officials.

"I felt the sky was broken and the earth was cracked," Li said, still appearing shaken and dejected as he described his experience six weeks later. "When I made up that folk song, I could never have imagined it would bring me such trouble."

Li, 31, a short, slight native of the nearby countryside who has big, round eyes, fell victim to the Communist Party's enduring determination to decide what Chinese people can read or hear, sing or say, write or perform. His travails were not unusual for modern China, even in a backwater town far from the center of power in Beijing. More than a quarter-century after Deng Xiaoping launched the country on a course of drastic reforms, the party at all levels has clung to rigid censorship over information and art - - including folk songs in a dialect only the locals understand.

But party censors are now turning to China's booming Internet and cellphone networks with particular vigor. Given the easy access to technologies such as text messaging, censors have found it difficult to keep a grip on information.
It hasn't been for lack of trying. The Public Security Ministry, which monitors the Internet under guidance from the Central Propaganda Department, has recruited an estimated 30,000 people to snoop on electronic communications. The ministry recently introduced two cartoon characters -- a male and female in police uniforms -- that it said would pop up on computer screens occasionally to remind people that their activity is being tracked.

Traditionally, the censors' main concern has been keeping political expression in check. That has become particularly urgent, officials say, as the country prepares for the 17th Communist Party Congress in October, during which President Hu Jintao is to solidify his leadership and move a successor into place. But because transmitting information of all kinds through the Internet and cellphone messages is relatively easy, the party's censorship bureaucrats also have been fighting new battles. As Li Hua's case showed, the enemy is not always political.

**Satire Stings the Party**

Fan Bin, who runs a little-known Web site in eastern China, was about 300 feet from his house in the Hangzhou suburb of Ling An in early June when he saw a police tow truck taking away a car.

Curious, Fan and his intern, Sang Yang, 26, moved closer to take a look inside. What they saw, Fan recalled, was the naked body of the local party secretary, Xu Xinxian, and the equally naked body of one of his female colleagues. The two apparently had been enjoying a tryst in the back seat, he said, and because they had left the motor running to power air conditioning, both were asphyxiated by leaking exhaust fumes.

Sang, the intern, could not resist the opportunity to poke fun at the philandering. Too inexperienced to worry about issues such as taste and official wrath, he immediately posted a satirical report on Fan's Web site.

"It was said that party secretary Xu and the lady had been discussing job issues in the car until the fuel ran out and the air conditioner was cut off. In order to cool down, the two people stripped off their clothes. They kept on talking business until they finally died," he wrote, employing an impressive imagination in describing the episode. "Local people are really lucky to have such a serious party secretary. He kept the people's business in his heart and even took care of the women's rights issue in person."

For two months, the posting bounced from Web site to Web site around the country, with delighted readers eager to share it with others. The topic touched a nerve for many Chinese, who are constantly told in official propaganda how party leaders are the "vanguard" to be emulated but who just as constantly see their local officials involved in corruption and dissolute living.

For reasons Fan does not understand, the posting long escaped the notice of Ling An censors. Finally, though, officials from Ling An and surrounding Qing Liangfeng County got wind of the merriment. Not amused, they had the city Propaganda Department order that the report be deleted immediately. The department's deputy director called, Fan said, accusing him of airing dirty laundry in public.

Fan, a businessman at heart, quickly complied, taking the satire down Aug. 8 and replacing it with a statement saying the intern "lacked social experience" and had made a blunder. The description of Xu's death was untrue, the Web site said, and the intern was fired for posting it. He has since gone into hiding, Fan said.

"We hope readers don't talk about this anymore, and please do trust the party," the notice concluded.
Fan's troubles were not over. Police raided his offices Aug. 24 and seized 13 computers, confiscating his investment and putting him out of business. Officials said he was allowing young people to log on from his office, turning it into an unauthorized Internet cafe. But in Fan's view, it was the Ling An party leadership getting back at him for the embarrassing report on their colleagues' deaths.

"It's revenge," Fan said.

Web Wins in Credibility

As July rains pelted China, the northeastern province of Shandong got an unusually heavy three-hour downpour. As a result, the provincial capital, Jinan, flooded.

Guided by the provincial Propaganda Department, government-controlled newspapers and television stations focused their reports on efforts by authorities to rescue those stranded by the floodwaters and restore municipal services to affected areas. In all, officials reported, 34 people were killed in and around the city.

Not so, insisted an Internet contributor who identified herself as Red Diamond Empire. At least 100 people were killed in downtown Jinan alone, she said, when floodwaters poured into an underground supermarket.

As usual, she went on, authorities were concealing the real death toll to minimize the scope of the tragedy. The truth came out because bystanders saw the bodies as the floodwaters receded, she said.

After her account attracted wide attention, the 23-year-old woman, identified only by her surname Li, was arrested and charged with contributing to public disorder by spreading rumors. The arrest was widely reported in government-controlled media. But more than a month later, a Jinan taxi driver eagerly recounted to a visitor how several hundred people had died in the supermarket.

Jinan residents and others across China readily believed the anonymous Internet posting rather than the official version provided by city and provincial authorities. Using their censorship powers, local governments routinely have concealed the extent of natural disasters and other accidents to avoid blame from the central government in Beijing. As a result, many Chinese learned long ago not to believe statistics relayed by the government-controlled media.

Tracking a Cancer Rumor

From spring well into the summer, southern China's banana farmers faced a crisis they could not understand. From cellphone to cellphone, a text-message rumor had swept the country saying that Chinese bananas carried an infection called "Panama virus" that could cause cancer. As a result, consumers everywhere were leery, and bananas piled up unsold.

Distraught agriculture officials knew of no such problem with Chinese bananas. Eager to restore the market, they called in the Public Security Ministry's electronic censors to find out where the rumor originated. From message to message, the monitors traced it back through thousands of cellphone connections.

After weeks of sleuthing, they discovered the first message had been sent by a woman in Nanning, capital of Guangxi province just northwest of Vietnam. Because she lived in a major banana-growing region, they surmised the woman might have been seeking to inflict harm on a local businessman or farmer.
But after tracking her down and interrogating her, Nanning police said she explained that she was only passing along what she had read in an article in China Daily, the government's main English-language newspaper. Beijing police launched an investigation at the newspaper's head office in the capital. The article in question was indeed about bananas and it did mention cancer, they found, but the writer had said nothing about bananas causing cancer.

After further interrogation, China Daily editors said, Nanning police discovered the woman was reading the paper as a way to improve her English -- which was still shaky -- and she had misunderstood the article.

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