Mob rule on China's Internet: The keyboard as weapon

By Howard W. French The New York Times

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SHANGHAI It began with an impassioned, 5,000-word letter on one of China's most popular Internet bulletin boards, from a husband denouncing a student he suspected of carrying on an affair with his wife.

Immediately, hundreds joined in the attack. "Let's use our keyboard and mouse in our hands as weapons," as one person wrote, "to chop out the heads of these adulterers, to pay for the sacrifice of the husband." Within days, the hundreds had grown to thousands, and then tens of thousands, with total strangers forming teams to hunt down the student's identity and address, hounding him out of his university and causing his family to barricade themselves inside their home.

It was the latest example of a growing phenomenon the Chinese call Internet hunting, in which morality lessons are administered by online throngs and where anonymous Web users come together to investigate others and mete out punishment for offenses real and imagined.

In recent cases, people have scrutinized husbands suspected of cheating on their wives, fraud on Internet auction sites, the secret lives of celebrities and unsolved crimes. One case that drew a huge following involved the poisoning of a Tsinghua University student - an event that dates to 1994, but was revived by curious strangers after word spread on the Internet that the only suspect in the case had been questioned and released.

Even a recent scandal involving a top Chinese computer scientist dismissed for copying an American processor design came to light in part because of Internet hunting, with scores of online commentators raising questions about the project and putting pressure on the scientist's sponsors to look into allegations about intellectual property theft.

While Internet wars can crop up anywhere, these cases have set off alarms in China, where this sort of crowd behavior has led to violence in the past. Many here draw disturbing parallels to the Cultural Revolution, whose 40th anniversary was in May. During that episode of Chinese history, mobs of students taunted and beat their professors and mass denunciations and show trials became common for a decade.

In recent years, the Chinese government has gradually tightened controls, requiring, for example, that customers at Internet cafés provide identification.

It also introduced an Internet policing system whose cartoon figure mascots show up on people's screens to remind them they are being monitored, and recently blocked access to the most popular blog search engine, the American company Technorati.

There has been recurrent talk by the government of registering all Internet users, and many here worry that a wave of online threats and vigilantism could serve as a pretext to impose new limits on users.

The affair of the cuckolded husband first came to public attention in mid-April,
after the man, who goes by the Web name Freezing Blade, said he discovered online correspondence between his wife, Quiet Moon, and a college student, Bronze Mustache. Following an initial conversation, in which he forgave his wife, the man said he found messages on his wife’s unattended computer that confirmed to him that the extramarital liaison was continuing. He then posted the letter denouncing Bronze Mustache by his real name, opening the floodgates.

The case exploded on April 20, when a bulletin board manifesto against Bronze Mustache was published by someone under the name Spring Azalea. “We call on every company, every establishment, every office, school, hospital, shopping mall and public street to reject him,” it said. “Don’t accept him, don’t admit him, don’t identify with him until he makes a satisfying and convincing repentance.”

Impassioned people teamed up to uncover the student’s address and telephone number, both of which were then posted online. Soon, people eager to denounce him showed up at his university and at his parents’ house, forcing him to drop out of school and barricade himself with his family in their home.

Others denounced the university for not expelling him, with one poster saying it should be “bombed by Iranian missiles.” Many others, meanwhile, said the student should be beaten or beheaded, or that he and the married woman should be put in a “pig cage” and drowned.

“Right from the beginning, every day there have been people calling and coming to our house, and we have all been very upset,” said the student’s father, who was interviewed by telephone but declined to provide his name.

“This is an awful thing, and the Internet companies should stop these attacks, but we haven’t spoken with them. I wouldn’t know whom to speak to.”

In hopes of quieting the criticism, Bronze Mustache issued a six-minute online video denying any affair with Quiet Moon, whom he is said to have met at a gathering of enthusiasts of the online game “World of Warcraft.” At the same time, Freezing Blade has twice asked people to call off the attacks, even joining in the denials of an affair - all to no avail.

At its height, the Bronze Mustache case accounted for huge traffic increases on China’s Internet bulletin boards, including a nearly 10 percent increase in daily traffic on Tianya, the bulletin board with the most users.

In many countries, electronic bulletin boards hark back to the earliest days of the Internet, before Web browsers were common, and when text messages were posted in static fashion in stark black and white. In today’s China, however, bulletin boards have been colorfully updated and remain at the heart of the country’s Internet culture.

“Our Web site is a platform, not a court,” said Zeng Lu, a Web master for Tianya, which boasts 40 million page visits daily and says it is the world’s largest bulletin board. “We cannot judge who is a good or bad person by some moral standard, but we have our own bottom line. If it’s a personal attack on someone, we delete it, but it is very difficult, given that we have 10 million users.” Although concerned about online threats, advocates of free speech say that is no reason for the Chinese authorities to place further limits on the Internet.

“The Internet should be free, and I have always opposed the idea of registering users, because this is perhaps the only channel we have for free discussion,” said Zhu Dake, a sociologist and cultural critic at Tongji University in Shanghai. “On the other hand, the Internet is being distorted. This creates a very difficult dilemma for us.”

Zhan Jiang, a professor of journalism, also defended open discussion on the Internet.

“As freedom of expression is not well protected here, we have to choose the lighter of two evils,” said Zhan, who teaches at China Youth University of Political Science, in Beijing. “The minority who are hurting other people in such cases should be prevented, but this behavior should not disturb the
majority's freedom of expression."

But there are drawbacks to unfettered discussion, as the Bronze Mustache case illustrates. "What we Internet users are doing is fulfilling our social obligations," said one man who posted a lengthy attack on the college student and his alleged affair. "We cannot let our society fall into such a low state."

Asked how he would react if people began publishing online allegations about his private life, he answered, "I believe strongly in the traditional saying that if you've done nothing wrong, you don't fear the knock on your door at midnight."