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Enemies of the Internet

CHINA

"Control 2.0" offensive held in check by inventive netizens

Domain name: .cn
Population : 1 338 612 968
Internet-users : 384 000 000
Average monthly salary : between 219 and 274 US$

Number of imprisoned netizens : 72
Average charge for one hour's connection at a cybercafé : About 2 US$

As its polemic with Google and the United States on the Internet's future unfolds, China continues to intensify Web censorship, faced with an increasingly forceful online community. The much-vaunted promises made by organizers at the open ceremonies of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games have proven to be mere illusions for the world's biggest netizen prison. Expanded dissemination of propaganda, generalized surveillance and crackdowns on Charter 08 signatories are commonplace on what has become the Chinese Intranet – with significant consequences for trade.

THE GOOGLE POLEMIC

Internet giant Google spotlighted Internet censorship in China when it announced on January 12, 2010, that it would stop censoring the Chinese version of its search engine, www.google.cn, even if it meant having to withdraw from that market. This decision was made following some highly sophisticated cyber-attacks aimed at dozens of human rights activists and journalists. Since then, there has been some growing tension between Chinese authorities – who assured the world that China has a "completely open" Internet – and the American company, which has become the standard bearer for freedom-of-expression defenders on the Net. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton lent Google her support in a historic speech on January 21. She portrayed the United States as defenders of a free Internet, accessible to all, and named freedom of expression on the Internet as a U.S. foreign policy priority.

THE "ELECTRONIC GREAT WALL": THE WORLD'S MOST CONSUMMATE CENSORSHIP SYSTEM

According to the authorities, China has the world's largest Internet user population: 380 million. Its censorship system is one of the most technologically advanced in existence. It was implemented when the Chinese Internet was first created to facilitate the latter's economic growth, while also strictly controlling its content to prevent the dissemination of "subversive" information. In the hands of a regime obsessed with maintaining stability – censorship has developed into a tool for political control.

Censors manage to block tens of thousands of websites by combining URL filtering with the censoring of keywords ranging from "Tiananmen" and "Dalai Lama" to "democracy" and "human rights."

Ever since Chinese characters were introduced on the Net and China took over domain names ending in ".cn," the regime has been developing a genuine Intranet. Ideogram-based domain names are used to access websites based in China. By typing ".com.cn," surfers are redirected to the Chinese version of the website concerned. Any Chinese Internet user using ideograms is thus restricted to this Intranet, disconnected from the World Wide Web, and directly controlled by the regime.

Censorship is institutionalized: it is managed by several ministries and administrations. In addition to the generalized filtering system, the largest blog platforms are also monitored. Assistance from foreign companies – mainly Yahoo!, Microsoft and, for now, Google – search engines is making their job that much easier.

The primary news sites, like the state-owned media, receive daily oral and written directives from the Department of Publicity specifying what topics can, or cannot, be covered and under what conditions. For example, the Department sent the following instructions to prevent coverage of a graft case implicating Hu Jintao's son, Hu Haifeng, in Namibia: "Hu Haifeng, Namibia, corruption probe Namibia, corruption