Written by **Steven J. DuBord** on September 10, 2009

China Orders Use of Real Names Online

In the past, users enjoyed more anonymity when posting comments on news stories at sites such as Sina, Netease, and Sohu. The posts still had to be screened by website personnel, and the identity of a user could still be traced through Internet protocol addresses, but a user was not required to supply any information that would directly reveal their true identity.

The State Council Information Office, one of China's primary governmental agencies tasked with Internet supervision, issued the directive quietly to avoid stirring up resistance. News sites that tried to report on the edict prior to its enactment — such as Ta Kung Pao, a Hong Kong-based newspaper supportive of the regime in Beijing — were forced to remove their online articles because the new rule was being treated as a state secret.

The *Times* noted that Chinese Internet users were uncharacteristically slow to criticize the new requirement, although commentators were starting to be more vocal. One reason for the lack of an immediate uproar may be the fact that the mandate apparently only applies to new users. Since veteran comment posters seem to be unaffected, they would be less likely to notice any change. Also, "blog hosts, forums or government news sites like People's Daily or Xinhua" were not affected, the *Times* said.

It is estimated that there are about 340 million Internet users in China, and the sheer number presents difficulties for China's repressive rulers to control. Government officials maintain that the new rule will cut down on inflammatory attacks, misinformation, and illegal activity that endangers the social order. Of course, these officials consider criticism of the government to be inflammatory, telling the truth about repression to be misinformation, and using the Internet to organize grass-roots resistance to be dangerous to the order they have imposed on society.

"Critics counter that government regulation represents an incursion on free speech, individual privacy and the watchdog role of the Web in China," the *Times* stated. After the communist government's failed effort to have their Green Dam Youth Escort censorship and spy software installed on every computer sold in China, this is a step backward that will have a chilling effect on the freedom of Chinese Internet users.

While it will still be possible to simply use falsified names and numbers when registering at the websites, the principle of establishing real-name identification will curtail the average user who doesn't want to risk getting caught lying about his ID. "Netizens will have less trust in the government, and to a certain extent, the development of the industry will be impeded," commented Hu Yong, a new media

specialist at Peking University.

Editors at some of the major portals covered by the rule indicate that the number of posts has already begun to drop off.

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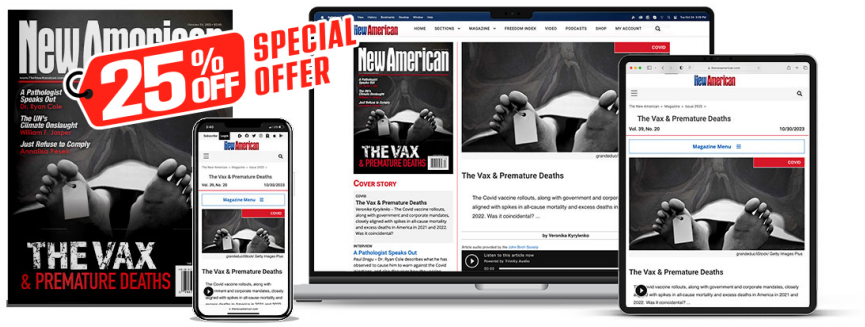

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