Written by **Brian Koenig** on January 19, 2012

China Announces More Open Gov't., Less Open Internet

In response to rising citizen demand for government transparency and efficiency, this year China plans to defog the secretive workings of the government and ruling Communist Party, a senior official said Wednesday. "In this new year, we will adopt an even more open attitude and even more forceful policies," asserted Wang Chen, a Chinese propaganda official.

The Chinese government will expand the overseas spread of state media, strengthen the presence of its spokespeople, and nourish the rising trend of microblogs to provide more information to the public. Wang indicated that emergency response systems and information about the government's day-to-day activities will be streamlined and expanded to provoke interest and encourage public interaction.

China's authoritarian one-party political system has strapped a tight leash on government departments, leaving officials with little accountability to public opinion and allowing policies to be implemented without democratic consent from its citizens. But rising incomes and public demand for government transparency have forced departments to boost the role of public relations and to address political concerns from the media and the general public.

Much of the information wave has stemmed from the Internet, as most government departments now have websites and microblogs (similar to Twitter) that they use to publish news and important information.

However, while Chinese officials tout a new "transparency" in government, its intrusive Internet censorship laws remain perfectly intact. In recent years, China's Internet traffic has undergone explosive growth, with 513 million people now online and over 250 million registered microbloggers, more than any other country.

The Internet has unleashed a wave of public opinion, both positive and negative, and its true impact was revealed last July, after a high-speed rail accident in Zhejiang Province triggered tens of millions of online comments, many criticizing the government's response to the incident. "Such a major accident, how could it be attributed to weather and technical reasons?" one blogger wrote. "Who should take the responsibility? The railway department should think hard in this time of pain and learn a good lesson from this."

China's Internet explosion, and the political opposition it has spawned, has ushered in a catalog of regulations — including bans on major social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter — as the government takes action to silence webmasters, journalists, and pro-democracy activists who publish subversive content in protest of corruption and political mischief. In fact, many of these Internet rebels

have been detained or even imprisoned for undermining government authority.

The Chinese government's declaration for a more "open" government seems to clash with another announcement made the same day and by the same official, Wang Chen. The latest Internet-censorship scheme employed by Chinese authorities is to expand real-name registration requirements for microblog users in order to better regulate China's popular Twitter-like websites. Reuters elucidated:

> Officials acknowledge that microblogs are useful as an outlet for critical public opinion, but have repeatedly accused them of spreading what they call unfounded rumors and vulgarities. They have issued warnings that online content must be acceptable to the ruling Communist Party.

> The Beijing city government said in December it would tighten control over microblogs, which have vexed authorities with rapid dissemination of news. The government said it would give users three months to register with their real names or face legal consequences. Other major cities followed suit.

"Currently, this type of registration is being tested in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, and we will extend it to other areas once the pilot programs prove successful," said Wang, who as well as a propaganda official is also in charge of the State Council Information Office, which regulates the Internet.

Wang affirmed that name verification will be a standard requirement for creating new accounts with microblogs, such as Sina's Weibo, a Chinese version of Twitter which allows users to post messages up to 140 characters. Existing users will be required to register sometime in the near future.

"Microblogs on one hand can reflect the social situation and public opinion, and broadcast a positive public voice," Wang added. "At the same time, microblogs … can make it easy to disseminate a few irrational voices, negative public opinion and harmful information," he alleged, noting that the websites possess "strong capabilities for social mobilization."

Free-speech advocates railed against the move, suggesting that mandated real-name registrations will neuter politically-controversial debate if the government recognizes the true identities of citizens posting their opinions. The move also would allow security officials to target users who regularly post comments on politically-sensitive issues, which will stifle even the slightest criticisms, for fear of government retaliation.

One might find it odd that the same day Chinese officials announced a more transparent government, they also announced a new "censorship" policy that forces online users to relinquish their anonymity — which, as a consequence, will likely lead to less government subversion and, in turn, less government transparency.

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