China requires ID to buy mobile phone numbers

The Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) -- China began requiring identification on Wednesday from anyone purchasing a new mobile phone number in what it says is a bid to stamp out rampant junk messages but that some say gives the government a new tool for monitoring its citizens.

The rules apply to everyone, including foreigners visiting China for a short stay, the China Daily newspaper reported.

The paper said the regulation was "the latest campaign by the government to curb the global scourge of spam, pornographic messages and fraud on cellular phones."

Low-cost mobile phone SIM cards are readily available in China, offered for sale at convenience stores, newspaper stands and at airport kiosks. Users could previously buy cards anonymously with cash and use them right away, a system that has made it difficult to track down spammers.

The China Daily said that mobile users in China receive an average of 43 text messages a week, including 12 that are spam.

The ID requirement is raising new privacy concerns and will likely upset some customers unwilling to give personal information to vendors and telecom companies for fear it will be resold, said Duncan Clark, managing director of BDA China Ltd., a technology market research firm.

Wang Songlian, research coordinator with the Hong Kong-based Chinese Human Rights Defenders, said the new requirement fits a pattern of tightening government control over new communication technologies.

China censors Internet content it deems politically sensitive and blocks many websites, including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Following ethnic riots in far western China's Xinjiang, international phone service and the Internet in the region were suspended for months.

The new regulation probably won't impact Chinese dissidents, many of whom already have their phones closely monitored, but it could help police track down ordinary people who take part in spontaneous protests, Wang said. China has seen a growing number of protests sparked by labor disagreements, anger over pollution or other issues.

"I think the government has an eye on Iran where protests were fueled by text messages and Twitter and they are doing this for social stability reasons," Wang said.

China has more than 800 million mobile phone numbers already in use. The Global Times newspaper reported Wednesday that about 320 million of those were purchased without real-name registration. They will have to be reregistered by 2013 or could be suspended, it said.

China Unicom, one of the country's three major state-owned phone carriers, issued a notice on its website on Aug. 20 saying that the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology had informed them that real-name registration would be required for all new telephone number purchases starting Sept. 1. An official with China Unicom's press office, Wen Baoqiu, said the company would strictly implement the new rule.

"It will help reduce spam and fraudulent text messages, and also help us improve service to customers," Wen said.

China Mobile - the world's biggest phone carrier by subscribers - was also complying with the directive, said a customer service representative who would only give his surname, Zhang.

The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology did not respond to questions about the new rules and a man who answered the phone at the ministry's press office refused to comment.

At a newspaper stand in downtown Beijing where SIM cards are sold, a 24-year-old officer worker said she read about the new regulations Wednesday morning on her mobile phone and supports the move.

"I hope it will help crack down on spam," Wu Xi said. "It won't be a problem if I have to show my ID."

Chen Haimin, the owner of a Beijing convenience store, said he was still selling cards without personal information and he was doubtful that the new scheme would put an end to junk mail.

"How do you know if people are even showing their real ID?" he said. "People who want to send spam can always come up with ideas to get around the regulations. Besides, it's not hard to get a fake ID."

Associated Press researchers Yu Bing, Xi Yue and Zhao Liang contributed to this report.

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