

China require microblogs to get users' real names

ALEXA OLESEN - Associated Press - Associated Press

Beijing authorities on Friday ordered Internet microblogs to require users to register with their real names, a tightening of rules aimed at controlling China's rapidly growing social networks.

An announcement posted online said all microblog companies registered in the capital had to enforce real name registration within three months.

The rules, jointly issued by the Beijing government, police and Internet management office, apparently apply to all 250 million users of the hugely popular Twitter-like service Weibo.com, regardless of location, because its operator, Chinese Web portal Sina Corp., is headquartered in Beijing.

Sina rival Tencent Holdings is based in the southern city of Shenzhen. It wasn't immediately clear whether the company's microblog service would have to comply with the same rules.

China had more than 485 million Internet users as of the end of June, the most of any country in the world.

Government officials warned in October that tighter new guidelines for social media sites were coming. Officials said then they were concerned about people using the Internet to spread lies and rumors. But the government is also clearly worried about the use of Weibo and other sites to mobilize potentially destabilizing protest movements.

The new rules explicitly forbid use of microblogging to "incite illegal assembly." Public protests are illegal in China and are a concern for the Communist leadership.

Microblogs helped mobilize 12,000 people in the northeastern city of Dalian to successfully demand the relocation of a petrochemical factory and served as an outlet for public anger after a crash on the showcase high-speed rail system in which at least 40 people died. They also have given a national platform to a handful of independent candidates who have run this year for local legislative councils.

Mark Natkin, managing director of Marbridge Consulting, which is based in Beijing and specializes in China's telecommunications and IT sectors, said announcing the rules in Beijing first could be a way of testing their impact in a limited area before expanding them to cover the rest of the country.

He said the system would inevitably rein in China's microblogs. "Having a real name system will make people much more cautious about what they post," he said.

China blocked Twitter and Facebook after they were instrumental in anti-

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government protests in Iran two years ago, and instead encouraged homegrown alternatives in the apparent belief that domestic companies would be more responsive to government demands.

It remains to be seen whether China's new rules could drive some people away from domestic services. Tech-savvy Chinese are still able to access Twitter and Facebook by using special software that circumvents the government's firewall.

"Real name registration is sadly predictable, but very hard to implement, or if implemented is futile anyway as users will just shift to other platforms," said Duncan Clark, managing director of BDA China Ltd., a Beijing research firm.

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