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Virtual voices

■ BEHIND THE NEWS
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Sep 01, 2007



In March, 37-year-old Lian Yue began voicing concerns on his blog about a proposed paraxylene factory in **Xiamen**.

Paraxylene, which is used to make polyester, is known to pose health and environmental risks.

Mr Lian was not the only one publicly airing doubts about the planned paraxylene plant. One of the most active protesters was Zhao Yufen, a professor of chemistry

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at Xiamen University, who had spearheaded a petition campaign against the factory. According to Mr Lian, there were many people like Professor Zhao, including government officials, who were working behind the scenes and in public to stop the construction of the plant.

But Mr Lian's blog became the lens through which many people viewed the story, including many journalists.

On June 1 and 2, an estimated 10,000 people in Xiamen marched against the construction of the factory. The marches were organised through notices posted on internet bulletin boards and sent via text message.

The Xiamen government got the message, and construction of the factory was suspended.

This extraordinary example of a local government capitulating in the face of public protest came on the heels of another instance of citizens demanding action from a local government and getting it.

In May, a group identifying themselves as "400 fathers" posted a letter on forum site Tianya.cn, publicising the plight of their children, forced to work as slaves in illegal brick kilns in Shaanxi. The fathers had tried repeatedly but failed to obtain assistance from the Shaanxi government, so they turned to the Web.

In response to the public outcry that greeted the letter, the central government intervened and more than 1,000 slave workers were freed from the kilns and returned to their families.

Given the mainland's reputation for crushing protest and dissent, these victories may be startling. But they are part of a larger trend of the public using electronic media to engage their government in increasingly effective ways.

Since 2003, the role of electronic media has developed from subverting the censorship of the traditional media to functioning as a platform for non-threatening protest and demanding action from government.

During the Sars scare in 2003, the mainstream mainland media were restricted in their ability to report on the spread of the disease and the government's handling of the epidemic. Not until April 2003 did the central government admit there had been a cover-up and promise transparency on the issue.

Sars and the admission of a cover-up created a demand for reliable information and many people turned to the internet.

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Before Sars, according to government statistics published in January 2003, the mainland had 59 million internet users. Six months later the number of internet users had risen by 9 million, to 68 million.

Nearly half of these users reported spending more time online during the Sars scare, and about 55 per cent said domestic websites were their main source of information. About 27 per cent received most of their information from television, and just under 10 per cent relied mainly on newspapers and magazines.

Despite the increasing sophistication of internet censorship on the mainland, the use of the Web for reliable, uncensored information seems only to have increased.

In March, the mainstream media were banned from reporting on the "**Chongqing** Nail House", occupied by a couple who refused to vacate in the face of demolition and redevelopment of the area. Yet photographs of the house, perched on a column of earth and surrounded by excavations, circulated on the internet, and commentary was posted on the blog of self-styled "citizen journalist" Zuo La.

Mr Lian said: "New media is becoming massive. The cost of keeping a lockdown on information is enormous. People who have even just a little internet experience can pretty much get any information you want."

Hong Kong-based blogger Roland Soong, the media commentator behind the website EastSouthWestNorth, said the anti-Japanese marches of April 2005 were the first time a mass protest had been organised over the Web.

The marches, which took place in **Beijing**, **Shanghai** and **Shenzhen**, were sparked by Japanese textbooks' inaccurate portrayal of actions during the second world war.

Like the Xiamen protests, they were organised through notices on internet bulletin boards and text message. For those who took part in the protests, a sense that their conduct was, if not condoned, at least not threatening to the government, seemed justified. Beijing even rejected Tokyo's request for an apology for the protests.

A similar incident occurred last summer, when Zhang Jiehai, a psychology professor at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, devised a plan to pressure the Shanghai government to

deport a foreigner known as "Chinabounder" who had blogged about his sexual exploits with Chinese women.

In a now infamous blog post entitled "The Internet Hunt for the Immoral Foreigner," Dr Zhang wrote: "In order for the relevant [Shanghai government] departments to take action, the media must intercede. My media friend tells me that the media needs a news lead ... Therefore, the first step is to create an opinion wave on the internet."

Dr Zhang succeeded in creating his "opinion wave", generating a furore among Chinese on the Web and extensive foreign press coverage, although Chinabounder was neither located nor deported.

The tactics used 10 months later by the 400 fathers whose children were enslaved in Shaanxi were similar to those used by Dr Zhang. Both involved a rising tide of public outrage online that flowed to traditional media, an interaction that both Mr Lian and Mr Soong said was critical to their success, and which resulted in government action.

Online activism has succeeded where more direct methods have failed, mainly because people can speak anonymously.

Yang Guobin, a professor of Asian and Middle Eastern cultures and sociology at Barnard College and Columbia University, said bulletin boards were "important in public discussion and mobilisation, mainly because they are interactive".

John Kennedy, the Chinese-language editor of blog aggregator Global Voices, said the interactive quality was critical and compared "the keyboard forces rising up in anger" to pre-internet television and print media structures that didn't take into account audience response.

But interactions on the internet are monitored by the government, and websites that allow users to upload text, images and video are expected to keep their pages free of subversive material.

Liu Dele, chief financial officer of video-sharing site Youku.com, said: "We will delete anything we think might be reporting serious social and political problems. In fact, the state-owned TV networks are actually bolder than internet video sites in reporting serious social, economic and political issues."

But despite such monitoring, information distributed on internet bulletin boards is difficult to regulate, because it is distributed quickly.

Mr Kennedy said a post can be seen by hundreds or sometimes thousands, even if it does get deleted, so the information has already spread.

Mr Soong said internet-based advocacy campaigns online may be presented in a way the government finds more or less acceptable. But with online activism having become a tool for demanding action from the authorities, a clampdown would, perhaps, not be surprising. The Xiamen government has already moved to ban anonymous posting on the internet, and Beijing has floated proposals for real-name registration systems.

Yet any clampdown may come too late. Professor Yang said that although the development of the internet on the mainland was a story of growing political control, online activism was able to develop.

Mr Kennedy said: "It's too late for there to suddenly be no anonymous posting. It's pretty established that official moves such as real-name registration are ineffective."

Mr Soong doesn't think a clampdown is likely either. "The trend is inexorably moving towards greater freedom," he said, as both the public and the government learn from online campaigns.



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