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NEWS: ANALYSIS & COMMENTARY

Outrunning China's Web Cops

Net-savvy outfits are finding ways to let citizens see banned sites

From an undisclosed location in North Carolina, Bill Xia is fighting a lonely war against China's censors. From morning till well into the night, the Chinese native plays a cat-and-mouse game, exploiting openings in Beijing's formidable Internet firewall and trying to keep ahead of the cybercops who patrol the Web 24-7 and have an uncanny ability to plug holes as quickly as Xia finds them. A member of the banned Chinese sect Falun Gong, Xia is so fearful that Beijing will persecute his family back in China, that he refused to be photographed for this story, reveal where exactly he was born, or even provide his age beyond saying he's in his 30s.

Xia is part of a small group of Chinese expatriates who are making a modest living helping Web surfers back home get the information their government would rather they not see. Chinese citizens hoping to read about the latest crackdown on, say, Falun Gong or the most recent peasant rebellion in the provinces can use technology provided by Xia's Dynamic Internet Technology Inc. to mask their travels to forbidden Web sites.

Voice of America (VOA) and human rights organizations also are paying DIT to help evade the censors and get their message out to the Chinese masses. Says Xiao Qiang, who teaches journalism at the University of California at Berkeley and runs the China Internet Project: "These tools have a critical impact because the people using them are journalists, writers, and opinion leaders."

So far, DIT, UltraReach, and other outfits like them have lured less than 1% of China's estimated 110 million Net users. But Google ([GOOG](#)) decided in January to censor information inside China, a practice already followed by Microsoft ([MSFT](#)) and Yahoo ([YHOO](#))!, arguing that it's the only way the search engines can crack the Chinese market.

So Xia is convinced that the services he and others provide will become increasingly crucial to keep information flowing and, ultimately, he hopes, build an open society back home. "Once in a while I feel more homesick than usual," says Xia, who says he hasn't seen his family in seven years. "But it's such a great project, and it helps so many people."

The seeds of DIT were sown when Xia arrived in the U.S. for grad school in the '90s. Stunned by America's openness, he realized his perception of reality had been warped growing up in China. "I was a believer of the propaganda," he recalls. And when Xia was exposed to all of the information on the Internet, it "started tearing apart what I'd accepted before." At the same time, the repression of Falun Gong at home angered him, though he insists it is Beijing's curbs on free expression that led him to found DIT in 2001. A year later he began building up a roster of clients, including VOA, Human Rights in China (HRIC), and Radio Free Asia.

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The simplicity of DIT's approach belies its effectiveness. The company distributes software, called FreeGate, which disguises the sites a person visits. In addition, DIT sends out mass e-mails to Chinese Web surfers for clients such as VOA, which is banned in China. The e-mails include a handful of temporary Web addresses that host off-limits content and springboards to other forbidden sites.

Keeping one step ahead of the censors is what this game is all about. China's cybercops are so efficient that these gateways typically stay open for only 72 hours, according to Ken Berman, an information technology director at the State Dept.-affiliated International Broadcasting Bureau, which hired DIT and UltraReach to help make VOA's Web content available in China.

Yet despite being outmanned and outspent -- Xia has a tiny staff, an annual budget of about \$1 million, and relies mainly on volunteers -- DIT's customers say it has been remarkably successful. Xia's staff monitors the success rate of the hundreds of

thousands of e-mails they send out each day. If one gets bounced back, the language must be scoured and the offending words detected and added to the company's blacklist. Workarounds are often developed, much like spammers finding holes in a corporate e-mail filter. For instance, an e-mail that contains "VOA" might get squelched, but one with a zero substituted for the "O" could get through.

As Google and other U.S. search companies increasingly cooperate with Beijing, DIT is helping the groups like HRIC break through the firewall. Before Google began censoring its results in China in January, HRIC appeared in the top three search results. Although China's Google users would have had difficulty accessing the HRIC sites, which are blocked, they at least knew they existed. Today they don't appear at all in China. But thanks to DIT and others, visitors to its Chinese-language newsletter spiked to more than 160,000 in January, up sixfold in the past 18 months. Says Xia: "If information isn't available on the Internet, it might as well not exist."

Every time something momentous happens in China -- and Beijing smothers news about it -- more people use his software, Xia says. In 2003, when the SARS epidemic peaked and Chinese authorities seemed to be withholding information, the number of DIT users spiked by 50%, he says -- and they doubled after reports surfaced in December that Guangdong police had shot protesting villagers.

Such moments invigorate Xia, making the effort worthwhile. And by the looks of things, the services he and his peers provide will be in demand for quite a while to come.

By Ben Elgin, with Bruce Einhorn in Hong Kong

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