■ Text : Lon Yan (Source: S-file)    ■ Photos : Sing Tao Daily, Internet
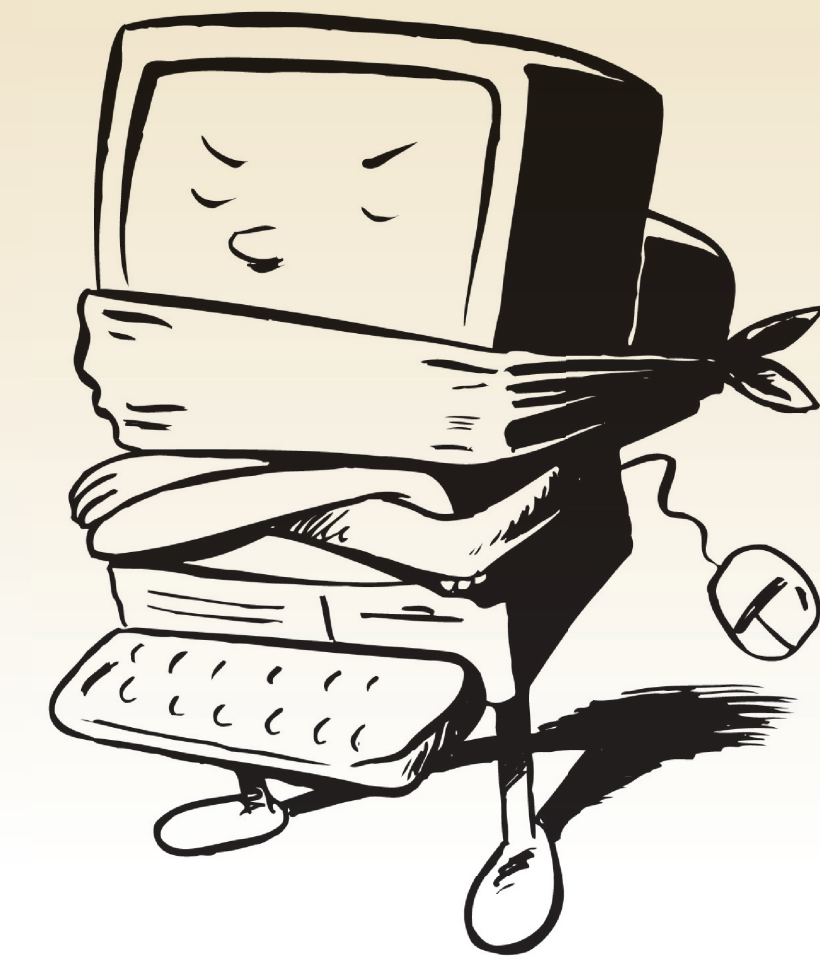
# Shut up!

**The internet has been widely used by citizens in China to expose injustice, but some are using it to feed the public with misinformation. Will the fast-growing medium turn out to be a springboard for progress or a tool of destruction for the country?**

THE internet is changing the lives of everyone in the world, and the people in China are no exception. In the mainland, the internet has been increasingly used by the people as a platform to expose corrupt officials and to seek **redress** for social injustice. But some are employing this powerful new medium to spread rumours which could cause social unrest. This has led the country's new leader Xi Jinping (習近平) to warn repeatedly that the internet must be controlled for the sake of maintaining social stability.

## New control body?

THE Xi administration is clearly taking the issue very seriously. The third plenary session of the 18th Communist Party of China Central Committee last November resolved to speed up the perfecting of the leadership in respect of the management of the internet. **Elaborating** in the conference, Xi said the present regulatory system was inefficient because of an overlapping and **inconsistent** chain of command. He said the regulatory regime was lagging far behind the rapid developments of instant communication channels such as microblogs and social media.

The president was reported to have stressed to party officials efforts to control the internet need to be **uncompromising**. He was said to have observed that the internet could be detrimental to the country and the party, and urged for "determination to flash the sword and to capture bases".

Recent reports said the central government is setting up a new body, the Informationalisation and Internet Information Security Leading Group (信息化和互聯網信息安全領導小組), to oversee the matter, to be headed by Xi and other top leaders.

## Upsetting social stability?

IT is undeniable that China's netizen population is increasing, and Beijing is finding it hard to ignore the internet's power to mobilise the public in social movements.

In recent years, the internet has been frequently used as a platform for organising "mass incidents".

Examples include the protests by thousands of residents of Wukan village in Guangdong against the illegal selling of village land by officials in 2011, and the resistance put up by the locals against the construction of a copper plant in Shifang in Sichuan in 2012. Both of these actions ended in ugly **confrontation** with the authorities.

The internet also played a key role in mobilising people to stage the anti-Japan street protest last year. While the action may have been motivated by patriotic sentiments, it caused disruption to society and economic loss in many cities.

The China Social Science Academy (中國社會科學院) observes in its *Blue Book of China's Society* (社會藍皮書): "The radical behaviours of some young people in environmental and anti-Japan protests have **triggered** concerns and controversies." This reflects the central government's **apprehension** towards developments on the internet.

## An anti-corruption force?

IT is also undeniable that the internet is helping anti-corruption efforts in the mainland. Evidence of official misconducts posted online has brought down many corrupted officials. Chongqing Beibei District Party Secretary Lei Zhengfu (雷政富) was fired after a sex video went viral online and mainland netizens have forced the Red Cross Society of China to admit to inappropriate use of funds.

Meanwhile, a new breed of internet celebrities has emerged, taking up the role of justice fighters. Affectionately called "Big Vs" (V standing for VIP) by their supporters, these online commentators have massive followings of millions. A Big V with the moniker 'Huazong' (花總), for example, was credited for exposing the lavishness of close to 100 officials by uploading information about the luxury watches they wear. But the successive arrests of a number of Big Vs shows that the authorities are not tolerating these "online people's heroes".

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## Seven internet base lines

LAST August, the China Internet Conference adopted what were called *qi tiao dixian*, or the Seven Base Lines (七條底線) regarding the use of the internet. The stated objective of these rules was to foster a "favourable online environment", but some viewed them as restrictions on the freedom of speech.

The base lines are:

1. the legal baseline;
2. the socialist system;
3. the national interest base line;
4. the legal civic rights base line;
5. the public order base line;
6. the moral base line;
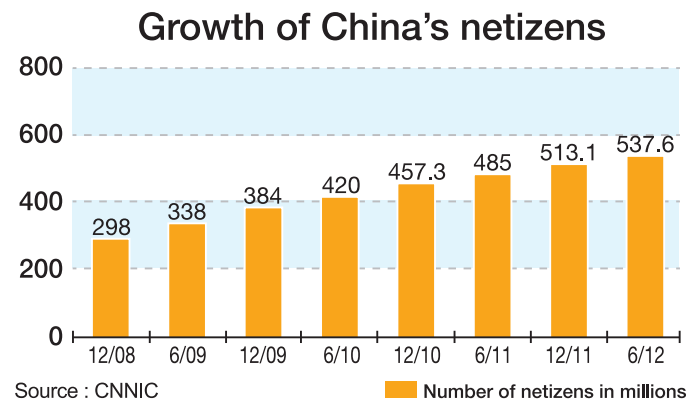7. the information accuracy baseline.

## Global internet control

The internet is a very powerful medium, and many governments around the world, not only China, are exercising control, openly and secretly. The United States National Security Agency was exposed for using a computer program, XKeyscore, to secretly monitor and analyse internet data.

Whistleblower Edward Snowden provided documents that reveal that the program allows analysts to search through databases containing e-mails, online chats and the browsing histories of millions of individuals without their authorisation. ◆

## Growing power of the internet

ACCORDING to government figures released in early 2012, the number of internet users in China as of December 2011 had reached 513 million, the highest in the world, and that user numbers were growing at a breathtaking rate.

Another government report issued in July 2013 shows that the number of users had grown by 2.65 million people in the first half of 2013, with 70 percent of the users going online via mobile phones. By June 2013, half of the population of China – about 591 million – were internet users.

### Growth of China's netizens

| Date | Number of netizens in millions |
|------|-------------------------------|
| 12/08 | 298 |
| 6/09 | 338 |
| 12/09 | 384 |
| 6/10 | 420 |
| 12/10 | 457.3 |
| 6/11 | 485 |
| 12/11 | 513.1 |
| 6/12 | 537.6 |

Source : CNNIC    ■ Number of netizens in millions

## Monitoring social stability (維穩)

The central government has made maintaining the stability of the overall community one of its major tasks in recent years. Expenditure on this front in 2010 amounted to 549 billion yuan (HK$692 billion), which is even higher than the national defence spending of 534 billion yuan.

The overriding principle of 'stability trumps everything' is, however, viewed negatively by many liberal commentators. Some say the kind of "stability" fostered by covering up the truth or even acquiescing the perpetration of injustice is only **illusory**. According to these views, suppressing public grievances is counterproductive and will not end well.