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Green Dam Protesters Wait for China's Other Shoe to Drop



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What will the Chinese government do next in its crusade to police the Internet? Having backed away from its requirement to install Web-filtering software on all computers sold in the country, will Chinese officials simply abandon their controlling ways? Or, will they come up with an even harder-line solution

designed to block online pornography, but perhaps capable of doing much more?

China reversed itself Tuesday, lifting the mandate to install Web-filtering software on all personal computers sold in the country. The Green Dam-Youth Escort software -- ostensibly a means to stem the flow of pornography -- was to be installed on all computers shipped into China beginning July 1.

The government's announcement of the requirement, made without warning in June, was met with opposition from human rights activists and Chinese citizens protesting censorship, from PC manufacturers reluctant to retrofit their products, and from Internet security professionals who warned the software could introduce more problems than it might solve.

It is unclear which of these forces influenced China's decision -- if any did at all. It could be that the day of reckoning has simply been put off. China's [Ministry of Industry and Information Technology](#) merely announced the launch would be postponed, without providing additional details or setting a new deadline.

If China has decided to abandon the filtering requirement altogether, it is likely due to a combination of the above factors -- and perhaps a dawning realization that the Internet is becoming impossible to police -- even for China, said Usha Haley, Asia fellow with the [Harvard Kennedy School](#) and author of [*New Asian Emperors: The Business Strategies of the Overseas Chinese*](#).

Certainly the intensity of the resistance -- huge numbers of angry citizens reportedly signed petitions denouncing the censorship -- was more than the Ministry had expected, Haley told TechNewsWorld.

One Mind?

Another issue worth examining is whether the Chinese government was of one mind on this from the beginning, Leslie Harris, president of the [Center for Democracy and Technology](#), told TechNewsWorld.

"I don't think it was," she said, speculating that the intensity of the resistance may have prompted some behind-the-scenes backpeddling.

There was also strong pushback through diplomatic channels and from the computer industry, Harris noted. Granted, some manufacturers appeared to have blinked by stating they were ready to comply with the government's order. For the most part, though, trade associations and major vendors strongly voiced their complaints.

The issue is probably dead for now, said Harris, and couching it as a temporary reprieve was no doubt a face-saving tactic.

"The lesson to learn from this is that companies do not have to roll over and play dead when China issues an unreasonable mandate that undermines users' rights," she said. "Companies won't always win these fights, but even incremental victories can help protect the rights of users."

Tech Issues

A darker possibility is that China is merely licking its wounds and intends to implement a similar mandate from a stronger position.

It would be a mistake to assume that China is pulling back from its ever-present monitoring or enforcement of its online policies based on this one development, Haley cautioned. Indeed, it would be very surprising if that were the case.

"I believe what has happened is that they have decided to better pick their fights," she said. "It looks as though they have decided that this is a good time to step back and re-evaluate the terrain."

It may be that China decided the cost-benefit ratio was too lopsided. Internet security groups were also critical of the Green Dam software, pointing out that it could open more backdoors for malware exploits. A [University of Michigan](#) report illustrated how vulnerable it could render computers.

There also have been claims that the software is using pilfered technology, noted Christopher Ciabarra, president of [Network Intercept](#).

It is probably the security concerns that dominated the discussions in Chinese officialdom's inner circle, Ciabarra told TechNewsWorld, although a controversy also arose over the possibility that some of the Green Dam software code was lifted from another commercial



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copyrighted software would not help China if the matter got to the Organization.

the realization that the Green Dam software just wouldn't work. "It was too easy to circumvent."

"They have forced us to look for another way to accomplish this," he said. **ECT**

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