



Policy Forum 09-070: Civil Society Reaction to the “Green Dam” Internet Filter Software



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Civil Society Reaction to the "Green Dam" Internet Filter Software

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By Jia Xijin

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I. Introduction

Jia Xijin, Associate Professor at the NGO Research Center at Tsinghua University, writes, "because of the importance of freedom of expression and the value of information to promote social justice the government should control and supervise the internet very cautiously. That's why people are concerned about Green Dam. Qin suggests that, except for illegal information which is banned by

law enacted through due process and authority, adult citizens should assess the harmfulness of information, not the government."

II. Article by Jia Xijin

- "Civil Society Reaction to the "Green Dam" Internet Filter Software"
By Jia Xijin

On May 19th, 2009, MIIT (the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology) issued the *Notice for Computers to Pre-Load Green Internet Filter Software*, requiring that all personal computers produced and sold in China should be pre-loaded with the internet filtering software -- "Green Dam-Youth Escort" after July 1st, 2009.

This notice aroused immediate concerns both in and out of the country. This compulsory act by Chinese government has been questioned and criticized by international media. Susan Stevenson, Spokesman of US Embassy in China, voiced concerns about this issue. Inside China Zhou Yun, Associate Professor at the South China University of Technology, said in the *Changjiang River Daily* that the government should not infringe into the private rights of citizens and that this was a violation of civil rights and freedom.[1] On June 11th, Wei Yongzheng, Professor of Hong Kong Shue Yan College, and Zhou Ze, Associate Professor of China Youth University for Political Sciences, submitted a formal proposal to the State Council, stating that the *Notice for Computers to Pre-Load Green Internet Filter Software* issued by the MIIT violated regulations and was not practical technologically. The proposal suggests the State Council withdraw the policy.[2] At the same time Li Fangping, a lawyer at the Beijing Ruifeng Law Firm, also applied to MIIT for information disclosure and public hearings about this software. In particular information and discussion of the legal basis for installing Green Dam, the financial process for the 41.7 million RMB purchasing costs, the protection of personal privacy and information security, and the arrangement of the annual fee for using this software in the future was requested.[3]

Defects in the software itself also caused criticism. Functional defects caused the picture identification mechanism to be much too sensitive, the word filter mistakenly judged certain combinations of words to be harmful, and network speeds were seriously, negatively impacted. Additionally there were security flaws. According to analysis reports by professors from Harvard University and University of Michigan this software made the computer it was installed in vulnerable to attack. In fact some hackers published codes for attacking computers using the loopholes that created by the Green Dam software. Additionally there are copyright protection issues. Some software companies pointed out that Green Dam could be copied and used without authorization. Finally there were issues about the bidding process to develop the software. MIIT called for bids from the public in January 2008 with only a ten day submission period. In May, 2008, MIIT announced that Zhengzhou Jinghui Computer Systems Engineering Co., Ltd and Beijing Dazheng Linguistic Knowledge Treatment Technology Co., Ltd had won the bid. MIIT spent 41.7 million RMB for purchasing this "software" co-developed by the two companies.[4]

In addition, the filter scope of Green Dam has been disputed by NGOs. Director of Love Knowledge Action (an AIDS prevention organization) Wan Yanhai said in an interview that if the information about sex education and homosexuality is filtered, then people would not be able to visit web sites that talk about the treatment of issues like AIDS. It is very important, he said, for teenagers need to know this information for AIDS prevention. These websites were originally an important supplement to school education but now they would be hard to access using the Green Dam software. "In a time of internet, the management should be proper. This kind of software should not be made compulsory by the government but should be chosen by consumers freely," said Wan.[5]

This issue also aroused broad reaction from internet users. The phrase "this information has been deleted or not available for public" has been spread on the internet as a very popular joke in response to the software. Other netizens launched "Internet Boycott Day" and some people wore T-shirts with "Anti-Green Dam" slogans or cartoons written on them. A letter titled the "Announcement of the Anonymous Internet-users" has been spread through the internet showing the reactions against the software.

Qin Xudong analyzed the reasons that Green Dam generated such a negative response.[6] He points out that many believe that the government will enhance control over the internet and restrict the flow of information. Qin believes that the internet technology has brought a revolutionary change to information dissemination. For example, the internet is an open forum for all the public, has almost unlimited sources of information, and is interactive. All these characteristics have provided a great convenience for the diversification of information and expansion of free expression. It cannot be denied that these characteristics have also been used to spread harmful information and exacerbate social problems, including information that is harmful to minors. None the less because of the importance of freedom of expression and the value of information to promote social justice the government should control and supervise the internet very cautiously. That's why people are concerned about Green Dam. Qin suggests that, except for illegal information which is banned by law enacted through due process and authority, adult citizens should assess the harmfulness of information, not the government. Even for protecting minors it is more effective and practical to let parents play the dominant roles. At present, there are already a lot of web filtering products on the market for parents to choose, and the government should not be the almighty "Patriarch".

On June 30th, 2009, MIIT of China has announced that they would not load this software on computers.[7] But a report from China Daily on July 2nd said that according to MIIT, the compulsory loading of web filtering software is imperative and it is only a matter of time before an alternative version is put onto the market.

III. Notes

[1] Zhouyun, Green Dam, Please Do Not Encroach On Citizen's Freedom In Name of Children Protection, Changjiang Daily, June 11th, 2009.

[2] Validity of Green Dam Questioned by Scholars and Lawyers, Finance, June 11th, 2009. [Li Fangping: pre-installed "green dam - the flowering season in defense of" public hearing on the application software and information]

<http://www.bullogger.com/blogs/yangzhizhu/archives/299771.aspx>

[3] [Li Fangping: pre-installed "green dam - the flowering season in defense of" public hearing on the application software and information]

<http://www.bullogger.com/blogs/yangzhizhu/archives/299771.aspx>

[4] Notice on Competitive Negotiation Result of One-year Using Right and Related Service Purchase of Green Online Filter Software, MIIT of People's Republic of China, May 20th, 2009.

[5] [Non-governmental AIDS workers also anti-green dam], Radio Free Asia Blog, 6/24/2009

<http://www.rfachina.com/?q=node/6341>

[6] [Qin Xudong: "green dam" Why challenge encountered]

<http://www.ngocn.org/?action-viewnews-itemid-49364>

[7] [A spokesman for the Department of Public letter to the Internet filtering software on the green Answer Questions] <http://news.sohu.com/20090630/n264878950.shtml>

IV. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the

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