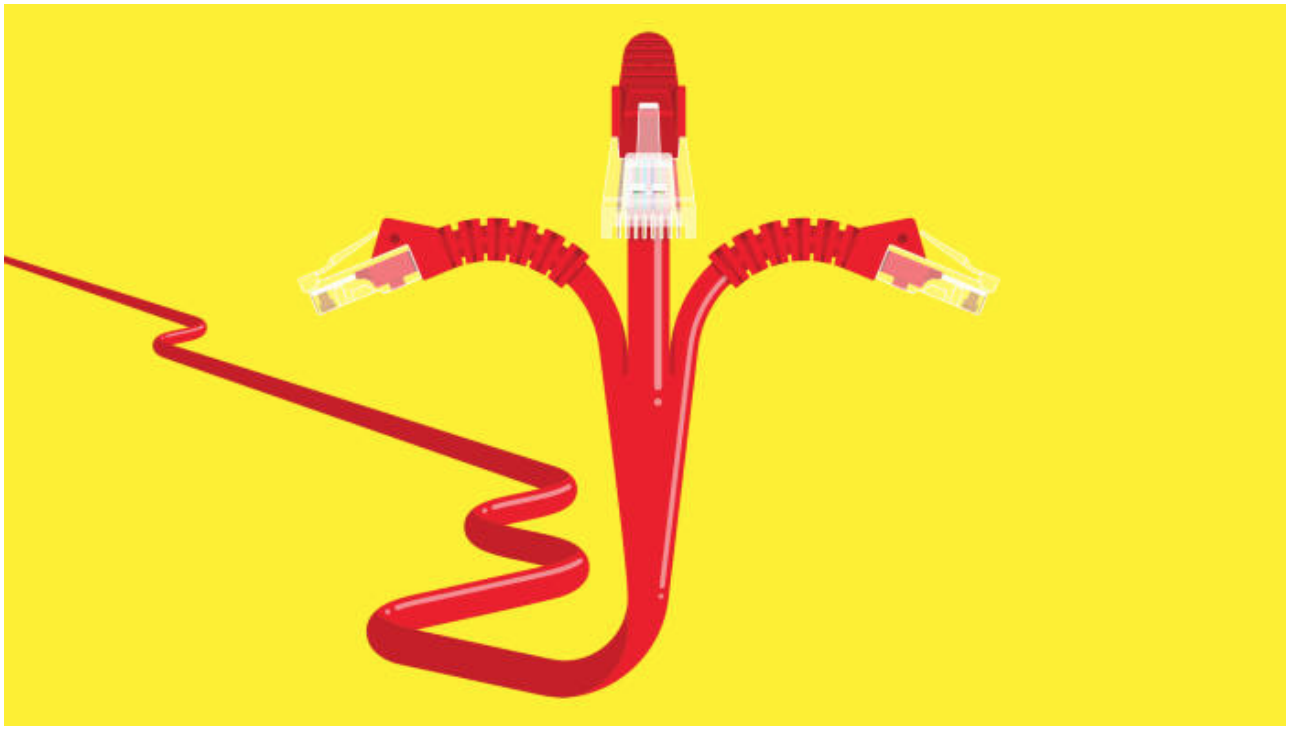
Opinion **FT Magazine**

The many-headed hydra of Chinese censorship

Internet platforms closed more than 700,000 accounts in the second quarter of the year

YUAN YANG



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Yuan Yang YESTERDAY

Last weekend, two acquaintances of mine here in China discovered their social lives were over. They lost access to their WeChat social messaging accounts — and with them, the thousands of WeChat friends and the groups they were part of. They didn't even have back-up numbers for many friends, since WeChat in-app calls are as easy to make as regular phone calls.

If you've ever lost your phone, you've experienced putting your digital life on hold. But that's only temporary. My acquaintances received a permanent block — a new invention this summer from WeChat's parent company Tencent — because they had been suspected of "spreading sexual, violent, sensitive, or other illegal information".

They are not alone: regulators recently announced that 720,000 accounts were closed down by Chinese internet platforms in the second quarter of the year. The process seems to have accelerated during a febrile summer, as China's own #MeToo movement has erupted on social media.

The explanations given to victims of this censorship are vague. The government has released regulations listing forms of speech a service provider cannot distribute. Some are fairly clear: information "detrimental to national unity" covers anyone suggesting Taiwan is a separate country; "disseminating pornography", while debatable, gives an idea of intended scope.

But what about "disrupting social order and stability", or, as Tencent put it to my acquaintances, spreading "sensitive" information? One of them, Yue Xin, was a vocal student supporter of #MeToo, and had tried to help workers at the Jasic Technology factory in Shenzhen to unionise. The other is concerned with social issues but hardly outspoken. Tencent, however, could not provide further explanation, though it clarified to the Financial Times that permanently blocked accounts were lost for ever.

These stories echo the fate of Feminist Voices, China's most prominent feminist social media outlet, which was closed down the day after International Women's Day in March. In all these cases, what is most confusing is who decides to censor, and why.

All tech companies, from Tencent to Apple, explain their censoring of content by saying they have to obey Beijing's laws. This simple explanation hides the fact that the laws are extremely vague — and thus open to interpretation. It also masks the surprisingly non-unified nature of the government.

Rather than thinking of China's system of censors as a set of departments controlled by a puppet master, we should see it as a many-headed monster, like the hydra. Each head has its own ideas, and each has to second-guess what the others want. All hate taking responsibility for decisions.

Inevitably, the hydra sometimes lacks co-ordination. Last winter, censorship of discussion about a child abuse scandal caused outrage. Amid the criticism, one employee of the Cyberspace Administration of China — the government's internet super-regulator — grumbled that although the public blamed the CAC, in fact, the police force was responsible.

The heads also send out conflicting messages. Last summer the China Netcasting Services Association, a government-controlled industry body, reiterated guidelines against showing "abnormal sexual lifestyles", including homosexuality, in online videos. Yet China's delegation to the UN has voiced the country's support for people of all sexual orientations.

Feminist Voices has received no answers from any of the hydra's heads. They have now approached at least seven government departments, all of which either denied they were responsible, or had no relevant information to share. It's still not clear if their block was the result of anti-feminist censors at the service providers, or a government request.

Yue Xin now has a new WeChat account using a new phone number, but can no longer share posts

in her social feed. The other person now doesn't want to speak via any mobile app — a savvy move after the surveillance of the past few days. Maybe we'll simply have to meet in person.

Yuan Yang is an FT correspondent in Beijing

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