

# How the '50 cent army' manipulates online opinion

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The number of Chinese Internet users is currently believed to be around 538 million and half of them use microblogging services, according to official statistics. Ever wary of this powerful new social media and its implications and influence over public opinion, Chinese authorities have made tremendous efforts to gain and maintain control of the virtual battlefield. Besides the Great Firewall, a less obvious tactic employed is the use of paid web commentators, known as the "50 cent army," or *Wu Mao*.

The once-secret 50 cent army has increasingly become visible to the public, as politically driven postings, recruitment notices and detailed work schemes have been posted online. Internal training materials and photos taken at official training meetings for regime-sponsored web commentators, reveal previously unknown facets of the complex operation.

## Monthly salaries

It is unclear when the Chinese regime started systematically using commentators, but the earliest known record can be traced to 2004 when the Changsha municipal authorities built a web commentator team, according to an official report. The commentators were required not only to post opinions and news with a spin, but contact public websites to delete "harmful" posts in order to maintain the regime's positive image, the report said. Each commentator received a 600-yuan (\$90) monthly base salary. The report was later removed from the official website, but not before

it was widely circulated by netizens.

Other universities followed suit. In 2005, Nanjing University officials closed a student-run Internet bulletin board system, or BBS, which refused to "harmonise" (a euphemism for censorship) its content. When they launched a new official version using the old domain name, school authorities appointed student cadres and a few "enthusiastic" individuals to be web commentators. They received payments based on monthly performance evaluations.

The responsibility of web commentators at Nanjing University was to "neutralise" information critical of the authorities by posting positive information, replying to posts and by "establishing an active and healthy" university web environment.

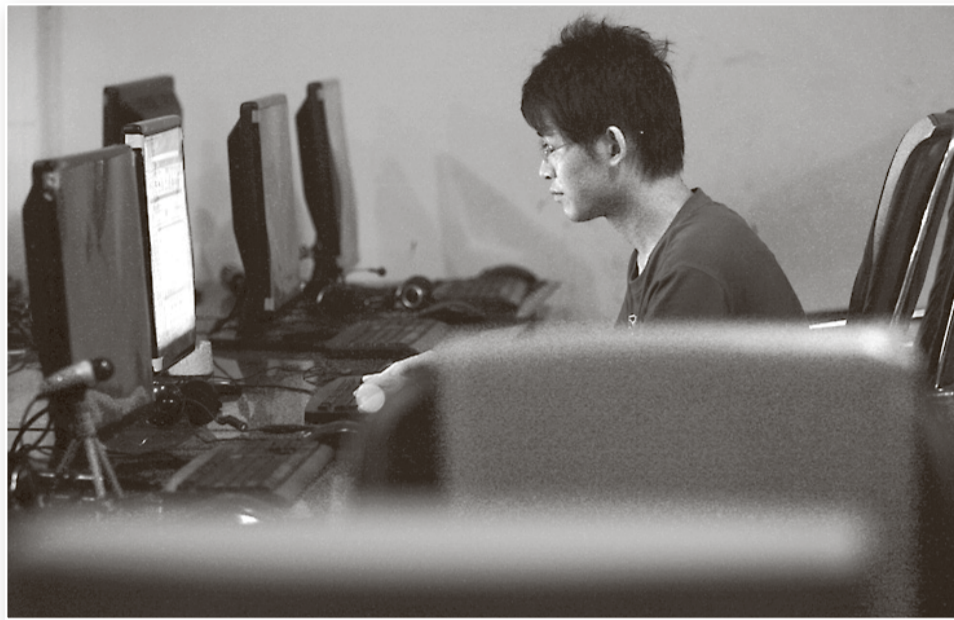
## Making it positive

It is not clear how many Internet bloggers the Chinese regime has hired, though some estimates run into the hundreds of thousands.

During a Politburo meeting on Jan 23, 2007, Chinese leader Hu Jintao demanded the "reinforcement of the ideological and public opinion front, and the construction of positive publicity" (also translated as propaganda).

Soon, the Communist Party's Central Committee and General Office of the State Council required all large Chinese websites and local governments to select "comrades of good political quality" and form teams of Internet commentators.

The size of these teams varies greatly by region. Early on, such teams were reported to consist of 10-30 people. But in June 2009, Beijing announced plans to recruit



CHINA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

**A man surfs the web in a net cafe somewhere in China. Internet commentators – nicknamed the '50 cent army' – are hired in China to post comments on the web that favour the Chinese Communist Party's agenda in bid to manipulate public opinion.**

10,000 Internet monitors, and announced that other cities would soon follow its example.

This announcement was apparently in response to a March 2009 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) document that urged local governments to "strengthen Internet control" and "expand Internet law enforcement" forces.

An internal document issued in May 2009 warned local governments that "the Internet could drastically change the public's opinion of the Party and the Government".

In January 2010, Gansu Province, a relatively small and remote region, announced plans to establish a 650-person Internet blogger team.

Well-known Chinese blogger Han Han made fun of Gansu authorities' announcement of their secret force. The news was quickly removed

from the official site, but was widely circulated by netizens.

## 'Inspiring hostility and fear'

A number of internal training materials and guidelines for Internet commentators have been published in recent years. Though it is difficult to prove their authenticity, these materials seem to accurately summarise key principles and tactics often employed by Internet users identified as pro-regime commentators.

New 50 cent blogger recruits are told in the training manuals to "thoroughly understand" instructions from the leaders and faithfully execute orders, stay immune to dissident thoughts and remain unswervingly loyal to the Party.

"Cherish your own political future," one document said.

Students are also asked

to "use various skills to hide [their] identity and pretend to be an ordinary netizen", one document says. They are to "expand [their] online influence through networking with other netizens, especially influential bloggers".

Common techniques listed in the training materials include "inspiring hostility and fear" for democratic countries, labelling dissidents as traitors, creating debates or controversy of trivial matters to distract attention from politically significant topics, and encouraging nationalism.

There are also major projects or themes, for which talking points are developed. One document listed techniques on how to attack democracy, for example. It included arguments like: "Democracy is the Western world's weapon to invade China," "There is no real democracy," "Democracy leads to turmoil and chaos,"

and "Democratic countries also have corruption and crime." All these arguments closely shadow official Party propaganda.

## Staged debates

One individual identifying himself as a paid web commentator told dissident artist Ai Weiwei in an interview that a 50 cent blogger typically has many different online IDs and in order to stage dramatic online debates, often plays different roles.

When the authorities raised petrol prices, for example, this person was instructed to control negative comments. In one remark, he said: "I don't care. It should rise more, so you poor people can't afford to drive and it'll free up the roads. Only the rich should drive." Then he used several other IDs to quote and attack his own comment. His strategy worked, people attacked the provocative remark instead of the Communist Party and the discussion was diverted away from the high petrol prices.

"I usually debate with myself...It's like playing a mind game," he said to Ai Weiwei.

Another strategy he cited is to use questionable details when citing negative news reports, in order to undermine the story.

The blogger also said that 10 to 20 per cent of the comments he sees online are by paid commentators. "Chinese netizens are really quite stupid. They become easily agitated. I can very easily control them," he said.

Though he justified his work, the blogger also said he thought the Chinese regime had gone too far on certain issues, such as carefully crafted attacks against the Falun Gong spiritual practice and the Dalai Lama.

## Cashed-up and emigrating for security and education

Wen Jun

Liu Qingmei, the head of an education services business in China, saw yet another friend emigrate from China to the United States recently.

Writing on his Sina microblog, he recounted his friend's reasons for leaving China. "First, lack of a sense of security. Second, better education for children. Third, the moral confusion, not being able to tell right from wrong in China."

Mr Liu reflected: "Right now, the trend that started with the wealthy is spreading to the middle class. For those

who have a certain economic base, whether they persevere here or get out has become a big question."

US immigration data shows that in the fiscal year 2011, there were 2969 EB-5 visa applications from China, which allowed processing of multiple family members at the same time. The EB-5 program is for individuals who are usually required to invest \$US1 million and create 10 jobs. There were only 787 applications two years ago.

According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the total number of visa applications from China in

a similar investor category stood at 2567 in 2011, up from 383 in 2009. The Canadian Government then limited the number of such application to 700, beginning on July 1, 2011, because of the demand. Within less than a week, all 700 applications had been filed, with 697 of them coming from China.

*The Wall Street Journal* quotes Su Bin, who runs an aerospace technology company, about why he wishes to leave China. "The Government has too much power...Regulations here mean that businessmen have to do a lot of illegal things.

That gives people a real sense of insecurity," he said, in the interview.

He also referred to his son's education and the wish for him to escape the Communist Party's Young Pioneers, a mass organisation that indoctrinates the very young with Party dogma.

"The problem is that government power is too great," Mr Su said in the interview. "When the economy is going up, they think that everything they are doing is right."

Without change to the political system, Mr Su said, "another revolution will come soon".



STR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

**A passenger and his baby watch the jetliners parked on the tarmac at the Beijing Capital International airport. The trend to emigrate from China has slowly spread from the rich to the middle-class.**