

Bloggers celebrate breaching Green Dam

China

Beijing has delayed the introduction of its unpopular online filtering software, writes **Kathrin Hille**

A garden party in eastern Beijing planned as a protest turned into a celebration yesterday after the Chinese government postponed its plan to fit all computers in the country with Green Dam, a controversial web filtering software.

"The government has learned a valuable lesson that you cannot treat your citizens like that," said Ai Weiwei, an outspoken artist who had invited internet users to spend the day in a garden restaurant and off the web to mark the day, originally the government's deadline for the program's introduction.

About 200 bloggers, artists, journalists and students frolicked on the lawn and sipped cold beer, many wearing T-shirts mocking Green Dam.

Mr Ai, holding court on the terrace in a pink T-shirt, declared the last-minute climbdown a victory for public opinion.

The announcement by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology on Tuesday night that the deadline for the blanket introduction of Green Dam would be delayed followed a barrage of ridicule and scorn on the internet, China's freest public space



Ai Weiwei, an artist who organised a protest party, signs anti-Green Dam T-shirts. He called the government climbdown a victory for public opinion Bloomberg

and one closely watched by the political leadership.

But there is much more to the episode than a trial of strength between censors and netizens. While expressing support for Beijing's effort to protect children from internet pornography, the PC industry opposes the fact that the government has picked one piece of software, which was developed by two little known domestic companies, instead of recommending a variety of

well-tested products already available around the globe.

"Therefore we read this also as another case of industrial policy and protectionism," said the country head of a foreign company in China.

The incident resembles attempts to shut foreign encryption technology out of the Chinese market in 2000 and to force the global electronics industry to sign up to Wapi, a domestically-developed wireless stand-

ard, in 2004. These two cases offer clues as to how Beijing might deal with Green Dam in future.

"They have said they'll delay it, and 'delay' is code for total re-evaluation and potential scrapping," said Duncan Clark, chairman of BDA, a telecom and media consultancy. "However, as we think these things are driven by the idea that indigenous innovation must be promoted, the people behind this will keep push-

ing, and this might come back at us in the future from some unexpected corner."

That is what happened in the case of Wapi. In 2004, the government surprised the communication industry with an edict that the homegrown wireless encryption standard - in competition with WiFi - would be compulsory for all mobile data products sold in the country. Only just before the May deadline,

Wu Yi, then vice-premier, backed down during a visit to the US. After China failed to win recognition for Wapi as an international standard two years later, the industry assumed the episode was over.

But now, Wapi is back, with a government demand that WiFi handsets for sale in the country will be approved only if they are also equipped with Wapi.

The other example in China's record is more

encouraging. In 2000, Beijing decreed that all companies and people using hardware devices or software programs to encrypt electronic communication had to apply for government approval, and approval for all foreign products would be denied - a rule that could have hit the entire electronics industry.

But after an outcry from multinationals and an industry-wide failure to comply, the government "clarified" that the rules would apply only to products whose main purpose was encryption. Those were never identified, and that ended the whole affair.

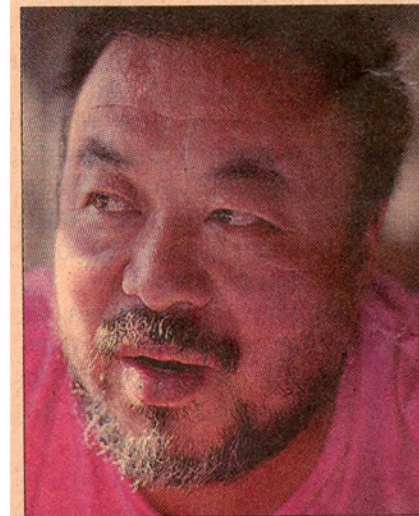
The Green Dam plan may not dissolve so quickly. Industry sources said PC makers would not settle for a mere "delay" and were setting their sights higher. "We still need the dialogue the US government has called for, and it will have to lead to a clear message that this is over," said one lobbyist.

If that does not work, the industry may need the help of China's netizens again. In a reminder of how much attention Beijing has come to pay to their voice, the People's Daily, the Communist party's mouthpiece, acknowledged the authorities had lost their total control over the spread of information.

"In the internet era, everyone has the potential to become a channel for information. It is as though everyone has a microphone in front of them," it said.

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China backs down



A garden party that was meant to be a protest turned into a celebration by about 200 bloggers, artists, journalists and students after Beijing postponed its plan to fit all computers with Green Dam, a controversial web filtering software. 'The government has learned a valuable lesson, that you cannot treat your citizens like that,' said artist Ai Weiwei (above).

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