

CHINA'S CRACKDOWN ON "ILLEGAL" INTERNET PUBLICITY ACTIVITIES

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EAI Background Brief No. 681

Date of Publication: 8 December 2011

Executive Summary

1. China's Internet population stood at 485 million in June 2011, the largest in the world. The unprecedented development, while contributing to the country's economic growth, has also given rise to various business malpractices such as "illegal Internet public relations" (IIPR), or *wangluo tuishou* in the Chinese context, a way of maneuvering online opinions.
2. *Wangluo tuishou* (henceforth *tuishou*), which has gone rampant on the Chinese Internet, is a type of organized business operation in which online posters are recruited to use multiple Internet identities in promotional and marketing campaigns, particularly in Internet forums and social networking sites (SNS).
3. Greater regulation over China's Internet looms ahead as the Chinese government launched the first nationwide crackdown on IIPR in the spring of 2011.
4. About 6,600 websites which were engaged in IIPR activities were shut down and 6,713 access services or websites with domain name resolution services in the country were suspended.
5. Meanwhile, 140 top Internet sites in China signed a self-disciplinary convention against IIPR during the campaign.
6. Greater regulation is expected as new legal and regulative measures for Internet information supervision and management are currently under review. Tougher legal penalties were imposed for the first time in a *tuishou*-initiated defamation case. The terms of imprisonment ranged from 25 days to a year.
7. *Tuishou* operations have four characteristics: they are well organized business undertakings; they appear as a chain of industry with upstream and downstream flows; there is an alliance among *tuishou* companies and with

companies and people engaged in website and social media businesses; and, they integrate with traditional media relations to maximize online impact.

8. *Tuishou* operations are criticized for spreading false and defamatory information; initiating unfair business competition; manipulating online mob sentiments, degenerating social morals; abusing netizen's trust, and discrediting the Internet as a trustworthy public space.
9. Apart from the government's crackdown on "IIPR" operations, other measures have yet to be announced.
10. Foreign governments should be made aware of *tuishou* operations in Chinese cyberspace. Close monitoring of the Chinese Internet especially when negative sentiments are directed at another country (or a brand) and showing signs of gaining momentum are important. Targeted countries would do well to come up with measures to address these sentiments to stabilize relations.