

**MANAGING SOCIAL MEDIA IN CHINA:
A FRESH CAMPAIGN AGAINST
INTERNET CELEBRITIES**

CHEN Gang

EAI Background Brief No. 859

Date of Publication: 17 October 2013

Executive Summary

1. China has recently detained a number of online opinion leaders after the leadership ordered the Party to “wage a war” against negative public opinion on the new media.
2. To provide legal foundation for social media control, China’s Supreme Court issued a judicial interpretation under which people may be charged with defamation if their online posts containing rumors are visited by more than 5,000 Internet users or reposted more than 500 times.
3. The propaganda war has ideological implications as reflected in the ban on the discussion about “universal values” of the West, as well as advocacy of constitutionalism.
4. Chinese users of the Twitter-like microblogging service, which experienced explosive growth from 2010 to 2012, reached 331 million by end June 2013, accounting for 56% of total netizens. Netizens who are connected to the Internet through their cell phones amounted to 78.5%.
5. Technically speaking, it has become more difficult for propaganda departments to continue their ironclad censorship of social media, which are fully integrated into smart phone applications with such functions as instant messaging and photo/video-sharing.
6. With the Internet and smart phones becoming more popular among the Chinese especially the youths, outspoken social media figures have emerged as opinion leaders who exercise substantial political, economic and social influence.
7. Some microblog celebrities have millions of followers in cyberspace, far surpassing the subscription of many official newspapers and thus vesting them with unfettered power in influencing the political, economic and social agenda.

8. The ideological debate between the leftists and rightists has escalated, with much of the online media being won over by the liberals and rights activists who urge the government to enforce the Chinese Constitution and safeguard civil rights.
9. The government has been changing its strategy from censoring online information to targeting individuals with high popularity; it is however too early to tell whether the outspoken social media will succumb to the crackdown.