

China's quiet experiment to let millions roam the real internet

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In a quiet experiment of just two weeks, China provided millions of people access to long-forbidden foreign websites like YouTube and Instagram. The trial appears to signal the Communist government is moving toward giving the country's citizens greater access to the global internet - while still attempting to control who sees what.

The Tuber browser-app, backed by government-linked 360 Security Technology Inc., appeared without fanfare late September and offered for the first time in years a way to view long-banned websites from Facebook Inc. to Google and the New York Times, albeit sanitized versions. Chinese users rejoiced in a newfound ability to directly peruse long-blocked content from a mobile browser without an illegal virtual private network or VPN.

The browser, carried on app stores run by Huawei Technologies Co. among others, suggests Beijing is testing ways to let its 904 million [internet users](#) into once-prohibited zones. While Tuber bore the hallmarks of state-style censorship and got pulled without explanation Saturday, it's Beijing's most significant experiment in years with greater internet freedoms.

State-sanctioned apps like Tuber offer a possible compromise - a [controlled environment](#) in which activity can be tracked and content screened, while allowing academics, corporations and citizens to exchange information. It addresses a complaint among corporations local and foreign that need to access everything from financial data to critical software tools from abroad.

"This latest development with Tuber is interesting because it could be seen as more openness," said Fergus Ryan, a researcher at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. "But the way that it would actually work would mean that people who use it would be highly surveilled and the information that they are able to access via this platform is filtered by the censorship apparatus."

Call it Censorship 2.0. Beijing is increasingly confident of support at home after successfully quashing Covid-19. That - and the urgent need to increase the quality of its scientific and technological research - could explain why it's growing more comfortable with the idea of giving

broader access to the internet for at least some of its citizens.

Yet it also realizes it faces growing hostility overseas. Beijing, seeking to better police its citizens, still requires companies from Tencent Holdings Ltd. to TikTok-owner ByteDance Ltd. to censor and scrub content critical of the government or its policies. It tried for years with mixed success to abolish the hundreds of VPNs commonly employed to bypass the Great Firewall. Endorsing a state-sanctioned window to the internet could curtail their usefulness.

That could have implications for the likes of Facebook and Microsoft Corp. to Alphabet Inc. and Apple Inc., who now either comply with censorship to reach China's users or remain on the sidelines. Google explored - but shelved under internal pressure - a project to create a filtered version of its app for the country. Facebook flirted with the idea of a Chinese service but ultimately torpedoed that too.

Tuber - downloaded five million times from Huawei's app store since at least late September - attracted such an initial frenzy in part because of the pedigree of its largest backer. Its developer is controlled by billionaire and tech mogul Zhou Hongyi, who delisted his security company Qihoo 360 Technology Co. from New York in 2016 and aligned himself with national interests.

It's unlikely that Qihoo developed and distributed the app without Beijing's blessing. It has reportedly worked on projects for the Chinese military and advises Beijing on sensitive cybersecurity issues. The U.S. Department of Commerce in May sanctioned two of Zhou's companies among 24 entities it said posed national security concerns.

It's unclear whether any government agency ordered Tuber's removal. A public relations employee at 360 Security declined to comment. The Cyberspace Administration of China, which regulates the internet, hasn't

responded to calls and emails from Bloomberg News since Saturday.

Tuber appeared to censor some content, including on YouTube. A search of President Xi Jinping's name in Chinese yielded only seven video clips uploaded by three accounts claiming to be television stations in Shanghai, Tianjin and Macau. Searching for Xi's name in English yielded no results at all.

It required mobile number registration, giving developers the ability to track activity because all smartphone numbers in the country are linked to unique Chinese identification. And, like many commercial apps, it asked for permission to access users' contacts.

"China has to be really cautious to carefully balance opening a little bit more" with maintaining domestic social order, said Yik Chan Chin, who researches media and communications policy at the Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou. "It's very important to release the information flow and let the Chinese people have more interaction with the outside world and also to understand the world better."

Loosening controls over China's internet could play a vital role in advancing domestic innovations, said Wang Huiyao, president of the Beijing-based think-tank Center for China and Globalization. Its leaders will eventually open up cyberspace - to an extent, he said. Tuber, including its official website, remained blocked as of Monday.

"The fact that news about this particular app spread so quickly in China and generated so much excitement was testament to the pent-up appetite for access to the wider [global internet](#) in China," Ryan said.

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