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China turns screws on media as Google self-censors

By Benjamin Kang Lim

BEIJING, Jan 25 (Reuters) - China's propaganda mandarins closed an outspoken supplement of a respected newspaper, as Web search leader Google announced restrictions on a new service for China to avoid confrontation with Beijing.

China's Communist Party publicity department ordered Freezing Point, the weekly supplement of the China Youth Daily, to stop publication, its founding editor Li Datong confirmed by telephone on Wednesday.

Li's blog has also been shut after he publicized the decision to close the weekly, founded in 1995 with a circulation of 300,000. He declined further comment.

The Communist Party has tightened its hold over the media, the Internet, non-governmental organizations, lawyers, academics and dissidents to prevent "color revolutions" along the lines of popular protests which toppled dictatorships in post-Soviet Georgia and Ukraine in recent years.

China also sentenced a journalist to three years in prison on Tuesday for fabricating and spreading alarmist information about an outbreak of dengue fever in the southeastern province of Fujian in 2004, defense lawyer Mo Shaoping said on Wednesday.

Li Changqing reported for U.S.-based news portal Boxun, which is blocked in China, that more than 100 people were infected with the mosquito-borne disease. Authorities in the provincial capital Fuzhou kept silent for one month before announcing 94 cases.

China was the world's leading jailer of journalists in 2005 for the seventh consecutive year with 32 behind bars, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

A China Youth Daily editor who requested anonymity said the weekly supplement was shut for publishing an essay this month by Sun Yat-sen University history professor Yuan Weishi, which criticised Chinese high school textbooks for portraying the 1900 xenophobic Boxer Rebellion as a patriotic movement.

"They wanted us to thoroughly correct our mistakes, but how can we do so if we didn't do anything wrong?" the editor said.

Li Datong's run-in with the China Youth Daily's editor-in-chief last year was another factor, the editor added.

Li attacked editor-in-chief Li Erliang in an internal memo for introducing an appraisal system in which bonuses were linked to praise or criticism by leaders. The memo was leaked and published on the Internet, angering and embarrassing the editor-in-chief. The two Lis are not related.

## GOOGLE'S SELF-CENSORSHIP

Google said its new Chinese service at <http://www.google.cn> will offer a self-censored version of its popular search system that restricts access to thousands of terms, Web sites and services to which users contribute e-mail, chat rooms and blogs.

"Other products -- such as Gmail and Blogger -- will be introduced only when we are comfortable that we can do so in a way that strikes a proper balance among our commitments to satisfy users' interests, expand access to information, and respond to local conditions," the company said in a statement.

Hot topics might include independence for self-ruled democratic Taiwan, which Beijing claims as its own, the Himalayan region of Tibet and the Falun Gong spiritual group, banned by Beijing as an evil cult in 1999.

"There is no question. Google would tell you that going into China is about making money, not bringing democracy," said John Palfrey, director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University and also a law professor.

In seeking to compete in the world's second biggest Internet market, where Google has lost ground to a more popular home-grown search company Baidu Inc., the company is facing the toughest challenge yet to its corporate mantra of "don't do evil."

It has reached a compromise that trades off Google's desire to provide universal access to information in order to exist within the tough local laws.

Google is the latest international concern to bow to Chinese censors. Microsoft's MSN Spaces has censored phrases like "human rights" and "Taiwan independence" from the subject lines of its free online journals.

Yahoo was accused of supplying data to China that was used as evidence to jail a Chinese journalist for 10 years. Yahoo defended itself saying it has to abide by local laws.

(Additional reporting by Eric Auchard in San Francisco and Vivi Lin in Beijing)