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## Illegal Internet bars in firing line

Underground Internet cafes will be targeted in a four-month crackdown designed to stop teenagers accessing harmful and violent content.



Officials raid an illegal Internet cafe that serves underage consumers in Fuzhou, Fujian province.

File photo

Internet bars located in rural areas, joint rural-urban areas, and locations surrounding middle and primary schools are the main targets of the campaign.

"Illegal Internet bars are harming left-behind rural teenagers that lack parental care because their parents are away trying to make a living in cities," Zhou Yongping, deputy director of the State Administration for Industry and Commerce, said in a national teleconference yesterday.

"There is also a trend of more illegal Internet bars appearing in urban-rural joint areas and city communities."

The campaign will run from June 1 until Sept 30, with the participation of the administration, the ministries of public security, culture, and industry and information technology, as well as the

civilization office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.

Zhou said local authorities would confiscate facilities and equipment belonging to illegal businesses, instead of simply punishing violators with fines. Those found violating laws would also face criminal punishment.

Tao Ran, a medical expert on Internet addiction at Beijing's Military General Hospital, said illegal cafes lured many pupils and middle school students away from their studies.

They could access unhealthy content, including obscene and violent images and even information about gun sales and weapons, he said.

Tao welcomed the campaign but worried that it would only have an impact in the short term.

As part of the campaign, authorities will appeal for information from the public to help them find the illegal Internet bars, which are often hidden and are difficult to identify.

Phone numbers and e-mail addresses which people can contact with tip-offs would be published in middle and primary schools, city communities and shops in the countryside from next month.

"The overall general public will be mobilized to participate in the campaign," Zhou said.

Tao compared Internet bars that allow students to access harmful content to the recruiting of teenagers into prostitution and drug trafficking.

"It is an infringement on their spiritual world, and we have to give enough attention to bad influences on youngsters," he said.

"Legislation should stipulate heavier criminal punishment for those offering unhealthy online services," Tao said.

"Simply confiscating their earnings won't solve the problem as there are huge profits involved."

### Rise in demand for outlets

The number of illegal Internet cafes is growing because of demand, the limited number of legal outlets, limited access to the Web and a lack of enforcement, Tao said.

Nanfang Daily newspaper reported yesterday that children were watching porn in a number of illegal Internet cafes in a local village in Longgang district of Shenzhen.

Local government agencies occasionally raid the premises and order all computers to be confiscated, but illegal operators often bribe authorities and ask for computers to be returned so the business can continue, said the report.

Longgang is a huge industrial area with more than 3 million migrant workers, and Internet bars are their main entertainment venues.

Official data show that the area has 256 legal Internet cafes with far fewer in remote industrial areas, the newspaper reported.

Illegal Internet bars make large profits because they have much lower costs compared to registered outlets.

Underground Internet bars also have poor quality computers, so even if they have many terminals the businesses are still cheaper to operate.

A national regulation released in 2004 requires the owners of registered Internet cafes to have a minimum of 1 million in the bank, 200 computers and an operating area of more than 300 sq m.

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