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# China is escalating its war on kids' screen time

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9–11 minutes

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*This story first appeared in China Report, MIT Technology Review's newsletter about technology developments in China. [Sign up](#) to receive it in your inbox every Tuesday.*

Two years ago, parents around the world likely looked at China with a bit of jealousy: the country had instituted a strict three-hour-per-week limit for children playing video games. In the time since, it's also demanded that TikTok-like social media platforms curate a heavily filtered content pool for users under 18, while also limiting their screen time and spending in the apps.

**For better or worse, these moves have put China ahead of just about every other country in terms of controlling how minors use the internet.**

But Beijing is now going even bigger: last week, the government escalated its current regime into a comprehensive set of restrictions and regulations on how children use all apps, with the goal of limiting them to age-appropriate content on their phones, smart watches, speakers, and more.

On August 2, China's cyberspace administrator released the

[“Guidelines for the Establishment of Minors’ Modes for the Mobile Internet.”](#) Essentially, this is a cross-platform, cross-device, government-led parental control system that has been painstakingly planned out by Beijing. Whereas past rules mainly required cooperation from app companies, the government is now asking three sides—app developers, app store providers, and makers of smartphones and other smart devices—to coordinate with each other on a comprehensive “minors’ mode.” This would apply to Chinese companies, though non-Chinese tech giants like Apple and Samsung would be asked to cooperate with the system too.

The rules are *incredibly* specific: kids under eight, for instance, can only use smart devices for 40 minutes every day and only consume content about “elementary education, hobbies and interests, and liberal arts education”; when they turn eight, they graduate to 60 minutes of screen time and “entertainment content with positive guidance.” Honestly, this newsletter would have to go on forever to explain all the specifics.

I think part of the reason the guidelines are so detailed—prescribing exactly the products that tech companies need to build for underage users—is that **the government wants to increase enforcement and eliminate any loopholes**, like those it’s seen children exploit in regulations on gaming and social media use.

To take a step back, those rules have generally been pretty effective. A year after the three-hour-per-week gaming rules were instituted, 77% of young gamers had reduced the amount of time spent gaming each week, [according to a 2022 survey](#) conducted by Niko Partners, a research firm focusing on the Asian games

market. Tencent's earnings in the first quarter of 2023 also show "a dramatic 96% decrease in gaming hours and 90% decrease in gaming spending" by underage gamers from three years ago, Xiaofeng Zeng, a vice president at Niko Partners, tells me.

**But when there are rules, there will always be workarounds.**

Of the gamers surveyed in 2022, 29% still reported weekly game time over three hours, mostly by using their adult relatives' accounts. While some companies, like Tencent and NetEase, have started to use facial recognition to verify the actual player, most game developers don't have the capability to do that yet.

Underage gamers are also fueling the growth of gaming account rental platforms, which have less incentive or technological know-how to filter out underage users.

**So now Beijing is moving toward a standardized technical system that allows institutions—whether the government or private tech companies—to have almost total, end-to-end control over individual young users in areas far beyond gaming.**

Many parents, both [in](#) and [outside](#) China, have celebrated Beijing's past parental controls as the right approach for a government to take. But will all those people be comfortable with the government's ever-intensifying restrictions?

(One important caveat I should note: Jeremy Daum, a senior fellow at the Yale Law School Paul Tsai China Center, [points out](#) that the rules may not, at least at first, be binding; for example, the regulation has not laid out the liability for companies that fail to comply.)

I'm curious to see how legislators in the United States will respond, since some are trying to introduce similar rules.

My colleague Tate Ryan-Mosley [has written about](#) the recent wave of child safety bills being proposed across the US. One of the major obstacles for these rules is that they are hard to enforce technically. In some ways, China's detailed planning for "minors' mode" could be instructive for other governments interested in translating child safety concerns into the language of app development and regulation. (Of course, I doubt any American legislator would publicly endorse a piece of Chinese regulation.)

**But with increased control come even more concerns about personal data** (a point I also made back in March in a [piece](#) about limits on TikTok use). As Tate asked in [The Technocrat](#), her newsletter on tech policy, in April: "[A]ll this legislation depends on verifying the ages of users online, which is hugely difficult and presents new privacy risks. Do we really want to provide driver's license information to Meta, for example?"

Beijing has an easier time answering that question. The government has already built a comprehensive national identity verification system that the gaming and social media companies are using to discover underage users' accounts. It is also more comfortable and adamant about deciding what content (politics, LGBTQ issues, uncensored news, etc.) is not for children. ([The US is catching up on that.](#))

In the end, **it's the same technical system that protects children from harm, censors online speech, and collects vast amounts of personal data.** It's the same paternalistic attitude that determines what children should watch and [what adults should read](#). How comfortable are we in pushing the balance further to the side of centralized control rather than individual decision-making?

*If you are a parent, how do you feel about China's new and old rules restricting minors' internet use? I want to hear from you.*

*Write to me at [zeyi@technologyreview.com](mailto:zeyi@technologyreview.com).*

## Catch up with China

1. Speaking of app stores, Apple just removed more than 100 generative AI apps from its Chinese app store because they violated the country's new generative AI regulation. ([Gizmodo](#))
- The law, passed in July, is wholly focused on generative AI, continuing the Chinese government's whack-a-mole tradition when it comes to taming new tech phenomena. ([MIT Technology Review](#))
2. China has spent billions of dollars in recent years to build "cities like sponges," but severe flooding this summer, which has affected 30 million people and caused 20 deaths, shows it's not enough. ([Bloomberg \\$](#))
3. TikTok could soon obtain a payment service license in Indonesia, which would boost its e-commerce ambitions. ([Reuters \\$](#))
4. Neville Roy Singham, an American tech mogul, is at the center of a global web of donations that pushes pro-China talking points within progressive groups. ([New York Times \\$](#))
5. How Li Ziqi, the original Chinese cottagecore creator on YouTube, rose to fame and then quietly disappeared. ([New Yorker \\$](#))
6. A new report found that the solar panel industry—with its close ties to China's Xinjiang region, where forced labor has been

documented—has become less transparent about the origin of its products. ([New York Times](#) \$)

7. As China's economic growth slows, more wealthy Chinese people are turning to a US program that offers permanent residency in exchange for business investments. ([Wall Street Journal](#) \$)

8. A batch of online matchmaking apps in China have been created for a new demographic: parents who want their children to marry as soon as possible. ([Rest of World](#))

## Lost in translation

The extreme summer heat of 2023 has made it a great year for Chinese air-conditioner manufacturers. According to the [Chinese financial publication Yicai](#), the El Niño phenomenon caused temperatures to reach new heights starting in June, pushing consumers to splurge on AC purchases early this year.

Domestic sales of AC units in the first half of 2023 increased about 40% over last year. The CEO of a Chinese home appliance company told the publication that this is the only large appliance to see an increase in sales this year.

Meanwhile, the global demand for AC also keeps increasing (even though cooling systems are a [double-edged sword](#) when it comes to climate change). In June, China's AC exports rose 12.2%. As the largest AC exporter in the world, the country already has an annual production capacity of 255 million units, and that's set to increase by another 20 million this year.

## One more thing

What's the trendiest pet on Chinese social media these days? Mango pits. As the [South China Morning Post reported](#), some people are washing, brushing, drying, and applying aloe vera gel to mango pits to make them look like animals, the seed fiber resembling fluffy hair. There are even mango pit pet influencers on social media now! I love mangoes, but I think this is going way too far.



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