

Blanket ban on Chinese software

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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The Executive Yuan on Thursday said that new rules would ban public officials from using Chinese software on government-issued phones and computers. The move is aimed at preventing data breaches and coincides with heightened restrictions on government procurements from Chinese tech companies.

It should come as no surprise that Chinese software would be considered a security risk, given Beijing's demand that the data of users of Chinese software be stored on servers in China.

Washington-based think tank the Center for Strategic and International Studies in a report on Aug. 2 last year said that Chinese companies do not have the same concerns about personal data protection that companies elsewhere do. The companies make their own assessments about message content and regularly submit data to the Cyberspace Administration of China before allowing messages to leave China. The cyberspace agency also conducts its own audits whenever "deemed necessary," making assessments on whether messages meet its ambiguously defined criteria for risk of harm to "national security, economic development, or social public interest."

Computer science researchers Tao Zhu, an independent academic, David Phipps of Bowdoin College, Adam Pridgen and Dan Wallach of Rice University, and Jedidiah Crandall of the University of New Mexico in a paper for the 22nd USENIX Security Symposium in Washington wrote that China tends to randomly change the terms of its Internet censorship, and that messages are often blocked or made invisible to users without their knowledge. The group posted "sensitive" messages to accounts registered in several countries and found that they were often censored, even outside China.

This means that messages posted to Chinese social media platforms by users in Taiwan could easily garner the attention of Chinese authorities. If Chinese authorities know the user is a Taiwanese official — which they could easily determine — there is nothing to stop them from taking over the accounts of any Chinese contacts, or telling them how to respond.

Government-issued devices should of course not be used to access Chinese software, but in addition, government officials should be completely prohibited from accessing such software, even on private devices.

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This might be seen as a violation of personal freedoms and democratic rights, but civil servants already face restrictions on travel to and activities in China, especially if they have access to confidential information. The government on July 7, 2017, bolstered travel restrictions on retired military and government officials, saying it was necessary to ensure that national security and sovereignty would not be compromised. The move came after former officials were found to be cooperating with Chinese authorities.

“As members of the armed forces, whether retired or on active duty, their lifetime role should be to preserve the integrity and well-being of Taiwan’s 23 million people, and to defend Taiwan’s hard-earned democracy and freedom,” Presidential Office spokesman Alex Huang (黃敬哲) said at the time.

The same concerns should be felt by all civil servants, military or not.

Given the strict censorship that Chinese messaging services are subject to and the security risks they pose, what legitimate purpose could a government official have for using them? Even if Taipei feels that an outright ban on such programs would be too much, at the very least it should be monitoring former and current officials who use them.

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