



# Social Media and Censorship in China

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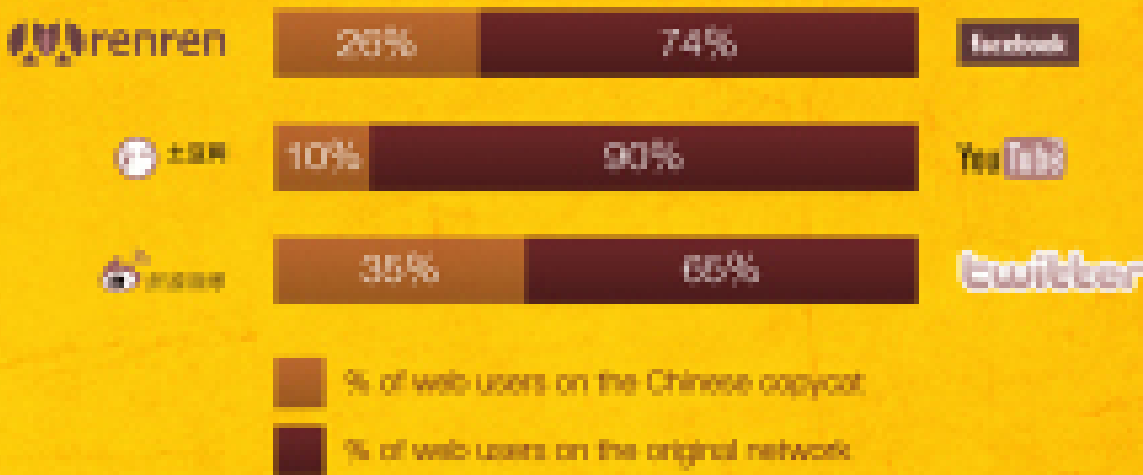
# Social media and censorship in China

**425 000 000** Chinese citizens are online.

Almost as many as the entire region of Europe, with its 475 million people<sup>1</sup>

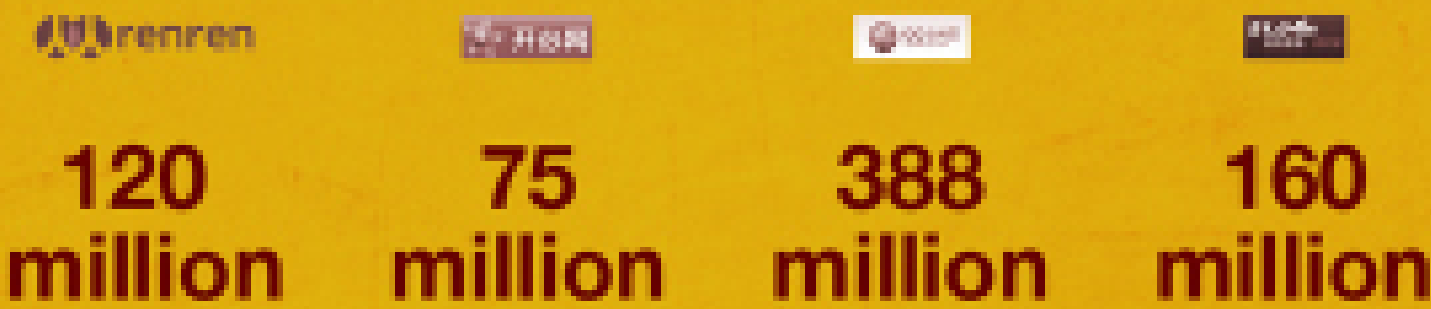


**25%** of all social network users in the world are Chinese



## A social network for everyone

### Number of Members



### Type of Members



<sup>1</sup> Internet World Stats, 30-June 2010  
<sup>2</sup> Western China Forum: Go Digital in China, December 2012

## Half of all Asian web users are Chinese<sup>2</sup>



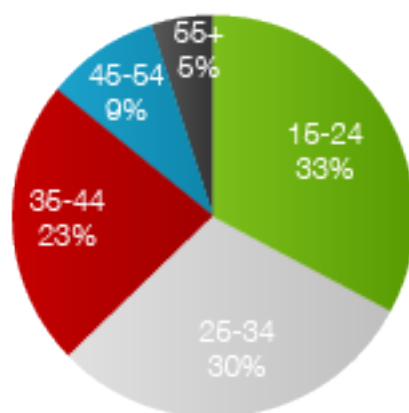
The Chinese account for 35% of the entire Asian population, but 52% of all Asian web users. Despite initially being behind the West in terms of Internet access, the most populous country in the world has demonstrated a remarkable turnaround. With one third of its population connected – 425 million people, of which 87% use broadband Internet – and the largest annual increase in the number of Internet users in Asia, China is now a world leader online.

## 49 million Chinese citizens can only access the web using their cell phones

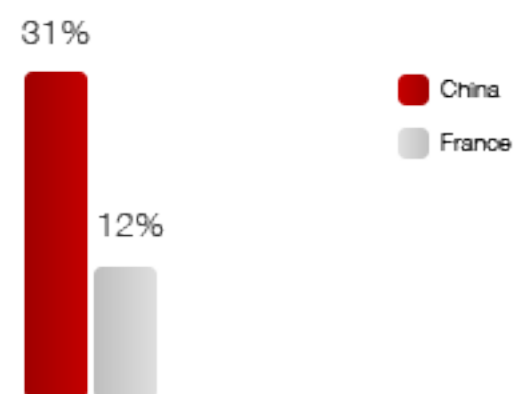
A year after the launch of a 3G network in October of 2009, 66% of Chinese Internet users accessed the Internet through their mobile phones and for 49 million people, or 11.7% of all Internet users in the country, it is the only access they have to the web. This usage is particularly significant among China's rural population, of whom 70% of web users use their telephone to access the Internet, while the figure is 10 points lower in urban areas.

## 60% of Chinese web users are under the age of 30

Age structure of Chinese web users



Percentage of students among web users



The demographic breakdown of Internet users in China is significantly different from that of Western countries particularly with regards to age. While the percentage of Internet users that are students is just over 12% in France, for example, and less than 35% are ages 15-34, two-thirds of Chinese Internet users fall within this age group and 31% are students.

<sup>2</sup> One third of the Chinese population has Internet access – so far

## Almost 1 million articles were censored every day in 2010<sup>2</sup>

## Facebook is a hit worldwide, but used by less than 1% of the entire Chinese population<sup>3</sup>

While Facebook is the most popular social network worldwide, the site usage remains marginal in China. This is not due, necessarily, to user preference but rather an issue of accessibility.

The Chinese government implemented the Golden Shield Project, commonly known as the Great Firewall of China or GFW, in 1998 to monitor and censor the web within the country. The Chinese Director of Information, Wang Chen, declared that 350 million pieces of information, including text, photos, and videos, were blocked by the GFW on the Chinese web in 2010.

Access to most major social networks as well as many Western news sites is restricted or impossible unless a proxy server is used to guarantee anonymity of the web user. The few Chinese members of Facebook are often people that have lived or studied abroad and wish to maintain links with these communities, but in order to connect with their fellow countrymen and women in China, it is best to create accounts on Chinese social networks.

## Content in China caters exclusively to the Chinese people

Without access to the majority of social media used elsewhere in the world, the Chinese have created their own copycat networks. These sites are uniquely intended for Chinese speakers, as they are only available in Chinese languages. Subject to the control of Chinese authorities, they are obligated to monitor and filter comments made by users or risk seeing their sites suspended.

Foreign companies wishing to establish a presence in China must apply for government authorization. This permission is only granted if the company agrees to respect the constraints and censorship imposed by the government and must be renewed every few years.

### How Google stood up to the Chinese government



In January 2010, Google discovered that Gmail accounts of several Chinese activists had been hacked. Detecting an attack too sophisticated to be the work of an average web user, Google suspected it to be the work of the Chinese government, publishing an article on its blog. The U.S. company had previously agreed to censor its search results on China. However, upon this discovery of piracy, Google decided to uphold its

motto “Don’t be evil,” and announced the closure of its Chinese site.

The site was closed in March of 2010, and people wishing to visit Google in China were redirected to a Hong Kong version of the search engine which is uncensored. The government was capable of blocking the redirection at any time. Four months later, Google managed to renew its authorization to operate in China by delaying the redirect with a page requesting a click to access Google.com.hk.

However, authorities can still reverse their decision and numerous Google services, like YouTube and Blogger, continue to be prohibited.

<sup>2</sup> Official numbers

<sup>3</sup> SocialBakers, 21 January 2011



## First-hand account of Chinese censorship and the “50 Cent Army”

### Interview : social media censorship in China

Synthesio interviewed a self-proclaimed Chinese tech veteran, whose name shall remain anonymous. He has been blogging since 2002, and has been forced in the past to open up several new blogs after others had been closed by the infamous Great Fire Wall (GFW) of China.

#### **Copypcat social networks**

China is known for its copypcat products, including social networks. “Twitter, Facebook and similar social network sites are nipped in the bud before they become popular. Instead, there are always copycats growing up as alternatives for local Chinese, e.g. Renren - Facebook, Sina Weibo - Twitter, Youku - Youtube, and so on. This is what the government loves to see.”

#### **Censoring the Chinese Internet**

Chinese and foreign social networks are blocked by the Chinese government regularly. According to our interviewee, it is “the most advanced censorship system in the world.” Every content-related internet service provider is required to “assign full time employees to monitor their user-generated content. And these employees will have to report to a government department - an Internet propaganda department. Sensitive keywords like ‘democracy’, ‘Tibet’, ‘Tiananmen Square’, the country’s leaders’ names, etc. are blocked.

“It is said there is a large dictionary for these sensitive keywords, but bloggers can still easily get past the automated blocking system by posting content indirectly or just using an obviously ‘wrong’ word. That is why human moderators are needed.

“I don’t know the exact number of people that work for the government. We call these people the ‘50 Cent Army’ or ‘50 Cent Party’ for the amount they are paid per deleted post. They have an automated keyword filtering system, and once any sensitive word triggers the system, the content will be automatically blocked. The human moderators monitor an assigned area (boards, users or other topics). I believe they also have a behind the scene supporting system.

“Blogs in foreign languages are better treated. I guess the government thinks only a few people will read blogs in foreign languages. But there are exceptions, such as Danwei, an English blog popular among expats in China, which was also blocked. For blogs hosted on foreign servers, it depends. If you are politics oriented, of course, you are dead. If you’re not, then good luck.”

#### **Getting past the blocks**

According to our interviewee, “Tech bloggers in China play an important role in bringing freedom of speech while introducing new technologies. Their natural advantages are their knowledge of the Internet and their skills to avoid being blocked from accessing information. Third party software, SSH, VPN: they spread the tools around the internet to get over the block. They are usually active users on twitter, Facebook, youtube and other blocked services. And some of them host their blogs overseas.”

#### **False comments**

“There are many Internet PR companies now working on popular forums. They are hired to create events marketing for their clients, attack clients’ competitors, and plant other types of dubious content. Even large PR agencies will hire people to transfer ethical problems to “net gangsters”. There are many so-called ‘soft articles’ which are indirect advertisements. It is hard to differentiate between the real customer voice and the soft articles, at least for me. The good thing, though, is that Renren, Kaixin (Facebook copypcat) and Weibo (Twitter copypcat) are currently not so easy to submit false information to, unlike the forums. So if you want to monitor social media, they are a good start.”

#### **Monitoring Chinese social media content and doing business in China**

“For businesses who want to use social networks in China, I think it is a good time now so long as you just focus on business. If your activity becomes a threat for the government, you have to cooperate or stop working in China. Google’s retreat of their servers back to Hongkong to resist the government’s censorship demands is a good example.

“I think Sina Weibo is the most successful social network right now in China (and will continue to be in the coming years). It’s used by many celebrities and other so called opinion leaders who are a tremendous drawcard in terms of attracting active users. And I know its founders try to balance between the censorship and freedom of speech. On one hand, they are very careful not to touch any raw nerves with the government. On the other hand, they enable some limited freedom of speech which I think is creating a gradual relaxation in the level of the government’s tolerance. This limited freedom lights up many users’ passions. There are many meaningful social events that are spread and communicated by Weibo.”

# Chinese Internet users have an average of 3 social profiles<sup>4</sup>

## A social network for everyone

50% of Chinese Internet users, or 600 million Chinese, use more than one social network profile<sup>5</sup>, and one third connect at least once a day.

	Renren	Kaixin001	Qzone	51
# of members	120 million	75 million	388 million	160 million
Type of members	Students	Young employees	Teenagers	Rural population
Strenghts	Social gaming, many active members	User-friendliness, very active members	Massive amount of members	
Weaknesses	Students moved to Kaixin001	Losing ground on gaming	Weakadded-value and retention	Perceived as old-fashioned

Although each Internet user may have several profiles, the major Chinese social networks often target specific segments of the population. The two most promising networks are Renren and Kaixin001. While Qzone merely aggregates profiles of people that use Tencent (QQ messenger, QQ pet, QQ games, etc.) and 51.com is losing ground among urban users, Renren and Kaixin001 have been able to hold their own.

### Renren, “the social network for everyone”



Created in 2006 under the name Xiaonei (“the campus network”), this network is a copycat of Facebook, gaining ground in the major Chinese universities in order to develop. Recreating even the same user interface as that of Zuckerberg’s Facebook, Renren has difficulty, however, retaining its members once they leave university. In order to change this, Renren launched an extensive communications campaign in 2008, changing its name

in order to encourage people to reconnect with their former friends. Renren’s strength lies in its use of games developed both internally and by third parties. Not only does the network propose a variety of attractive games that is constantly renewed, but it created a mechanism called “funware” through which users can see their status and services enhanced thanks to their involvement in the platform’s games.

### Kaixin001, the preferred network of young employees



In 2008, Kaixin001 joined the social networking market in China. With an audience of young, urban employees in mind, the most attractive target for brands, Kaixin001 became a destination for aging members of Renren. With an acquisition strategy based on massive spamming, Kaixin001 experienced early growth, recruiting 3,000 members during its first month. The “happy network” built its reputation on the quality of its games,

but their insistence on internal development caused them to quickly be overtaken by Renren in terms of number of members. Nevertheless, its members spend on average 33 minutes per visit on their site during which they visit 30 or more pages.

<sup>4</sup> 26ème Rapport Annuel de l’Internet en Chine, CNNIC, 2010  
<sup>5</sup> Nielsen China Forum: Go Digital in China, décembre 2010



## 20% of Chinese social network members are registered to play their games<sup>6</sup>

Just like meeting people online, games are a motivating and retaining factor for web users to join social networks en masse. Half of the regular visitors to Renren play games.

Game	Description	Equivalent on Facebook
Happy Farm	Farming game	Farmville
Renren restaurant	Managing a restaurant	Restaurant city
Happy Aquarium	Pet game	Happy Aquarium
Happy baby	Pet game	Pet Society
Building one	Players work, live and interact in a single building	NA
Promotion	Becoming the best employee	NA
House-Buying	Real Estate Game	NA
Wonder Hospital	Heal your patients	NA
X-World	Clan war	Mafia wars
361° Basketball	Team-management game sponsored by the sportswear brand 361°	NA

The craze for these games is such that a number of Chinese children and teenagers ask their parents to take their place in the game and play for them when they are busy. These parents proclaim to do so with great enthusiasm, seeing it as an opportunity to maintain a strong link with their children.

With **40% of the members of Chinese social networks clicking on games' banners ads<sup>9</sup>** and **35% watching advertisements to earn virtual rewards<sup>9</sup>**, social gaming represents a huge opportunity for advertisers and brands.

### Lay's, Happy farmer



Before knowing the success that would come with Facebook, the game Happy Farmer was developed by the Chinese company 5 minutes for Renren. The Lay's potato chips brand has inserted itself into the game by allowing users to grow potatoes and buy Lay's potato chips factories. The operation was a resounding success:

- 519 540 players have made their own chips
- 8.4 million members have visited the page linked to the activity
- 65.6% of Happy Farm players bought Lay's chips in the 2 months following the start of the operation, while only 45% did before its launch

<sup>6</sup> China Social Game Annual Report, Appleap inc., 2010



## Lohas, Happy garden



Happy Farm became so popular that it has been adapted to different platforms. Kaixin001, for example, offers the game Happy Garden, a copy that is more focused on gardening. The leading brand in China's agroalimentary market, COFCO, began to sell premium and organic fruit drinks under the brand Lohas. This positioning led them to choose Kaixin001 for their campaign. Happy Garden players were able to plant seeds and squeeze juice for Lohas. Each bottle offered to another player allowed that player to participate in a lottery to win a virtual rabbit or bottle of Lohas.

- 9.7 million players participated
- Lohas saw sales increase by 30%

## 784 messages per second on Sina Weibo<sup>7</sup>: the main Chinese microblogging platforms will soon exceed the number of Twitter users worldwide

Chinese Internet users have quickly adopted the practice of microblogging and take the posting of information on the Twitter copycat, Sina Weibo, very seriously. According to a survey conducted by the Daily Youth of China, 73% of users say that they consider microblogging to be an important source of information, and 56.5% trust this media for information. Celebrities and well-known businessmen are the most followed.

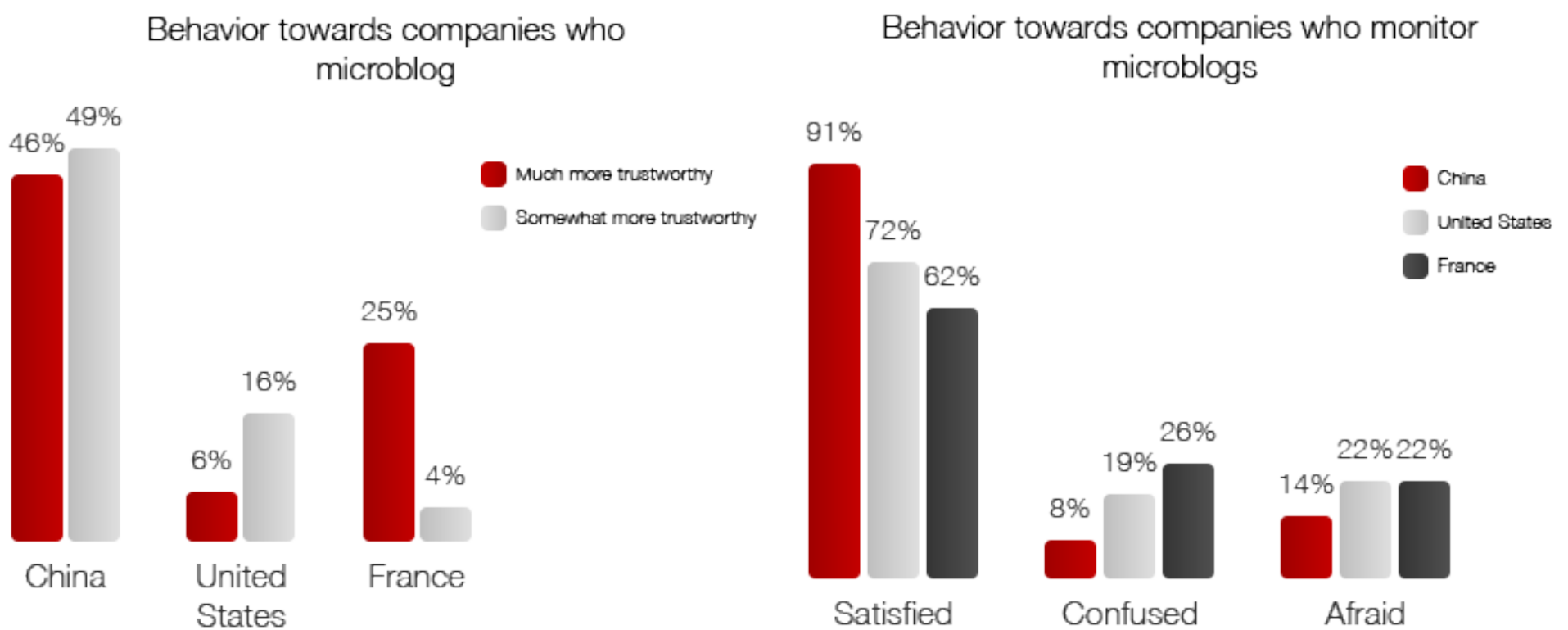
There are two major players in Chinese microblogging, the most active being Sina Weibo, with 25 million messages posted per day<sup>10</sup>. Announcing 50 million users in October of 2010<sup>10</sup>, after just one year of activity, and counting 70 million in February 2011 according to forecasts, Weibo lies on the border between Twitter and Facebook. Information is shared in the form of thread discussions with comments and shared media immediately available without leaving the platform. This allows the site to keep people on its pages, maintaining its high traffic levels and visiting times à la Facebook. Tencent also has its own microblogging platform called QQ microblogging and has said that 80 million members are active<sup>10</sup>, among whom the activity levels are still less than that of Weibo's visitors. Between the two of them, the main Chinese microblogging platforms will soon exceed the number of Twitter users worldwide. For the first time since January 2011, the top 10 most followed microbloggers in the world use Weibo, not Twitter: Chinese actress Yao Chen came in tenth in the standings, taking the place of Oprah Winfrey. One month later, Yao Chen also bypassed Taylor Swift and Katy Perry, placing 8th among the ranking with 5,722,251 followers.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers communicated by the company

## Brands and social media in China

53% of Chinese Internet users join branded “communities” to learn more about the brands themselves<sup>8</sup>

50% of Chinese Internet users, or 600 million Chinese, use more than one social network profile<sup>5</sup>, and one third connect at least once a day.



While the presence of brands in social media is often subject to debate in Europe or the Americas, the Chinese have a very positive attitude towards brands using these tools to communicate. According to a study by Fleishman-Hillard<sup>9</sup>, no Chinese Internet user has less confidence in a brand because it is present on a microblogging platform, unlike in France and the United States, where this is the case for a small proportion of users. In addition, the Chinese are more likely than anywhere else in the world to appreciate brands listening to conversations on microblogging platforms. This is particularly interesting for brands given that 62% of Chinese Internet users share negative opinions online, versus 41% worldwide<sup>10</sup>.

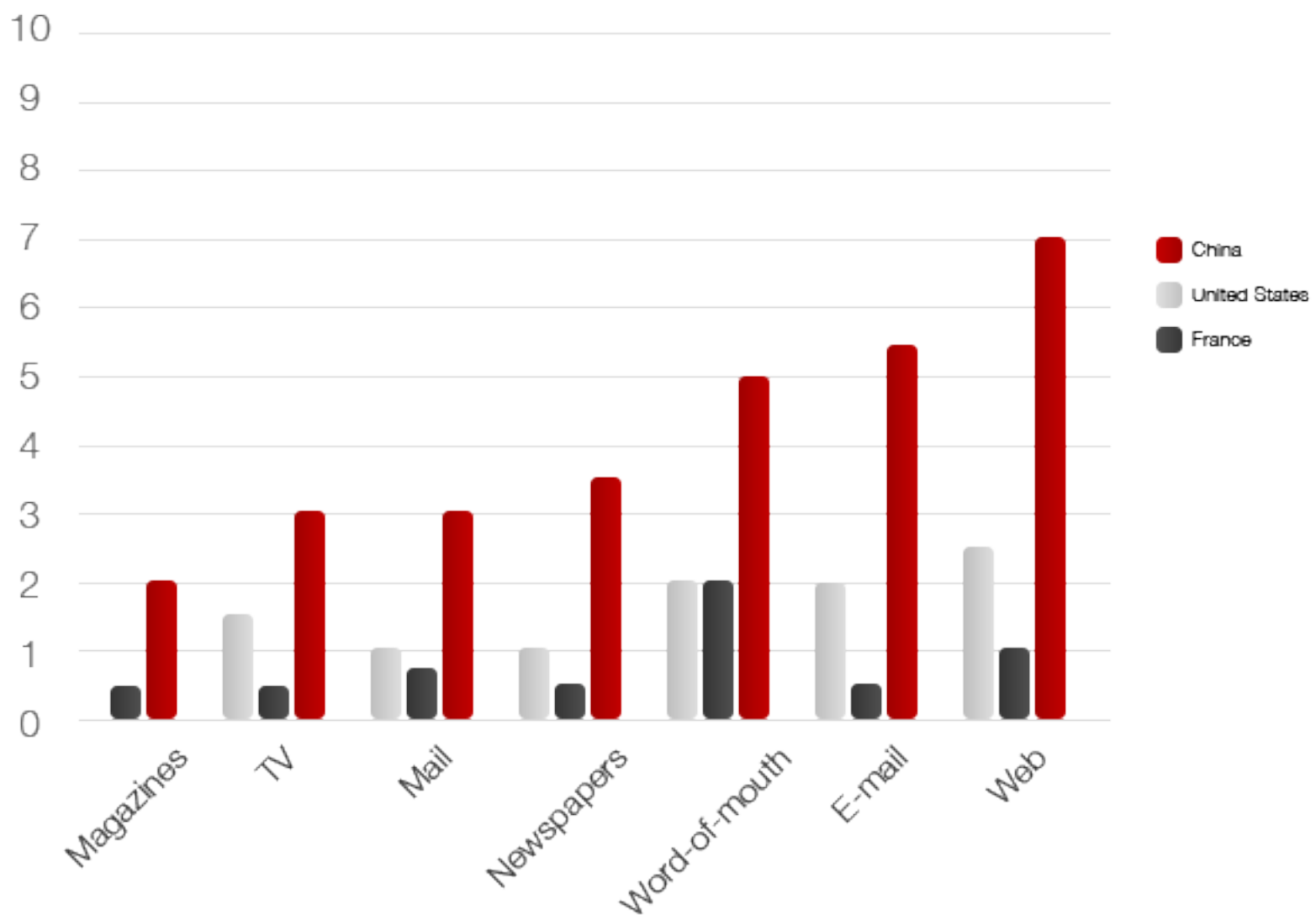
The government’s strict control of Internet access has driven the Chinese towards more informal sources of information. When Fleishman-Hillard asked Internet users to rank their primary sources of information, in order of importance, the first three were the Web, email, and word-of-mouth, respectively.

<sup>8</sup> Discover Digital Life, TNS-Sofres, February 2011

<sup>9</sup> Digital Influence Index, Fleishman-Hillard & Harris interactive, June 2010

<sup>10</sup> Nielsen China Forum: Go Digital in China, December 2010

## Main source of information Fleishman-Hillard study



61% of Chinese social network users have already made a purchase because of a digital marketing campaign<sup>11</sup>

The Chinese involvement with brands online has begun to extend past digital borders. After a positive digital experience with a brand, 42% of social network users say that they considered buying a product, and 27% actually did make a purchase.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, two thirds of consumers surveyed by OgilvyOne said that they do not hold back on purchasing because they learned about a product online.

### Chevrolet Cruze, the star of a Youku webTV and film



In August of 2010, General Motors created a series of eleven short videos with the help of Youku and the China Film Group for the launch of the Chevrolet Cruze. Broadcast weekly on Youku, the Chinese version of YouTube, the series tells the story of two 40-year-old friends who relive memories of their adolescence, with the Chevrolet Cruze appearing in every episode. People were able to accumulate points by leaving comments and sharing the videos in order to win a Cruze. On October 28, the eleven episodes were reposted on Youku, this time as a 42 minute film called, The Old Boys.

Playing on nostalgia and emotion, the operation was a great success:

- 1.4 million views for the first episode in 3 days
- 98,000 people went to the Chevrolet site to subscribe to the series
- 8 millions views in mid-November of the film
- A total of 22 million views by the end of December

<sup>11</sup> OgilvyOne connected report, 2010

## BMW: using Kaixin001 games to instill purchasing desire



In October of 2009, BMW created a group on Kaixin001 that was set to be launched in June 2010. Four months later, the group already had 627,000 members and 2 million visits. Groups created by brands on Kaixin001 are allowed to, among other things, share information in the form of a blog post, to share them (similar to a Retweet on Twitter) and to have a meeting place for members. BMW published more than 90 blog posts, received an average of 115 comments for each, and shared 63 pieces of information which were each relayed more than 7,600 times.

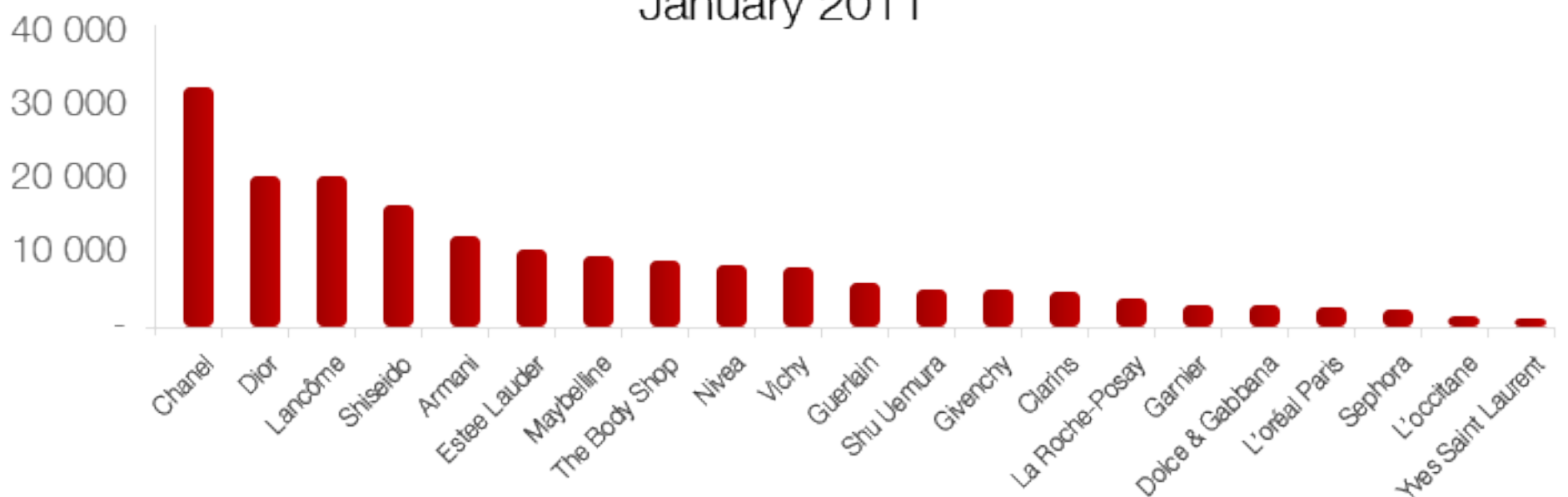
From November 2009 to January 2010, the Smiley X1 contest was an opportunity for members to win objects derived from the new BMW X1: members sharing them with more than ten of their contacts in a day increased their chances of winning. 1,365 people participated even though the group was not even officially launched.

BMW also incorporated its cars into one of the most popular games on Kaixin001: Car Parking. The game has 45 million players including 5.5 million daily visitors. The deal allowed the brand to increase brand awareness as well as a desire to purchase; BMW models were purposely more expensive than the other cars in the game, forcing players to play more in order to earn enough virtual money to acquire a virtual BMW. Many players said they felt genuinely satisfied to be able to purchase a BMW car in Car Parking.

## Cosmetic sales increase at a yearly rate of 16.3% in China<sup>12</sup>

Among the most popular topics of conversation online in China are automobiles and cosmetics. The subject of numerous digital conversations, beauty products are often mentioned in tandem with luxury brands or on sites specializing in luxury branding.

Main cosmetics brands mentioned on Renren  
January 2011



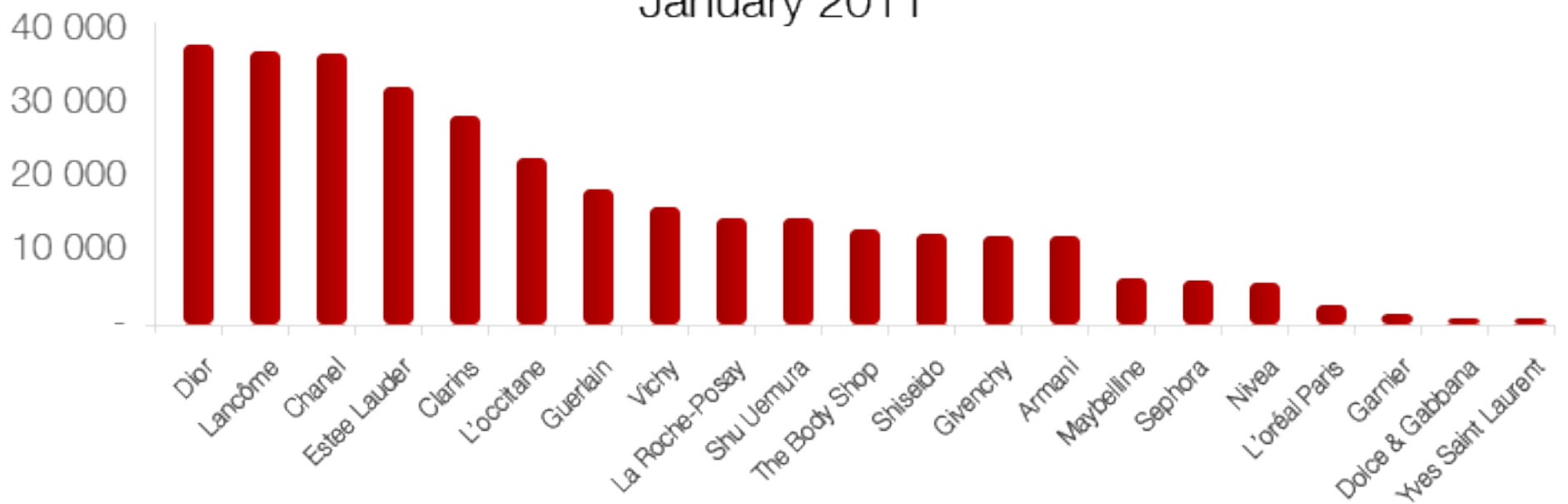
Chanel, Dior and Lancôme were the three most mentioned cosmetic brands on Renren over the past month, with a considerable rise in the rankings for Chanel.

Forums are still very popular in China and, in addition to other social networks, the Chinese converse on many forums that were created specifically to cater to buying experiences, like 55BBS.

<sup>12</sup> China National Statistics Bureau, 2010



Main cosmetics brands mentioned on 55BBS  
January 2011



## Lancôme: a community site for beauty



Lancôme is a brand that has demonstrated exemplary management of its on-line presence in China since 2006, when the brand created a community site called Rose Beauty. The site allowed consumers to share information about cosmetics, their opinions about Lancôme products, as well as to stay up with

the brand's latest news and take advantage of the brand's beauty tips. In 2011, close to 4 million members belong to the community. The Rose Beauty Forum has 795 topics of conversation, the most popular of which contains 87,000 messages. Forum administrators play a key role in maintaining its activity, creating new subjects and rebounding off of others'.

Moreover, Lancôme has had a branded group on Kaixin001 since January of 2008. The group collected 250,000 members in just its first year of existence. Lancôme has created make-up tests and career-oriented personality tests that more than three quarter of its members have taken. In 2008, a beauty pageant was held over the course of 2 months: 18,000 women participated by creating a profile within the group, and more than one million votes were collected.

## Conclusion

Although Internet access is restricted both in terms of physical accessibility and government censorship, Chinese Internet users have repeatedly shown an interest in brands' presence online and joining Chinese social networks. Certain linguistic barriers should be expected for any non-Chinese brand wishing to enter these spaces, but the brands mentioned in the case studies here are proof that it is possible to have tremendous success on Chinese social networks, particularly through the use of social gaming.

The web being the most important primary source of information for Internet users is not to be ignored, nor is the fact that more and more Chinese people access the web through their mobile phones.

## About Synthesio

Synthesio is a global, multi-lingual Social Media Monitoring and research company, utilizing a powerful hybrid of tech and human monitoring services to help Brands and Agencies collect and analyze consumer conversations online. The result is actionable analytics and insights that provide an accurate snapshot of a brand and help answer the ultimate questions – how are we really doing right now, and how can we make it better. Founded in 2006, the company has grown to include analysts who provide native-language monitoring and analytic services in over 30 languages worldwide. Brands such as Toyota, Microsoft, Sanofi, Accor, Orange and many other well-known companies turn to Synthesio for the data they need to engage with their markets, anticipate and prepare for emerging crisis situations, and prepare for new product or new campaign launches.