

# Google's China censorship sets dangerous precedent

Mike Ingram  
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Google's decision to abide by Chinese censors in the launch of its new google.cn search service is a blow against democratic rights and free speech that sets a dangerous precedent both in China and internationally.

Though certainly not the first such move—Yahoo's and Microsoft's MSN service have both stated that they abide by Chinese government censorship policies, banning such words as “freedom” and “democracy” from bulletin board postings—the decision by Google is perhaps the most significant.

The announcement January 25 came within days of news that Google had refused to hand over details of search records to the US government. In a response to a US government subpoena, the company said, “Google's acceding to the request would suggest that it is willing to reveal information about those who use its services. This is not a perception that Google can accept. And one can envision scenarios where queries alone could reveal identifying information about a specific Google user, which is another outcome that Google cannot accept.”

Google's refusal to go along with the Bush administration's demand for data stood in contrast to Microsoft and Yahoo, which had handed over the requested material without a word.

In this context, Google's decision to launch the google.cn service under what has been termed “self-censorship” received significant attention from the world's media, with editorials weighing in both for and against the decision, together with the inevitable right-wing outrage against a company willing to abide by the demands of China's “communist” government while refusing the supposedly more reasonable requests of the Bush administration.

Initial reports spoke of Google's filters being far more severe than even those of Microsoft and Yahoo, blocking not only political and news sites, but also those referring to alcohol or sex. These proved to be technical difficulties

that were quickly fixed, leaving only the, if anything, more ominous filtering of content based on government lists of banned material.

Google's senior policy counsel, Andrew McLaughlin, attempted to justify the collaboration with the Beijing regime, stating, “While removing search results is inconsistent with Google's mission, providing no information (or a heavily degraded user experience that amounts to no information) is more inconsistent with our mission.”

Google co-founder Sergey Brin said in an interview with CNN, “Essentially, the [already existing] great firewall is sophisticated enough that it would block connections based on sensitive queries. The end result was that we weren't available to about 50 percent of the users. Universities can't afford the international bandwidth, so, for example, students at Tsinghua University—and I saw this myself—had to pay in order to use Google, and I mean pay a lot, even 25 cents a megabyte, which would be unaffordable even by American standards.”

He added, “We ultimately made a difficult decision, but we felt that by participating there, and making our services more available, even if not to the 100 percent that we ideally would like, it will be better for Chinese Web users, because ultimately they would get more information, though not all of it.”

Brin continued, “Just over the years I've been interested in this question, and talked to three or four different people in China. My point of view really did change. And don't forget that I was born in the Soviet Union and my early childhood was spent there, so I'm very sensitive to this kind of issue. It wasn't easy. But I gradually grew comfortable, and I think we're doing the right thing.

“And we also, by the way, have to do similar things in the US and Germany. We also have to block certain

material based on law. The US—child pornography, for example, and also DMCA [Digital Millennium Copyright Act].”

Google accepts as a given that the Chinese government censors the Internet and there is nothing that it or anyone else can do about it. But what would have been the impact of Google refusing to go along with the Chinese authorities? To state that it valued freedom of information more highly than its ability to do business in China and that it would not operate there until the Chinese government guaranteed full freedom of information on the part of its citizens would have put the Beijing regime in a difficult situation.

Internet technology is today so crucial to the development of world economy that it must be embraced by the Chinese regime, even though it threatens to weaken its authoritarian rule. It is not possible for China to integrate more closely into the world economy, as it must, without providing the necessary infrastructure, to which the Internet is central.

But whatever Brin’s personal feelings about Chinese censorship, or the company’s desire to bolster its liberal reputation associated with the motto “Don’t be evil,” Google’s actions in going along with state censorship have strengthened that authoritarian regime. Google’s actions in China reveal that the overriding concern for Google, as with all the other corporations making inroads into the country, is profit.

China, with a population of more than 1.3 billion, is the fastest growing market for Internet technology. China’s 100 million Internet users already make it the biggest market outside of the US.

While in the US Google accounted for 43.6 percent of searches in November 2005, compared to 23.4 percent for its nearest rival Yahoo and only 11.4 percent for Microsoft’s MSN, in China Google held just 27 percent of the Internet search market, compared with 46 percent for the local company Baidu. Yahoo has just 3.7 percent of the existing search market in China.

Whatever misgivings Brin and others may have had, the Google executives obviously decided that too much was at stake in the struggle against its corporate rivals to let principles get in the way. In taking that decision, they have set a dangerous precedent for new attacks on democratic rights throughout the world.

It is not only China that has an interest in suppressing and monitoring the Internet, as is shown in last month’s government subpoena of search data in the US. Google’s actions in China inevitably undermine the stand it has

taken in the US.

Given the amount of data that Google holds on its users, this is extremely worrying. The US government insists that it is not interested in individual data, but simply wants to know what searches were made. Privacy campaigners have correctly pointed out that if such information is handed over, it will be just the beginning, and ever more invasive requests will be made in the future.

Were Google to be subpoenaed at a future date for specific user data, it would be handing over a phenomenal amount of material. Every time a user enters the Google search engine, a “cookie”—a small file to make the computer recognizable—is downloaded to the user’s hard disk. The same process is used by most sites that demand user registration and, in particular, e-commerce sites such as Amazon.

This cookie gives Google a complete record of everything that is asked for online, identifiable by the computer that is being used. Furthermore, if any of Google’s extended services are used, such as Gmail, Google Talk, or the Google Desktop, a great deal of additional information is sent back to Google and stored in its data bases.

An article on the *Open Democracy* web site states, “Most cookies are temporary, but the Google cookie doesn’t expire until 2038.” According to Roger Clarke, this long-term cookie “appears to be associated with all Google Services, and appears to contain an identifier that would therefore enable all visits to any Google site to be correlated”.

Google could then—and given that target advertising is a main source of revenue, probably does—tie an individual’s e-mail and instant messaging into his web searches and use of maps, dictionaries and calculators, all of which Google offers through its web site.

Google’s decision to tailor its Chinese-language site to the regime’s censorship policies underscores the fundamental incompatibility between private ownership and control of the telecommunications industry and the subordination of the Internet to the capitalist market, on the one hand, and the defense of privacy rights and civil liberties, on the other.



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