

Google Goes to China

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Gu Ge (roughly translated as “harvesting song”) is the name of Google’s mainland Chinese version of its internet search service. Mainland China boasts a huge and growing market of internet users estimated at 111 million. But, China also has arguably the most sophisticated government censorship in the world. The same Chinese government that censors films, bans television programs and rock bands is now sanitizing search pages by filtering out key words, pictures, and news accounts.

In early 2006, Google decided that in order to retain access to China’s huge and growing market of internet users (a report last year showed it losing market share to Beijing-based rival Baidu.com), the company would cooperate with the Chinese government’s demand to block Chinese customers’ access to internet sites that include information about topics the government deems off limits to its citizens such as democracy, human rights, Tibet, Taiwanese independence or information about the Dalai Lama. Searches either turn up “acceptable” information or no information and a message saying “operation timed out.”

Here are a few examples of “scrubbed” searches on Gu Ge:

Searches of “Tiananmen Square” produce some 400 photos, all depicting an empty square or one filled with tourists - Search on Google in the U.S. and you find 22,000 photos, many of them of bloody protests. In 1989 Tiananmen Square was the site of student-led demonstrations against government corruption that culminated in a bloody standoff. Protestors defied orders to disperse and tanks and infantry were sent in killing 2600 civilians and injuring another 7000-10000. Widespread arrests followed and press coverage was strictly controlled.

Searches of “Falun Dafa” (also known as Falun Gong) finds only a series of websites that condemn the practice – Search on Google U.S. and you will learn that Falun Dafa is a system of New Age style meditation practiced by some 100 million members. It has been suppressed in China since 1999 when 10,000 members staged a peaceful protest outside China’s Central Appeal Office.

The Dalai Lama, often called “His Holiness,” is considered by Tibetan Buddhists to be the current incarnation of Buddha, the latest in a lineage that dates back to 1391. However, searches of “Dalai Lama” produce only pictures of a young man that were taken before 1959 when China invaded and took over Tibet and the Dalai Lama, as Emperor, was forced to flee to India where he continues to lead the Tibetan government in exile. The

Dalai Lama has been credited with preserving Tibetan culture and education and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for his leadership of the global movement for a Free Tibet.

Google has been criticized by some in the U.S. Congress who accuse the company of “decapitating the voice of dissidents in China,” “enabling evil,” and facilitating the oppression of Chinese citizens via "sickening collaboration" with Beijing. Others have introduced legislation that would require U.S. companies to locate their computer hardware outside China, create a code for all U.S. internet companies doing business in repressive countries, curtail technology exports to countries with censorship policies and create a State Department office of internet freedom.

Bloggers have argued that Google has a “moral duty not to succumb to China’s wishes. The Reporters Without Borders group has said that Google’s decision to “collaborate” with the Chinese government was a “real shame.” And, Amnesty International condemned Google’s self-censorship policy. The Electronic Frontier Foundation has argued that if these companies are going to negotiate away users’ rights, the companies should at least work together to form an industry-wide code of practice.

On the other hand, the Chinese allege that they are no different from western countries like France and Germany that restrict Nazi-related content. And, company defenders say that these companies are helping to open up Chinese society in the long run.

Google’s position:

- Despite admitting to compromising its values, Google maintains that the company serves a more useful role in China through participation. Withdrawing the service would be “a greater evil” the company says. Although the decision to go into China “involved a lot of hand-wringing and weighing the consequences of censoring results... providing some information to Chinese users is better than none at all.” Google’s CEO called the choice a “difficult but principled decision.”
- Google's Chief Executive, Eric Schmidt also said that Google had a responsibility to abide by the law in every country where it does business. "We had a choice to enter the country and follow the law, 'or we had a choice not to enter the country." I think it's arrogant for us to walk into a country where we are just beginning operations and tell that country how to run itself."
- The company discloses censorship at the bottom of Web pages that says, “In order to follow local laws, some search results are not displayed.” In addition, Google chat, email or blogs are not included in the

current service offering. Google does not wish to find itself in a position of having to turn over email files to the government. (The company recently resisted U.S. government requests for data on what people were searching for).

Google's stated goals and values:

“Never settle for the best” - The perfect search engine would understand exactly what you mean and give back exactly what you want...Google's goal is to provide a much higher level of service to all those who seek information, whether they're at a desk in Boston, driving through Bonn, or strolling in Bangkok.

1. Focus on the user and all else will follow

Google has refused to make any change that does not offer a benefit to the users who come to the site...

2. It's best to do one thing really, really well.

3. Fast is better than slow.

4. Democracy on the web works.

Google works because it relies on the millions of individuals posting websites to determine which other sites offer content of value.

5. You don't need to be at your desk to need an answer.

The world is increasingly mobile and unwilling to be constrained to a fixed location.

6. You can make money without doing evil.

7. There's always more information out there.

8. The need for information crosses all borders.

...Our mission is to facilitate access to information for the entire world.

9. You can be serious without a suit.

Google's founders have often stated that the company is not serious about anything but search...

10. Great just isn't good enough.

Always deliver more than expected.

How do other tech companies compare?

- Yahoo handed over email files to the Chinese Government to aid in the arrest of two “dissident” journalists who were using their email system to spread news. The reporters are in a Chinese jail, along with at least 42 other bloggers and cyber-dissidents.
- MSN’s Bing search engine, acting on Chinese government orders, shut down a blog critical of local politicians. MSN has a clear policy (now) of only taking down Web sites when served with a legal order to do so, and publicly stating why the site was taken down, rather than merely deleting it
- Cisco has been accused of helping the Chinese government build its censorship-heavy Internet system by providing the hardware to block internet sites.
- MSN, Yahoo, Cisco, and Google made a statement asking the U.S. government to pressure the Chinese to abandon its efforts to censor expression on the internet.

Case Discussion Questions

1. What was Google's ethical dilemma (values in conflict) in this situation?
2. Analyze the dilemma from a consequentialist, nonconsequentialist, and mixed ethics perspectives. Based upon your analysis, what do you think is the right thing to do? Do you agree with Google's CEO that the company made "a principled decision?" Why or why not?
3. Google's motto is "Don't Be Evil." What does that mean? And, how does it apply in this situation? Is the company living up to its motto?
4. Consider Google's other values related to democracy, not doing evil, focusing on the user, providing information, etc. Can Google do business in China and maintain these ideals? If so, how? If not, why not? Can Google maintain its reputation or will it be viewed as hypocritical? Does it face unique expectations because it is an internet company?
5. Google says that it is complying with the law in countries where it does business. But, the author of a book on IBM and the holocaust says that IBM used the same defense in the 1930s when it provided Adolf Hitler with the tools to keep "the wheels of the Holocaust running on time." What is your reaction to these comments?
6. Tom Donaldson rejects ethical relativism ("when in Rome") and ethical absolutism (insisting on the same exact standards everywhere for every situation). Instead, he recommends that companies operating overseas adopt an ethical threshold based upon core values such as the golden rule and respect for human rights. Those must then be translated into specific guidelines. Do you think Google's operating standards are consistent or inconsistent with Donaldson's recommendations? If you were going to recommend a set of standards for Google, what would they say and why?
7. Every transcultural set of ethics standards for global business practice includes the principle of human rights. For example, the UN global compact says that companies should protect internationally proclaimed human rights and not be complicit in human rights abuses. The "Caux Roundtable Principles" state that businesses should contribute to human rights in the countries in which they operate. Is Google's behavior consistent with these expectations? Or, do you agree that the company "negotiated away users' human rights?"
8. Having considered all of this, what is your evaluation of Google's decision?