

The China Yahoo! welcome: You've got Jail!

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This week's revelations involving a Chinese journalist sentenced to 10 years in jail for revealing state secrets indicates the weaknesses of human rights and corporate behavior in the virtual world.

Media watchdog group Reporters Without Borders in Paris issued a scathing indictment of Yahoo! China for its IP address information sharing that contributed to the arrest and conviction of Shi Tao, a reporter from the Contemporary Business News based in Changsha, the provincial capital of Hunan province.

It is scary to retrace the simple steps landing Shi, 37, behind bars. He logged on to the Internet, went to the Chinese Yahoo! homepage, clicked on the mail icon, signed in with ID and password, saw the message "Welcome!" and then sent e-mail messages his government didn't like. Pressing the Enter button on those messages logged him off personal freedom for a decade.

Shi's information content was something Americans might not think about twice, but mishandling history marked "juemi" (top secret) put the reporter in big trouble in the modern Middle Kingdom.

If you followed news in 1989, a time just before the Net explosion, you might remember some of the "top secret" events supposed to go down China's Orwellian memory hole: the TV image of the lone man in front of the tank or perhaps the phrase "hundreds, if not thousands" reported dead that was written by Western press in the aftermath of the bloody Sunday June 4 killing during the Beijing Spring Democracy Movement

16 years ago.

This last great act of unbridled naked Chinese Communist aggression against its own people is an uncomfortable truth the current leadership supported in their climb to prominence up the Party ladder. The Chinese government doesn't like commemorations of this tragic period and sent a circular to state-controlled media dictating there should be no coverage of 15th anniversary remembrances.

Shi's case and the punishment meted out is an old Chinese aphorism still expressing bottom-line realities on human rights from Beijing. Making an example out of an individual for many to see, "sha ji, gei houzi kan," (meaning kill the chicken and make the monkey watch) comes to light during the "Year of the Chicken" on China's lunar calendar. Critics say repression is the other "bird flu" the country faces in 2005.

Contemporary China is a curious mixture of good and bad ancient cultural strains. The term "Great Firewall of China" coined in a late 90s issue of Wired was no myth. This is a techno-savvy authoritarian state where multiple midrange PC servers form the wall's hardware bricks, filtration and alert software is mortar gluing the wall together, and security apparatus sit in front of computer monitors ensconced in today's version of watchtowers. Authorities have deep pockets profiting foreign suppliers of transferred goods and services that accomplish this objective.

Analysts are posing a range of questions centered on the theme of corporate responsibility in the emerging age of digital human rights. Whether numbers or words, manipulation of information, its interpretation and dissemination, shapes the world we share.

An interesting issue raised is a review of Yahoo!'s privacy policy in all languages. The company is known to have cooperated with U.S. law-

enforcement officials after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks and with the Chinese in cracking the Shi Tao case.

Julian Pain, heading the Internet desk at Reporters Without Borders, was asked to compare Yahoo!'s position on police collaboration. "The thing is you can't compare China and the U.S. Of course you can say in the U.S., even in France ISPs and hosting companies comply to the demands of the police," UPI learned.

"They have to help the police, so I'm not saying that what Yahoo! is doing is totally illegal. If they follow the Chinese rules, they have no other choice; but the thing is you can't turn a blind eye on what China is doing in its own country," Pain said.

He added: "Everybody knows that China is a repressive regime and it tracks down dissidents, tracks down journalists who only want to speak out and to talk about democracy. So you can't act the same way in China as in the U.S. It's simply not possible."

Pain's group believes "at some point Yahoo! should say no to the Chinese authorities. Say OK, we agreed to censor such and such engine, but now you are going too far asking us to collaborate with the police to track down dissidents."

Reporters Without Borders is asking Yahoo! to take a strong position. It wants them to say "as an American company, we have to respect certain basic values, universal values, human rights; so that even if it's legal in your country, we as an American company won't do it."

Pain said what Yahoo! did was "probably legal, but it was totally immoral, totally not ethical and that is what we are condemning."

Yahoo! and other Internet heavyweights jostle for market share in China

and the U.S. sectors. Signing up with their Internet services comes with a caveat that your IP address and cookies are collected and made available as public information when required. Clear, easily available answers on what information they provide and the agencies they give it to is not transparent for the average user.

The firm that announced a billion-dollar bet on China slightly more than a month ago partnering with Hangzhou-based Alibaba in Zhejiang province has a public-relations black eye in the first round of its sparring with Google and local competitors such as Baidu.com. It needs to do damage control or stock prices may be impacted.

One place that the company could start is by adopting the seven major human-rights agreements of the United Nations as its corporate policy relates to privacy issues. Yahoo! has contributed to global acceptance of the Internet. Individuals can access their Yahoo! E-mail accounts everywhere on the planet.

Louise Arbour, head of the U.N.'s Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) said in Beijing on Sept. 5 she will "work with China to help it remove obstacles to ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and to implement recommendations of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

In the meantime, Shi Tao faces 10 years in jail for the crime of sending an e-mail.

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