

Rights experts question Google censorship

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Google's decision to do business in China by adhering to the government's strict censorship rules has come under attack by many bloggers, academics and activists alike. What's more, some question whether the Internet giant might actually eke out a profit from the venture, if at all.

Of course, multinational corporations risk losing a lot if they choose to ignore the potential of the Chinese market, or so the general consensus appears to be. Yet as a provider of information, Google's agreement Wednesday to abide by the Chinese authorities' rules and keep large amounts of information away from users appears to contradict the company's mission as the leading provider of information on the World Wide Web.

"In order to operate from China, we have removed some content from

the search results available on google.cn, in response to local law, regulation or policy," the Mountain View, Calif.-based group's senior policy counsel, Andrew McLaughlin, said in a statement.

Moreover, the company justified the self-censorship by adding that "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."

Still, there is plenty of criticism against the Internet search engine as many argue that it is going precisely against its own corporate slogan, "don't do evil."

Granted, Google is far from being the only information provider that has agreed to cooperate with the wishes of the Chinese government. Rival Yahoo! has been operating with the blessing of the authorities for a number of years, while Microsoft's MSN blog site too has been restricting postings when operating in the country on its own accord.

Until now, though, Google had operated in China by having a Chinese link on its main site, google.com, which was censored by the government. By setting up its own Chinese site, Google will be taking the censorship role out of the authorities' hands and keep a lid on available information itself.

"This is a full-fledged assault on the freedom of information," said Mickey Spiegel, senior researcher of the Asia division at Human Rights Watch in New York. "The Internet was where the Chinese population could challenge the government's monopoly on information ... and they're trying to shut that down," she added, pointing out that the population will no longer be able to obtain information on subjects that are deemed sensitive by the government such as the environment, or taboo such as Tibetan independence or the status of Taiwan.

Meanwhile, some are not too certain that Google will actually make a profit out of its China business, even as they increase their cyberspace presence in the world's seventh-largest economy.

"It isn't clear whether Google will be profitable in China," said Usha Daley, director of the global business center at the University of New Haven, arguing that no company has really been able to make money in China as of yet. Yet the company would be "diminishing its moral authority ... when it has stood for representing the values of freedom of information," she added.

So Google might well be compromising its integrity for limited profit. Nevertheless, few expect the company to suffer a slowdown in usage or growth outside of China even if its veneer of dot-com trendiness and righteousness is damaged as users are unlikely to stop using the ubiquitous Web site.

For now, though, the biggest winner of Google's decision is likely to be the Chinese rulers.

"This is the best new year's present for the Chinese government," Spiegel said.

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