

# Analysis: Google performs virtual kowtow in China

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Google's chief executive officer performed the modern-day equivalent of the kowtow in the Chinese capital this week, saying his firm would obey the laws of the land calling itself a democratic dictatorship.

The kowtow (koutou in Mandarin) is the act of getting on one's hands and knees and touching the forehead to the ground as a sign of deference, submission or homage. It is still performed at state-sanctioned Buddhist and Taoist temples nationwide in the People's Republic of China.

Google's media event in Beijing Wednesday showed a company willing to bow and scrape, making at least two stunning public compromises in a bid to lock in the loyalty of a market poised to become the largest on the

planet.

You don't need Google's renowned algorithms to crunch the numbers. As of January 2006 China had more than 110 million Internet users, and with the government's new policy promoting technology, it is on the precipice of surpassing the United States.

Duncan Clark, a managing director of BDA, an Asia-Pacific technology consultancy based in Beijing, told United Press International China will overtake the United States in terms of raw numbers in two or three years, but "an accurate forecast depends on the methodology used."

"It's a question of how you count users," Clark said, citing service subscriptions, shared use of a single account and Internet cafés as just three of the ways "methodologies can muddy the picture for an accurate assessment."

Nevertheless, the issue is not if China becomes the largest country to use the Internet, but when it happens, what it will mean for determining standards and practices.

How long can an authoritarian government intolerant of free expression impose its will behind the Great Firewall? The popular search engine has indicated it will do whatever it takes to make sure it's along for the ride in China's rise in the geopolitical economy of the 21st century.

The first concession was to translate the firm's name into Chinese, something it has not done in any other market. The word Google, inspired by the mathematical term googol (1 followed by 100 zeroes) is the same for Internet surfers from Moscow to Madras -- but not China.

Google unveiled a transliteration of its name in Chinese, "Gu Ge." The first character means cereal, grain or millet; the second means song or

sing. A company spokesman said it carried the connotation of a "harvest song" trilled "after a fruitful search experience."

The press kit for the event included a three-page statement entitled, "Ten things Google has found to be true." These included five corporate credos that have been instrumental to success: "Focus on the user and all else will follow"; "It's best to do one thing really, really well"; "Fast is better than slow"; "You don't need to be at your desk to need an answer" and "You can be serious without a suit."

BDA's Clark said a localized name was "not that big a deal since surfers have both the .com and .com.cn options." He noted "the question is the cultural viewpoint on control of content."

Content boundaries in the Western world where government intervention takes place tends to focus on hate speech, racial or religious intolerance and child pornography. China has more than 30,000 members of the public security apparatus monitoring the Internet around the clock blocking access to sites.

Google's corporate image has taken a hit in the United States already with its bid to expand operations in China, an authoritarian nation in both the real and virtual worlds. Critics in the West are asking how a company that trumpets itself as serving the free flow of information can operate in a country that systematically tries to suppress all forms of information it finds unpalatable.

In the real world China regularly stops satellite broadcasts of foreign news in midstream and tears out magazine articles when the content is critical of the government. Authorities routinely purge editors and shut periodicals in the domestic media when the wrong toes of power get stepped on and when the ill-defined line of what constitutes acceptable content gets crossed. Last year Chinese journalist Shi Tao was given a

10-year prison sentence for sending an e-mail the government didn't like.

Google CEO Eric Schmidt responded to a reporter's question about censorship and his firm's role in it by saying Google's goal was to "serve all citizens," but at the same time it "must comply with local laws in China," reflecting the ethical dilemma the company faces caught between diametrically opposing worlds.

Schmidt's statement there was "no alternative" to obeying Chinese rules and regulations "where certain information is prohibited" will make it hard for skeptics to believe the five other things Google says it has found to be true: "Democracy on the Web works"; "You can make money without doing evil"; "There's always more information out there"; "The need for information crosses all borders" and "Great just isn't good enough."

Under democracy the company claims "Google works because it relies on the millions of individuals posting Web sites to determine which other sites offer content of value" using its "PageRank" technology. This evaluates all sites enabling it to analyze the full structure of the Web to determine which have been "voted" the best source of information.

This raises the issue of what types of data the company will be sharing with the Chinese government. Will China's Public Security Bureau be given access to individual users' search patterns? Will it share information on the latest proxy server sites that enable surfers to circumvent the government's firewalls?

Google defines not doing evil while making money by the fact it prevents certain types of advertisements from appearing on Web sites; however, its claim that great isn't good enough may be a disturbing look at the future.

The California-based firm says "through innovation and iteration, Google takes something that works well and improves upon it in unexpected ways. Its "point of distinction is anticipating needs not yet articulated by our global audience then meeting them with products and services that set new standards."

While this "constant dissatisfaction with the way things are is ultimately the driving force behind the world's best search engine," what does it mean after kowtowing to a regime afraid of what Chinese people might learn?

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