

Yahoo! summit champions human rights online

May 6 2009, by Glenn Chapman

Human rights trump doing business, Yahoo! chief executive Carol Bartz insisted at a summit of Internet allies combining forces to battle censorship by oppressive regimes.

Bartz's remarks Tuesday opened a [Yahoo! Business & Human Rights Summit](#) at which she acknowledged that the US Internet pioneer made some mistakes in foreign markets.

Internet companies must learn when not to hide behind the notion "We are corporations so it is our Number One obligation just to do business," Bartz said.

"It isn't our Number One obligation," she maintained. "Our Number One obligation is to be good world citizens."

Activist bloggers writing about affairs in Africa, India and the Middle East joined executives from Yahoo!, Google, and Microsoft at the one-day summit at Yahoo!'s campus in Sunnyvale, California.

"It is really going to take all of us working together to learn better how to act as good world citizens," Bartz said.

"We don't want to impinge on anybody's rights. We don't want to force our beliefs versus someone else's beliefs but we do have a responsibility."

The US technology giants and a coalition of human rights and other groups late last year unveiled a code of conduct aimed at safeguarding online freedom of speech and privacy.

The "Global Network Initiative" (GNI) commits the technology firms to "protect the freedom of expression and privacy rights of their users."

The initiative, which follows criticism that the companies were assisting censorship of the Internet in nations such as China, requires them to narrowly interpret government requests for information or censorship and to fight to minimize cooperation.

GNI provides a way for participants to "work together in resisting efforts by governments that seek to enlist companies in acts of [censorship](#) and surveillance that violate international standards."

A number of US companies, including Microsoft, Cisco, Google and Yahoo!, have been hauled before the US Congress in recent years and accused of complicity in building what has been called the "Great Firewall of China."

Yahoo! was thrust into the forefront of the online rights issue after the company helped Chinese police identify cyber dissidents whose supposed crime was expressing their views online.

China exercises strict control over the Internet, blocking sites linked to Chinese dissidents, the outlawed Falun Gong spiritual movement, the Tibetan government-in-exile and those with information on the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

Internet firms contend they must comply with China's laws in order to operate there.

GNI sets a stage for industry peers to stand by Internet firms in face-offs with governments demanding topics be censored or online critics be exposed, Google deputy general counsel Nicole Wong said at the summit.

"There are a number of things a company might do when they get that first demand from government X saying 'take that down and identify that blogger for me'," Wong said during a panel discussion.

"At some point in those countries you will run out of your legal and policy cards. That is where the promise of GNI lies. With companies and human rights groups working together we have another way to put pressure on governments."

Burma topped a Committee to Protect Journalists list of "The 10 Worst Places to be a Blogger," with Iran, Syria, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Tunisia, China, Turkmenistan, and Egypt following in that order.

Western countries have been striving to "close the Internet" in the names of causes such as fighting pornography or cyber crime, said Gaurav Mishra who blogs about happenings in India.

"There is an absolute need for GNI to expand its international perspective," said Microsoft senior policy counsel Chuck Cosson.

"It is particularly important that the governments we traditionally speak of as aggressive with free rights continue to do that and are not backsliding."

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