

Google stops China censorship, Beijing condemns move (Update 3)

March 22 2010



The Google logo on the rooftop of the Google China headoffice building in Beijing. Google announced Monday that it has stopped censoring its Chinese-language search engine Google.cn.

Google stopped censoring search engine results in China on Monday in a move that drew anger from Beijing and leaves the Web giant facing an uncertain future in the world's biggest online market.

Google announced in a blog post that it had shifted mainland Chinese users of its Chinese-language search engine Google.cn to an uncensored site in former British colony Hong Kong.

"Users visiting Google.cn are now being redirected to Google.com.hk, where we are offering uncensored search in simplified Chinese, specifically designed for users in mainland China and delivered via our

servers in Hong Kong," Google chief legal officer David Drummond said.

While ending censorship in China, the Mountain View, California-based Google said it planned to keep sales, research and development teams in the country of some 384 million Internet users.

Google's decision came a little more than two months after the Internet titan threatened to close its Chinese operations because of censorship and cyberattacks it said originated from China.

China reacted quickly to Google's move saying it was "totally wrong" for it to stop censorship and to blame Beijing for the cyberattacks that Google said targeted email accounts of Chinese human rights activists.

"Google has violated its written promise it made when entering the Chinese market by stopping filtering its searching service," said the official in charge of the Internet bureau of the State Council Information Office.

"We're uncompromisingly opposed to the politicization of commercial issues, and express our discontent and indignation to Google for its unreasonable accusations and conduct," the Chinese official said.

The White House said it was "disappointed" Google could not reach a deal with Beijing and reiterated that US President Barack Obama is "committed to Internet freedom and... opposed to censorship."

"The US-China relationship is mature enough to sustain differences," added National Security Council spokesman Mike Hammer.

Drummond, Google's top lawyer, said "figuring out how to make good on our promise to stop censoring search on Google.cn has been hard.

"We very much hope that the Chinese government respects our decision, though we are well aware that it could at any time block access to our services."

Google co-founder Sergey Brin told The New York Times that shifting the Chinese service to Hong Kong was not given a clear-cut stamp of approval by Beijing but "there was a sense that Hong Kong was the right step."

"There's a lot of lack of clarity," he said. "Our hope is that the newly begun Hong Kong service will continue to be available in mainland China."

"The story's not over yet," Brin added.

Drummond said "the Chinese government has been crystal clear throughout our discussions that self-censorship is a non-negotiable legal requirement."

He said providing uncensored search from Hong Kong is "entirely legal and will meaningfully increase access to information for people in China."

Beijing tightly controls online content in a vast system dubbed the "Great Firewall of China," removing information it deems harmful such as pornography and violent content, but also politically sensitive material.

Google launched Google.cn in January 2006 after agreeing to censor websites for content banned under Chinese law. Google.cn is the second-largest search engine in China after Chinese search engine Baidu.com.

Google's decision to end censorship in China was welcomed by human rights and technology groups and members of the US Congress.

"It is a remarkable, and welcomed, action and an important boost of encouragement for millions of Chinese human rights activists and political and religious dissidents," said US Representative Christopher Smith, a Republican from New Jersey.

Arvind Ganesan, business and human rights director at Human Rights Watch, called it "an important step to challenge the Chinese government's use of censorship to maintain its control over its citizens."

"The onus is now on other major technology companies to take a firm stand against censorship," Ganesan said.

Sharon Hom, executive director of New York-based Human Rights in China, said Google was throwing the ball in the court of Beijing, which promised to respect freedoms in Hong Kong when it regained the territory in 1997.

"They are technically staying in China but stopping censorship," she said.

"Google has taken a courageous position against censorship," said Lucie Morillon of Paris-based media rights group Reporters Without Borders.

Leading Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng, who spent nearly two decades in prison and now lives in the United States, said he knew China "would not back down."

"But we also knew that Google's motto was 'Don't be evil.' So there was no point on which to compromise," Wei said.

Leslie Harris, president of the Center for Democracy & Technology, praised what she called Google's "continued effort to enable China's people with unfiltered access to robust sources of information from all over the world."

Chronology of Google's operations in China

The following is a chronology of major developments involving China and Google, which announced Monday that it has stopped censoring results on its Chinese-language search engine:

July 19, 2005

Google announces plans to open a research and development center in China, hiring former Microsoft executive Kai-Fu Lee to head the operation.

January 25, 2006

Google launches a China-language search engine, Google.cn, after agreeing to censor websites for content banned under Chinese law. Chief executive Eric Schmidt, at a ceremony in Beijing in April, says Google "must comply with the local law." "It is not an option for us to broadly make information available that is illegal, inappropriate or immoral," he says.

January 4, 2007

Google announces it has forged an alliance with China Mobile, the nation's largest handset operator, to provide mobile and Internet services in China.

October 27, 2008

Google, Microsoft and Yahoo! band together with a coalition of human rights and other groups in the "Global Network Initiative," unveiling a code of conduct aimed at safeguarding online freedom of speech and privacy.

June 18, 2009

China attacks Google over pornography for the second time in six months, accusing it of not installing filters to block "vulgar" content. Google says it is "stepping up its efforts." Google services begin to suffer intermittent outages around June 25. Outgoing Google China president Kai-Fu Lee announces in September that Google services have been fully restored.

January 12, 2010

Google threatens to shut its operations in China after uncovering what it says are "highly sophisticated" cyberattacks originating from China aimed at the email accounts of Chinese human rights activists. "These attacks and the surveillance they have uncovered -- combined with the attempts over the past year to further limit free speech on the Web -- have led us to conclude that we should review the feasibility of our business operations in China," Google chief legal officer David Drummond says. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asks China for an explanation.

January 14, 2010

China says foreign Internet firms are welcome but must operate "according to law." Internet users leave messages, flowers and fruit outside Google's Beijing headquarters.

January 21, 2010

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a major speech in Washington on Internet freedom, urges China to investigate the cyberattacks on Google and calls on US technology firms not to support Internet censorship. China says such remarks harm relations.

February 21, 2010

Shanghai Jiaotong University and the Lanxiang Vocational School, two schools named by the New York Times in connection with the cyberattacks on Google, deny involvement.

March 22, 2010

Google announces that it has stopped censoring its Chinese-language search engine Google.cn and is redirecting mainland Chinese users to an uncensored site in Hong Kong, Google.com.hk.

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