

Should Google stay in China?

April 30 2010, by Larry Hardesty



On Jan. 12, Google announced that, because of a series of sophisticated attacks that seemed to originate in China and targeted the Gmail accounts of Chinese human-rights activists, it would cease to censor the results of searches performed using its Chinese search engine, Google.cn. In March, it began redirecting search queries sent to Google.cn to its search engine in Hong Kong, which is excluded by international treaty from the censorship laws that prevail in mainland China.

On April 28, a group of MIT experts convened at the MIT Sloan School of Management for a panel discussion titled “Should [Google](#) Stay in China?” Two of the panel members, Sloan professor Yasheng Huang and Xiaojian Zhao, a Knight Science Journalism Fellow, answered the

panel's titular question with an unequivocal "yes"; the other two panelists, David Clark of the Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Lab and Craig Simons, another Knight Fellow, were less direct but certainly offered arguments that bolstered their colleagues' positions.

The three panel members who are experts on China — Huang, Zhao and Simons — all agreed that the Internet had been a powerful democratizing force within the country. Simons, who for five years was Asia bureau chief for Cox Newspapers, pointed out that until 2004, the Chinese government had released statistics on the number of protests that occurred within the country each year. In 2004, Simons said, that number was 74,000, up from 10,000 10 years earlier. "My feeling — and, I think, the feeling of a number of journalists in China -- is that the number of incidents has continued to rise," Simons said. "That was one reason they no longer release the information." The rise in public dissent, Simons suggested, was largely because of the Internet, which had proved an "incredible tool for mobilizing people across localities and across class lines."

Zhao, a reporter in the Beijing bureau of Southern Weekly, which The New York Times has called "China's most influential liberal newspaper," agreed, citing a phenomenon that, she said, the Chinese refer to as "human-flesh search engines." In China, corruption is rampant in local government, she explained, but official complaints must be lodged with the central state, through a woefully inefficient process that local officials frequently impede. Human-flesh search engines, she explained, are networks of Internet users who broadcast and publicize incidents of local corruption nationwide. "I think that human-flesh search engines are one of the most effective ways for ordinary people to go after corrupt local officials in China," Zhao said. She even suggested that the central government welcomed them, as a way "to supervise the local governors."

Huang added that it may be difficult for Westerners to understand quite how revolutionary the Internet has been in China, because in China, “the traditional channels of communication are terrible.” The Internet didn’t just allow companies and media outlets to convey information more efficiently to existing markets and audiences, he said; it created entirely new markets and audiences. “Thirty years of economic growth, foreign direct investment, \$2 trillion of foreign-exchange reserves, exports, the rising middle class, urbanization,” Huang said. “The Internet has given China more transparency and more democracy and more political accountability than all these other things combined.”

Clark, who had served as the Internet’s chief protocol architect for most of the 1980s, was on the panel as a technical expert, and he pointed out that there was no technical reason that an attack on Google’s mail servers should require the withdrawal of its search engine from mainland China; indeed, he said, the mail servers that were attacked weren’t in China to begin with. He also pointed out that China was by no means the only country whose government inserted itself into the operation of the Internet. “If I were to describe a country in which you cannot attach to the Internet without completely identifying yourself — if you go into a hot spot, you have to give them your identity card — You might say, ‘What kind of country is that?’ And the answer is Italy. Not China,” he said.

Given that the Internet is a democratizing force in China, and that Google’s withdrawal from mainland China didn’t make the servers that had been attacked any safer, there still remained the question of whether the promotion of Chinese democracy required Google in particular rather than just the Internet in general. While Google.cn was still operating, after all, it accounted for only about 25 to 30 percent of the search market in China. The other 70 to 75 percent belonged to Baidu, [China’s homegrown search engine](#).

On that topic, Huang was blunt: “I don’t trust Baidu,” he said. He said that companies could pay to have their URLs included in the top results of a Web search on Baidu. “I can’t point to an academic study, but I think their rule of thumb was, before Google left, the top three results on Baidu were paid,” Huang said. “Now the top 10 are, potentially because they don’t have to compete with Google.” During the question-and-answer session that followed the discussion, he expanded on this point, in the accustomed manner of a business-school professor: “It’s the Internet that is promoting democracy and promoting transparency. So then the issue is, how do we make the Internet better? And my view is that we make the Internet better by having more competition.”

Provided by Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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