

Google challenger in Vietnam redirecting queries

May 16 2013, by Chris Brummitt

(AP)—A Russian-financed search engine seeking to challenge Google's dominance in Vietnam is redirecting queries for some politically sensitive terms to the American company's search engine, apparently as a way of avoiding government anger or legal liability for sending surfers to sites containing criticism of the ruling party.

The move Thursday follows an Associated Press story on the well-funded start up, Coc Coc, which noted it didn't seem to be censoring results. The shift illustrates the difficulties facing companies in Vietnam's booming Internet industry, which must contend with a government intent on stifling online dissent that is a challenge to its authoritarian rule.

For Coc Coc, it sends a message to the ruling Communist Party that it doesn't have to worry about it encouraging opposition to one party rule. But it points to possible difficulties for Google if it wants to open offices and promote its products in Vietnam—and not have to act as a government censor. Google doesn't have an office in Vietnam because it is concerned about liability for content on its servers. Coc Coc has more than 300 staff and a large office in Hanoi, the capital.

The AP story Wednesday noted that Coc Coc search results for "Viet Tan," a well-known overseas pro-democracy group outlawed in Vietnam, were similar to Google's. Each brought up the English and Vietnamese language websites of the organization. By Thursday, that had changed. Searchers were greeted with a message saying the search "was not valid"

before being automatically redirected to the Google page displaying the returns for "Viet Tan." Searches for one of the country's most well-known dissidents, Le Quoc Quan, were dealt with in the same way.

In an interview with a Coc Coc representative over an instant messaging service, the company said it "decided not to serve the segment of political queries at all."

"We are computer geeks completely out of politics and keen on technologies only," the representative said. "It's not our focus at all. So that whenever you want to find something in English, French or about politics in Vietnamese—just please use Google."

Google declined to comment.

In 2010, Google shifted its search engine in China to Hong Kong after a censorship row with Beijing. The decision allowed Baidu, a Chinese search engine that censors on behalf of the government, to dominate the market. Google does take down some material at the requests of governments around the world, but balks at wholesale censoring of content.

Coc Coc, or "Knock Knock" in English, is the latest in a series of challengers to Google's dominance in Vietnam, a country of 90 million people with one of the fastest-growing Internet use rates in the world. It believes that its algorithms make for a better search in the Vietnamese language. It is also photographing and filming commercial businesses on streets around the country, data that is used for a richer search experience.

Shaken by the explosion in online dissent, Vietnam's government is drafting laws that would tighten freedom of expression on the Internet and possibly force companies such as Google to keep their servers inside

the country. It routinely blocks and filters sensitive sites, sentences bloggers to long jail terms and is alleged to be involved in hacking attacks on websites critical of the ruling party.

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