

Silicon Valley idealism at odds with China market

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Using technology to make the world better is a well-worn mantra in Silicon Valley, preached so strongly by internet companies such as Google and Facebook that it has become part of their identity

Google workers' outrage over the notion of censoring searches to

appease Chinese officials highlights the dilemma US tech companies face in accessing the lucrative market.

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That idealism has repeatedly run headlong into a wall of reality when it comes to [internet firms](#) needing to compromise with the interests of governments that have oppressive approaches to online activity.

"The tech industry had a utopian view of the world and of itself," said Irina Raicu, director of the internet ethics program at Santa Clara University in Silicon Valley.

"It's running up against its own narrative of how it holds certain values."

After portraying itself as a champion of making all the world's information freely available, Google would be hard-pressed to explain taking part in online censorship in China, according to Raicu.

Hundreds of Google employees were said to have signed a protest letter after reports that the company is working on a censor-friendly search engine to get back into China.

The employees are demanding to know more about the supposed "Dragonfly" project so they can weigh the moral significance of their work at the company.

"We are seeing technologists start to flex their power," Raicu said.

"They do want to change the world for the better, and this goes against that."

'Do no evil'

Silicon Valley companies share global ethics challenges with other industries, but they face employee rebellion and user scrutiny because of having built images of being devoted to doing good, or at least "no evil."

Facebook is banned in China, but that has not stopped the leading [online social network](#) from exploring the potential to establish a beachhead there, even if only for an "incubator" that nurtures local entrepreneurs.

Facebook last year discretely released a photo sharing mobile application, named Colorful Balloons, in China. Two years ago, it reportedly worked on a censorship tool that would filter out posts on forbidden topics there.

Even Apple, the world's most valuable company, has had to make concessions in China, pulling items from its App Store and transferring control of cloud storage accounts of Chinese customers to a [company](#) there.

Meanwhile, Chinese internet firms such as Baidu, Tencent, Alibaba, and WeChat have thrived.

Money over morals?

Google and other publicly-traded US tech titans are legally obligated to maximize shareholder value, but being viewed as "oppression's little helper in China" can hurt their businesses along with their reputations, noted Human Rights Watch senior internet researcher Cynthia Wong.

Wong called on tech firms looking to do business in China to have plans in place to improve the censorship and the human rights situation, which

she said has worsened since Google pulled out.

"Google wants to organize the world's information; Facebook wants to connect everyone," Wong said.

"I think the engineers really do believe in those missions, and that accounts for some of the difference in how Silicon Valley reacts than, say, the oil sector."

Google is among the Silicon Valley companies that pride themselves on open cultures in which workers are encouraged to share views, creating an environment ripe for employee activism when values seem compromised, according to Ann Skeet, senior director of leadership ethics at Santa Clara University.

"Google has led with this strong culture, and now has its own employees calling it on hypocrisy," Skeet said.

Employees, many of them Millennials, also feel a right to know how what they are working on is going to be used—and to be able to decide whether to participate.

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