

The Web: Free speech -- for Chinese admen

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Commercial speech on the Internet -- marketing and advertising -- does not seem to be subject to the same strict censorship standards that political speech is in China, and today, most surprisingly for Westerners, exists in a relatively free state of expression, experts tell United Press International's The Web.

Concerns were raised in the U.S. Congress Tuesday about censorship fetters being placed by the Chinese Communist government on U.S. Internet service providers like America Online and search-engine providers like Yahoo! and Google.

These companies are "enabling dictatorship," said Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., chairman of the House Human Rights Subcommittee that is holding hearings Wednesday on China and the Internet.

The conventional wisdom -- promoted by Smith, other pols and much of the mainstream media -- is that U.S. companies will forever tolerate the shackling of the human rights of their customers in exchange for the lucre of billions of potential profits in the Chinese market.

But experts tell The Web that marketers faced a lot of censorship by Chinese authorities 15 years ago -- with restrictions even as to the color and typeface of adverts -- but that today this is more relaxed.

Portland, Ore.-based interactive marketing company The New Group works extensively in China, helping U.S. companies introduce new products into the Chinese market, a spokeswoman said. A decade and a half ago the government there prohibited a certain ad from being broadcast because the type was in green. But today the content and marketing messages for new services and products is often so technical that the government does not interfere with the content that The New Group creates for the Internet and other channels. Clients include IBM, HP, Quark and Dolby.

The go-along-to-get-along strategy may work over the long term in China, experts said.

According to Don Harris, a law professor at Temple University's school of law in Philadelphia, there are a number of competing interests that companies weigh when making a decision to cooperate, or not cooperate, with the Chinese government on censorship issues. Google has received the most criticism in the media in the states over its decisions, but the company's overall strategy may not be unreasonable, given the context of what is going on in China, he said.

"Google's decision involves two competing interests. One interest is competition. Google needs to compete with Microsoft and with Yahoo!," said Harris. "Because those two already offer Internet services, Google is obviously at a disadvantage by not also having access to the large Chinese market. The other interest is democracy and the free exchange of ideas. It seems a bit disingenuous to suggest, as Google does, that 'more information is better, even if not full.' More information, at the expense of getting only one side or not having reasoned and full debate on any particular view or issue, is not better by a long shot."

Harris added, "Google's decision, which is not unreasonable, chooses money over democracy -- as defined by open and unfettered dissemination of knowledge. As I say, the decision is not unreasonable in light of the ever-growing need to be competitive and gain access to an extremely attractive market, but let's be more frank and truthful about what is happening here."

More than 15 years ago, recalls Brian Olsen, director of marketing communications for Denver-based software company Video Professor, he had a spirited debate with Sen. Alan K. Simpson, R-Wyo., about human rights in China. "He (Simpson) said we still needed to maintain relations with China. His point was simple. Progress in China would only happen with communication between

our countries, student and cultural changes, etc.," said Olsen. "Despite what happened, putting the wall back up would solve nothing. As long as our citizens could interact with China's, there would be hope for a better future. Sometimes you have to compromise a little now, to make bigger gains later. Senator Simpson, who remains a valued friend, was right. That said, I'm totally dedicated to our First Amendment. I really think China will get there some day. Just not on our timetable."

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