Internet Censorship in China: The Conventional View

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No one doubts that the government of the People’s Republic of China is one of the most repressive regimes on the planet, nor that its repression extends to pervasive interference with its citizens’ access to information at all levels, including blocks on Internet-mediated transmission from outside the country and suppression of internal news circulation by indigenous reporters. Australian journalist Jodie Martin <http://www.suite101.com/profile.cfm/jodielou> wrote, “Since the introduction of the internet in China in 1994, the Chinese government has tried to contain and control online information available to its citizens. China’s censorship of the internet has forced websites to be blocked, blogs shut down, and keywords censored in search engines resulting in no search results for certain topics.”

Amnesty International <http://www.amnestyusa.org/> has worked for years to oppose Chinese Internet censorship, harshly criticizing companies such as Yahoo, Cisco and Sun Microsystems for collaborating with the Chinese regime in building technical barriers to communication in China (quoting directly):

- In China, individuals can be sentenced to death for publishing information on the Internet considered a “state secret” – the definition of “state secret” can change daily, and can include important public health information (i.e., SARS or HIV/AIDS) or simply controversial opinions. Scores of people have been imprisoned for using the Internet, and, of those arrested, some have died as a result of torture by the police.
- Some companies, including Cisco Systems and Sun Microsystems, have helped to build the infrastructure that makes Internet censorship possible while others, including Yahoo, Microsoft, and Google, are increasingly complying with government demands to actively restrict Chinese users.
- In China the internet is heavily policed. To operate in China, US companies say they must monitor and restrict search results and blogs, and are actively restricting topics such as human rights, political reform, Tiananmen Square and Falun Gong, among others. Yahoo, Microsoft and Google all help to implement China’s draconian system of censorship.
- Yahoo! has sacrificed the privacy of users to facilitate their subsequent imprisonment for peacefully expressing opinions over the Internet. Shi Tao, a Chinese poet and journalist, is serving a ten-year prison sentence in China simply for sending an email to the USA. In a disturbingly similar case, Li Zhi, another Yahoo email customer, was jailed for eight years in 2003, after posting comments that criticized government corruption. Amnesty considers them both Prisoners of Conscience.
- These companies claim that accepting China’s restrictions is unavoidable. Yet these forms of censorship contradict the very principles that these companies were founded upon, and also go against the constitution of the People’s Republic of China and violate Articles 17 and 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantee privacy and freedom of expression.(Amnesty International 2007)

In recent months, I’m sure that many readers have been following with interest the conflict

Typing “China Google” into any search engine will bring readers a torrent of articles on this topic, including vitriolic attacks on the Chinese government’s fear of allowing their citizens to access the riches of Western information and culture. Just as a single example, an otherwise staid report in Ecommerce Journal uses the headline “Chinese censorship becomes outrageous, Google threatens to leave China.”< http://www.ecommerce-journal.com/node/26399 >

Bill Gates’ 2008 assurance that “Internet Censorship Won’t Work”< http://www.nytimes.com/idg/IDG_002570DE00740E18882573F50010C487.html?ref=technology > emphasizes the ethnocentric confidence of what up to now has been a dominant culture and economic powerhouse on the planet. Gates reportedly said, “I don't see any risk in the world at large that someone will restrict free content flow on the Internet…. You cannot control the Internet.”

In the next column, I’ll present a contrarian view of what’s going on in China with respect to the Internet. Perhaps there’s more going on than a reaction to the infinite riches and resistance to the intellectual wealth of the West.

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