



Google's Diluted Message

Statement on censorship on Google.cn

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Statement on the launch of Google.cn

ARTICLE 19 urges Google to uphold its commitment to the right to access all possible information by anyone anywhere. Google's decision to censor news, democracy and human rights information from its Chinese search engine to appease the Chinese authorities seriously undermines further development of the right to free speech and freedom of information in China.

Google, one of the world's leading Internet search companies, has launched a Chinese version of its service, www.google.cn, based in mainland China. By locating its new service inside the mainland, Google hopes to speed up access for its users. However, in order to be allowed to do business in China, it has bowed to government demands that it should filter out any search results that link to sites that the Chinese government disapproves of.

ARTICLE 19 reminds Google that it holds a critical position as one of few major gateways with excellent Internet search engine technology. It could play a major role in realising the right of every Chinese Internet user to freedom of expression and information. But by complying with the Chinese authorities' censorship demands, it has achieved the opposite: it has become complicit in China's official censorship regime and it has also reneged on its own commitment to support freedom of expression and the right to access information.¹

Google claims that "...with google.cn, Chinese users will ultimately receive a search service that is fast, always accessible, and helps them find information both in China and from around the world". The google.cn search engine may always be available, but the search results are incomplete and unreliable – there is a massive disparity in the search results from the US-based Google and its new Chinese version. Google admits that it will censor the information available through google.cn in line with the demands of the Chinese authorities. For example, a search for "Falun Gong" on the US based google.com returns approximately 3 million hits; the same search on the Chinese version, google.cn returns only 12 thousand hits. The same search in Chinese returns a mere 1,000 results on Google.cn, versus 3 million on Google.com. A perfunctory notice appears on the bottom of Google.cn announcing that certain search results have not been displayed "pursuant to local laws, regulations and policies."

ARTICLE 19 rejects Google's claim that providing some information in China is less inconsistent with not providing any information at all. Incomplete, filtered information poses a serious risk to the awareness and enforcement of individual rights, public accountability of government authorities and support for the dissenting views of minority groups. Google.cn assists the Chinese authorities by allowing its search engine to present an altered reality, cleansed of any information that the Chinese government disapproves of.

¹ See, for example, Google's Prospectus lodged with the Securities and Exchange Commission, 29 April 2004, p vi: http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1288776/000119312504073639/ds1.htm#toc16167_2

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GLOBAL CAMPAIGN FOR FREE EXPRESSION

ARTICLE 19 reminds Google of the recent Joint Declaration by the freedom of expression watchdogs of the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Organisation of American States,² in which they say:

- Filtering systems which are not end-user controlled – whether imposed by a government or commercial service provider – are a form of prior-censorship and cannot be justified; and
- Corporations which provide Internet searching, chat, publishing services should make an effort to ensure they respect the rights of their clients to use the Internet without interference. While this may pose difficulties in relation to operations in certain countries, these corporations are encouraged to work together, with the support of other stakeholders, to resist official attempts to control or restrict use of the Internet, contrary to the principles set out herein.

Google's decision to engage in prior censorship of material which they fear may offend the Chinese authorities is particularly disappointing in the wake of recent actions by Microsoft and Yahoo. Microsoft recently took down a blog that was critical of Chinese policies at the request of the Chinese authorities³ and Yahoo disclosed confidential account information of a Chinese journalist to the Chinese authorities, after he had provided details of a censorship order to the Asia Democracy Forum and the website Democracy News. As a result, this journalist was sentenced to ten years in prison for "providing state secrets to foreign entities".

The realisation of fundamental human rights on the Internet, such as the right to access information and the right to free speech, effectively rests in part with corporations such as Google, Microsoft and Yahoo. They are the corporate intermediaries that are critical in making freedom of expression a reality. This is evident in the context of the Chinese authorities achieving what no one thought was possible – controlling access to information on the Internet. ARTICLE 19 urges Google to give serious consideration to the long-lasting regressive impact of its decision and adopt a more meaningful stance to protect the interests of its users who would most benefit from its ethical corporate mandate.

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² Available at <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/standards/three-mandates-dec-2005.pdf>.

³ Article at <http://www.vnunet.com/vnunet/news/2148091/microsoft-kowtows-chinese>