

Google, Yahoo criticized over foreign censorship

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In a report on Internet censorship, Reporters Without Borders scolds the tech giants—including Microsoft—for cooperating with repressive governments.



Big Internet companies that do business abroad often find themselves in a quandary. While at home they champion privacy and free speech rights, overseas they often have to play by rules that don't reflect those same freedoms.

Paris-based humanitarian group Reporters Without Borders underscored that tension in its annual report on the state of Internet censorship and repression around the world, released Mar. 12. The group pointed a finger at China, which it says engages in the most sophisticated online censorship in the world, and Egypt, which it says routinely jails activist bloggers. Reporters Without Borders also called out numerous other regimes it says engage in unfair treatment of Web users.

But Reporters Without Borders also had a message for the U.S.-based technology companies growing their businesses in these countries: Stop cooperating with these "enemies" of the Internet. "They are aware of what's going on," says Clothilde Le Coz, who heads the Internet freedom desk for Reporters Without Borders, referring to Internet giants Google (GOOG), Yahoo! (YHOO), and Microsoft (MSFT). But in many parts of the world, Le Coz says, these companies are "not going far enough" to protect their users from what her group considers repressive governments.

In well-publicized cases over the past few years, each of these three companies has cooperated with Chinese officials to censor or prosecute Internet users. In 2005, Microsoft deleted the blog of political activist Michael Anti. The same year, journalist Shi Tao was sentenced to 10 years in prison after China Yahoo! provided his information to authorities (China Yahoo! is operated by Alibaba.com (1688.BE), minority-owned by Yahoo). Google China prevents Web pages from appearing on its search results if they are on the government's blacklist.

"These companies are about communication and information," says Colin Maclay, managing director of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society. "The challenge is that those two things represent power, and they represent a threat" to governments used to wielding the power, he says.

Tech giants help launch standards body

Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo are working together to better handle legal and ethical problems raised while operating in countries that have different views of Internet freedom. Last October, they launched the Global Network Initiative (GNI), along with Harvard's Berkman Center, the Center for Democracy & Technology (CDT), and other nonprofit groups. GNI drafted guidelines for what procedures to take in the event of requests to take down content or provide user information. As a result, the companies "have something to turn to on what process to take and how to mitigate that risk," says Cynthia Wong, staff attorney for Washington-based CDT.

Reporters Without Borders says forming GNI is a constructive first step, but remains skeptical about how much change it can effect. "By signing the Global Network Initiative, the U.S. firms Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft publicly said that they wanted to respect their customers' freedom of expression worldwide," wrote Le Coz in the Mar. 12 report. "How much they may in reality defy the demands of authorities in countries to which they provide services remains to be seen."

The international humanitarian group is pushing for standards that would require all government requests and takedown notices be made in writing. That way, every incident of potential conflict would be brought into a public, permanent record. The group says that it asked GNI to include this provision in its guiding documents, but was refused.

Such an arrangement would be time-consuming for companies, says CDT's Wong. "With respect to requests for user content, there's just going to be some cases when the communications are going to be oral on the phone," she says. GNI's guidelines state that "written demands are preferable," but allow for "some circumstances" when they would not be feasible.

Chuck Cosson, senior policy counsel for Microsoft, says that the Redmond (Wash.)-based company asks that requests made by governments be made in writing, but that sometimes results in overly broad demands. For example, China officials once requested that Microsoft remove content from a blog, but didn't explain why. Since identical content was freely available on other sites, that situation required Microsoft to call the government and get a clarification.

Yahoo's adjustments in China and Vietnam

In recent months, Reporters Without Borders has pressed Yahoo to exert more control over Alibaba.com and its dealings with the Chinese government. In January, Yahoo addressed the issue in a letter to the group, saying its encouragement helped convince Alibaba.com to put notices on search pages of China Yahoo! letting users know that certain results have been filtered because of Chinese law. On China Yahoo! e-mail pages, the company says, a notice informs new users that the service is subject to the country's laws. The company also said it has met with the families of Tao and Wang Xiaoning, another user who was detained for online activities, and publicly called for their release. Google did not return a request for comment for this story.

While China has been a frontier in the online privacy battle, Vietnam may be the next war zone. In January, the country issued new regulations limiting bloggers to writing only about personal information and not "press articles, literary works, or other publications banned" by Vietnamese legislation.

Many of Vietnam's nearly 1 million bloggers use Yahoo! 360, the Internet company's blogging platform. Anticipating the need to defend its users' privacy there, Yahoo set up its Vietnamese-language operation in Singapore, where it says laws have stronger protections for consumers. In a post to Yahoo's corporate blog on Mar. 12, the company's vice-president and deputy general counsel Michael Samway addressed the issue: "We've learned tough lessons as pioneers in the emerging markets, and we're now applying them to how we build businesses in new markets. In the case of Vietnam, we took deliberate steps when launching services there to protect our users."

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