Ethics in question: Is Google’s censoring of anti-Chinese information on its Chinese search engine ethical?

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Abstract

In this research paper, I will proceed to explain why Google’s decision to censor anti-Chinese government information violates traditional business ethical standards. Google is a very successful search engine in the United States. Very recently, Google decided to release a Chinese version of the traditional Google search engine to the internet users in China. After being shut down by the Chinese government, Google decided to release a new version of the Google search engine called Google China. Google China received much criticism from human rights advocates because it censored anti-Chinese government information such as human rights information. Thus, Google’s actions in China became a major issue pertaining to traditional business ethics.

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“Youth+freedom+equality+bottom-up innovation+user focus+don’t be evil=The Miracle of Google (Thompson, 2006).” This equation was written by Kai-Fu Lee, the head of operations for Google in China, on his personal website. It accurately summarizes Google’s company mission (Thompson, 2006). In my research paper, I help the reader understand why Google’s decision to censor anti-Chinese government information is unethical by traditional business standards. The paper will begin by providing information on Google’s founding and the issue facing Google in China. The paper will then continue by giving a brief definition of traditional business ethics and how they relate to Google’s censoring of anti-Chinese government information. The paper will end with a conclusion derived from the information presented.

Background information on Google, the company

The name "Google" originated from a misspelling of the word “googol.” “Googol” refers to $10^{100}$, meaning a 1 followed by one-hundred zeros. Google began as a research project in January of 1996 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, two PhD students at California's Stanford University. They hypothesized that a search engine that analyzed the relationships between websites would produce better results than existing techniques. It was originally nicknamed "BackRub" because the system checked back links to estimate a site's importance (Google, 2006). Google Inc. became an incorporated business in California in September of 1998 (Google, 2006).

The Google search engine helps users gain access to relevant information utilizing a stripped down version of Linux and a vast online index of websites (Google, 2006). The goal of Google is to “organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible
and useful (Company Overview, 2006).” In order to achieve this goal, the Google search engine interface is now available in over 35 languages (Google, 2006).

Google recently expanded its operations by providing an email service called Gmail and a map service called Google Maps. Some of Google’s registered trademarks in the US are Google, AdSense, AdWords, and Blogger (Google Products, 2006).

Background on the issue concerning Google in China

When Google first made the decision to market its search engine to internet users in China, the idea was to have a Chinese version of the Google search engine. This would include translating all of the Google search engine components into Chinese, but not limiting any information to the average Chinese internet user. Google decided that it would be up to the Chinese government to decide what content was blocked. By doing this, Google effectively relieved itself of any ethical liability to the internet user in China.

When the Chinese version of Google was shut down by the Chinese government, Google decided to take a different path. In December of 2005, Google signed a deal with the Chinese government that enabled the company to establish a legal presence in China (Keen, 2006). The next big task was to find what sites to limit inside China. Since the Chinese government refused to give a “back list” of banned websites in China to Google, Google decided to mimic the firewall of China. Google achieved this by setting up a computer inside China and programmed it to try to access websites outside the country that were controversial. If a site was blocked by the firewall that meant that the Chinese government regarded the content as controversial and Google added it to its blacklist of banned websites (Keen, 2006). Some examples of content that was blocked by Google are information pertaining to Falun Gong, which is a banned spiritual movement in China, any site on Tibetan opposition to the Chinese government, most links to human rights organizations and Tiananmen Square commemoration sites (Keen, 2006).

After finding what sites to block, Google launched its newest creation, Google China on January 27, 2006. Google China gives the average Chinese internet user the ability to search for information without being slowed down by the Chinese firewall. The question that remains is whether Google’s decision to censor the information stated above followed traditional business ethical standards (Keen, 2006).

Definition of business ethics

Business ethics is “a form of applied ethics that examines ethical rules and principles within a commercial context, the various moral or ethical problems that can arise in a business setting, and any special duties or obligations that apply to persons who are engaged in commerce (Business Ethics, 2006).” Business ethics is very much centered on business philosophies, which are deeply rooted in the morals and values of a company (Business Ethics, 2006). In order to evaluate a company’s ethical decisions, one must look at the fundamental purpose of the company. For example, if a company’s purpose is
to maximize returns to shareholders, then it would be considered unethical for a company to consider the rights of anyone else (Business ethics, 2006).

Situational ethics also play a part in how decisions are made regarding different business situations. This refers to a particular view of ethics that states, “The morality of an act is a function of the state of the system at the time it is performed (Situational ethics, 2006).” Not every situation is the same, so not every ethical decision will be the same. Situational ethics becomes very pertinent to the ethical decisions of Google in China (Situational Ethics, 2006).

Why Google’s actions in China follow traditional business ethical standards

Supporters of Google’s actions in China maintain that Google has not violated traditional business ethical standards by censoring anti-Chinese information. The main reasoning for this statement centers on the fact that Google is helping the average Chinese internet user gain more access to valuable information from all over the world.

“Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful (Company Overview, 2006).” Sometimes in the process of trying to accomplish this mission, the company may run into certain “Invisible Barriers of Trade,” as was the case for Google in China (Barriers, 2006). The definition of “Invisible Barriers of Trade” must be understood in order to explain why Google censored anti-Chinese government information (Barriers, 2006). As it applies to business in China, “Invisible Barriers of Trade” refers to “government regulations (national and local), and cultural conditions that do not directly restrict trade but hinder it with excessive and obscure requirements (Barriers, 2006).”

Critics of Google’s actions in China must understand that not every country is a democracy. China is a country that continues to hold strict communist ideals and Google is merely obeying the rules set forth by the Chinese government. I think that is important to look at the fact that the Google China website does not just display a message such as “page not available,” but instead displays a message that explains to the Chinese internet user that the “Information is not available due to Chinese law (Keen, 2006).”

By agreeing to censor anti-Chinese government information, Google is still helping millions of Chinese internet users gain better access to valuable information from around the world. Jim Harper advocates this view in his article Google Isn’t Evil in which he states, “Just as importantly, the search engine will expose the Chinese people to a world of information and ideas, including the value and strength of freedom (Harper, 2006).” Although Google has had to censor certain information regarding anti-Chinese government content, it is clear that Google has done all it can to abide by traditional business ethical standards in China.

Why Google’s actions in China do not follow traditional business ethical standards
Regardless of one’s view on Google’s actions in China, the fact is that its decision to censor anti-Chinese government information violates its own stated moral standards. By censoring anti-Chinese government information, Google has strayed from its dedication to helping every user get unrestricted access to content on the internet. Let’s refer back to the equation that Kai-Fu Lee developed about Google China, “Youth+freedom+equality+bottom-up innovation+user focus+don’t be evil=The Miracle of Google (Thompson, 2006).” By censoring anti-Chinese government information, Google has not only violated the mission stated above, but also its own company moral obligations (Business Ethics, 2006). By this logic, since business ethical principles are rooted in company morals, Google’s decision to censor anti-Chinese government information is unethical (Business Ethics, 2006).

Kai-Fu Lee’s formula makes use of the word “freedom” which means “exemption from external control, interference, regulation, etc (Freedom, 2006).” By using the word “freedom,” Kai-Fu Lee is indirectly professing that Google is ethically bound to give the average Chinese internet user the unlimited ability to search for any topic on the net without interference by the Chinese government. Google has not given the average Chinese internet user this freedom at all and has, instead, decided to follow the path of “least resistance” and succumb to the Chinese government. By allowing the Chinese government to dictate how Google runs its operations in China, Google has failed in its purpose of giving the average Chinese internet user the freedom that he or she is entitled to and has thus violated its own ethical principles.

Kai-Fu Lee’s equation refers to the informal company motto which is “Don’t be evil (Company Overview, 2006).” When considering this motto, one must refer to the concept of “authentic capitalism.” As it relates to Google, authentic capitalism is the concept that states that any moral argument is valid, provided that the CEO’s of Google believe it. Andrew Keen makes reference to this idea of authentic capitalism by quoting an excerpt from Clive Johnson’s New York Times magazine piece. In this excerpt, Clive Johnson states that Google’s China policy is being defined by the company’s “halcyon concept of itself (Keen, 2006)”: By merely improving access to information in an authoritarian country, Google is doing the right thing ethically. In contrast, critics hold that by censoring this vital information, Google is telling the average Chinese internet user that it has no interest in helping to liberate China from Communist ideals (Keen, 2006). James Burnham states in his article “Chinode Doing Evil” that, “Google prides itself on the democratization of information, stating that the internet has the power to liberate (Burnham, 2006).” Google’s corporate motto, “Don’t be evil” is not reflected in its decision to censor anti-Chinese government information in China (Company Overview, 2006). Instead one can see how the actions of Google reflect the violation of traditional business ethical standards.

Given this information, one must wonder how Google can call its decision to censor anti-Chinese government information in China ethical, when it is clearly unethical. In his article “Chinode Doing Evil,” Burnham maintains,
Google in China raises a host of interesting ethical questions about what degree of obligation U.S. companies have to Western ideals, such as liberty or democracy. While one may not advocate total subversion of Chinese law in pursuit of freedom of information, it is still disconcerting when, as the article states, "Earlier this month, Google's C.E.O., Eric Schmidt, visited Kai-Fu Lee [Google's China CEO] in Beijing and told journalists that it would be 'arrogant' of Google to try to change China's censorship laws (Burnham, 2006).

By abiding by the Chinese government’s rules and regulations, Google is becoming just another company willing to give up any sense of company ethics in the pursuit of market share and profits.

Conclusion

The idea that Google is making the right ethical decision by providing “limited” internet access to the Chinese people rings hollow. While Google is helping the average Chinese internet user gain better access to information from around the world, it is also denying them the same internet user the freedom that American internet users receive. By denying this freedom to Chinese internet users, Google is failing in living up to its informal company motto, “Don’t be evil (Company Overview).” Google’s actions in China represent a new wave of corporations who are willing to give up their ethical obligations in pursuit of market share and profits in other countries. Only by focusing on sound ethical principles can Google come back to its roots and live up to its informal company motto, “Don’t be evil (Company Overview).”

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