

April 2010

Virtue In Action

Google: Search vs. Censorship

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



Google™

CENSORED

Google is the largest Internet search and online ad sales company in the world. The very name Google is so popular that it is synonymous with “search.” In addition to its financial success, Google also is known for its people-centric, fair-play philosophies, including the motto “don’t be evil.” Google recently ranked third in a list of American companies with the best reputations.

But over the past several years, Google has increasingly come up against policies from the Chinese government that have challenged its **integrity**. Specifically, the Chinese government demanded that Google **ensor** search results for Chinese residents using Google’s Chinese service www.google.cn. This placed Google in a unique situation where it had to balance competing interests and responsibilities—its **responsibility** to generate profits for its employees and shareholders (individuals who invest in the company) with its responsibility to live up to its own principle of not being “evil.” In March, Google decided it could no longer abide by the Chinese government’s demands and it stopped **ensoring** its search results.

For Google, this is a significant decision as it places at risk its ability to operate and conduct business in China, which has more Internet users than any other nation in the world. The manner by which Google came to this point provides an interesting and powerful study of the virtue of **integrity** in trying to live up to stated principles, while at the same time trying to **wisely** balance its other responsibilities and interests.

China’s History of Censorship

When Google first entered into the Chinese search market, company executives knew they would have to abide by the Chinese government’s demands to censor the results of search queries that produced results the government found objectionable. For example, the Chinese government blocks Internet and general media access to information on topics such as the government’s violent suppression of student protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989, and China’s actions in Tibet where it has forcefully exerted its rule since the 1950s.

It also tries to limit access to information on current protests against the government. The government’s control of information on the Internet is known as the “Great **Firewall** of China.”

The firewall doesn’t only apply to the Internet. China has a history of threatening and imprisoning journalists who write content that doesn’t fall in line with government standards and beliefs. Watchdog group Reporters Without Borders ranked China 163 out of 168 countries in its 2007 index measuring press freedoms. Journalists face harassment and even prison terms for violating the government’s bans on publishing stories it considers objectionable, such as the promotion of human rights and exposing abuses by government officials.

According to a New York Times article, China leads the world with the number of journalists it has imprisoned with an estimated 24 journalists being detained as of the most recent count in December of 2009.

Google Goes to China: Short-Term Sacrifice for Long-Term Good?

In addition to not being evil, Google has a corporate policy supporting the **dissemination** and availability of free information. Given China’s suppression of free speech, the press and the Internet, it might seem odd that Google would consider being a part of the “great firewall” by agreeing to government directed censoring of its search results. In order to build a stronger presence in the Chinese market, Google opted in 2006 to physically enter the country and set up a Chinese language search engine in accord with Chinese government rules.

Google defended its decision by pointing out that entering the Chinese market would fulfill its “mission to serve all the people in the world,” according to the China Daily newspaper. In addition, Google executive Andrew McLaughlin said in a statement released to cnet.com, “In deciding how best to approach the Chinese—or any—market, we must balance our commitments to satisfy the interest of users, expand access to information, and respond to local conditions.”

The CEO of Google also explained the company’s approach as an attempt to understand and respect cultural differences. “I think it’s arrogant for us to walk into a country where we are just beginning operations and tell that country how to run itself,” Schmidt explained in an article that appeared in the San Francisco Gate.

Google imposed some rules of its own in an attempt to maintain some of its principles, including the insistence that any blocked or banned searches would reveal that they are banned, rather than leading searchers to a dead end with no explanation.

Google was attempting to balance wisely the negatives of censoring its own search results, in opposition to its own principles, with the hoped for long-term benefits of providing Chinese Internet users with additional search options, and possibly over time influencing the Chinese government to allow greater freedom of information.

At the time of Google's decision, many argued that Google would be a more effective agent of positive change by working within China than from the outside. Google's decision may also have been influenced by the reality that China was quickly becoming the largest Internet market in the world, and it has a responsibility to its employees and shareholders to generate profits.

Some argued that this was an unacceptable undermining of Google's **integrity** in not steadfastly adhering to its own principles. Protesters appeared outside of Google's headquarters, and some of its executives were even pulled into Congressional hearings.

Google's decision to enter the Chinese market on the government's terms was a classic example of trying to balance competing responsibilities, and in the process, sacrificing one of its principles over the short term in the hopes of achieving a greater good over the long term.

Google executives pressed on, hiring new workers at its Chinese operations and providing what Chinese citizens increasingly saw as a vital service. In fact, a Nature News survey of Chinese scientists revealed that 84 percent of them thought losing Google access would "somewhat or significantly" hurt their work process, according to wired.com.

Censorship Intensifies

Following Google's full entrance into the Chinese market, its share of search and ad revenues increased.

And Google executives expected that going into and following the 2008 Olympics the Chinese government would loosen up on censorship. Unfortunately the opposite happened.

Google co-founder, Sergey Brin, told the Wall Street Journal that the rules of working in China became murkier and murkier beginning around 2008 and that "executives throughout the company grew more anxious about the policy," according to WSJ reporter Jessica Vascellaro.



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"China was ever-present," Brin (left) told Vascellaro for an article entitled "Brin Drove Google to Pull Back in China." "One out of five meetings that I attended, there was some component specifically applied to China in a different way than other countries."

Tensions peaked in January 2010 after a major cyber attack—seemingly backed by the Chinese government—appeared to target the e-mails of human rights activists using Google's gmail accounts. Brin said he could not stand for it, particularly given the fact his family is originally from Russia and left the country when he was a child to escape another repressive **communist** regime.

"In some aspects of their policy, particularly with respect to censorship, with respect to surveillance of dissidents, I see the same earmarks of **totalitarianism**, and I find that personally quite troubling," Brin told the WSJ.

This realization presented the next moment of decision for Brin and Google. Google was **humble** enough to honestly assess the reality of its position, that they had become a part of a system of censorship that violated their own principles, and they had been unable to promote greater freedom of information by working within China.

Principles over Profit

Fortunately, in nations with freely competitive economies there is rarely a conflict between profits and principles. In a fair and competitive environment the firms that profit are normally those who serve their

customers best by listening to their needs, working hard, and providing their customers with the best quality products and services. Google was unfortunately placed in a position by the Chinese government where to even compete it would have to violate its own principles of how to best serve its customers.

Google responded by deciding to no longer censor its search results. Users of google.cn are now redirected to the company's Hong Kong based service where there is no censoring.



Chinese government agencies now determine what information they will allow Google users to view coming into China from Google Hong Kong.

As of the writing of this lesson, the Chinese government is aggressively censoring Google's search results for Chinese users, and irregularly denying access to basic Google services such as its maps and pictures.

Google has also begun to take the expected financial hit for its stand against **ensorship**. In March, China's second largest cell phone operator, China Unicom Ltd., announced it wouldn't install Google's search functions into new handsets due to its decision. In addition, Google employees there are starting to leave to work for rivals, including Microsoft, recruiters told Vascellaro.

The worst could be yet to come, according to an analyst, Marianne Wolk, from Susquehanna Financial Group cited in the Financial Times, "By 2014 the Chinese

market could well have grown to \$15 [billion] to \$20 billion a year, and Google could have expected—before this week's announcement—to earn \$5 [billion] to \$6 billion of that."

Google has clearly decided that in balancing its responsibilities to its employees, shareholders, customers and principles, it will adhere to its principles, even if it means reduced future profits.

Decisions like this are never easy, either as a company or an individual. Google's story is a powerful example of how when we have to balance competing interests, and we are tempted to abandon a principle, it's best to adhere to our principles and live with **integrity**.

Vocabulary

Censorship: a system of examining in order to suppress or delete anything considered objectionable

Communism: a system of social organization in which all economic and social activity is controlled by a totalitarian state dominated by a single and self-perpetuating political party

Firewall: computer hardware or software that prevents unauthorized access to private data

Integrity: steadfast adherence to a moral or ethical code; being true to oneself

Responsibility: accepting and meeting the demands of our duty in life, being accountable pursuing excellence

Totalitarianism: a form of government in which the political authority exercises absolute and centralized control over all aspects of life, the individual is subordinated to the state, and opposing political and cultural expression is suppressed

Wisdom: ability to apply knowledge, experience, understanding in ways that are effective and good. The ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting

Oppressive: unreasonably burdensome or severe

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1126 Dartmouth Rd. Flossmoor, IL 60422
Phone: 708.922.1075

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Lesson goals

- Help students to understand the virtues of integrity, responsibility and humility and to appreciate their importance in business and in their daily lives
- Develop awareness of how in striving to do what is right we sometimes have to balance competing interests, and to present students with a framework of the virtues for evaluating competing interests
- Develop understanding of the nature of censorship in a totalitarian nation
- Help students to appreciate the freedoms we enjoy

Highlighted Virtues

Humility: an honest self appraisal of one's position, including strengths and weaknesses; a lack of false pride

Integrity: steadfast adherence to a moral or ethical code; being true to oneself

Responsibility: accepting and meeting the demands of our duty in life, being accountable

Wisdom: ability to apply knowledge, experience, understanding in ways that are effective and good. The ability to discern or judge what is true, right or lasting

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Discussion Question Options

1. What is China's recent history regarding censorship and freedom of information? What are some examples?
2. Let's list on the board some of Google's primary guiding principles and responsibilities (Don't be evil, increase the dissemination of free information to all peoples, generate profits for its employees and shareholders).
3. How did Google's establishing a Chinese version of its services impact these principles and responsibilities? Specifically, in what ways were Google's actions in China violating or affirming its own principles and responsibilities?
4. Try and place yourselves in the position of the Google executives in charge of deciding whether to establish a Chinese service, with the requirement of censoring on behalf of the government. Would you be willing to sacrifice some of your principles over the short term, with the hope of achieving a perceived greater long term good? Discuss your thoughts incorporating the virtues of responsibility, wisdom and integrity.
5. What personal experience made it more difficult for Brin to stomach the reality of Google's position in China?
6. Do you think Google made the right decision in discontinuing the censoring of its searches, and in doing so placing its Chinese business in jeopardy? Please discuss your answer from the perspectives of Google's responsibilities to its various constituencies, and from the perspective of the virtue of integrity.

Writing Options

1. Write about a time you were tempted to violate a principle of yours over the short term with the hope of achieving a "greater good" over the long term. Write about what you decided, the effects of your actions, and whether, with the benefit of hindsight, you made the right decision.

Extended Learning Activities

1. Organize the class into debate teams and have at least two debates, each centered on a different situation in our lives, where we are tempted to sacrifice a principle over the short term, with the hope of achieving a "greater good" over the long term.
2. Have the students research and write a brief report about how China's censorship affected the 2008 Olympics held in Beijing. Have them write specifically about how the Chinese government lifted some restrictions during the Games, still enacted censorship in other ways, and then increased censorship following the games.
3. Have each class member identify a historic incident in the United States that benefited from having the press there to cover it (Watergate, Rosa Parks civil disobedience, etc.). Demonstrate the importance of press freedoms using an example, either writing it up, or presenting it to the rest of the class.

Internet Resources

- "Brin Drove Google to Pull Back in China,"
Wall Street Journal: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704266504575141064259998090.html?mod=WSJ_article_related
- "Google Faces Fallout as China Reacts to Shift,"
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/24/technology/24google.html>
- "Leaping the Great Firewall of China,"
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704896104575138933670303698.html>
- "Google's Freedom Search," <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704896104575138933670303698.html>

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