

Extra Feature Story

China-Google Battle Over Internet Freedom

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Google has threatened to pull its business out of China, ending a 2006 compromise in which the popular search engine company agreed to allow the government to filter taboo topics on searches done inside the populous Communist Party-run country.

The dispute has heightened U.S.-China tensions and renewed an international debate over people's basic right to access information over the Internet.

The war of words began after Google reported that Chinese hackers gained access to Google's computers and broke into the Google e-mail accounts of Chinese human-rights activists. Google followed the trail to servers in Taiwan and eventually back to mainland China.

"We love China and the Chinese people," said Google CEO Eric Schmidt, according to the Wall Street Journal. "This is not about them. It's about our unwillingness to participate in censorship."

The Chinese government and state-run media denied accusations of any involvement in hacking attempts and charged the U.S. with trying to harm China's image.

While it would be a major public blow Beijing's image, it is not clear what effect Google's disappearance would have. Google is the most-used search engine on the Internet, but it ranks a distant second in China, behind Baidu

International tensions on the rise

The U.S. government stepped into the dispute by supporting Google's stand against censorship. In a speech on Internet freedom and foreign policy, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton criticized countries that censor the Web.

"Countries that restrict free access to information or violate the basic rights of Internet users risk walling themselves off from the progress of the next century," Secretary Clinton said.

The Chinese government fired back saying that the issue will strain relations between the two countries.

China's top newspaper, the state-run People's Daily, charged U.S. officials with attempting to "meddle in other nations' affairs on the one hand and to consolidate American hegemony in cyberspace on the other hand."

Is access to the Internet a human rights issue?

China argues that its limits on Internet use, including the elimination of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, are intended to protect minors from pornography and Internet scams.

However, the government also filters sites that allow discussion of events like the bloody 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre or the treatment of Tibetans. Critics call the policy "The Great Firewall."

The "Internet has become an important avenue through which anti-China forces infiltrate, sabotage and magnify their capabilities for destruction," the public security minister, Meng Jianzhu, wrote in *Qiushi*, a magazine published by the Communist Party's Central Committee.

Michael Posner, assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, told the NewsHour that countries that restrict the right of citizens to speak openly on the Internet are "preventing them from really engaging within their own societies in a dialogue about issues that are important to them."

But David Lampton, director of the China Studies Program at Johns Hopkins University, explained that "information control is at the heart of the Chinese strategy to maintain social stability."

Reaction from Chinese young people

Some scholars, including GuoBin Yang, author of *The Power of the Internet: Chinese Society in the Information Age*, argue that "Google's refusal to censor its Chinese search engine is consistent with Chinese citizens' broad demands for openness, transparency, and speech freedom, and should be taken just as seriously as those popular demands.

A 21-year old civil engineering student predicted a strong reaction against the government. "If Google really leaves, people will feel the government has gone too far," he told the New York Times.

But others wondered if Google was really that important. "The Internet is really big," Wang Quiya, a 27-year-old worker in Beijing's financial district, said to a Times reporter. "Something will take its place, right?"

-- Compiled by Kate Stanton and Lizzy Berryman for NewsHour Extra

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