

Google Takes the Rap for the Tech Gang of 4

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Earlier this week, the board of directors of a well trafficked grassroots online news-source decided to pull Google AdWords from their site. The decision was based on the outrage its members felt over what they perceive to be Google's collaboration with Chinese Government (PRC) officials to censor or otherwise limit content available through Google China.

It's easy to understand why a group of social activists have become disenamored with Google over its relationship with the PRC. The details surrounding the numerous issues shared amongst activists are far too broad to mention however most people are familiar with concerns over Tibet, Human Rights and Democracy.

It is more difficult to understand why Google is so often singled out as the major collaborator with the totalitarian PRC regime. Along with Google, Cisco Systems, Microsoft, and Yahoo have each made startling compromises in their bids to do business with the People's Republic. Known as the Tech-Gang of Four, these firms comprise the biggest Western players in the Chinese Internet market.

While they are not the only Western firms willing to comply with laws that violate concepts of free thought and expression, the Tech-Gang of 4 have, directly or indirectly, helped the PRC impose severe restrictions on the flow of information.

In the case of Cisco Systems, its routers are viewed by many, including a number of [Cisco shareholders](#), as the cornerstone components in what is referred to as the Great Firewall of China. With the ability to identify and filter individual information packets based on keywords, Cisco's routers are used by the PRC to censor information as it flows into China. Cisco also sells networking and monitoring equipment to Chinese law enforcement authorities, including products that could be used to trace the origins of content found on Chinese Internet servers.

In June 2005, Microsoft faced intense criticism over its reprogramming of the Chinese version of its blogging tool, MSN Spaces. In compliance with a Chinese Government request, a pop-up warning reading, "This message contains a banned expression, please delete this expression", when users in the PRC type a banned word into the body of their message. Banned words or expressions include reference to Tibetan independence, Taiwanese independence, the Tiananmen Square massacre and Chinese violations of human rights.

One of the most frightening accusations of collaboration with repressive officials were thrown at Yahoo last year when it was revealed that Yahoo shared information identifying Chinese journalist Shi Tao that led to his arrest and subsequent 10-year jail sentence. Tao's alleged crime, forwarding to foreign websites of a government Email warning journalists of the dangers of social destabilisation and risks resulting from the return of certain dissidents on the 15th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

In each of the cases outlined above, Western tech firms assisted the Chinese government by making it easier to exercise state control over the information available to its people. At the same time, each firm

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asserts they are only following the laws of the land in which they work. Both statements are true and reasonable. In an [interview with the BBC](#), William Makower, CEO of Panlogic, a marketing consultancy with operations in China said, "If you want to deal with the Chinese, you have to deal with their rules. It is all very well to have high-minded ideals about how you want the Chinese to behave, but opposing China is going to be counter-productive."

Citizens of any jurisdiction have the right to expect corporations operating in those jurisdictions to follow the law of the land, just as we have the right to expect fellow citizens to abide by the laws that govern our society. Arguing against rule of law is a kin to arguing against reason. So, what should a company do when the rule of law is unreasonable? A good answer might be found in the actions of the much-maligned Jr. member of the Tech-Gang of 4, Google.

Partially in reaction to the public furor over self-censorship at Google.CN, and partially in reaction to the arrest of Shi Tao, Google has moved many services aside from core-search away from Chinese jurisdiction. Gmail, blogger, Orkut, and other Google-based tools are not available to Chinese users, unless accessed via proxy.

Google has also demonstrated a high degree of corporate responsibility by openly addressing issues associated with doing business in the PRC. It has posted its rationale on its [official blog](#), and has explained how it weighs such decisions against its "Don't Be Evil" ethics policy.

In January 2006, cofounder Sergey Brin explained Google's decision to self-censor Chinese results to [Reuters News](#). In his explanation, he outlines why Google does not offer blog, email or chat services in China. "The practical matter is that over the last couple of years Google in China was censored — not by us but by the government, via the 'Great Firewall,'" said Brin. "It's not something I enjoy but I think it was a reasonable decision."

Google was also the only search firm to stand up to the [US Department of Justice request](#) for millions of search-queries and results. Due to Google's legal challenge of the request, a significantly smaller set of data, minus user identifying information, was turned over. Its competitors caved to the initial request; over six months before the story became public knowledge, giving US Government authorities an enormous amount of user generated data.

[Search Engine Watch](#) Chief-Editor, Danny Sullivan, often questions why Google seems to attract most of the negative press, often to the exclusion of its competitors. That they are the biggest seems to be the only explanation.

It is no surprise that a group of people concerned over social issues, the environment and human rights would be so upset with Google that they remove AdWords advertising from their community news site. In doing so, they will be paying costs that AdWords was able to cover, thus transferring those costs back to their own wallets.

What is surprising is how easy it is to forget the operations of other firms in regards to the Chinese Internet market. More than any other search engine, Google attracts a great deal of user outrage. When compared to its competitors and others in the tech world, Google tends to err on what appears to be the side of good far more often than on the side of perceived evils.