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China Moves to Block Uncensored Google Content

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China has responded to Google's Monday decision to offer uncensored content to more than 300-million Internet users in the country by instituting their own measures to block search results on hot-button issues such as the pro-democracy movement, the Associated Press (AP) is reporting.

The search engine giant announced on Monday that they were going to cease filtering content in China and redirect users of their .cn website to their Hong Kong page, where there are no such censorship requirements.

However, in a March 23 article, the AP's Michael Liedtke reports, the move "doesn't prevent China's government from using its Internet filters -- known as the Great Firewall -- to block some search results and Web sites from being seen in the mainland."

"On Tuesday, a search request from within mainland China about the 1989 Tiananmen democracy protests returned a notice that the page cannot be displayed," Liedtke reported. "It also caused the Web browser to disconnect for several seconds. Under the old Google.cn, a similar query usually returned a list of sanitized sites about Tiananmen Square."

He also noted that the government "could block all mainland access to the Hong Kong service. Or they could exert their control of Chinese telecommunications companies to slow the speed of queries and responses, to help drive traffic to homegrown rivals."

Chinese officials also voiced their criticism of Google in the state media.

In an interview with Chinese news agency Xinhua, an unnamed government official called Google's actions "totally wrong. We're uncompromisingly opposed to the politicization of commercial issues, and express our discontent and indignation to Google for its unreasonable accusations and conducts."

The situation continued to fold 48 hours after Google Senior Vice President of Corporate Development and Chief Legal Officer David Drummond announced that the California-based technology company would start providing free access to search results, images, news, and other online information.

That move was the result of January cyber-attacks that targeted Google source code and the Gmail email accounts of Chinese human rights activists.

"We want as many people in the world as possible to have access to our services, including users in mainland China, yet the Chinese government has been crystal clear throughout our discussions that self-censorship is a non-negotiable legal requirement," Drummond posted in a statement on the company's official blog.

"We believe this new approach of providing uncensored search in simplified Chinese from Google.com.hk is a sensible solution to the challenges we've faced--it's entirely legal and will meaningfully increase access to information for people in China," he added. "We very much hope that the Chinese government respects our decision."

Recent developments would suggest that the response of Beijing's communist government has been far different than Drummond had hoped for. Not surprising, given the tenuous relationship between not just Google and China, but also amongst officials in Beijing and Washington "over a range of issues, from Internet freedom to the yuan exchange rate, economic sanctions on Iran and U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan," according to a March 23 article by Reuters reporters Chris Buckley and Melanie Lee.

AP writer Alexa Olesen reported on Tuesday that many of China's 380-million plus Internet users "felt caught in the middle" of the battle between the popular search engine and their homeland's government, "admiring Google for taking a stand against censorship but wondering whether the government might further punish the company."

"I feel that people will greatly respect Google's action," Beijing law professor and human-rights activist Teng Biao told Olesen on Tuesday. "China's censorship of the Internet search engine results is a violation of the most basic of human rights. By doing this, Google will bring more global attention to China's human rights situation."

Google has announced that they would like to continue to pursue research and development for other products in China, and Gmail accounts and Google Maps are still directly accessible in the country. However, some experts, including BGC financial analyst Colin Gillis, predict that the move could wind up having a negative impact on consumer relations in mainland China.

"What Google has done is a slick trick," Gillis told Liedtke in an interview, "but it's also a direct slap in the face to the government. The repercussions from this will be going on for several years."

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