

Going Global

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Chinese Internet company Baidu recently debuted Busca, a Portuguese version of its search engine localized for Brazilian users. Though, as China's state news agency *Xinhua* pointed out, this was not Baidu's first foray into

overseas markets, it was the first time China's top leader was personally on hand to support the launch. As Chinese President Xi Jinping and Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff jointly pressed a button initiating the service, it appeared China had taken another step in leveraging its fast-growing technology companies to enhance its global soft power—something Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao, had declared a key national objective.

But for those who track freedom of expression in China and across the globe, seeing Xi standing alongside Baidu CEO Robin Li, whose search engine is far and away the most popular in China, was especially uncomfortable. Xi has been the figure most closely associated with the ever-increasing restrictions on China's Internet in the past year, which included

last summer's crackdown on Sina Weibo, a popular social media website. Xi has publicly pronounced the need for "a strong army" to "seize the ground of new media" and the necessity of building a "clean" cyberspace, all in the name of security and morality. Fears abound of when and how China will export these tactics and values outside its borders. Human rights groups in Iran and across Africa, where China has also been especially active in areas ranging from oil to infrastructure, have already raised alarms at the Chinese sharing IT knowledge and building telecommunications infrastructure in their home countries.

These worries of spreading Chinese-style regulation of the Internet recently resurfaced when Fei Chang Dao, a blog tracking censorship on Baidu and Weibo, documented apparent filtering of Chinese search terms on Busca. Fei Chang Dao's findings were re-packaged in a TechCrunch article titled "Chinese Communist Party-Backed Tech Giants Bring Censorship to the Global Stage."

IN THE BATTLE FOR WORLDWIDE MARKET SHARE, CHINESE INTERNET COMPANIES AND CONTENT PROVIDERS HAVE LITTLE RATIONAL INCENTIVE TO DEBASE THEIR FOREIGN-TARGETED PRODUCTS.

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Unfortunately for TechCrunch, the article's evidence was either flat-out wrong or, at best, merely outdated. Searches for the terms it claimed were censored produced genuine results, and TechCrunch retracted the story without notice a few days later. However, more notable than this journalistic lapse was how readily accepted the article was despite its many obvious flaws. If Chinese tech companies want to assume a leadership role in the global Internet industry and to reach out successfully to foreign users and investors around the world, they'll need to understand why the premise in TechCrunch's headline might be so widely believed, as well as what steps they might take to tackle these issues in the future.

LEAVING HOME

Of course, this isn't to say we should discount the excoriation Chinese digital media companies receive from their own citizens for participating in the censorship system the government has mandated. However, their government often shields Chinese Internet companies from foreign competition. The blockage of Twitter and YouTube in China is a huge boon to their domestic counterparts, Sina Weibo and Youku. This in turn means domestic companies are generally more immune to internal criticism because their Chinese users don't have non-domestic alternatives—at least if they don't want to use versions crippled by network interference or lack the mass Chinese user bases of the local services. Censorship of foreign sites—the so-called Great Firewall—not only grants domestic companies a competitive advantage at home but also provides the government a more easily managed Internet since their interests almost always trump user concerns. All in all, the current system in place benefits both

the government and domestic online content providers within China.

However, that synergy is upended once local markets are saturated and Chinese online companies are required to look abroad to continue the exponential growth that shareholders expect. For example, the chat application WeChat (Weixin in China, produced by Tencent) has eagerly sought to gain entry throughout the developing world, even hiring soccer star Lionel Messi as a global spokesperson for the app. But without the advantage the Chinese government provides at home, companies must now consider more seriously the interests of—and potential criticism from—foreign users.

Leaving home doesn't come without its advantages, though. Unless foreign governments demand it, Chinese tech companies are able to remove the onerous censorship features from their localized products. So long as the service is directed at foreigners and not primarily used by Chinese audiences, tight control of information appears to be of secondary importance to championing business abroad. And then there's the accompanying soft power these products provide. In theory, the Chinese government could require censorship and surveillance features even in products aimed for foreign audiences and broadcast only the sunniest of news about the Chinese Communist Party. But party leaders no doubt recognize that such a step would simply reaffirm for many foreign users the preconception that Chinese Internet companies are not to be trusted, leaving their companies shunned in the global marketplace.

TRANSPARENT CENSORSHIP

In the battle for worldwide market share, Chinese Internet companies and content providers have little rational incentive

to debase their foreign-targeted products and override user concerns on behalf of the Communist Party leadership. Still, it's understandable how foreign users and observers might jump to the conclusion that a Chinese product must be bowing to government pressure and enacting censorship if an app or website acts in an unexpected manner. Years of negative news stories about Internet censorship in China—much of it independently verified and rigorously documented by researchers around the world—have conditioned foreign netizens to assume the worst about Chinese Internet services and even foreign companies operating in China.

So when the international version of WeChat was discovered to be blocking messages that contained certain sensitive words in January 2013 and international versions of Microsoft's Chinese-language Bing search engine failed to return results for search terms like Dalai Lama last February, censorship was the conclusion. Of course, Tencent and Microsoft responded that it was a "technical glitch" and an "error," respectively. Indeed, in hindsight, it is possible to give WeChat and Microsoft the benefit of the doubt. The evidence collected showed filtering was certainly taking place in WeChat, but Tencent's immediate correction of the blocking implied that whatever took place certainly wasn't intentional. Of course, this doesn't absolve either from having developed or executed the de facto filtering mechanism in the first place. However, if this was indeed the case, Tencent and Microsoft should have been more forthcoming and explained clearly what had happened. By providing such vague or improbable explanations, each only fed foreign users' expectations that it had been pressured into censoring its app or website, backtracking only after being caught redhanded.

Imagining an unlikely, hypothetical world where Chinese online content providers are more transparent about when and how they implement filtering measures can be a useful exercise. There's no expectation that companies like Baidu, Sina, and Tencent could be in a position to completely dismantle their censorship apparatus in China in the near future. But clear, detailed error messages and explanations for inconsistent results would seem to be one of the few options Chinese Internet companies have available for maintaining their credibility both at home and with foreign audiences. Strange as it may sound, it is almost more comforting when Baidu and Sina Weibo openly announce that keywords are being filtered "due to laws and regulations" than when they opaquely sanitize content without explanation. At least with the former, there is clear indication that information is being manipulated. If even more information were provided—whether the blocking was temporary or permanent, who might have requested the keyword be blacklisted, what other similar keywords might be blocked—users would have less reason to mistrust the application.

This might be a pipe dream, but if Chinese authorities genuinely believe cleaning up the Internet is a key national objective, now is the chance to put up or shut up. They could either allow companies to walk users through what informa-

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tion controls are in place, or by omission concede that filtering is less about protecting citizens from unsafe content and more about disrupting communication, perpetuating ignorance, and maintaining power. As painful as it is to admit and paradoxical as it sounds, if we must have censorship, at least make it open. If Fei Chang Dao's findings were accurate at the time of their posting, and we have no reason to suspect otherwise, why shouldn't Baidu even be allowed to admit that selective filtering had accidentally transferred over from their native search engine into the Brazilian product but had now been fixed? Or that certain keyword filtering did have to take place while Xi was in Brazil, but now that he'd left, all had returned to normal? The long-term gain in credibility for both Chinese Internet companies and the Chinese government would certainly be worth any short-term criticism. Of course, this assumes that any restrictions on information are wholly well-meaning—a proposition that too often feels painfully laughable.

STOP PLAYING THE VILLAIN

However, no standalone band-aids will solve the underlying problem. The worst is always assumed when it comes to Chinese tech companies operating globally, not only because of their behavior or lack of transparency, but also because Chinese officials feed perceptions that China is willing to go to extreme lengths to control its image abroad. This July, at a typically benign Sinology conference in Portugal, Chinese officials were displeased that the

conference program handbook contained information about a Taiwanese academic organization. Mainland Chinese officials secretly confiscated the programs and ripped out the offending pages before returning them for distribution.

There are too many of these kinds of incidents of Chinese officials trying to manhandle foreign media and cultural institutions. Most recently, there was Chinese refusal to subscribe to Bloomberg financial terminals in retaliation for its news service's investigative reporting of Xi Jinping's family wealth. A number of Western correspondents have had their work permits and visas held up or refused for similarly objectionable reporting. All such activities only reaffirm outsiders' assumptions that any Chinese digital media companies based in foreign countries are merely an extension of this official Chinese strategy of propaganda and media manipulation.

If Chinese Internet companies want to achieve Google- or Microsoft-like global status, they'll need not only produce outstanding products, but will need help from their government to quash the perception they are mere pawns for the Communist Party's overarching goals. They'll need government officials to divest from their companies or potentially face charges of subservience—as well as stop ripping pages out of books and blocking websites every time they see an “offensive” article. Hopefully, in time, Internet companies will be given the space to build the soft power that China desires, deserves, and can wield wisely. ●