

*A short note written for the Asymmetric Threats Contingency Alliance (ATCA) dated 14 February, 2006*

## **Should freedom of expression be approached differently in different cultures and countries?**

Google's recent decision to block politically sensitive terms in its new internet search site in China has raised many eyebrows, particularly in the West where freedom of expression is a time-honoured commandment. Apart from media criticisms and questions in the House of Lords, the US Congress has earlier invited Google and its main competitors: Yahoo, Microsoft and Cisco, to a hearing in the coming weeks on freedom of speech and the Internet in China.

It is not the first time Google has to contend with internet censorship in China. Its latest decision was the culmination of struggles against the 'Great Firewall' over the last couple of years. Nor is Google the first 'to follow the local custom'. Yahoo provided information leading to the imprisonment of journalist Shi Tao last year. Microsoft closed down Zhao Jing's blog at Beijing's instruction.

Ahead of the congressional hearing, all four have lately joined hands to call on the US government to press Beijing to abandon its internet restrictions.

Notwithstanding various United Nations reports pointing to continuing improvements, China is aware that the West remains unsatisfied with her human rights records, which is used, amongst other reasons, to block her international trading and other efforts from time to time, as in the case of CNOOC's recent bid for UNOCAL.

It is worth remembering that internet censorship is not confined to China. Indeed, it exists in different ways in virtual all parts of the world, let alone 'politically correct' self-censorship in the

most advanced countries. Nazi sites are banned in Europe and those promoting terrorism, violence, or racial hatred are outlawed in many countries. There is a Harvard site detailing how various countries restrict what websites their citizens can see. The broad justification is the maintenance of social order and stability.

But just as the current furore over the Danish cartoons raises the issue whether freedom of speech is absolute regardless of the likely audience, the Google affair also begs the question who should decide what to allow in order to maintain social order and stability in a specific country.

In a letter to The Times editor on 12 February, a reader (Bob Cranmore) wrote: 'I find the West has a total insensitivity and an assumption that everyone in the world must surely approach everything in the western way. If they don't, it is just necessary to point out their error and they will change.' He was referring to Islam as a religion and a system of life and government. The remark could equally apply to freedom of expression in China.

It is all too easy for an observer not entirely conversant with the complexity of China's culture and development to think that for all the dazzling lights of her big cities, China is more than ready to embrace fully and immediately some of the West's most cherished norms like democracy and freedom of expression.

In barely over two and a half decades, China has lifted more humanity out of poverty than the United Nations has ever done. She has created a fiercely competitive economy now the fourth largest in the world. What is more, she has witnessed a momentous change in her citizens' lifestyle and thoughts.

A cursory browse through her many websites never fails to yield surprises of how relatively free the society has become in comments on corruption, unbalanced developments, the plight of farmers and 'immigrant labourers', the environment, the arts

and sports, and the latest in Western-style entertainment. A civil society is beginning to emerge. It has been reported that as many as quarter of a million local NGOs are taking an active part in environmental and welfare projects. Certain young and progressive mayors are making use of the internet to monitor public feedback on their policies and performance. Even President Hu and Premier Wen have said they use the internet to feel the pulse of the people.

But China is far from being a paragon of freedom and democracy. Her break-neck growth has produced acute inequalities of wealth with decentralisation breeding corruption and abuse of authority. Local unrest is rapidly rising. Beijing has recently ordained a tightening of the reporting system of such unrests to be followed by provincial, city, and lower-level leaders. Social order and stability have become even more paramount.

Yet, in spite of natural resource constraints and many international trade and geopolitical challenges, she has to maintain a relatively rapid rate of growth to sustain job stability for a fifth of mankind and to build up a solid fountain for long term development ahead of her coming demographic 'greying period'.

Amidst all these, China is now alive to the imperative of creating a Nation of Innovation. During a three-day national conference on science and technology in Beijing commencing on 9 January, President Hu and Premier Wen highlighted a road map to achieve greater innovation and creativity as the next new driver for China's sustained growth. It is evident that creativity seldom thrives without freedom of expression.

Google has said that it would be better to play by China's rules and stay in China, which is the world's second largest internet community, expected to increase from 100 million to 187 million users in two years time. John Palfrey, Harvard Law

School Professor and author on Chinese internet censorship said, 'Going into China is about making money, not bringing democracy'. No doubt this is true. Google has become a part owner of China's largest search engine Baidu and is set to play an important role in China's rocketing internet growth.

But by complying with China's rules, Google's page will let users know if search results are restricted. This would not be the case if the search is filtered by the government. Continuing advice and support, together with increasing public demand in due course, may promise a sustained advancement towards more accepted international norms than punching China's nose every time something seemingly undesirable happens.

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