A Big Decision

Google is at a crossroads. In its current position it has two choices: either (1) give in to China’s demands that it censor itself and reap the reward of the hundreds of millions of users it could add to users and the massive amount of revenue it could produce, or (2) refuse to give in to China, truly live up to its motto “don’t be evil” and take a stand against China’s morally repressive authoritarian government.

Google markets itself to consumers as a company that does things differently from other companies that are only in it to make as much money as possible. It tells users they can trust Google. It’s motto is “don’t be evil.” And in its dealings with China it appeared at first that Google might actually do the right thing and leave China after it mostly withdrew in 2010, telling mainland users to re-route their searches through Hong Kong, which bypasses the Beijing’s “Great Firewall” (Helft and Barbosa, n.p.). However they never fully left, too conscious as they were of the incredible amount of revenue the addition of China’s population could give their company if they replaced Baidu as the most popular search engine in China. Google is all too aware of the fact that developments of internet technology are moving too quickly to be regulated successfully by any governmental agency and so they must decide whether they truly want to embody their motto or simply become another meaningless company chasing the highest profits for their stockholders and the biggest bonuses for their CEO.
Google is in a unique position right now because even though the amount of revenue the Chinese market would add to Google would be almost mind-blowing, Google simply does not need it. In the United States, Google is currently over 50 percentage points ahead of both Microsoft and Yahoo (La Monica, n.p.). That kind of lead is unprecedented and to some even frightening as there are fears Google might be establishing a monopoly in the industry. As a result, Google is in a position in which it could feasibly refuse to cater to China’s demands and leave China altogether. Despite this loss of a possible revenue, they would continue to dominate the American market, more than enough to not just keep the company afloat, but enough to continue fostering its growth.

In the past weeks, my partner and I have discussed in depth whether or not the internet should be regulated. Should it be regulated at all? If it should be regulated, what should the laws say? If there are laws being written, who should be doing the writing? Congress? The president? An independent agency? All of these are questions that have arisen in the past weeks and after all of our discussions there is one element that we have definitively concluded: regulating the constantly changing worldwide web is incredibly, ridiculously, unimaginably difficult and maybe even an unrealistic expectation to have for the government. If we have figured this out, I think it is fair to say that Google has figured this out. As a result, Google knows that the government cannot be expected to effectively regulate the industry in which Google operates. Therefore, Google must be obligated to regulate itself. Let me rephrase, Google does not have to regulate itself, but not doing so would be acting against its own motto. If Google truly wishes to be seen as a company standing for good not one that is “evil,” taking a political and moral stand against the censorship and authoritarian Chinese regime would be the perfect way to do it.
Everyone would know the massive economic loss Google would be suffering in taking a stand against China, and everyone would realize that it could not simply be a political stunt, as there is simply too much at stake. The entire world would be put on notice that Google was maybe the first truly benevolent company. It’s goal has always been to set itself apart from other companies and this would be the perfect way to do so. It would prove Google truly embodies its motto “don’t be evil.”

While China is admittedly not a political enemy of the United States and there is much economic exchange between the two countries, that does not justify how the Chinese government treats its people. Saudi Arabia is also not a political enemy of the United States but that certainly does not mean the Saudi regime is a good one. According to Human Rights Watch, a Saudi “court convicted activist Raif Badawi and sentenced him to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for ‘insulting Islam’ by founding a critical liberal website, and for his comments during television interviews” (). While China’s human rights record might not be quite as bad as that of Saudi Arabia, it is clear that the United States’ official alliances have little to do with the country being generally good or evil especially in its treatment of its people. There are countless example in history of companies and even nations profiting economically from terrible atrocities, and those nations and companies end up on the wrong side of history. One might think of the Swiss banks during both World Wars. During the war, as Switzerland was neutral, many wealthy people from both sides of the fighting placed much of their money in Swiss banks in order to assure it would not be lost or plundered in war. Countless Swiss banks therefore profited from holocaust. Theoretically this type of thing would be fundamentally against Google’s motto and against their
whole ideology as a company. However, they run the risk of becoming just another cruel soulless company with no display of conclusive understanding of the meanings of the words good or evil.

If Google wishes to uphold its reputation as a company that cares about people and live up to its motto “don’t be evil it must refuse to censor its content and leave China altogether, taking a clear political stance. Not only would it be the right thing to do based on their motto but Google is also in a position as a corporation where it has enough revenue to take such a drastic and impactful political stand without jeopardizing the success of the company. And finally as Google knows that the government cannot keep up fast enough to effectively regulate the tech industry it is up to Google to live up to its self imposed motto and regulate itself. Google must do the right thing and leave China altogether.

Works Cited


