

**THE BLOG**

# Yoohoo! Yahoo!

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By Marty Kaplan

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If an American enters “Li Zhi” or “Shi Tao” in the search engine at Yahoo! News, more than 400 stories turn up, none of them flattering to Yahoo! But those articles won’t appear if you search for those words, or countless others deemed subversive by officials, on a computer in China.

For nearly a decade, not only has Yahoo! allowed the Chinese version of its search engine to be censored; worse, it has also turned over to Chinese state security the IP and e-mail addresses they have sought in order to nail and jail dissidents. When an American-based multinational is complicit with a police state’s worst practices, at the very least it takes the zing out of the exclamation mark in its branding.

Shi Tao, 37, was a reporter for the business daily, Dangdai Shang Bao. A year ago, he was sentenced by Beijing to 10 years in prison for “divulging state secrets abroad.” His offense was e-mailing to non-Chinese Web sites the warning that the Beijing government told his newspaper and others not to cover the 15th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. According to the text of the verdict, it was Yahoo! Hong Kong that enabled Chinese investigators to track the posting on a foreign Web site to Shi’s yahoo.com.cn e-mail account and to the IP address of his computer.

This month, another such case was reported. Li Zhi, a 35-year-old ex-civil servant from Dazhou, who was sentenced to eight years in prison for criticizing the corruption of local officials in online discussion groups, also had Yahoo! to thank for handing over to the police his e-mail address and user-name.

Yahoo! is not alone among American media companies kowtowing to the People’s Republic. Google, despite its “Don’t Be Evil” motto, has also agreed to abide by Beijing’s censorship guidelines. Microsoft’s MSN Spaces censors its Chinese-language blogs.

The Chinese police’s surveillance infrastructure is located in thousands of routers sold to them by Cisco Systems and programmed by Cisco engineers. It enables the authorities to suppress “subversive” key words and identify visitors to banned sites.

When pressed, these companies’ apologists offer the when-in-Rome defense: If you do business in other countries, you have to follow their laws and practices. But that argument conveniently forgets the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which outlaws bribery by U.S. firms, no matter how common or licit it might be in the countries where they do

business. It also ignores the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which conditioned U.S. trade relations on Soviet emigration policies.

If complicity with bribery deserves outlawing, then why not censorship? If Soviet repression of Jews' human rights could be part of our economic policy, then why not Chinese repression of dissidents?

Defenders of American-enabled cyber-snitching claim that foreign investment in China will liberalize Chinese society. The more they taste the goods, services and rising standard of living delivered by Western free markets, it's said, the more political freedom the Chinese will demand.

Unfortunately, it's the reverse that seems to be happening. The more that Western companies yearn for billions of yuan, the more willing they have been to compromise human rights values, if that's what it takes.

Every major advance in technology has generated both utopian and dystopian visions of the future. The optimistic version of what will eventually happen is that the Internet is inherently, wonderfully uncontrollable. The genie out of the bottle is freedom's ally; new provocative commentators, using new technologies like podcasting, and employing new workarounds, like IP anonymity software, will eventually make the Web a censor's worst nightmare.

The countervailing vision is Big Brother. Recent revelations about warrantless wiretapping in the United States remind us how sophisticated the black arts of snooping are. If the limits on their use in a democracy are the subject of fierce debate, imagine how fragile are dissent, privacy and civil liberties in authoritarian societies that brook no compromise on state power.

No one knows which version of the future will prevail. This week the House Human Rights Subcommittee held a hearing about the ethical responsibilities of Internet firms. Yahoo!, Google, Microsoft and Cisco were summoned. The expected arguments on both sides were aired: trade, capitalism and technology were depicted on the one hand as liberators of the human spirit and on the other as accessories of human rights abuses.

Since it's a crapshoot what direction the information revolution is really heading, surely the right path for an America that doesn't merely mouth its moral values is to hold Yahoo! et al's feet to the fire. The Web prides itself on being self-regulating; what about a cyber-rally on behalf of human rights, along with a reminder of consumers' economic power?

Internet companies, rather than hunkering down and trying to get away with what business practices they can, could create voluntary codes of conduct that go beyond apparently hollow mottoes. The mere threat of government regulation could do wonders to focus the corporate mind. Any or all of that would be way better than what we're doing now: rolling the dice that benevolent geeks and prosocial hackers will inevitably outwit the thought police and their kangaroo courts.

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