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"The Connection Was Reset": Google goes to War for the West

LSE Ideas

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Internet users in China last night discovered that the domain Google.cn redirected to Google.com.hk, as the world's largest search engine shut down its Chinese servers and redirected traffic to Hong Kong, where – crucially – the search engine results would be uncensored by Google themselves. Of course, users with IP addresses in mainland China attempting to search for material deemed 'sensitive' by the Chinese authorities would still be prevented from accessing information by the 'Great Firewall', with its tell-tale error message: 'the connection was reset'.

Yet Google's decision is of limited significance to Chinese surfers. Experienced activists in China have ways and means of getting round the authorities' controls, for example by using IP blocking, VPNs and proxy servers. Indeed, within China Google accounts for only around 20% of searches, with the home-grown search engine Baidu holding the kind of dominance Google is used to enjoying, with 75% of all searches. Having said that, China's technology for blocking and filtering web results is less sophisticated and effective than the rules Google voluntarily applied to its Chinese 'spiders' four years ago, so the move does represent a very small, but nonetheless welcome, boost for freedom of information in China.

Nor is Google's decision of particular significance for the finances of the company itself in the short term, even if the decision has been taken – as was the case in 2006 when Google decided to filter its results in China – very much from a business perspective. China accounts for less than 1% of Google's total income: whilst companies like Google, Microsoft and Yahoo have been eager to gain access to a rapidly-growing market with up to a billion new customers, the fact is that currently revenues from China are insignificant. Indeed the business decision that Google appears to have taken is that their stance on China has begun to erode their position in other markets. Google's idealistic founders may have based the company around the slogan 'don't be evil', but that clever piece of marketing disguised the essential truth behind the search engine's success: yes Google was fast; yes it returned different, and ultimately better, results; but the key to Google's dominance was that their users had trust in it. And user trust is all the more important as firms compete to control user data as more and more computing takes place 'in the cloud'. So whilst Google's decision is based on a long-term business argument that has brought it great success to date, it risks little in the short term in the Chinese market. Google also clearly believes that Chinese censorship is unsustainable, and that once controls are removed it will be able to return to that market victorious, able to generate user trust quickly on the basis that it – unlike Microsoft or Yahoo – has a genuine commitment to open information, that it had not been evil.

And here is the rub: by revealing the Chinese government's widespread hacking regime – a fairly open secret in the IT world – and by withdrawing from China, Google has raised the stakes in the ideological conflict surrounding the rights of people versus the rights of governments; it has essentially gone to war for liberalism. Whilst China may have embraced the economic tenets of liberal capitalism fairly convincingly over the last two decades, its attitudes to political liberalism lag far behind. Ultimately – as Google rightly believes – sociologically the two cannot be separated: free consumption requires political freedom and vice-versa, and the progress of Chinese economic growth, particularly as it seeks to develop its economy past the core manufacturing stage to focus on R&D and information services, cannot hope to proceed smoothly without political liberalisation. Google's actions, however, are a spur to that process, which will both embolden activists, weak though they remain in the face of the Chinese state, and more importantly detract from China's ability to continue to progress its economy into more advanced sectors.

It is, as well, inconceivable that Google would have taken this move without consultation with the United States government. Whilst the administration is truly a 'team of rivals' with regards to policy on China, with Hilary Clinton significantly more hawkish than the President and Vice-President, the government's enlisting of Twitter as a policy adjunct during the Green protests in Iran demonstrates that the administration understands the power of open information in driving social and political change conducive to US interests. So while China is able to defy the diplomatic demands of the US on the level of the Yuan, on sanctions for Iran, or on human rights, in Google it may encounter an irresistible force for the spread of political liberalism.

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