



Google vs. China's "Great Firewall": Ethical implications for free speech and sovereignty[☆]

Sung Wook Kim^a, Aziz Douai^{b,*}

^a School of Communication and Media, Seoul Women's University, 621 Hwarang-ro, Nowon-gu, Seoul 139-774, Korea

^b Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, 55 Bond Street East, Oshawa, ON L1G 0A5, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Prior to its 2010 decision to leave China, Google has been blamed for helping the Chinese government to filter the Internet since it launched "Google.cn" in 2006. The primary goal of this paper is to investigate whether Google's launching of "Google.cn" that censors material deemed objectionable to the Chinese government is ethical or not. Apparently, it seems that Google should be blamed for helping Chinese officials to filter the Internet and to abridge freedom of speech. Unlike its outward aspects, however, Google's case is not simple. This article presents evidence and arguments that suggest it is difficult to assert that Google is an unethical firm to abridge freedom of speech in China.

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1. Introduction

China's modernization and global economic muscle have come at the expense of free speech and other political freedoms. Human Rights organizations and advocates have described the anachronistic discrepancy between economic wealth and the freedom deficit in powerful terms such as the famous "The Great Firewall of China." The Chinese speech censorship and policing of the Internet have become fixtures in global human rights campaigns and other debates about the role of technologies in social change. As a global technology powerhouse, Google's tussle with the Chinese regime, its relocation of its search engines to Hong Kong in 2010 to avoid censorship, has been celebrated as standing up for free speech. In a context where the revolutionary role of social media in the so-called "Arab

Democracy Spring" has been amply vaunted, it behooves scholars to re-examine Google's role in China, specifically its decision to launch its Chinese search engine, Google.cn in 2006. The local Google site, "Google.cn (Google-China)," has been a controversial issue because it exposed corporations' willingness to censor materials deemed objectionable to the Chinese government for the sake of profit. Many people and organizations including 'Reporters Without Borders' criticized Google, arguing the company was taking an immoral position that could not be justified. However, Andrew McLaughlin, senior policy counsel for Google, argued that people getting limited access to content is better than getting no access [9].

The primary goal of this paper is to investigate the ethical nature and implications Google's launching of "Google.cn" that censors material that offends Chinese government. Apparently, it seems that Google should be blamed for helping Chinese officials to filter the Internet and to abridge freedom of speech. Google defends itself, however, by arguing that it has to remove some content from the search results available on Google.cn in response to local law, regulation and policy. In addition, it explains

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 905 721 8668 x 3790; fax: +1 905 721 3372.

E-mail addresses: aziz.douai@uoit.ca, azizdouai@gmail.com (A. Douai).

that while removing search results is inconsistent with Google's mission, providing no information (or a heavily degraded user experience that amounts to no information) is more inconsistent with its mission. Moreover, other Internet and network companies such as Microsoft, Yahoo!, and Cisco also have helped authorities in China to censor or block online content in order to enter the Chinese market [9].

In light of these complexities, can we still blame Google as an unethical company for abridging freedom of speech in China despite Google's arguments? If so, what moral philosophy enables us to criticize Google? If not so, why shouldn't we blame Google? It seems that a cursory glance at Google's case drives us to judge Google as an unethical company because it abridges freedom of speech in China.

Unlike its outward aspects, however, Google's case is not simple. Its complicated interstices suggest that we should consider the multi-dimensional aspects of this case before blaming Google in order to prevent a misjudgment. First of all, Google's case is fundamentally related to the issue of freedom speech. In addition, it is closely embedded in the question of China's sovereignty. Therefore, we should think about the concept of freedom of speech as well as sovereignty. If the definition of freedom of speech in China is different from that in other countries such as the United States, what should we do? Can we assert that the definition of freedom of speech in the United States is universal? If the definition of freedom of speech in the western world including the United States is superior to that in China, do western countries have a right to intervene in China's domestic problems related to freedom of speech? If so, how implicated is China's sovereignty?

Secondly, before blaming Google, we should remember that Google is a private company and take for granted its pursuit of profit maximization. Based on this point of view, it is natural that Google is trying to enter China's market, one of the biggest emerging markets, complying with local Chinese laws and regulations. As mentioned above, Microsoft, Yahoo!, and Cisco had already helped authorities in China to censor or block online content in order to enter the lucrative Chinese market before Google announced that it would launch "Google.cn". Does Google also have a right to do business in China for its profit maximization if it does not violate Chinese laws as well as the United States laws?

Ironically, Google has been blamed much more than other companies such as Microsoft, Yahoo!, and Cisco for abridging freedom of speech in China because it had been praised by privacy advocates and consumers for fighting the U.S. government's request to hand over random web search data. In the chorus of opprobrium, for example, "Reporters Without Borders" condemned Google's stance since it would lead to the impression that "the firm defends the rights of U.S. Internet users but fails to defend its Chinese users" [9]. In spite of its condemnation, however, Google's attitude to look like antinomy provides us with grounds solid enough to criticize its actions and decisions. Furthermore, this case has some complicated issues below its surface, and further scrutiny is necessary to thoroughly grasp this case's interstices.

This article does not aim at criticizing Google based on a jaundiced point of view, nor does it aim to shield it from

warranted criticism. Therefore, before asserting whether Google is ethical or not, this study will examine the crucial issues related to this case, such as freedom of speech as well as national sovereignty, and the ethical duty of a private company through a brief literature review and a case study in order to appraise Google's case adequately. The second section of this paper looks at definitions of freedom of speech and sovereignty; and thus explores not only what the difference of freedom of speech between China and the United States is but also how we should approach the issue of sovereignty. The impact of the launching of "Google.cn" on China, especially the relationship between "Google.cn" and freedom of speech in China are described in Section Three, while Section Four briefly looks at the issue related to the ethical duty of a private company. Finally, Section Five summarizes and concludes the paper.

2. Freedom of speech and sovereignty

When "Google.cn" was launched in January 2006, it left behind two of its most popular features in the United States - e-mail messaging and the ability to create blogs- in order to cope with China government's Internet controls [9]. In addition, Google made it easier for Chinese authority to filter the Internet, by launching "Google.cn" without objectionable content to Chinese officials such as "Taiwanese independence" or "freedom of speech." As soon as the launching of "Google.cn" was announced, many people blamed Google for abridging freedom of speech in China. For example, Reporters Without Borders condemned the Google-China deal as "hypocrisy" and called it "a black day for freedom of expression in China" in a statement published on its Web site [9].

At this point, we need to think about the meaning of freedom of speech before criticizing Google for abridging freedom of speech in China. What is the freedom of speech? Why is it important? Is its definition the same all around world? Does it always take priority over other values? As [2] defines it, freedom of speech is regarded as a fundamental right that individuals enjoy as well as fundamental to the existence of democracy and the respect of human dignity. Especially, freedom of speech is accepted as the most important value necessary for a democratic society that respects human rights, as the United States. In reflecting this sense of value, the First Amendment of the constitution of the United States prescribes that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

According to First Amendment scholars such as Powe Jr., the philosophical background of freedom of speech is originated from market theory rooted in John Milton's "Areopagitica" and John Stuart Mill's "On Liberty" [1]. The 'market place' theory of ideas is based on the assumption that "the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market" [5]. However, the First Amendment does not always protect freedom of speech in the U.S. even though free speech is one of the most fundamental conditions for democracy.

Speech that jeopardizes national security, or one that imparts real threats, defamation or obscenity is not protected by the First Amendment because it is harmful to others as well as infringes on others' human rights.

In addition, freedom of expression is sometimes outweighed by other values such as national security and foreign policy. This results in the restriction on freedom of speech. For example, despite the fact that freedom of travel is regarded as a right protected by the First Amendment, U.S. citizens are not allowed to travel to Cuba without government permission in compliance with U.S. economic and political embargo laws. "In 1965, The Supreme Court held that a restriction banning travel to Cuba was not unconstitutional because it was justified by the weightiest considerations of national security" [14]. As we can see from The Court's decision, laws in the name of national security or foreign policy occasionally restrict freedom of speech.

Furthermore, we can hardly apply the absolute definition of freedom of speech all over the world because the definition of freedom of speech is different from one nation to another. For example, while flag burning is protected as a symbolic speech by the First Amendment in the U.S., it is still regarded as illegal and unprotected by freedom of expression because of Flag Protection and Anti-Desecration Act laws in some other nations such as Korea.

In addition, access to a Nazi-related auction site is allowed and protected by freedom of speech in the United States, while it is illegal and is not protected by freedom of speech in France. In detail, the French Court ordered in 2000 "the Company Yahoo! Inc. to take all necessary measures to dissuade and render impossible any access via Yahoo.com to the Nazi artifact auction service and to any other site or service that may be construed as constituting an apology for Nazism or a contesting of Nazi crimes." In response to the French Court's order, Yahoo! posted warning and prohibited postings in violation of Section R645-1 of the French Criminal Code from appearing on Yahoo.fr. On the other hand, Yahoo! claims that "because it lacks the technology to block French citizens from accessing the Yahoo.com auction site to view materials which violate the French order or from accessing other Nazi-based content of websites on Yahoo.com, it cannot comply with the French order without banning Nazi-related material from Yahoo.com altogether." Yahoo! contends that "such a ban would infringe impermissibly upon its rights under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution" [15].

As we can see in *Yahoo! Inc. v. LICRA* case, the meaning and concept of freedom of speech can be interpreted differently according to each nation's philosophical and historical backgrounds, even though the United States and France are both developed western nations, and both of them are democratic societies based on free market and capitalism. As [3] points out, "it must be noted that many countries carry out their versions of control and censorship in ways that reflect their historical approaches to expression of view and communications as well as their political and economic preoccupations."

So far, this paper has touched briefly on the definition and concept of freedom of speech in western countries such as the United States. As a way to grasp the differences

in the concept of freedom of speech between the United States and China, it will look at the definition and meaning of freedom of speech in China [12]. description of the former Soviet Union's press system helps us to infer that the Chinese government's point of view on speech and writing is basically rooted in Marxism-Leninism with a mixture of Hegel and 19th century Russian thinking. As socialist nations, the ex-USSR and China share nearly identical views on speech and writing as well as similar worldviews. The Chinese media have a duty to contribute to the success and continuance of the Chinese socialist system, and especially to the dictatorship of the party. Based on such a point of view on speech and writing, the Chinese government does not allow its citizens to criticize the socialist system and the Communist party. In addition, Chinese officials have thought that the free flow of information and freedom of expression result in harmful effects on the Chinese socialist system and national security. As a result, the Chinese authorities have eagerly tried to prevent some Chinese people and western countries from disseminating the idea of freedom of speech based on the western countries' point of view to China in order to protect national security and the socialist system.

What is the difference between the Chinese authorities' censorship and the United States's banning its citizens from traveling to Cuba? The Chinese government required foreign companies such as Yahoo!, Microsoft, and Google to help enforce its censorship policy, while the French Court ordered Yahoo! to prohibit postings in violation of Section R645-1 of the French Criminal Code from appearing on Yahoo.fr. What is the difference between the Chinese government's policy and the French Court's decision? Despite the fact that many critics are blaming China for oppressing freedom of speech, why aren't they criticizing the United States for banning its citizens from traveling to Cuba without permission? Why have we not seen a similar criticism of France for ordering Yahoo! to censor content of Yahoo.fr? In addition, Google has blocked its French and German websites (Google.cn and Google.de) in order to prevent racist, anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic materials, as expected under French and German laws, before launching Google.cn in China [3]. Why didn't critics including "Reporters Without Borders" blame Google for helping French and German officials to filter the Internet and abridge freedom of speech?

With regard to these provocative questions, some may argue that we should consider historical backgrounds of France and Germany when we appraise their position on freedom of speech, and thus we should admit that China's abridgment of freedom of speech is different from other countries' cases as mentioned above. Of course, this article doesn't reject the argument that we should distinguish the Chinese authorities' oppressing of freedom of expression from other countries' cases, considering China's extreme position on freedom of expression. Neither does it defend the Chinese government's censorship. Nevertheless, this article suggests that we should reconsider China's position on freedom of speech because China also abridges freedom of speech in the name of national security, as other western countries, including the United States, France, and Germany, do.

An emerging rationale can be gleaned from official statements. For example, a spokesman of the Chinese Embassy in Washington D.C. retorted against criticism on the Chinese government's Internet censorship: "China has adopted effective measures to prevent the Internet from being disturbed and invaded by harmful information. This is in China's national interest, and has won the support of the great majority of the Chinese people. This is also the common practice of many other countries" [3]. In spite of the Chinese spokesman's argument, the western world's criticism against the Chinese authorities' policy on freedom of speech has not decreased. Therefore, this paper suggests that we should think about how warranted is the unconditional critique of China's Great Firewall," and whether foreign countries' criticism of the censorship of China is justifiable or biased.

Along with the meaning and definition of freedom of speech, the issue of sovereignty should be considered to appraise the case of "Google.cn" acutely. Some scholars argue that along with the advent of international organizations such as the United Nations and transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the trend of globalization in recent years has led to the collapse of national sovereignty. Despite their argument, however, the meaning and role of nations' sovereignty are getting more solid and important even in this era of globalization. A majority of nations including the United States and China have no inclination to abandon their domestic autonomy [8].

What is the definition of sovereignty? [8] explains that "in the contemporary world, sovereignty primarily has been linked with the idea that states are autonomous and independent from each other. Within their own boundaries, the members of a polity are free to choose their own form of government. A necessary corollary of this claim is the principle of non-intervention: One state does not have a right to intervene in the internal affairs of another." If we accept the contemporary definition of sovereignty, we should respect China's position on freedom of speech. Thus it would be inconsistent to criticize the Chinese authorities for asking Google.cn to censor material deemed objectionable to the Chinese government because it is a Chinese internal affair and China's government has a right to choose a policy on freedom of speech without the intervention of other countries.

Unfortunately, however, the issue of sovereignty is not simple, and thus the complicated issue still remains unresolved because sovereignty is intertwined with the issue of universal human rights. In detail, the United Nations Charter has endorsed twenty-plus human rights accords covering wide range of issues such as genocide, slavery, refugees, and racial discrimination. And, the UN has encouraged and enforced member nations to respect its human rights accords through its enforcement mechanisms, even though they have often been ineffective to enforce member nations to obey human rights accords of the UN [8].

Here comes a vexing dilemma. We should respect other nations' sovereignty as well as we have a duty and a right to suggest to other nations that they should promote and protect universal human rights. What should we do if sovereignty conflicts with universal human rights? In other

words, which position should we take if China's domestic policy on freedom of speech infringes on universal human rights? Should we keep silent about the Chinese authorities' abridgment of freedom of speech in order to respect China's sovereignty? Or should we urge the Chinese government to stop censoring in order to promote and protect universal human rights of the Chinese? Regrettably, respecting a nation's sovereignty is often incompatible with promoting universal human rights. Furthermore, there is no one correct answer to what we should do to reconcile respect for sovereignty with promotion of universal human rights when they conflict with each other. Therefore, further study and discussion are necessary to grasp the relationship between sovereignty and universal human rights.

3. The impact of the launch of "Google.cn" on China – can "Google.cn" contribute to the free flow of information and freedom of speech in China?

As mentioned above, Andrew McLaughlin, senior policy counsel for Google, argued that people getting limited access to content is better than getting no access, in response to people's blaming Google for abridgment of freedom of speech in China [9]. Is Google's excuse for censorship in China justifiable? While some may accept Google's rationale, others may refuse to accept it as a self-serving excuse. Philosophically, while some who think that Google's argument is justifiable have a utilitarian point of view, others who reject Google's explanation may be espousing a Kantian perspective. This study will not investigate these philosophical underpinnings because such a task is beyond this paper's scope. In addition, it is not going to compare and evaluate both of them because to assert which philosophical point of view outweighs the other is also beyond this study's primary purpose.

Nevertheless, Google's argument that the Chinese people are getting limit access to content is better than getting no access is legitimate. In fact, this access to Google might be used by the Chinese people as atoll to improve the free flow of information and freedom of expression in the long term in China. Despite the fact that China is one of the most controlled and autocratic societies, it is a rapidly changing nation thanks to economic development and foreign investment as well as the introduction of new technologies such as the Internet. The sweeping spread of the Internet has deeply affected Chinese society, especially the Chinese authorities' censorship. When the Internet was introduced to China, the Chinese government thought that the Internet could be a tool that would endanger the security of the State, damage its unity, and harm the dignity and interests of the State. Therefore, the Chinese authorities tried to control individual access to the Internet at its initial stage [3]. Furthermore, as [4] and others have documented, Chinese censorship of the Internet includes any content that challenges the legitimacy of the Communist Party and the Chinese regime, as well as political discussions of Taiwan, Tibet, and the independence of other parts of China such as Yilishan.

As [3] points out, however, the Chinese government admitted soon that controlling individual access to the

Internet was impossible. Thus it attempted to control networks (network operators) instead of individual persons. As a result, Chinese networks still should register every user and his/her activities. At the next stage, the Chinese government forced network operators to obtain prior registration of materials with the Press and Publication Administration in order to observe the ban on well-known forms of harmful content. In the fourth stage, the concept of industry groups' self-regulation has been reflected in Chinese Internet regulation from 2001 even though self-regulation should be under the administrative supervision of the Chinese authorities. Therefore, the industry groups' self-regulation can be regarded as illusory [3].

The sweeping spread of the Internet in China has shown that the Chinese authorities have failed to find an effective way to control the Internet in spite of their great efforts to protect the Chinese people from undesirable content. In other words, the despite Chinese government's curbing of the Internet, the proliferation of the Internet has gradually weakened Chinese authorities' strict control and regulation of the Internet. It seems to have contributed to the improvement of the free flow of information and freedom of expression in China. Regarding this [3], asserts that "above all, China's fixation with shutting out the Internet as a means of mass communication and flow of information will only shorten the days of the dictatorship."

The history of the Internet industry in China has indicated that the emergence of new Internet service and technology has resulted in not only the change of information flow but also in the easing of censorship. It has contributed to the improvement of the free flow of information and freedom of speech, even though some Chinese Internet users are still sentenced and sent to prison by censorship. Therefore, it might be said that the launching of "Google.cn" also would provide the Chinese people with a chance to access a new information source, and eventually it would help the improvement of free flow of information in the future.

One remarkable fact that accompanied Google's expansion to China is that the number of Internet users in China has more than doubled, reaching almost 400 million users in 2009 (see Fig. 1 from [7]).

While empirical data about the positive or reprehensible impact of Google on China's political opening may be hard to find, indirect evidence about the impact of the Internet in China in the years following Google's entry largely suggest a positive effect on Chinese political and social spheres. For instance [6], argued that the Internet has increased the number of netizens, social and political activists who use the web to voice their concerns about the political system. The enhanced visibility of these netizens, according to Herold, has led to an "uneasy and unofficial truce" between the central government and these cyber-activists' management of government censorship. On the one hand, these netizens are growing more vocal about exposing local and municipal corruption while steering clear of criticizing or challenging the central government and the Communist Party. On the other hand, Chinese authorities appear to tolerate this sort of criticism as long as it does not constitute a formidable threat to its legitimacy [6]. concludes that

The relationship between China's netizens and the state is one of mutual wariness and is subject to temporal and spatial fluctuations. It is strengthened, though, by the strong feelings of patriotism expressed by the online community, and by its current support for the general direction of the Chinese Communist Party's rule over China. This support is given on the basis of the continuing improvements the Party is delivering to China, and unlikely to waver while the economic development and international political rise of China continues. (p. 36)

Overall, despite some obvious limitations, one cannot but note that the boundaries of civic action and engagement are enlarged by even a circumscribed margin of dissent. The vibrant civil society and community emerging from the Internet's expansion in China may very well move, albeit slowly, into an "offline" and real-world organizing force that demands genuine political rights and freedoms.

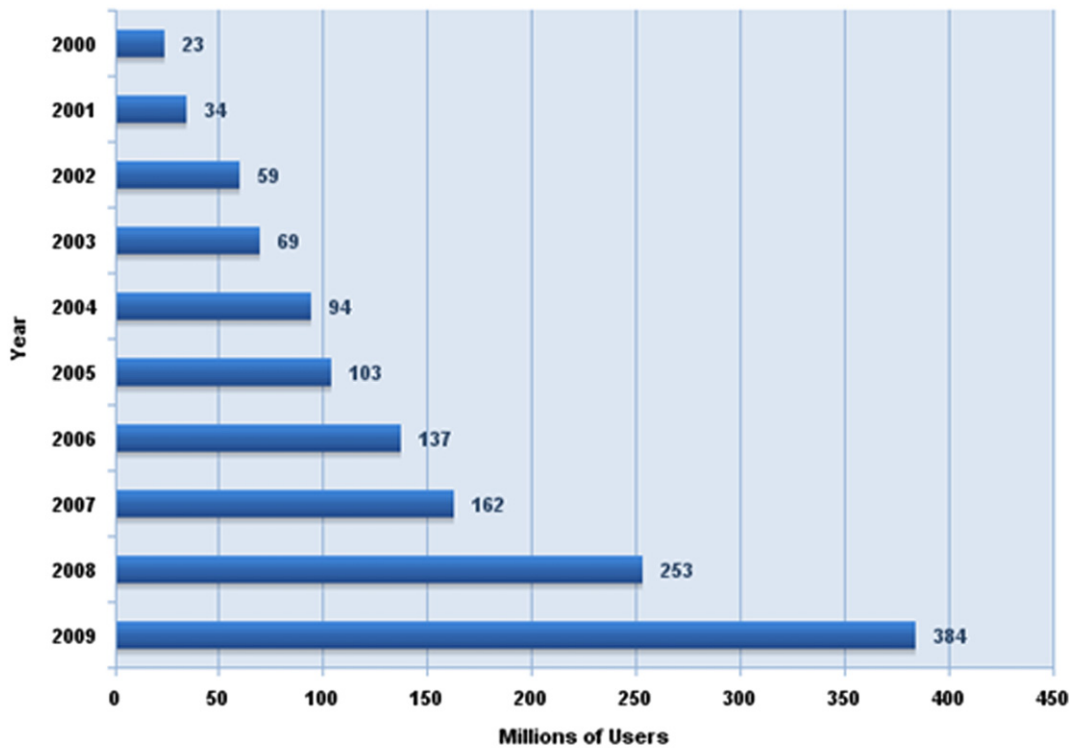
From this perspective, this article does not agree with some critics' argument that Google should not provide China with its Internet service unless the Chinese government abolishes its censorship. The proliferation of new Internet services and the growth of Internet users are much more effective ways to contribute to the improvement of the free flow of information in China than prohibiting Google's service in China. Since it is impossible to change China's censorship in a day, it is desirable to induce the Chinese government to reform and reduce its censorship gradually through the proliferation of the Internet services and technologies. Let's imagine, what would happen if all foreign Internet companies including Google stop their business in China to resist China's censorship. It would result in the regression of the free flow of information in China rather than contribute to the abolishment of China's censorship. Furthermore, the Chinese would suffer from the lack of information sources. Therefore, we need to think once again about the argument that Google should stop its business in China to avoid helping the Chinese authorities to filter the Internet, even though it is definitely unpleasant to know that Google assists China's censorship.

4. What is the ethical duty of a private company?

Over the last few decades, China has become one of the most rapidly growing countries in the world, and thus it has become a lucrative and attractive market for foreign investors and companies. As a result, a majority of multinational companies including Information Technology (IT) firms such as Google, Microsoft, Yahoo!, and Cisco are rushing to China to do business in an emerging and profitable market. Prior to the launch of "Google.cn", Microsoft, Yahoo!, and Cisco began their business in China, and they have helped the Chinese government to filter the Internet. Nevertheless, Google which launched "Google.cn" in January 2006 has been much more criticized for abridgment freedom of speech in China than have other companies been criticized.

One major reason Google has been criticized seems that it is one of the richest companies as well as the most famous company in the area of the Internet search engine industry. It

Internet Users in China 2000 - 2009 February 2010



Source: www.internetworldstats.com
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Fig. 1. Internet users in China 2000–2009, February 2010.

has been asked to be ethical and socially responsible more frequently than other companies have been asked. In general, big firms and their presidents are asked to be ethical and to contribute to the development of society. In addition, the “UN Global Compact” proposed by World Economic Forum in 1999 suggests that enterprises should have social responsibility, and thus they should respect the guidelines designed to protect universal human rights, to minimize pollution, and so on [11]. Bill Gates, the president of Microsoft, has donated huge amounts of money to charity and computer manufacturers such as Dell and HP have been trying to produce “green PCs” to protect environment [10]. These cases illustrate good examples of corporate social responsibility. Similarly, many critics insist that Google should contribute to the improvement of universal human rights because it has become an influential multinational company and is expected to demonstrate social responsibility. This encouraged a fierce chorus that blamed Google for helping the Chinese government to censor the Internet. The launching of “Google.cn” appears to have been construed as an action against universal human rights, neglecting the mere positive implications of information proliferation.

In addition, the timing of the launch of “Google.cn” could not have been worse. “Google.cn was introduced into a political environment that was rapidly souring for American high-tech firms in China” [9]. Last September, Reporters

Without Borders disclosed that in 2004 Yahoo! had helped Chinese officials to arrest Shi Tao who was a journalist charged with leaking state secrets by providing his personal information. Then, Microsoft deleted the blog of Zhao Jing who was a Chinese journalist from its MSN space site in order to obey a request of the Chinese government [9]. Google’s actions consequently drew greater attention.

This article raises two objections to some critics who blame Google. First of all, as emphasized so far, the launching of “Google.cn” can contribute to the improvement of free flow of information and freedom of speech in the long term, and thus it eventually results in the easing of China’s censorship. In particular, we should carefully distinguish the launch of “Google.cn” from Yahoo!’s and Microsoft’s cases as mentioned above. Unlike “Google.cn” preventing the Chinese from accessing material deemed objectionable to Chinese government, Yahoo! revealed a political offender to Chinese officials by infringing on his privacy. One interpretation of this action is that Yahoo! betrayed its customer’s identity despite the fact that Yahoo! argued it should cooperate with Chinese officials to respect the local laws. A Chinese blogger said that “the difference between Yahoo! and Google was that while Yahoo! had put individual dissidents in serious danger and done so apparently without thinking much about the human damage, Google had avoided introducing any

service that could get someone jailed" [9]. In addition, unlike Yahoo! and Microsoft, Google decided not to offer e-mail and blogging services inside "Google.cn" because it was unwilling to be forced to censor e-mails and blog postings or provide the Chinese authorities with dissidents' personal information [9].

Secondly, we should consider that Google is a private company, and thus it has to pursue profit maximization to survive in its fierce competition with other companies. As mentioned before, foreign investors and companies have been eager to enter the increasingly luring Chinese market. In addition, Google's rivals such as Yahoo! and Microsoft have begun to do their business in China by helping the Chinese government to censor the Internet prior to the launch of "Google.cn". How can we dissuade Google from doing business in China?

5. Summary and conclusions

Based on the western world's point of view, China is still an extremely autocratic nation that regards the Internet as a pernicious tool that would harm its political and social systems. Additionally, Google is heavily criticized for helping the Chinese government to censor the Internet. Before criticizing China and Google, however, we should consider the meaning of freedom of speech and sovereignty because like other countries, China also restricts freedom of expression in the name of national security, even though it takes extreme positions on freedom of speech and national security compared to other nations.

On the other hand, China is a rapidly changing country due to the development of its economy and the diffusion of new technologies. Therefore, we should also consider the role of proliferation of new technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones. An article of New York Times [13] describes this environment in the following manner:

At one point in our conversation, Lee talked about the "Super Girl" competition televised in China last year, the country's analogue to "American Idol." Much like the American version of the show, it featured young women belting out covers of mainstream Western pop songs amid a blizzard of corporate branding. (The full title of the show was "Mongolian Cow Sour Yogurt Super Girl Contest," in honor of its sponsor.) In each round, viewers could vote for their favorite competitor via text message from their mobile phones. As the season ran its course, it began to resemble a presidential election campaign, with delirious fans setting up Web sites urging voters to pick their favorite singer. In the final episode, eight million young Chinese used their mobile phones to vote; the winner was Li Yuchun, a 21-year-old who dressed like a schoolgirl and sang "Zombie," by the Irish band the Cranberries. "If you think about a practice for democracy, this is it," Lee said. "People voted for Super Girls. They loved it — they went out and campaigned." It may not be a revolution, in other words, but it might be a start."

As this article demonstrates, the proliferation of new information technologies has heavily influenced the Chinese's daily life. The rapid diffusion of mobile phones has enabled the Chinese to get closer to democracy, and the

proliferation of the Internet has contributed to the improvement of the free flow of information and freedom of expression. Consequently, "Google.cn" is expected to be an effective tool to help the Chinese to get closer to democratic society based on the free flow of information and freedom of speech, even though it helps the Chinese authorities to censor the Internet now.

In addition, when launching "Google.cn", Google showed its efforts to avoid infringing on human rights. For example, Google has not offered email and blogging services to avoid to being forced to censor emails and blog postings in China. In addition, it has offered two versions of its search engine to the Chinese people in order to enable them to get uncensored search results through "Google.cn", even though the site would sometimes be blocked by the firewall [9].

Therefore, considering the political and historical backgrounds of China as well as Google's concerted efforts, we think that it is rather too soon to assert that Google is an unethical firm to abridge freedom of speech in China. In fact, we should perhaps hold judgment on Google until after looking at the change in China driven by the proliferation of the Internet in the future.

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Dr. Sung Wook Kim is an assistant professor in the School of Communication and Media at Seoul Women's University in Korea. He worked at a Korean newspaper firm as a journalist for 10 years from 1994 to 2003 and he earned a Ph.D. degree from Pennsylvania State University in 2009. His research interests include telecommunications policy, technology and ethics, new media and journalism.

Dr. Aziz Douai is an assistant professor of Communications in the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in Canada. A specialist in international communications, his research has covered global media and international politics/conflict, such as media's coverage of terrorism. His current research projects focus on

the socio-political implications of new communication technologies. Dr. Douai's publications have appeared in many peer-reviewed journals including *Journal of International Communication*, *Global Media Journal*, *First Monday*, *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, and *Carnegie's Arab Reform Bulletin*.