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GOOGLE: SHOULD “DRAGONFLY” FLY?[[1]](#endnote-1)

Veena Keshav Pailwar wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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On August 1, 2018, The Intercept website reported leaked information that Google LLC (Google) was planning to launch a censored version of its search engine in China, which it had codenamed “Dragonfly.”[[2]](#endnote-2) The news disturbed some Google employees, as they were unaware of the development of a censored search engine. Describing the project as a moral and ethical crisis, about 1,400 Google employees (out of more than 88,000)[[3]](#endnote-3) circulated a signed letter stating that they “urgently need more transparency, a seat at the table, and a commitment to clear and open processes.”[[4]](#endnote-4) They also expressed apprehension that the company was violating its own ethical principles. The news also led to sharp negative reactions from various human rights activist groups. In an open letter dated August 28, 2018 to Sundar Pichai, the chief executive officer of Google, a coalition of 14 organizations[[5]](#endnote-5) demanded that Google cancel its plan to launch a censored version of its search engine in China.[[6]](#endnote-6) Justifying its demand, the coalition wrote that the censored version of the search engine represented “an alarming capitulation by Google on human rights,” which could result in the company “directly contributing to, or [becoming] complicit in, human rights violations.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

Apart from the protest from the employees and human right activists, there were other challenges that the Dragonfly project was facing. The U.S. government was against the idea of Google entering China with a censored version. Expressing the government’s disapproval, Mike Pence, the U.S. vice president, commented that Dragonfly would “strengthen Communist Party censorship and compromise the privacy of Chinese customers.”[[8]](#endnote-8) The U.S. government’s tariffs on Chinese goods and the retaliation by the Chinese government[[9]](#endnote-9) were also having a negative effect on the acceptance of launching Dragonfly in China. Google had provided a censored version of its search engine in China from 2006 until 2010 but withdrew these services after receiving complaints about cyber-attacks from inside China on its corporate network, and learning of protests by human rights activists that the Chinese government was misusing the search data to target their Gmail accounts.[[10]](#endnote-10) Nevertheless, the number of Internet users in China had increased substantially over the next eight years (see Exhibit 1), to become the biggest market in the world for Internet services by 2018 (see Exhibit 2).

Google had the opportunity to improve its share in the global search-engine market if it could somehow tap into the vast Chinese market. The tight control over the Internet market by the Chinese government, as well as the protest by the human rights activists, the U.S. government ruling, and the internal rift within Google over Dragonfly, had all put Google in a tight spot. Should Dragonfly be launched in China in this hostile environment?

Google: History, Products and Services, and Culture

Google was an American multinational technology company founded in 1998 by Sergey Brin and Larry Page.[[11]](#endnote-11) In 2015, it became a subsidiary of Alphabet Inc., which was a collection of companies engaged in a large number of projects ranging from search engines to self-driving cars. Google provided mobile and Internet services such as Android, Google Search, YouTube, Google Ads, Google Apps, and Google Maps.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Google provided most of its services, such as Google Maps, Google Docs, and Google Plus, to users free of cost. Its main source of earning was the targeted advertising on the Internet. In addition to advertisements accessed through contextual links, it offered video ads, banner ads, and others. Google also generated revenue by selling business versions of its applications such as Gmail and Google Drive, and selling apps, books, movies, and music on Google Play.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Google was known for technological innovations. The Internet search engine was its most innovative and popular product, and it was well-known for providing search results with very high speed. Google’s search engine was the largest and most popular search engine in the world (see Exhibit 3). Because the search engine was the easiest and the most convenient method to find a response to users’ queries, it had created a competitive advantage for the brand. Google’s search services were available in several languages, which made it popular among Internet users around the world. Google built up its brand through product quality and usability, and by providing a large product mix that served a large and varied customer base.

Google was also known for its human resource policies and its casual workplace atmosphere. It provided free lunch and laundry and allowed its workers to spend 20 per cent of their time on projects of their choice.[[14]](#endnote-14) Due to high employee salaries, other benefits, and employee friendliness, it was ranked as one of the ten best employers.[[15]](#endnote-15) Google was also appreciated for its involvement in corporate social responsibility and sustainability projects. As a part of its environmental sustainability activity, it had invested over US$3 billion in renewable energy projects.[[16]](#endnote-16)

China: Governance, Economy, and Society

Governance

China was a socialist country since 1949, with government controlling and commanding all economic activities.[[17]](#endnote-17) By the early 21st century, the country had become a socialist market economy ruled by a single-party government (the Chinese Communist Party). Governance through command-and-control had led to a top-down approach and necessitated a huge work force of bureaucrats.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Economy

In 2018, as per the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) World Economic Outlook database, China was the second largest economy in nominal gross domestic product terms and the largest growing major economy in the world.[[19]](#endnote-19) The high growth of the economy during the last three decades, achieved through reforms, improved the business climate and technological developments, and brought the masses above the absolute poverty level.

The economic performance was impressive, but the country was facing some “teething problems.” After the peak growth of 10.6 per cent in 2010, there was an overall decelerating trend, which was forecasted to continue in the period ahead.[[20]](#endnote-20) In the high-growth phase of the economy, the country faced widening income inequality. As per the IMF working paper, differences in education levels and skills were the significant drivers of a widening rural–urban divide and regional growth imbalance.[[21]](#endnote-21) Corruption was another major issue that the country was facing. In 2018, China stood 87th out of 175 countries on the “least corruption” list prepared by Transparency International.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Society

Along with a diverse climate and many different topographical conditions, China also had a great deal of cultural diversity—there were 56 ethnic groups with the Han groups comprising 92 per cent of the population.[[23]](#endnote-23) The minority groups included Hui, Manchu, Mongols, Uyghurs, Tibetans, and many others.[[24]](#endnote-24) The minority groups were suppressed by the government and the majority Han. People with connections could get away with some things easily, whereas others could be taken advantage of by those in power and with connections.[[25]](#endnote-25) Suppression and discrimination led to sporadic riots and unrest by some minority groups in far-flung regions of the country.

The functioning of the contemporary society was governed simultaneously by three streams of thought.[[26]](#endnote-26) One was Confucianism, which stressed the importance of harmony, understanding of one’s role in the society and doing it well, respecting hierarchy, and empowering oneself with education. The second was Legalism, which believed in one party dictatorship by disciplined, centralized and enlightened ministers and bureaucrats, leading the masses to a socialist and then a communist pattern of society, which could meet the people’s basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, jobs, and health care.[[27]](#endnote-27) Chinese leadership viewed the Internet and social networks as threats to their long-time dictatorship and that they could sink the country into a trough of internal disorder and derail the development that the country had achieved so far. The third social force, the gradual opening up of the economy to market forces, had made China very competitive.[[28]](#endnote-28)

the Search Engine Market in China

With a population of 1.4 billion, China had the largest number of Internet users in the world[[29]](#endnote-29) (see Exhibit 2). The country’s Internet search market was dominated by domestic firms, with Baidu as the largest web search engine, accounting for over 70 per cent of the market share.[[30]](#endnote-30) Other firms were much smaller—Shenma, a close competitor of Baidu, had 15 per cent of the market share,[[31]](#endnote-31) and Haosou and Sogou accounted for around four per cent of the market share (see Exhibit 4).[[32]](#endnote-32)

The online search market in China was tightly controlled by the government, which censored politically sensitive searches and curbed any voices raised against the government. Multinational tech companies like LinkedIn could survive only by following the government’s directives and agreeing to censor content that the Chinese government preferred to suppress.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Google was not operating within China after 2010; its services were blocked by the “Great Firewall of China,” which was a combination of legislative actions and technologies enforced by the Chinese government to regulate its own Internet services. [[34]](#endnote-34) Google’s services, however, could be accessed in China through virtual private networks[[35]](#endnote-35), which kept its share in the search market at 1.69 per cent in July 2018 (see Exhibit 4).

Google in China: 2006–2010

In January 2006, Google set up a censored Chinese language version of its search engine. This search version purged any website that had been disapproved by the Chinese government, such as sites promoting Falun Gong—a government-banned spiritual movement—sites promoting free speech, and sites providing information on the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and crackdowns in Tibet.[[36]](#endnote-36) Google’s entry into China was not hailed by everyone. Human rights activists labelled the censored version “Nazi collaborators.”[[37]](#endnote-37) The entry was also criticized by the U.S. government. The censored search engine remained a subject of criticism by the Chinese government, which stated that Google was not doing enough to block pornography. The government disabled some of its search functions on the pretext of pornographic and offensive content. It also blocked YouTube for four days when a video appeared of a Chinese police officer beating Tibetan protesters. In January 2010, Google stated that it was the victim of cyber-attacks aimed at accessing email accounts of Chinese human rights activists.[[38]](#endnote-38) State censorship and repeated cyberattacks were not compatible with Google’s philosophy of “Never be evil” (see Exhibit 5). Google decided not to censor its search results and withdrew its services from mainland China in March 2010.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Dragonfly: A Means for Google to re-enter China

Between 2010 and 2018, China’s Internet population increased by almost 70 per cent.[[40]](#endnote-40) Google, though still the biggest undisputed leader in the Internet search market worldwide (see Exhibit 3), was facing saturation in the United States and its other major markets with already high penetration ratios (see Exhibit 2). To retain its market share and accelerate growth, Google saw China’s huge market, with yet relatively low penetration, as attractive. In a striking reversal of the decision the company took in 2010, Google was planning to re-enter the Chinese market by launching a new heavily censored version of its search engine.

Only a few hundred Google employees were aware of the Dragonfly project.[[41]](#endnote-41) The media that reported the leaked information expected Dragonfly to be a censored version of Google’s search services that would run in partnership with a local company in China. The media speculated that the project, which was still a work in progress, was aimed at removing the content that China’s ruling communist party viewed as sensitive, such as free speech, human rights, democracy, and political dissent.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Challenges for Google in China

China was culturally and socially much different than the United States. Its political system was also drastically different, and ruled by a regime that believed in tight control of socio-economic activities as it sought to create social harmony within the country’s wide social–cultural diversity. [[43]](#endnote-43) Google knew little about the tastes and preferences of Chinese consumers.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Google would also face stiff competition from the incumbent local search engines, which had grown even more powerful in terms of technology, innovations, and confidence since Google’s exit in 2010.[[45]](#endnote-45) In China, many Internet companies paid franchise operators to switch out a rival company’s software with their own. Baidu, the largest Internet search service provider in China, had linked up with several Internet café chains to place its search engine prominently on their computers.[[46]](#endnote-46) Baidu also followed many other practices such as providing easy access to unlicensed MP3 music files, which could attract music lovers.[[47]](#endnote-47) The close competitors of Baidu— Shenma, Haosou, and Sogou—had succeeded in gaining some market share by following tactics that Google would have found difficult to match. To compete with Baidu, Shenma integrated its search engine with the giant Chinese e-commerce site Alibaba. Haosou integrated its search services with the parent company Qihoo 360’s web browser, whereas Sogou integrated its search engine with WeChat, which was China’s dominant mobile messaging service.[[48]](#endnote-48) WeChat also provided a multi-functional platform developed by Tencent—an Internet-based technology and cultural enterprise for shopping, banking, and many other activities.[[49]](#endnote-49) Given the strategic tie-ups of the existing local search engines, Google would face a high switch cost in trying to attract Chinese users to switch to its own services.

However, Google was optimistic about creating a space for itself in this highly competitive market by providing more reliable information than the existing Chinese search engines. Illustrating the need for accurate and reliable information, Pichai said, “Today people get either fake cancer treatments or they actually get useful information.”[[50]](#endnote-50) Google was expecting to ride in on the perception that overseas companies were more trustworthy. Google was a known brand that the public could easily recall, and they associated it with search engines and Internet services. Google’s search engine was not only known for user friendliness but also for its updated search algorithm, which was at least a century ahead of its competitors in terms of speed and quality of its search results.[[51]](#endnote-51)

Dragonfly: A Way Ahead

Protesting the development of Dragonfly in their open letter, the human right activists stated,

If Google’s position has indeed changed, then this must be stated publicly, together with a clear explanation of how Google considers it can square such a decision with its responsibilities under international human rights standards and its own corporate values. Without these clarifications, it is difficult not to conclude that Google is now willing to compromise its principles to gain access to the Chinese market.[[52]](#endnote-52)

Google was also a member of the Global Network Initiative (GNI) that worked with a coalition of companies, human rights groups, and academicians.[[53]](#endnote-53) The initiative worked toward freedom of expression and privacy and Dragonfly appeared to be against these agreed-on principles and values. Every two years, members of the GNI were assessed for compliance with the group’s principles.[[54]](#endnote-54) Any violation from the agreed-on principles could result in the loss of the membership as well as the good reputation the company had earned with hard work and clean policies.[[55]](#endnote-55)

The decision to re-renter the Chinese market through Dragonfly was against the prominent motto “You can make money without doing evil” (see Exhibit 5), though it might have substantially enhanced the company’s shareholder value. However, modern American capitalism was driven by the singular mission of bringing value to the stockholders. Hinting toward this mentality, Vox’s Matt Yglesias wrote,

Therefore, for executives to set aside shareholder’s profits in pursuit of some other goal like environmental protection, racial justice, community stability, or simple common decency would be a form of theft. If reformulating your product to be more addictive or less healthy increases sales, then it’s not only permissible but actually *required* to do so.[[56]](#endnote-56)

However, this perspective was gradually changing with more power being assigned to employees and consumers in corporate discussions and decision-making processes. Supporting this approach, in August 2018, Elizabeth Warren, United States Senator from Massachusetts, introduced a bill that would have required large public companies to take a holistic perspective when making decisions, by analyzing the impact of those decisions not only on the shareholders’ value, but also on consumers, employees, and communities where the companies operated.[[57]](#endnote-57)

Given these diverse views, questions and challenges were many for Google. What strategy should it adopt to access the vast Chinese market? Should it give up its core values and philosophy and go ahead with the project Dragonfly to achieve its business interest in China? What would be the implications of launching Dragonfly for Google’s reputation and business in other countries? Should Google put ethics before shareholder values? Should it abandon project Dragonfly? Or, were there other ways forward?

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Exhibit 1: The Scale of Internet Users and Internet Penetration in China   
(in 10,000 persons)

Source: Prepared based on data available from “The 41st Statistical Report on Internet Development in China,” China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), January 2018, accessed January 16, 2019, https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201807/P020180711391069195909.pdf.

Exhibit 2: Worldwide Internet Users’ Data

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **World Regions** | **Population (2018 Estimates)** | **Internet Users (June 30, 2018)** | **Penetration Rate (% of Population)** |
| Africa | 1,287,914,329 | 464,923,169 | 36.10% |
| Asia | 4,207,588,157 | 2,062,197,366 | 49.90% |
| Europe | 827,650,849 | 705,064,923 | 85.20% |
| Latin America and Caribbean | 652,047,996 | 438,248,446 | 67.20% |
| Middle East | 254,438,981 | 164,037,259 | 64.50% |
| North America | 363,844,662 | 345,660,847 | 95.00% |
| **Countries with Largest Number of Internet Users** |  |  |  |
| China | 1,415,045,928 | 802,000,000 | 56.70% |
| India | 1,354,051,854 | 462,124,989 | 34.10% |
| United States | 326,474,013 | 286,942,362 | 87.90% |
| Brazil | 210,867,954 | 149,057,635 | 70.70% |
| Japan | 127,185,332 | 118,626,672 | 93.30% |

Source: “Usage and Population Statistics,” Internet World Stats, accessed February 22, 2019, www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm.

Exhibit 3: Share in Search Engine Market, Worldwide—as of July 2018

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Search Engine** | **Market Share** |
| Google | 90.46% |
| Bing | 3.13% |
| Yahoo! | 2.21% |
| Baidu | 1.94% |
| Others | 2.26% |

Source**:** “GlobalStats,” Statcounter, accessed February 23, 2019, http://gs.statcounter.com/search-engine-market-share.

Exhibit 4: SHARE IN SEARCH ENGINE MARKET, China—AS OF July 2018

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Search Engine** | **Market Share** |
| Baidu | 73.84% |
| Shenma | 15.00% |
| Haosou | 4.13% |
| Sogou | 3.89% |
| Google | 1.69% |
| Others | 1.45% |

Source: “GlobalStats,” Statcounter, accessed February 23, 2019, http://gs.statcounter.com/search-engine-market-share/all/china/.

Exhibit 5: Google’s Core Values and Philosophy

Google followed the following 10 value principles:

1. Focused on the users: Google aimed at providing the best user experience possible. It took great care to ensure that any new Internet browser served, first of all, customer satisfaction. Its internal goal or bottom line was secondary to the goal of customer satisfaction. It never compromised in the placing of the search results; and advertisements were clearly distinguished from the search results.

2. Focused on search engines: Google was primarily focused on developing search engines and solving search problems so that its search engines were as efficient as possible.

3. Believed in “fast is better than slow”: By shaving excess bits and bytes from various Google search pages and increasing the efficiency of its serving environment, Google was able to reduce the average response time on a search result to a fraction of a second.

4. Followed democracy on the web works: To provide the most relevant information first, Google assessed the importance of every web page using more than 200 signals and a variety of techniques. To encourage innovation, it trusted the collective efforts of many programmers.

5. Allowed flexibility in accessing search services: It pioneered new technologies and offered new solutions for mobile services that enabled multiple takes, varying from checking email to searching information on mobile phones.

6. Believed in making money through right rather than evil things: Google believed in the objectivity of its search results and never breached the trust of its users to achieve short-term gains.

7. Strived to integrate the most possible information on its search engines: Google continuously strived to add information that was not readily available, such as adding phone number and business directories. Researchers at Google continued to look into ways to bring all of the world’s information to the people’s fingertips.

8. Worked with a mission to facilitate information across the world: The mission of Google was to facilitate access to information to the entire world and in all languages. It had presence in more than 60 countries and provided search services in more than 130 languages.

9. Believed that work should be challenging and fun: Google believed that to foster creativity the right company culture was required. It emphasized team achievements and took pride in individual accomplishments that contributed to its overall success.

10. Set unachievable goals: Google believed that by setting unachievable goals it could get further than it expected. Through innovation and iterations, it improved on tasks in unexpected ways.

Source: Compiled from “Ten Things We Know to Be True,” About Google, Google, accessed January 17, 2019, www.google.com/about/philosophy.html.

ENDNOTES

1. This case has been written on the basis of published sources only. Consequently, the interpretation and perspectives presented in this case are not necessarily those of Google LLC or any of its employees. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
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