

GOOGLE PITCHED CHINESE BOSSES AS "BEST COVERT INFO MANIPULATOR ON EARTH"

Ryan Gallagher

Illustration: Other Means for The Intercept

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GOOGLE IS PLANNING to launch a censored version of its search engine in China that will blacklist websites and search terms about human rights, democracy, religion, and peaceful protest, The Intercept can reveal.

The project – code-named Dragonfly – has been underway since spring of last year, and accelerated following a December 2017 meeting between Google’s CEO Sundar Pichai and a top Chinese government official, according to internal Google documents and people familiar with the plans.

Teams of programmers and engineers at Google have created a custom Android app, different versions of which have been named “Maotai” and

“Longfei.” The app has already been demonstrated to the Chinese government; the finalized version could be launched in the next six to nine months, pending approval from Chinese officials.

The planned move represents a dramatic shift in Google’s policy on China and will mark the first time in almost a decade that the internet giant has operated its search engine in the country.

Google’s search service cannot currently be accessed by most internet users in China because it is blocked by the country’s so-called Great Firewall. The app Google is building for China will comply with the country’s strict censorship laws, restricting access to content that Xi Jinping’s Communist Party regime deems unfavorable.

The Chinese government blocks information on the internet about political opponents, free speech, sex, news, and academic studies. It bans websites about the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, for instance, and references to “anticommunism” and “dissidents.” Mentions of books that negatively portray authoritarian governments, like George Orwell’s 1984 and Animal Farm, have been [prohibited](#) on Weibo, a Chinese social media website. The country also censors popular Western social media sites like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as American news organizations such as the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal.

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Documents seen by The Intercept, marked “Google confidential,” say that Google’s Chinese search app will automatically identify and filter websites blocked by the Great Firewall. When a person carries out a search, banned websites will be removed from the first page of results, and a disclaimer will be displayed stating that “some results may have been removed due to statutory requirements.” Examples cited in the documents of websites that will be subject to the censorship include those of British news broadcaster BBC and the online encyclopedia Wikipedia.

The search app will also “blacklist sensitive queries” so that “no results will be shown” at all when people enter certain words or phrases, the documents state. The censorship will apply across the platform: Google’s image search,

automatic spell check and suggested search features will incorporate the blacklists, meaning that they will not recommend people information or photographs the government has banned.

Within Google, knowledge about Dragonfly has been restricted to just a few hundred members of the internet giant's 88,000-strong workforce, said a source with knowledge of the project. The source spoke to The Intercept on condition of anonymity, as they were not authorized to contact the media. The source said that they had moral and ethical concerns about Google's role in the censorship, which is being planned by a handful of top executives and managers at the company with no public scrutiny.

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“I’m against large companies and governments collaborating in the oppression of their people, and feel like transparency around what’s being done is in the public interest,” the source said, adding that they feared “what is done in China will become a template for many other nations.”

Patrick Poon, a Hong Kong-based researcher with human rights group Amnesty International, told The Intercept that Google's decision to comply with the censorship would be “a big disaster for the information age.”

“This has very serious implications not just for China, but for all of us, for freedom of information and internet freedom,” said Poon. “It will set a terrible precedent for many other companies who are still trying to do business in China while maintaining the principles of not succumbing to China's censorship. The biggest search engine in the world obeying the censorship in China is a victory for the Chinese government – it sends a signal that nobody will bother to challenge the censorship any more.”

It is unclear whether Google will eventually launch a desktop version of its censored China search platform. For now, the company is focused on initially rolling out the Android app, which a large portion of China's population will be able to access. Researchers [estimate](#) that more than 95 percent of people accessing the internet in China use mobile devices to go

online, and Android is [by far](#) the most popular mobile operating system in the country, with 80 percent of the market share.

The documents seen by The Intercept suggest that Google will operate the search app as part of a “joint venture” with an unnamed partner company, which will presumably be based in China. However, much of the work on the Dragonfly project is being carried out at Google’s Mountain View headquarters in California, about 14 miles northwest of San Jose, the heart of Silicon Valley. Other teams participating in the project are based out of Google offices in New York, San Francisco, Sunnyvale, Santa Barbara, Cambridge, Washington, D.C., Shanghai, Beijing, and Tokyo.

PREVIOUSLY, BETWEEN 2006 and 2010, Google had maintained a censored version of its search engine in China. At the time, the company faced severe criticism in the U.S. over its compliance with the Chinese government’s policies.

During a February 2006 [congressional hearing](#) that focused on the activities of American technology companies in China, members of the House International Relations Committee called Google a “functionary of the Chinese government” and accused it of “abhorrent actions” for participating in censorship. “Google has seriously compromised its ‘don’t be evil’ policy,” declared Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J. “Indeed, it has become evil’s accomplice.”

The controversy eventually became too much for Google. In March 2010, it announced that it was pulling its search service out of China. In a [blog post](#) published at the time, the company cited Chinese government efforts to limit free speech, block websites, and hack Google computer systems as reasons why it “could no longer continue censoring our results.”

Sergey Brin, Google’s co-founder, was born in the Soviet Union and seemed particularly sensitive to concerns around censorship, having had personal experience under a repressive regime. After Google ceased its search service in 2010, Brin [said](#) that the company’s objection related to “forces of totalitarianism,” and added that he hoped the decision to pull the search platform out of the country would help lead to a “more open internet.”

Since then, however, censorship and surveillance in China has become more pervasive. In 2016, the country’s government passed a new cybersecurity law, which Human Rights Watch [said](#) “strengthens

**“Companies
operating in
China must be**

censorship, surveillance, and other controls over the internet.” The government is using new [automated systems](#) to monitor and censor the internet, and it has [cracked down](#) on privacy technologies that Chinese people were using to circumvent the restrictions.

prepared to turn over user data to security agencies.”

“It has been a requirement that companies operating in China must be prepared to police their users and turn over user data to security agencies upon request,” said Ron Deibert, director of Citizen Lab, an internet research group based at the University of Toronto. “We have also found overall that internet censorship [in China] is evolving towards less transparency, with less notification to users when messages are censored or removed across all platforms.”

Despite the continued repression, opinions have changed at the highest levels of Google. China now has more than 750 million internet users, equivalent to the entire population of Europe. It therefore represents a potentially massive revenue stream for the internet giant, which is likely a factor in its decision to relaunch the search platform in the country.

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Another reason for the planned policy reversal may be that since Google last operated its search tool in China, the company’s leadership structure has markedly changed. Co-founders Brin and Larry Page have adopted less hands-on roles, though they still serve on the company’s board of directors.

Google’s China rapprochement has been spearheaded by Pichai, Google’s current CEO, a 46-year-old Indian-American who took the helm in October 2015. At a June 2016 conference in southern California, Pichai made his intentions clear. “I care about servicing users globally in every corner. Google is for everyone,” he said. “We want to be in China serving Chinese users.”

In December 2017, sources say Pichai traveled to China and attended a private meeting with Wang Huning, a leading figure in the Communist

Party. Huning is President Xi's top foreign policy adviser and has been described as "China's Kissinger." Pichai is said to have viewed the meeting as a success. The same month, Google [announced](#) that it was launching an artificial intelligence research center in Beijing. That was followed in May 2018 with the [release](#) of a Google file management app for Chinese internet users. Then, in July, Google [rolled out](#) a "Guess The Sketch" game on WeChat, a popular Chinese messaging and social media platform.

The finale would be the launch of the search app — the Dragonfly project. According to sources familiar with the plans, timing for the app's release will depend on two main factors: approval from the Chinese government and confidence within Google that its app will be better than the search service offered by its main competitor in China, Baidu.

Google insiders say that it is not known when the company will obtain the approval from officials in Beijing because an escalating trade war between the U.S. and China has slowed the process. However, Google's search engine chief Ben Gomes told staff at a meeting last month that they must be ready to launch the Chinese search app at short notice, in the event that "suddenly the world changes or [President Donald Trump] decides his new best friend is Xi Jinping."

Google and the Chinese government's Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not respond to multiple requests for comment on this story.

