

GOOGLE STAFF TELL BOSSES CHINA CENSORSHIP IS MORAL AND ETHICAL CRISIS

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Illustration: Soohee Cho/The Intercept

GOOGLE EMPLOYEES ARE demanding answers from the company's leadership amid growing internal protests over plans to launch a censored search engine in China.

Staff inside the internet giant's offices have agreed that the censorship project raises "urgent moral and ethical issues" and have circulated a letter saying so, and calling on bosses to disclose more about the company's work in China, which they say is shrouded in too much secrecy, according to three sources with knowledge of the matter.

The internal furor began after The Intercept earlier this month [revealed details](#) about the censored search engine, which would remove content that China's authoritarian government views as sensitive, such as information about political dissidents, free speech, democracy, human rights, and peaceful protest. It would "blacklist sensitive queries" so that "no results will be shown" at all when people enter certain words or phrases, leaked Google documents disclosed. The search platform is to be launched via an Android app, pending approval from Chinese officials.

The censorship plan—code-named Dragonfly—was not widely known within Google. Prior to its public exposure only a few hundred of Google's 88,000 employees had been briefed about the project—around 0.35 percent of the total workforce. When the news spread through the company's offices across the world, many employees [expressed anger and confusion](#).

Now, a letter has been circulated among staff calling for Google's leadership to recognize that there is a "code yellow" situation—a kind of internal alert that signifies a crisis is unfolding. The letter suggests that the Dragonfly initiative violates an internal Google artificial intelligence ethical code, which says that the company will not build or deploy technologies "whose purpose contravenes widely accepted principles of international law and human rights."

The letter says: "Currently we do not have the information required to make ethically-informed decisions about our work, our projects, and our employment. That the decision to build Dragonfly was made in secret, and progressed with the [artificial intelligence] Principles in place, makes clear that the Principles alone are not enough. We urgently need more transparency, a seat at the table, and a commitment to clear and open processes: Google employees need to know what we're building."

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The letter goes on to demand "an ethics review that includes rank and file employee representatives," the appointment of an ombudsperson to oversee the process, a plan for more transparency to be instituted across the company so that employees can make ethical choices about what they choose to work on, and "ethical test cases" assessing the Chinese censorship plans. The effort to write and circulate the letter was partly led by a group of Google employees who previously [protested](#) the company's work with the U.S. military to build artificial intelligence that could identify vehicles and other objects in drone footage. That protest was successful and led to Google allowing its contract with the military to expire.

Many Google employees are members of the Association of Computing Machinery, the world's largest organization for computing professionals. The ACM's ethical code states that its members should "take action to avoid creating systems or technologies that disenfranchise or oppress people" and "use their skills for the benefit of society." Two Google sources told The Intercept that they felt the Dragonfly project clearly violated the ACM's code of ethics, which has led them to support the protests inside the company against the planned China censorship.

Google's leadership has still not spoken to employees about Dragonfly, according to the sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to contact the media. Publicly, Google's press office has declined to answer any questions from reporters about the censorship, and has said only that it will not comment on "speculation about future plans."

The silence from Google bosses appears to have fueled anger within the company. Discussion has raged among Google employees, with some questioning their managers, only to be told that details about Dragonfly cannot be shared. It has emerged that at least one Google staffer who worked on Dragonfly left the company partly due to concerns about the project, and another employee who was asked to work on it refused to do so.

This week, hundreds of Google employees shared an essay authored by Brandon Downey, a former Google engineer who says he worked for the company on an earlier version of its censored Chinese search platform. Google launched a censored search engine in China in 2006, but pulled the service out of the country in 2010, citing Chinese government efforts to limit free speech, block websites, and hack Google's computer systems. Downey's essay, [which he published online](#), criticizes the censorship, and calls on Google not to "make the same mistake twice" by launching Dragonfly.

"I want to say I'm sorry for helping to do this," Downey wrote. "I don't know how much this contributed to strengthening political support for the censorship regime in [China], but it was wrong. It did nothing but benefit me and my career, and so it fits the classic definition of morally heedless behavior: I got things and in return it probably made some other people's life worse."

"We have a responsibility to the world our technology enables," Downey adds. "If we build a tool and give it to people who are hurting other people with it, it is our job to try to stop it, or at least, not help it. Technology can of course be a force for good, but it's not a magic bullet – it's more like a laser and it's up to us what we focus it on. What we can't do is just collaborate, and assume it will have a happy ending."

Google is facing mounting pressure both inside and outside the company. The Dragonfly plan has been condemned by a bipartisan group of six U.S. senators and

several human rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Google has not yet responded to questions posed by the human rights groups or senators, sources said. However, the company has in recent days engaged with the Global Network Initiative, or GNI, a digital rights organization that works with a coalition of companies, human rights groups, and academics.

Google is signed up as a member of the GNI, which means that it has committed to implementing a set of principles on freedom of expression and privacy. The principles appear to prohibit complicity in the sort of broad censorship that is widespread in China, stating that member companies must “respect and work to protect the freedom of expression rights of users” when they are confronted with government demands to “remove content or otherwise limit access to communications, ideas and information in a manner inconsistent with internationally recognized laws and standards.”

Google will have to explain to the GNI how its plan to launch a censored search in China is consistent with the initiative’s principles. In response to questions from The Intercept, the GNI refused to discuss its interactions with Google. However, Judith Lichtenberg, the group’s executive director, said in a statement: “All member companies are expected to implement the GNI principles wherever they operate, and are subject to independent assessment, which is overseen by our multi-stakeholder board of directors.”

Cynthia Wong, a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch, is one of the representatives on the GNI’s board of directors. Wong told The Intercept that Google “owes the Chinese people an explanation of how the firm can launch Dragonfly without being conscripted into human rights abuses.”

Wong added: “Google earned a lot of good will from the human rights community with they stopped censoring search in 2010. Yet the human rights situation has only deteriorated in the years since. If it re-enters now without any clear strategy as to how its services will improve human rights, it would be a victory for [President] Xi Jinping’s regime and will only serve to legitimize the government’s abusive approach. We haven’t yet heard any such strategy.”

Google did not respond to a request for comment on this story.

