

Senior Employee Resigns From Google Over China Censored Search Engine Plans

BY COLIN FREDERICSON

A senior research scientist at Google quit after news of a search engine project in China leaked to the media.

Jack Poulson, who worked for the research and machine intelligence department, ended his employment on Aug. 31, *The Intercept* reported.

An Aug. 1 story by *The Intercept* about Google's plans to build a censored search engine in China caused an uproar at the company. Sources leaked news of the project, which was only known by a fraction of employees.

Poulson brought the matter up with his managers. He decided to resign by mid-August, seeing that Google would continue its plans.

He did not want to be involved in a company that would censor information at the request of Chinese Communist officials, simply to re-enter the Chinese market.

“Due to my conviction that dissent is fundamental to functioning democracies, I am forced to resign in order to avoid contributing to, or profiting from, the erosion of protection for dissidents,” Poulson wrote in his resignation letter, obtained by The Intercept.

Marco Rubio 

@marcorubio



Giving benefit of the doubt until we learn more. But reading how [@Google](#) has plans to help [#China](#) set up a censored search engine is very disturbing. They won't help [@DeptofDefense](#) keep us safe but they will help China suppress the truth?
theintercept.com/2018/08/01/goo...

7:48 AM - Aug 1, 2018

Google Plans to Launch Censored Search Engine in China, Leaked Documents Revealed

Search app that will "blacklist sensitive queries" could be launched in six to nine months, according to documents and people familiar with the plans.

theintercept.com

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Google's First Censored Search Engine in China, 2006-2010

For Google to have access to the Chinese search market again, they would have to host servers and store user data within mainland China. Chinese authorities would have access to that data. Poulson fears this situation would be used to oppress political dissidents.

Google accused China of doing just that, when Google discovered China hacked the email accounts of political activists on its servers before their highly publicized 2010 pull out from China, according to reports from The Wall Street Journal and Spiegel Online.

"I view our intent to capitulate to censorship and surveillance demands in exchange for access to the Chinese market as a forfeiture of our values and governmental negotiating position across the globe," Poulson continued, in the letter, seeing how Google's change of heart as a move that could set a bad precedent.

"There is an all-too-real possibility that other nations will attempt to leverage our actions in China in order to demand our compliance with their security demands."

Google has not addressed questions from human rights groups, journalists, and others about Google's reversal on censorship. Employees inside of Google have also received silence from the company when seeking answers about the project's ethical implications. Some have left the company along with Poulson.

Google was praised when it left the Chinese market in 2010. The move was spearheaded by Google co-founder Sergey Brin. He credited the decision to his experience of spending his early years under the Soviet Union, and noticing the same authoritarian "earmarks" of oppression in Communist China.

Google had operated a censored search engine in China from 2006 to 2010. An engineer who worked on that project wrote a letter in which he expressed regret in helping Google in its collaboration with Chinese authorities back then, and advised Google against going back.

Brandon Downey

@bdowney



This is strictly worse than the censorship scheme created in 2006, because it is apparently planning to both store personally identifiable info about users, but also linking it to searches with this data stored within the PRC.

I wonder what Google's privacy team thinks?

Ryan Gallagher  @rj_gallagher

NEW: Google built a prototype of a censored search engine for China that links users' searches to their phone numbers, making it easier for Chinese authorities to monitor people's queries: theintercept.com/2018/09/14/goo... #Dragonfly

2:46 PM - Sep 14, 2018

♥ 1 👤 See Brandon Downey's other Tweets



Formal Google engineer Brandon Downey criticized Google's basic rationalization for ever working with Chinese authorities. He described the company's decision like this:

"Look, China is already censoring the internet. So why don't we at least give people what information we can, because some is better than none?"

He responded to that rationalization like this:

"Google has already done this once, and it ended in disaster."

He also offered an apology for being involved in Google's first censorship project in China.

"I want to say I'm sorry for helping to do this. I don't know how much this contributed to strengthening political support for the censorship regime in the PRC, 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."