

APPLE IS YOUR PARTNER IN COMMUNISM



[Ryan Gallagher](#)

A new website exposes the extent to which Apple cooperates with Chinese government internet censorship, blocking access to Western news sources, information about human rights and religious freedoms, and privacy-enhancing apps that would circumvent the country's pervasive online surveillance regime.

The new site, AppleCensorship.com, allows users to check which apps are not accessible to people in China through Apple's app store, indicating those that have been banned. It was created by researchers at GreatFire.org, an organization that monitors Chinese government internet censorship.

In late 2017, Apple [admitted](#) to U.S. senators that it had removed from its app store in China more than 600 "virtual private network" apps that allow users to evade censorship and online spying. But the company never disclosed which specific apps it removed — nor did it reveal other services it had pulled from its app store at the behest of China's authoritarian government.

In addition to the hundreds of VPN apps, Apple is currently preventing its users in China from downloading apps from news organizations, including the New York Times, Radio Free Asia, Tibetan News, and Voice of Tibet. It is also blocking censorship

circumvention tools like Tor and Psiphon; Google's search app and Google Earth; an app called Bitter Winter, which provides information about human rights and religious freedoms in China; and an app operated by the Central Tibetan Authority, which provides information about Tibetan human rights and social issues.

Some bans – such as those of certain [VPN apps](#) and the [Times](#) – have received media coverage in the past, but many never generate news headlines. Charlie Smith, a co-founder of GreatFire.org, told The Intercept that the group was motivated to launch the website because “Apple provides little transparency into what it censors in its app store. Most developers find out their app has been censored after they see a drop in China traffic and try to figure out if there is a problem. We wanted to bring transparency to what they are censoring.”

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Smith, who said that the website was still in a beta phase of early development, added that until now, it was not easy to check exactly which apps Apple had removed from its app stores in different parts of the world. For example, he said, “now we can see that the top 100 VPN apps in the U.S. app store are all not available in the China app store.”

The site is not able to distinguish between apps taken down due to requests from the Chinese government because they violate legal limits on free expression versus those removed because they violate other laws, such as those [regulating gambling](#). However, it is possible to determine from the content of each

app – and whether it continues to be available in the U.S. or elsewhere – the likely reason for its removal.

Radio Free Asia, for instance, has been subject to censorship for decades in China. The Washington, D.C.-based organization, which is funded by the U.S. government, regularly reports on human rights [abuses](#) in China and has had its broadcasts jammed and blocked in the country since the late 1990s. That censorship has also extended to the internet – now with the support of Apple.

Rohit Mahajan, a spokesman for Radio Free Asia, told The Intercept that Apple had informed the organization in December last year that one of its apps was removed from the app store in China because it did not meet “legal requirements” there. “There was no option to appeal, as far as we could discern,” said Mahajan.

Libby Liu, Radio Free Asia’s president, added that “shutting down avenues for credible, outside news organizations is a loss – not just for us, but for the millions who rely on our reports and updates for a different picture than what’s presented in state-controlled media. I would hope that Western companies would be committed to Western values when it comes to making decisions that could impact that access.”

An Apple spokesperson declined to address removals of specific apps from China, but pointed to the company’s app store [review guidelines](#), which state: “Apps must comply with all legal requirements in any location where you make them available.” The spokesperson said that Apple, in its next transparency report, is planning to release information on government requests to remove apps from its app store.

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The Chinese government expects Western companies to make concessions before it permits them to gain access to the country's lucrative market of more than 800 million internet users. The concessions include compliance with the ruling Communist Party's sweeping censorship and surveillance regime. In recent years, the Chinese state has beefed up its repressive powers. It has introduced a new "data localization" law, for instance, which forces all internet and communication companies to store Chinese users' data on the country's mainland — making it more accessible to Chinese authorities.

In accordance with the data localization law, Apple agreed to a deal with state-owned China Telecom to control and store Chinese users' iCloud data. Apple claims that it retains control of the encryption keys to the data, ensuring that people's photographs and other private information cannot be accessed by the Chinese state. However, human rights groups remain concerned. Amnesty International has [previously](#) stated, "By handing over its China iCloud service to a local company without sufficient safeguards, the Chinese authorities now have potentially unfettered access to all Apple's Chinese customers' iCloud data. Apple knows it, yet has not warned its customers in China of the risks."

Apple CEO Tim Cook has presented himself as a defender of users' privacy. During a speech in October last year, Cook

[declared](#), "We at Apple believe that privacy is a fundamental human right." It is unclear how Cook reconciles that sentiment with Apple's removal of privacy-enhancing software from its app store in China, which helps ensure that the country's government can continue to monitor its citizens and crack down on opponents. Cook appears to have viewed compliance with Chinese censorship and surveillance as worthwhile compromises. "We would obviously rather not remove the apps," he [said](#) in 2017, "but like we do in other countries we follow the law wherever we do business. ... We're hopeful that over time the restrictions we're seeing are lessened, because innovation really requires freedom to collaborate and communicate."