Project Dragonfly and Free Speech

“Don’t be evil”

It’s a simple motto for Google that has existed for nearly two decades and it is as important as it is vague. It can seem simple or even silly because of its dramatic flair yet it has led Google well. At one point there was a small outrage when it was reported that Alphabet (Google’s parent company after it’s restructuring in 2015) had removed this simple phrase from it’s code of conduct\(^1\). Although, the motto still exists elsewhere in Google corporate code of conduct\(^2\). Curiously, Alphabet’s similar motto is “Do the right thing”. The right thing for whom and whether money or morality decides the definition of ‘right’ is left unclear. Why is this simple motto important however? It is this motto that Google employees cite when they argue and protest against Google’s recent actions. These inhouse protests began after a new secret project was leaked to the public.

This controversy comes out in the same year as Project Maven. That project was an AI technology developed with the Pentagon for American military application\(^3\). Maven was an AI that used algorithms to analyze military drone footage and identify targets and people\(^4\). This a broke from Google’s previous decision to not create military software. After public outcry and

\(^1\) [http://time.com/4060575/alphabet-google-dont-be-evil/](http://time.com/4060575/alphabet-google-dont-be-evil/)

\(^2\) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don%27t_be_evil](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don%27t_be_evil)


\(^4\) Ibid
in-company complaints Google stated that after the current government contract concluded they would abandon Maven. But a couple of weeks ago another project, perhaps even more concerning than Maven, was revealed by an unnamed insider at Google. It is named Project Dragonfly.

Project Dragonfly danger isn’t about military applications in war zones and a potential slippery slope like Project Maven but about a totalitarian government’s oppressively using and abusing Google’s software and the potential slippery slope. Dragonfly is a reintroduction of a Google search engine into China in an attempt to take advantage of the large open market share. This reintroduction however would require the addition of several features required by the Chinese government. The first change would bring censorship of words or phrases the Chinese government chooses. Dragonfly would also provide users search records and the government would be notified of anyone googling terms on the blacklist. It would also connect users phone numbers and IP address to their history. This would allow very fast identification and location of anyone googling information. Theoretically, the Chinese government could know the phone number of everyone that googles blacklisted words on their phone and locate and target those people with ease.

Certain queries that were blacklisted by the chinese government would show ‘no results shown’. Some examples of planned blacklisted words include “human rights,” “student protest”

and “Nobel Prize”\(^8\). It would also include questions that are critical of China’s President Xi Jinping\(^9\). This list was apparently developed by Google and could at any time have new phrases added on\(^10\). Furthermore, certain foreign news sites would be banned from the start including BBC news. Wikipedia would also be unavailable in all languages. Currently, the Chinese and Taiwanese languages are blocked but that status has varied over the years\(^11\). Wikipedia is an example of how the Chinese bans change constantly and aren’t entirely predictable. It’s impossible to know where the blacklist would end and what all it would include. At any time the list could be expanded and there isn’t an obvious limit for when Google should stand its ground and pull out. At the same time Baidu does the same censorship and is likely worse.

What would Project Dragonfly change however? China is already known for having a heavily censored internet, having blocked thousands of websites of varying size\(^12\). Some have stated that bans on many foreign websites has allowed Chinese companies such as Alibaba and Tencent to flourish\(^13\). China’s censorship is wide ranging both on the internet and off. On the internet all HTTPS sites are banned (HTTP sites are allowed) because these sites are to secure and limit the ability for Internet Service Providers (ISP’s) to spy on users and track internet history. Everything from literature, television, newspapers, movies, messaging services both text and instant, and video games are all censored\(^14\).

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9 Ibid

10 Ibid


12 Ibid


Even multi billion dollar services with massive chinese audiences aren’t immune with Fortnite being banned earlier this week only a couple months after Tencent spent $15 million to bring Fortnite\textsuperscript{15}. Strangely, Winnie the Pooh was censored in Kingdom Hearts 3 at the same time. These examples show how China needs little reason at all to ban or censor media. Some media is banned for reasons that it might promote beliefs in opposition to the government while others are banned for seemingly no reason at all. There isn’t a limit to what they will ban, modify, or leave alone. Nothing is safe from censorship. Overall, the state of censorship in China is extreme. China’s main search engine is Baidu which like Dragonfly complies to the Chinese government’s many censorship requests. Baidu has monopolized the search engine space after Google left in 2010\textsuperscript{17}.

The choice to enter the massive chinese market stands in direct contrast to Google’s choice to leave in 2010 after China breached security in order to gain information about human right activists\textsuperscript{18}. This was a massive market even back then and Google’s decisions to leave was surprising. Afterwards tech company Baidu has gained huge control over the market in china. The decision to leave stemmed largely because of moral issues. Their motto “Don’t be evil” comes to mind. Google’s CEO Sundar Pichai claims that Dragonfly would be better for the chinese than Baidu\textsuperscript{19}. He claimed that it would help people look for cancer treatment although Baidu already has thousands of returns for a question like that. Notably, this is referring to a

\textsuperscript{15} http://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/23304309/tencent-invest-15-million-fortnite-esports-china
\textsuperscript{16} https://gamerant.com/fortnite-china-ban-841/
\textsuperscript{17} https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/01/why-google-quit-china-and-why-its-heading-back/424482/
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid
\textsuperscript{19} https://www.vox.com/2018/8/17/17704526/google-dragonfly-censored-search-engine-china
famous case where a man died after spending thousands on one of the first results\textsuperscript{20}. That result was a scam. A result that had bought it’s place with nothing on the page declaring that. Despite Pichai’s claim that Google would have helped that man receive real treatment, it is difficult to state whether Google would have saved that man. Google will still be heavily censored so can it really provide a better service. Censorship is still censorship no matter whose name it is under. Even worse China’s extreme level of censorship is coupled with tracking and targeting of anyone attempting to view banned materials. Government enemies could be in danger if Google complied. Google’s claim it would rejoin the Chinese market to help people is a lie. The company only wants profits from a massive consumer base.

Google would be complicit with any actions the Chinese governments takes. It is obvious that Google was aware of the moral issue as Dragonfly did not go through the same process that other projects do. Project workers were encouraged to deflect questions from the media and their coworkers\textsuperscript{21}. Dragonfly itself was only revealed by an unknown leaker. When questioned by the senate and media, Pichai claimed that Dragonfly was only a preliminary look at what an entrance into the Chinese market would look like\textsuperscript{22}. This is in conflict with claims that Dragonfly was planned to launch early in 2019 with a report claiming that it was in its final stages of development when leaked.

Even if Dragonfly is abandoned, there are serious moral concerns at Google as they hid it from the public and majority of the company despite multiple members raising concerns and

\textsuperscript{20}https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/united-states/article/2168337/china-even-censored-goo
gle-search-engine-would
\textsuperscript{21}https://theintercept.com/2018/08/01/google-china-search-engine-censorship/
\textsuperscript{22}https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/10/16/google-really-is-trying-build-censored-chinese-
search-engine-its-ceo-confirms/?noredirect=on
some team members even quitting. Yonatan Zunger was an employee for 14 years, who left in
2017 after pointing out that Dragonfly would enable the government to interrogate and detain
people only for searches\(^\text{23}\). The danger to lives is a real issue. China has detained thousands of
muslims, the next Dalai Llama disappeared mysteriously, and recently a Canadian businessman.
China’s demands are about more than just censorship. China has detained large groups of people
some without warning or representation. Amnesty International and Google employees (some
now former employees) have raised issue about how it is likely that Google would provide a
helping hand in these detentions\(^\text{24}\).

Dragonfly links searches with people’s phone numbers and that method of identification
could endanger people’s lives. Kids who have no idea what they are doing could have a black
mark against them for the rest of their lives. Human rights activists could become victims.
Journalists that have been dying in large numbers all over the world would be in more danger as
well. Google left after a cyber attack from the chinese targeted human rights activists before.
Why would they not target the same people still seen as enemies of the state. China is already
creating a social credit system to rank people and control friendships and thoughts. Dragonfly
might only further enable Xi Jinping.

Also, if Google subsides to chinese demands, where would they stop? China is constantly
banning new things, and censoring all types of media so who will make the decision what is to
much and when it can’t be accepted. Google may be better than Baidu at the start but is not
guaranteed to always be better. That slippery slope can already be seen with China having

\(^{23}\) https://studybreaks.com/tvfilm/what-is-googles-project-dragonfly-and-why-is-it-so-concerning/
thousands of banned websites. That slippery slope exists for Project Dragonfly as well. The watchdog role in journalism exists when the government oversteps its bounds but Google will not have an outside watchdog of its own in China.

Google’s quality declining isn’t far fetched too. Why would China stop making demands if Google has already stated it will make moral sacrifices in order to make money. Because once they invest money in China, it will be difficult to say no because China will have greater control of the reins. Google has pulled out once but may not make the same choice since the leadership has changed. Other countries will try similar laws to heavily censor info. Why would China be the only exception. Some censorship already exists for Google in Russia and Turkey and it would likely worsen if Dragonfly was implemented. If Google abandons the idea of free speech in China it very likely will abandon it all over the world and internet freedom will drastically drop worldwide.

It should be stated that China’s Internet censorship is not absolute. A Chinese professor mentioned in greater detail later has a Virtual Private Network (VPN) through the American University he works with that allows him to use Google. This is how he was able to make the opinion of Google being superior to Baidu. People who need to google info in China can already use a VPN to access Google and other blocked websites. VPN’s allow a user to appear as if they are in another country and make tracking and censorship extremely difficult as the connection used by a VPN is much more secure and hidden because of the encryption used before connecting to the Internet. In China it is currently illegal to download VPNs but that is difficult to enforce and VPNs that were already in use are usable. VPNs are not very difficult to use but

not all people know about them, how to use them or where to find them. That freedom will only be available to a minority. Most average people won’t use a VPN to access the American version of Google or other websites and will instead use the censored option.

However, despite Dragonfly being extremely flawed from an American point of view and provoking outcry it is not completely horrible. Some chinese believe it to be a better option than Baidu. A chinese professor, Bai Tongdong argued that even a censored Google will be better than Baidu because it’s search results are less useful and the state of it’s “shameless commercialization of it’s search engine”\(^26\)\(^27\). Baidu does not reveal when a result is at the top because it paid and results are not guaranteed to be sorted by relevance\(^28\). He wants Google to do the lesser evil since little has changed since Google left in 2010\(^29\). It’s an important argument to consider because those in protest are mainly Americans. Americans who are deciding what is better for a group of people living differently than them.

It mirrors how the American government has interfered in undemocratic governments worldwide and has caused major instability and violence in the Middle East and Central America. Americans often believe that we can make the world a better place but often interference has unintended consequences. The trade war with China has been very costly but at the same time few people call it out because of the state of China. When international decisions are made carelessly the consequences are historically severe.

\(^26\)https://www.techdirt.com/articles/20181015/13522040844/chinese-professor-argues-google-should-launch-censored-search-engine-china.shtml
\(^27\)https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/united-states/article/2168337/china-even-censored-google-search-engine-would
\(^28\)Ibid
\(^29\)https://www.techdirt.com/articles/20181015/13522040844/chinese-professor-argues-google-should-launch-censored-search-engine-china.shtml
It is easy for Americans to say ‘don’t do give up on our values’ when we are very comfy and safe at home. Chinese citizens don’t have that luxury. China isn’t getting better when we leave it alone as Bai Tongdong mentioned\(^3^0\). Google is a very real improvement when compared to Baidu and would also allow for their to be competition. When Google left China, Chinese residents were sad to see it go. The protest against Dragonfly denies a slightly better life to oppressed people living in a totalitarian government. In the professor’s opinion, “a morally compromised Google is still better than Baidu”. This argument doesn’t fit with Google’s motto, “Don’t be evil” but can be argued to fit with Alphabet’s new motto, “Do the right thing”. A lesser evil while still evil may still be a right choice.

So, if we accept the premise that anything provided by Google will be better than Baidu it becomes an issue of how far is to far. Should American or Western morals be sacrificed to allow people a slightly better experience assuming it doesn’t worsen immediately? Will accepting this level of censorship enable other totalitarian governments to demand similar concessions? Also if Google makes this choice, is stepping back out of China feasible? The decision on whether Google should re-enter China isn’t simple but Dragonfly is the wrong way to go about it.

Project Dragonfly at its heart is not about increasing free speech in China or making it a better place but about gaining access to a massive market and making money. It was developed secretly and did not go through ethical evaluations that other projects did\(^3^1\). Pichai’s arguments for Dragonfly’s benefit have fallen flat because while 99% of requests may be allowed that 1% is a huge number of the nearly 3.5 billion searches on Google reach day. Dragonfly’s apparent lack

\(^3^0\)https://www.techdirt.com/articles/20181015/13522040844/chinese-professor-argues-google-should-launch-censored-search-engine-china.shtml
\(^3^1\)https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/11/27/google-employees-go-public-protest-china-search-engine-dragonfly/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.22c4603e54b0
of any arbiter or rules system to prevent misuse means it would be doomed to only make China’s situation worse. The explanations about Dragonfly from Google has contradicted previous company stances and contradicted internal discussions. Profit was the goal from the beginning and the few people at Google in on it were aware of concerns. Maybe going back to China is a bullet they will have to bite in the future but any trust to not be evil doesn’t exist after this attempt.

America has some of the most protected free speech of any nation. So it is to be expected that a form of censorship may exist in other countries that Google or other Internet companies operate in. The decision to operate so subservient to China is negative because if other companies follow Google direction to allow such a high level of censorship it will not be healthy. America is not able to protect free speech on the internet and other countries are quickly starting to regulate the internet. Few are at the level of China but that may change in the future especially if Google returns to China in a compromised form. Free speech allows chinese residents to know the truth about their government’s activities and possible human right abuse. Giving up that free speech might void the entire benefit of Google moving back in.

Personal privacy is also not being protected on the internet with ISPs, websites, and the government all spying on internet usage and gathering massive amounts of information on people that is stored in massive server banks where it can be accessed by many government officials or possible by independent hackers. Companies like Facebook and Equifax have had large scale breaches that reveal people’s information on accident too. Software designed to spy on people or record information may have increased vulnerabilities. The American government
records tons of information (These data servers weigh a lot!) so it is not unlikely that China records data similarly but utilizes that powerful weapon to control and oppress people.

It is rare that a project would be condemned by both sides of the political aisle in this environment yet both democrats and republicans including even Vice President Mike Pence have condemned Project Dragonfly. Both sides being able to agree has happen so rarely in my lifetime that it is quite strange. It seems that the protection of free speech in order to prevent tyrannical governments is still valued by both sides. The large scale petition by Google members in cooperation with Amnesty International show that people are willing to hold Google accountable to make sure just decisions are made32.

Free speech cannot be abandoned in order to make money if Google wants to not be evil.