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Google's censored search engine for China is sparking a moral crisis within the company

The company is reportedly cracking down on employees who are sharing details about it.

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Google's office in Gurugram, India, on September 7, 2018. | Nasir Kachroo/NurPhoto via Getty Images

An internal battle is playing out at Google's offices in Silicon Valley and around the globe.

After news **leaked in August** that the company was secretly developing a censored search engine for China, more than 1,400 employees have signed a letter demanding more transparency and accountability about the project's potential impact on human rights. The controversy has reportedly prompted at least five Google employees **to quit** in protest.

Now Google is **reportedly cracking down** on employees who say the tool will also allow a Chinese partner to closely track and monitor users.

The search engine under development, known as Dragonfly, is designed to hide search results that China's authoritarian government wants to suppress, such as information about democracy, free speech, peaceful protest, and human rights, according to **an investigation published in August by the Intercept**.

Google executives have revealed little about the project, but a Google spokesperson told Vox in a statement Tuesday that “the work on search has been exploratory, and we are not close to launching a search product in China.”

The spokesperson declined to confirm or deny **new details** published this week by the Intercept that suggest that the project is far along in development — and much creepier than we knew. It's sparking a moral crisis within the company that has yet to be addressed.

The search engine is a potential spying tool

In addition to hiding search results that the Chinese government wants to suppress, Google's new search engine would also track a user's location and would share an individual's search history with a Chinese partner, who would have “unilateral access” to the data. This includes access to a user's telephone number, according to an employee memo **obtained last week by the Intercept**.

The data would be available because the search engine would require Chinese users to download an app and log in with their personal information.

These alarming new details were **outlined in a memo** written by a Google engineer who was asked to work on the project and were posted in an internal chat room where employees have been voicing concerns about Dragonfly, according to the Intercept.

The new details seemed to confirm the worst fears of international human rights groups.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and about a dozen other groups signed a letter in August, urging Google CEO Sundar Pichai to cancel the project. “As it stands, Google risks becoming complicit in the Chinese government's repression of freedom of speech and human rights in China,” **they wrote**.

Google has not responded publicly to the claims in the engineer's memo or the system's potential use as a spying tool for the Chinese government. A spokesperson for Google declined to confirm or deny the reports on Tuesday and released this statement:

"We've been investing for many years to help Chinese users, from developing Android, through mobile apps such as Google Translate and Files Go, and our developer tools. But our work on search has been exploratory, and we are not close to launching a search product in China."

Instead of addressing employee concerns about the memo's claims, Google leadership has reportedly cracked down on its own employees.

Here's what happened, according to the Intercept's Ryan Gallagher:

According to three sources familiar with the incident, Google leadership discovered the memo and were furious that secret details about the China censorship were being passed between employees who were not supposed to have any knowledge about it. Subsequently, Google human resources personnel emailed employees who were believed to have accessed or saved copies of the memo and ordered them to immediately delete it from their computers. Emails demanding deletion of the memo contained "pixel trackers" that notified human resource managers when their messages had been read, recipients determined.

If the memo is accurate, and if this was the company's response, then Google's **moral crisis** is far worse **than many employees have described**.

Google employees are pushing back against Dragonfly

Hundreds of people who work at the Silicon Valley tech giant are protesting the company's decision to develop the censored search engine for Beijing.

About **1,400 Google employees** — out of more than 88,000 — signed a letter to company executives in August, seeking more details and transparency about the project, and demanding employees get input on decisions about what kind of work Google takes on.

They also expressed concern that the company is violating its own ethical principles.

"Currently we do not have the information required to make ethically-informed decisions about our work, our projects, and our employment," they wrote in the **letter, obtained by the Intercept** and the New York Times.

The existence of the **censored search tool** was revealed in early August **by the Intercept**, sparking outcry within the company's ranks and drawing harsh criticism from human rights groups across the world. Internal documents leaked to journalists described how the app-based search platform could block internet users in China from seeing web pages that discuss human rights, peaceful protests, democracy, and other topics blacklisted by China's authoritarian government.

Only a small group of Google engineers are reportedly developing the platform for Beijing, and information about the project has been so heavily guarded that until recently only a few hundred Google employees even knew about it.

The internal backlash among employees represents mounting concerns about whether Google has "lost its moral compass" in the corporate pursuit to enrich shareholders. But it also suggests, interestingly, that the people who make Google's technology have more power in shaping corporate decisions than even shareholders.

In April, thousands of Google employees protested the company's military contract with the Pentagon — **known as project Maven** — which developed technology to analyze drone video footage that could potentially identify and kill human targets.

About a dozen engineers resigned over what they viewed as an unethical use of artificial intelligence, prompting Google to let the contract expire in June and leading executives to promise that they would never use AI technology to harm others.

The fact that Google employees succeeded in forcing one of the most powerful companies in the world to put ethics before shareholder value is a remarkable feat in corporate America and signals why workers need an official voice in strategic decisions. Whether Google decides to drop its plan to help China censor information will be a test of how far that power extends.

At least five Google employees **have reportedly resigned** over the Dragonfly project, including a senior research scientist named Jack Poulson.

"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 protections for dissidents," Paulson **wrote in his August resignation letter**. "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."

For Google, doing business in China is good for shareholders, but possibly bad for humanity

It's no mystery why Google executives want to do business with Chinese government officials: It's profitable. With its population at 1.3 billion, China has the largest number of internet users in the world, so breaking into the Chinese market has been a long-time goal for Silicon Valley tech giants in their quest to find new users and to grow profits.

But working in China inevitably raises ethical issues for any US company. Doing business in mainland China means making deals with an authoritarian government that has a record of human rights abuses and **strict suppression of speech**.

Despite this, Silicon Valley tech companies have shown a willingness to put aside their idealism or rationalize their decisions to court Beijing. LinkedIn, for example, **has a presence in China** because it agreed to block certain online content.

Facebook is still banned in China, but chief executive Mark Zuckerberg has been trying to change that. In 2016, **news surfaced** that Facebook was building a censorship tool similar to Google's Dragonfly project: It would allow a third-party to block certain Facebook posts in China in exchange for the government's permission to operate the social media network there.

A backlash similar to the Dragonfly controversy ensued, raising concerns about the potential for government officials to use the platform to spy on dissidents and punish them. These concerns **led several Facebook employees** who worked on the project to resign. That project was in its early stages, too, and there's no evidence that Facebook ever presented the tool to Chinese officials.

But Google's decision to enter the Chinese market is more unnerving, for several reasons.

It's a striking reversal of **the strong stance** the company took back in 2010, when it decided to leave China in protest of Chinese government hacking and its crackdown on free speech. The decision also seems at odds with Google's once-prominent motto, "Don't be evil." It clashes with **the principles the company adopted** in June after the Pentagon contract controversy, in which Pichai promised that the company would not use artificial intelligence to develop technology "whose purpose contravenes widely accepted principles of international law and human rights."

Google employees say these kinds of promises are no longer enough, in light of the news about the censorship tool, and they are demanding a more formal role in decisions about the ethical implications of their work.

The push to make employees corporate stakeholders

For the past few decades, rank-and-file workers have had no real influence in how public companies invest profits or make decisions about new revenue streams.

In keeping with modern American capitalism, many companies are driven by a singular vision: to bring value to the people who own company stock. Vox's Matt Yglesias **explains** how this mentality plays out:

Therefore, for executives to set aside shareholder profits in pursuit of some other goal like environmental protection, racial justice, community stability, or simple common decency would be a form of theft. If reformulating your product to be more addictive or less healthy increases sales, then it's not only permissible but actually *required* to do so. If closing a profitable plant and outsourcing the work to a low-wage country could make your company even more profitable, then it's the right thing to do.

While it's true that CEOs are required by law to prioritize value to shareholders, that doesn't necessarily mean they are required to make decisions guided only by what maximizes profits. The Supreme Court made this clear in its **2014 opinion** in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*.

"Modern corporate law does not require for-profit corporations to pursue profit at the expense of everything else, and many do not," the justices **wrote in their opinion**.

Momentum is starting to build to change this dynamic, by giving employees and consumers more power in corporate decision making.

Just last month, **Sen. Elizabeth Warren** (D-MA) introduced a bill that would require large public companies to make decisions not only based on how they would affect shareholders, but also on how they would affect consumers, employees and the communities where the company operates. The bill, titled the **Accountable Capitalism Act**, would also require corporations to allow employees to elect 40 percent of a company's board of directors.

The idea behind the bill is to make sure that US corporations are decent citizens. That seems to be the same idea motivating Google employees to make more demands from their employer, which happens to be one of the most powerful companies in the world.

Google employees want a role in evaluating company projects

The response of Google employees to the company's Dragonfly project for China gives us a glimpse of what might happen if workers had a more formal role in corporate decision making.

In their letter to executives, Google employees made four specific demands. First, they want the company to create a structure to allow rank-and-file employees to review ethical issues in company projects. Second, they want the company to appoint an ombudsman to oversee the ethics review process, with input from employees over who fills the position.

They also want a plan to ensure Google is transparent with employees about the purpose of the technology the company is developing, so employees can make informed choices about the ethical implications of the work they do. And they want the company to publish ethical assessments of their projects, such as Dragonfly, and to communicate regularly with employees about issues of concern.

So far, Google executives haven't said publicly whether or not they will go along. Based on **reports describing a staff meeting** last month at the company's California headquarters, the conversation about Dragonfly didn't get that far.

But if Pichai and other executives do go along with the demands, it would certainly reflect a major shift in corporate priorities. And it would bolster a fundamental point in the debate: Employees are the ones who literally create value for shareholders, so they need to be on board with what they are creating.

Brandon Downey, a former Google engineer who says he regrets his role in helping develop the company's **first censored search tool** in China (before the company stopped operating its search engine in the Chinese market in 2010), **wrote a moving essay** about what's at stake:

Google is acting like a traditional company; one that squeezes every dime out of the marketplace, heedless of intangibles like principle, ethical cost, and even at the risk of the safety of its users. ...

If technology is a tool, then it means the people *making that tool* have a responsibility to curb their tool's misuse by playing a role in the decisions on how it gets used. And if the people who are the leaders of the company don't believe this, they should hear it in plainer and clearer terms: namely, you do not become one of the largest companies in the history of capitalism without the assistance of the workers making those tools.

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