

Skype joins in self-censoring in China



From the White House to business leaders in Seattle, policymakers and executives across the United States have been rolling out the red carpet for Chinese premier Hu Jintao. But even as the leader of one of the world's fastest-growing economies is feted, frustration about the country's policies ranging from its foreign-exchange regime to its human-rights record continues to mount.

Still, when it comes to freedom of speech, some of the world's biggest names in the business are prepared to abide by the Communist Party's rules in order to remain in the lucrative market. Indeed, only hours before Hu was slated to meet with President Bush in Washington, Internet phone service provider Skype admitted that its Chinese partner has been tasked with filtering text messages sent to and from the country.

In an interview with the Financial Times Tuesday, Skype founder Niklas Zennstrom said partner company Tom Online has adhered to "regulations" set by the Chinese authorities, adding that he defended this compliance as the only way to do business in China.

Specifically, Tom Online has been blocking messages that contain politically sensitive words such as Falun Gong and Dalai Lama, both of which are banned by Beijing.

"Tom has implemented a text filter, which is what everyone else in that market is doing ... those are the regulations," Zennstrom told the FT.

The 40-year-old Swede added that "I may like or not like the laws and regulations to operate businesses in the U.K., or Germany, or the U.S., but if I do business there, I choose to comply with those laws and regulations. I can try to lobby to change them, but I need to comply with them. China in that way is not different."

Certainly, the company that was bought out by online auction house eBay joins a growing list of some of the biggest names in the Internet business that have similarly complied with the rules set by the Chinese government.

Last September non-profit group Reporters Without Borders reported that search-engine giant Yahoo! had voluntarily supplied information to the Chinese government, including e-mails that he had sent from the company's Internet system, that led to the jailing of Chinese journalist Shi Tao. The reporter was subsequently found guilty and sentenced to 10 years in prison for allegedly sending internal Communist Party messages to foreign-based Web sites.

The group then found that Yahoo! had collaborated with the Chinese government in the arrest of two other local reporters, Li Zhi and Jiang Lijun.

On Tuesday, Reporters Without Borders said that "last week we went to the headquarters of the company to urge them to end this collaboration. We called on them to remove their e-mail servers from China, because it is the only way to avoid taking part in the current crackdown against journalists and democrats."

Meanwhile, Google said earlier this year that despite its corporate mantra, "do no evil," it too will work under the Chinese government's law by eliminating politically sensitive words such as Tiananmen Square from its search functions.

Such self-censorship by Internet service providers that is driven by profit can actually backfire in the longer term, advocacy group Human Rights Watch warned.

"It is illogical for companies to say they are expanding the boundaries of freedom in China if they strip their product of the very qualities that make it a force for greater freedom. These companies must protect the integrity of the product they are providing, or that product will no longer be the Internet as we know it, and will no longer have the impact on society we all wish to see," said Tom Malinowski, Washington advocacy director of Human Rights Watch.

Skype's Zennstrom insisted, however, that Tom Online's actions have not and will not put its users at risk.

That may or may not be, but how U.S. Internet companies do business in China will have repercussions far beyond the Chinese borders, Human Rights Watch cautioned.

"China is already exporting technology for monitoring the Internet to other repressive governments -- Zimbabwe, for example. And such governments in every part of the world are now watching to see if China can bend Internet providers to its will. If China succeeds, other countries will insist on the same degree of compliance, and the companies will have no standing to refuse them. We will have two Internets, one for open societies, and one for closed societies. The whole vision of a World Wide Web, which breaks down barriers and empowers people to shape their destiny, will be gone. Instead, in the 21st century, we will have a virtual Iron Curtain dividing the democratic and undemocratic worlds," Malinowski said.

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