

Google's future in China unclear, despite praise for standing up to Chinese censorship

Foster Klug@ - THE ASSOCIATED PRESS@ - Associated Press

Google Inc. is enjoying an avalanche of goodwill because of its threat to leave China over email hacking attacks against dissidents.

Does the Internet giant deserve the praise?

It took four years for Google to reconsider its decision to help China control Internet information in return for access to a booming market. Despite the widespread praise, Google is not backing away immediately from its censorship in China.

The company has announced that it is no longer willing to continue censoring results on Google.cn. It is pursuing talks with Chinese authorities about ways Google can operate an unfiltered search engine within Chinese law. But, pending those talks' results, Google spokesman Scott Rubin said Thursday that business will continue as it did before Tuesday's dramatic announcement.

In coming weeks Google might still find some compromise that would allow it to stay in China, which could anger those who are now showering the company with praise.

Ralph Cossa, president of the Pacific Forum CSIS think-tank , said Google's acclaim should be tempered.

"This shows that even Google has a conscience if the Chinese are egregious enough," Cossa said. "This is a long overdue correction. I give Google credit for having done it; it would have been nicer if they'd done it sooner."

For years, Google faced withering criticism for what activists and lawmakers said was a willingness to abandon social responsibility in return for greater wealth.

Google co-founder Sergey Brin shared many of the critics' concerns about Google's presence in China, but he publicly maintained that even a censored version of the company's search engine was better than none at all.

Now Google finds itself portrayed as a champion of corporate responsibility, the company that finally took a moral stand, despite potential Chinese riches.

Yahoo, Cisco, Microsoft and other tech companies are being urged to follow Google's lead in China.

"Good for Google," The Washington Post wrote in an editorial. The New York Times, praising Google's "bold stand," wrote: "There are limits to the price an American

company should be willing to pay for access to 300 million Web users."

U.S. lawmakers have been just as effusive.

Frank Wolf and Chris Smith, Republican congressmen and longtime critics of Google's involvement in China, called a news conference Thursday to sing the company's praises.

Smith said Google's announcement gave activists a "thrill of encouragement." Wolf said he was reminded of the companies that decided to pull out of South Africa during apartheid.

"God bless Google," Wolf told reporters. "They have been willing to speak out."

Despite all the praise, however, it remains to be seen whether Google, after years of painstaking effort, will walk away from China.

Beijing is very unlikely to accept an end to all censorship, but some sort of compromise could be possible, a deal, for example, that might reduce censorship and end email hacking, said Bonnie Glaser, an analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies think-tank .

Ike Skelton, the Democratic chairman of the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, said in a brief interview Thursday that Google has yet to say if it will leave.

"This may have been a shot across the bow from Google to China," he said. The company's message to Beijing: "clean up your act" or lose Western business in China.

Google and other tech companies made a difficult decision when they entered the Chinese market. They have been forced to satisfy a government that fiercely polices Internet content. Filters block objectionable foreign Web sites; regulations ban what the Chinese consider subversive and pornographic content and require service providers to enforce censorship.

China says it wants to protect its citizens from the Internet's "immoral and harmful content."

Google said it hoped to use its presence in China to provide communication options, such as email and blogs, for people who may not have had other ways to talk to each other freely. Its announcement this week could be a recognition that its experiment in China had failed.

Harry Wu, who spent 19 years in China's "laogai" labour camp system, brushed off Google's announcement with a blunt assessment of the company's role in China.

"Google doesn't really care about human rights," Wu said Thursday. It cares, he said, about the money to be made from China's 300 million Internet users.

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