

# Google has censorship balancing act outside China

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Google Inc. didn't stop wrangling with censorship when the company moved its search engine out of mainland China to shed its restraints on what can be shown on the Internet.

Even in countries Google has no intention of leaving, the world's Web search leader has been under increasing pressure to filter information. For instance, local laws prodded Google to help shield Turkey's founder and Thailand's monarch from public ridicule by blocking unflattering videos of them in their home countries.

The company also complies with laws in Germany, France and Poland that force it to exclude information that promotes or supports Nazi causes. Google has edited discussion forums in India to remove comments that the government flagged as violations of its restrictions against speech that's indecent, immoral or threatens public order.

The censorship demands often thrust Google into a tricky balancing act. Its pursuit of higher profits from international markets has entangled the company in vastly different cultures and laws that conflict with its idealistic crusade to make the world's information "universally accessible." Even as it censors some information, Google says it's fighting to ensure that the Web's most popular gateway doesn't also become the Web's main muzzle.

"We are fundamentally guided by the belief that more information for our users is ultimately better," said Nicole Wong, Google's deputy general counsel.

After four years of censoring search results in China, Google finally abandoned the effort last week. That decision was driven not only by the extent of Chinese censorship demands but also by hacking attacks traced to China on Google, at least 20 other U.S. companies and human rights dissidents.

But the censorship compromises seem likely to continue in other countries.

And even when Google resists censorship requests, its search engine and services can be cut off in a growing number of countries that are erecting barriers similar to the so-called "Great Firewall" that China has built to prevent traffic to its list of forbidden sites.

Access to Google's services have been blocked at some point in at least 25 of the 100 countries where they're offered, according to the company.

In some countries such as Spain, the barriers have been limited to a few Web pages

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that were barred under a court order. Other countries are far more repressive, with some of the most pervasive interference occurring in Iran, Vietnam, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Burma and China, according to evaluations by the Open Net Initiative, a partnership that tracks Internet censorship. Google also worries that Australia's government is going overboard with a proposal that would require Internet service providers to weed out information.

Microsoft Corp., Yahoo Inc. and other major Internet companies also must grapple with such demands. Google, though, is the biggest target because it processes about two-thirds of the world's search requests, and its YouTube service is the top spot for sharing video, with more than 500 million videos.

The flood of content has coincided with more people connecting to the Internet, giving governments even more desire to control the medium.

Except for child pornography, which is generally illegal even to possess, Google doesn't proactively screen content to determine whether it should be included in its search index, according to Wong. Instead, she said, Google makes an assessment after it has been notified that it may be breaking a country's law.

"We reactively remove (content) because countries and the regulators are in a better place to make the evaluation than we are," Wong said. "It's a better system to have them identify what they believe violates their laws than for us to try to guess."

When Google honors a government request, Wong said the company prunes as little information as possible. For instance, even if Google takes down a link to a Nazi site on its German search engine, Google.de, it won't necessarily remove the material in another country, such as France, governed by similar laws. (And given the worldwide nature of the Web, Google couldn't keep a German Internet user from seeing the material elsewhere, such as through the U.S.-based Google.com.)

Google also alerts its users when material has been omitted. For instance, a recent search in France for a white supremacist site included a note stating that 16 results had been removed to honor a legal request. Google referred people to [chillingeffects.org](http://chillingeffects.org), a site that fights for free speech.

Notices also pop up in the United States to explain why Google doesn't censor results that offend some people. People who enter "Jew" in Google's search box will see an in-house ad that points to a page where Google apologizes for listing an anti-Semitic site.

Google is far more likely to remove material from YouTube and other content-sharing services it runs, such as Orkut and Picasa, than from its search index.

The company's guidelines in these forums generally prohibit nudity, hate speech and extreme violence. Those restrictions often jibe with the laws in some countries, making it easier for Google to submit to certain censorship requests.

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Google relies on its users to identify videos that may violate the guidelines. Once it's notified of a potential problem, the company's own reviewers make a judgment call about whether to remove offending clips.

It doesn't always happen fast enough to satisfy some countries, as Google recently learned. In February, an Italian judge held three current and former Google executives criminally responsible for a 2006 video that showed a group of bullies tormenting an autistic teenager. The clip was watched about 5,550 times before Google removed it.

Google is appealing the judge's verdict and still feels comfortable enough with Italy's Internet laws to remain in the country.

Lauren Weinstein, co-founder of People for Internet Responsibility, which fights for free speech and privacy rights, and Robin Gross, executive director of a civil rights group called IP Justice, both said they admire how Google has navigated its global censorship challenges. But Weinstein worries that even limited cooperation with government restrictions will encourage more censorship demands.

"If you give an inch to some of these governments, the next thing you know they want a mile," Weinstein said. "What happened in China is just the beginning, not the end for Google."

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