

Nov 04, 2016 by [Ernest James Wilson III](#)

Google's Digital Diplomacy ^[1]

It was bound to happen. The iconic flagship of our voyage into the digital age has run up against the hard realities of state power and international relations. Internet naiveté is giving way to global realpolitik. Now that Google is in a major flap over its deal with the Chinese government to censor itself, what will become of Google's "foreign policy?" And what, if anything, should the American government do? This case simply foreshadows the complexities of designing "foreign policy" in the digital age.

Not long ago the government of China imposed requirements on Google mandating them to block access to certain sites the PRC deemed objectionable. According to its spokesmen, Google wrestled with the decision and then opted to accede to the government's demands. In their desire to play in the world's biggest market, Google followed similar compromises by Cisco, Microsoft, and other "new economy" firms.

The reactions have been swift, salty, and predictable. The new firewall created a firestorm of outrage among human rights advocates, some IT experts, and China watchers who frequent the blogosphere. "Sell out," "anti-democratic," "shameful," and other terms of derision have been bouncing around the blogs for weeks. They claim Google turned its back on the web's great potential for political liberalization, and reversed Google's own corporate commitment to openness. It is especially shocking on the heels of the company's recent decision to resist U.S. government requests for access to Internet use patterns among Americans. Some claim that Google's capitulation will encourage the Chinese Communist Party to demand even more repression. The search engine/information management company's policy also runs against the rhetorical stance of the U.S. administration, which touts democracy abroad.

Google stated: "While we don't particularly like the law, it is the law of the land and we have to obey." Google argues that providing the Chinese public access to 80% instead of 100% of the search engine's content is preferable to total censorship.

The flap raises important questions about the conduct of public and private diplomacy in cases where the "real" and "virtual" worlds sometimes collide. It's especially complicated in the internet sector because it happens at the intersection of traditional trade issues, virtual trade issues, and human rights.

Google's choices are hardly unique. Multinational corporations have always faced issues of territoriality and local vs. "home" obligations. U.S. companies in Europe have to obey local labor laws they don't like, and Japanese car manufacturers obey U.S. affirmative action requirements. At one level, this is nothing new. Companies are in the business of making money where they can, bound by the local legal restrictions.

In the digital world, however, borders and jurisdictions are blurred at best. Think of the big dust-up over European attempts to restrict the sale of Nazi paraphernalia on the internet. So

does Google really have to obey? Apparently yes, since they moved their host servers to China, (to improve the quality of service and probably to impress the Chinese with their local loyalty). But international fights in cyberspace could change matters of where “local” really is. After all, we’re not just talking sports cars and shampoo. These are fights over the control and censorship of the media, of who gets access to what information, and on what terms. Whenever we confront basic human rights and freedom of expression, it raises the stakes. Furthermore, corporate actions of a Google, Yahoo, or Cisco in countries like China cannot be taken lightly. The results of such actions and decisions could result in serious consequences for Chinese users, including arrest and worse.

This is new territory for companies and governments. Google, like Microsoft and other new economy companies, is trying to figure out what to do. It is taking the usual steps, including lobbying the feds to raise concerns about access; claiming censorship is a restraint on trade; holding meetings of industry associations to come up with common standards for operating in restrictive environments; and meeting with various stakeholders in the U.S. and China.

All this seems sensible. Pressing at the limits of the acceptable to advance democracy is a good thing, keeping in mind that local definitions do vary, and democracy -- like Rome -- was not built in a day. Google’s digital diplomacy, like America’s foreign policy, must find that balance.
