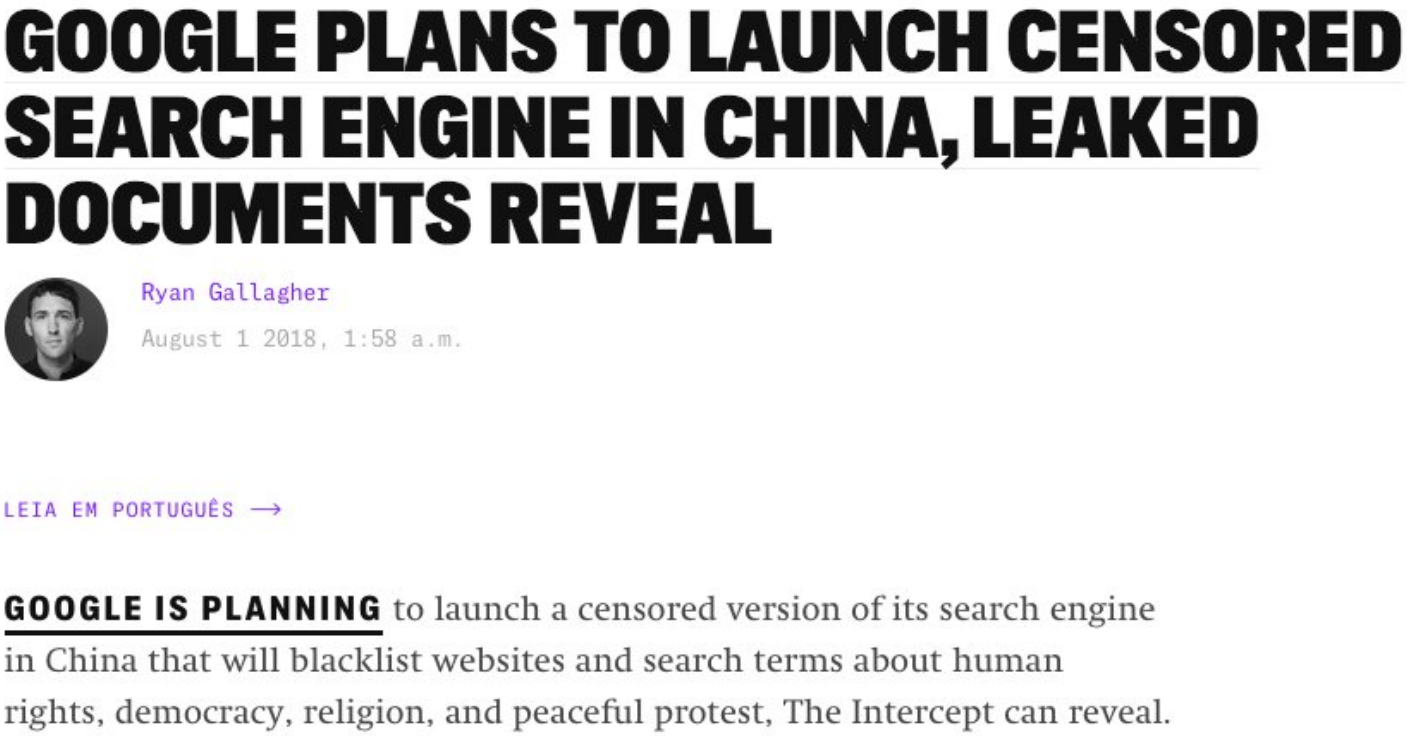
Twitter Thread by Vijay Boyapati



Vijay Boyapati
@real_vijay

1/ Google is working on a new search engine code-named "Dragonfly" that will aid China's effort to censor information from its citizenry.

As a former Google engineer I wanted to share some information on what it's like to be inside Google as these decisions are made



2/ I previously shared that in 2006 I was an engineer who worked on Google News and was asked to write code to censor new results in China.

I've found some emails from 2006 that shed more light on the censorship requirements of the Chinese state.

https://t.co/DGzLQ75n2y

> When I worked at Google, as an engineer on Google News, I was asked to write code to censor news articles in China (circa 2006). I refused and they took me off the project and put someone else on it.

> Doesn't surprise me Google is back at it. "Don't be Evil" is a Google myth. https://t.co/VEenWbPxkW
>
> — Vijay Boyapati (@real_vijay) September 16, 2018

3/ The emails I'm presenting came from a mailing list at Google where employees discussed topics on politics and economics. I have formatted the emails for readability and redacted the names of my colleagues, with whom I was debating. The topic was the 2008 Olympics in China.

On Fri, Feb 1?, 2016 @google.com> wrote:

> First, I heartily applaud the decision to launch google.cn. It is not only not evil, but one of the most good things we've done. Thus, I chime in another big vote of support for this decision. Controversy is expected, but I'm shocked at the level of criticism, especially at some of the comments made by members of congress today.
>
> I'm most surprised that I haven't seen any mention of the most direct and obvious analogy: the decision to hold the 2008 olympics in Beijing.
>
> Evidently, people forget quickly. This sparked huge controversy 5 years ago due to concerns about China's human rights record. Many people felt though that it would lead to fewer human rights abuses, promote democracy, and have other beneficial effects for the Chinese people and the world. For example:
>
> In Germany, Interior Minister Otto Schily said the decision should help promote democracy in China. "I am convinced that the Olympic Games will have a positive effect on China's democratic development," he said in a statement.

I vociferously disagree with your point of view on China. I hear the argument over an over again that economic prosperity is going to bring Democracy to China. What about the alternative scenario where China becomes an economic Leviathon without reducing one iota of its repressive and murderous policies? Why is that not equally likely? What historical precedents are you drawing on for democratization through prosperity? It certainly isn't the Soviet Union. They arrived as democracy through economic decline. My own belief is that prosperity is going to make it easier for the Communist party to control their people. If your population is well fed, have jobs and happy, then it's more likely they will tolerate the occasional crackdown on political dissidents. And the extra cash lying around is certainly useful for the purposes of building technology and hiring people to censor information not compatible with the regimes ideology. As for books for the opposing argument, the chair of the House Committee repeatedly cited the book "IBM and the Holocaust". I haven't read it, but I gather that it describes an example in history where another company decided to put profits before principles. This is a tarnish on IBMs reputation that will never go away.

And regarding the benefits of the olympics, recall that Germany had the Olympics in 1936. At the time many European governments believed the best way to placate Hitler was to engage and compromise with him, thereby ceding Czechoslovakia, before he ultimately swallowed Poland and other countries.

The opprobrium that will be brought on our company in the event that we've been complicit in helping censor a current event (Tiananmen Square II) is something that we should not tolerate.

4/ The striking fact that I had forgotten about until I rediscovered these emails was that China required Google to censor information both broadly (entire news sections were to be censored) and extremely expeditiously (Google needed to comply with requests within 15 minutes)

5/ It is very likely that the same censorship requirements will apply to the Dragonfly project that Google is currently working on and perhaps the requirements have become even more stringent given Google's new willingness to comply with the Chinese state.

6/ The other thing I find disturbing, after all these years, is the willingness of my former colleagues to not only comply with the censorship but their enthusiasm in rationalizing it. It is not a coincidence that the rationale they give was the same one management had given them

7/ As Blaise Pascal trenchantly observed in Pensées, *power creates opinion*. This is just as true within corporations as it is for national politics. There are benefits to toeing the line, plus obvious disadvantages to dissenting (e.g., risk of being fired).

8/ My colleagues, although they may have been well intentioned, were just regurgitating the reasons Google's management had given for its first foray into China.

The real problem, then as now, is that management seems to have no moral compass.

9/ For many people there is little difference between what is legal and what is moral. This mindset is especially dangerous when it is held by people in power, such as Google's executives. The mindset is: if it's a legal requirement to censor, then we should do it.

10/ The desire to comply becomes even more urgent for executives of large profit-seeking corporations because it gives them access to massive and lucrative markets. Without a strong moral compass, the temptation is far too strong for most of them.

11/ As I previously tweeted, Sergey Brin is a notable exception to this temptation, and he is reported to be the reason that Google left China in 2010:

https://t.co/QOPqtXQOU6

> Andrew McLaughlin, Google\u2019s former director of public policy,\xa0said that Brin\u2019s \u201cbackground as a refugee made him inherently more suspicious of doing business in an environment like that.\u201dhttps://t.co/0b0x1C5pEU
>
> — Vijay Boyapati (@real_vijay) September 18, 2018

12/ Unfortunately, Brin's influence in Google's decision making seems to have waned and the new management seems not only willing to be complicit in censorship, but to lie about what it's doing:

https://t.co/y0X711njeS

> Pichai\u2019s letter contradicts the company\u2019s search engine chief Ben Gomes, who informed staff during a private meeting that the company was aiming to launch the platform in China between January and April 2019. https://t.co/EOUR9rNkrn
>
> — Ryan Gallagher (@rj_gallagher) October 12, 2018

13/ I encourage employees of Google who have been asked to work on censored products to stand up against these requests, as I did in 2006, and make it known that Google's willingness to censor is immoral.