

Yahoo: a person lacking cultivation or sensibility

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[The title is the OED definition of the word.]

The post from last time about the US Trade Representative¹ was originally about boycotting Yahoo!. I realize now that the whole thing is probably best entitled ‘my immense disappointment with the software industry’, but I’ll get to that next time.

As you may know, Yahoo! voluntarily gave information to the Chinese government identifying three Chinese citizens (that we know of) who promoted democracy on Yahoo! web sites. Their finger-pointing led to their conviction and ten years’ imprisonment. Software is not real, the Internet is nothing but æther, but ten years in a forced-labor prison is as concrete as it gets. Yahoo! had a real, tangible influence on fucking up three people’s lives.

The Chinese court that convicted one of these individuals pointed out that Yahoo! was instrumental in the arrest of one Chinese dissident². I’d detail the lives these folks led after their inevitable conviction, but it’s so common that you already know it: beatings, psychological abuse, deliberately inferior conditions to ensure that inmates are unable to sleep or maintain good health, and of course the forced labor.

And so, in the U.S. courts, there is a federal lawsuit against Yahoo! claiming that its actions have violated the Alien Tort Statue and the Torture Victim Protection Act.

Why’d they do it? Because Yahoo! is big in Asia³. It cares deeply about maintaining its position as a major advertiser and content provider in Asia—especially China. Of course, so do other ‘Net conglomerates like Google and MSN, but those guys have managed to operate without rattling out their customers. Google’s apologia for censoring its web results in China⁴ states: “No, we’re not going to offer some Google products, such as Gmail or Blogger, on Google.cn until we’re comfortable that we can do so in a manner that respects our users’ interests in the privacy of their personal communications.” Chinese folks can use blogger.com, whose servers are located in the USA, and can safely expect that Google will not aid the Chinese government in prosecutions based on what is stored on those servers. That’s a fine approach, and I’m sure any of the big three conglomerates have more than enough lawyers to make it work.

The Yahoo! shareholder’s meeting was a few weeks ago. A large shareholder named the City of New York requested that the issue be addressed. Here is item #1 on

¹<http://fluff.info/blog/arch/00000217.htm>

²<http://watching-eyes.blogspot.com/2007/06/amended-complaint-by-victims-of-torture.html>

³http://www.theregister.com/2007/07/09/comscore_asiapacific_study/

⁴<http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2006/01/google-in-china.html>

the six-point list that the City proposed: “Data that can identify individual users should not be hosted in Internet restricting countries, where political speech can be treated as a crime by the legal system.” Notice how this basically matches what Google says it has in place right now.

And the board responded that “certain of the standards suggested by the proponent would give the Company insufficient flexibility in responding to applicable legal requirements.” So it looks like the board comprehends *exactly what the proposal was intended to do*. Other proposals by other shareholders met a similar fate, in the way of ‘Oh, we already have enough checks and balances in place’. This is an awkward statement given that shareholders care exactly because there don’t seem to be any checks.

What we get here is that Yahoo! is not merely complying with Chinese law, but is actively working with it, even in policies that we consider to be downright unethical. This makes Yahoo! money, because it continues to make billion-dollar deals to expand its conglomerate within China’s borders, and those deals only work if they have active government support.

Yahoo!’s board was handed an opportunity to apologize for their hand in sending two people to prison for writing words, to give shareholders and customers a half-hearted signal in the way of ‘oops, won’t happen again :)’. Instead, they chose instead to signal to the Chinese government that they remain free to comply next time they are asked to send somebody to jail.

Censorship My discussion above has focused on the question of cooperating with police in prosecuting dissidents. There is also another question that I personally consider to be secondary: should media providers comply to China’s insistence on censorship?

[In the USA, by the way, Google has a preeminently amusing approach to corporate censorship: if a company demands that they not post search results that the company dislikes, then they post the takedown notice instead (via chillingeffects.org), thus making the complainant look like even more of an ass, and leaving the URL available anyway, since it has to be in the takedown notice. Ha ha.]

But back to China, let’s not delude ourselves that the only way for a Chinese person to get information is to search via Yahoo!, Google, or MSN. There are several hundred other search engines, and although google.cn is filtered, google.com is much slower but not filtered. And hey, you can always use tor to get around all this. So I take censorship as a lesser evil than cooperating with police because there are easy ways around it. Although this isn’t strictly true, censorship feels passively unethical while volunteering a person for torture is actively unethical. Of course, you can decide for yourself whether you agree (and post in the comments if you don’t).

Walking away I mentioned all this to Ms LKB of Baltimore, MD, and she points out that the US isn’t really entitled to dictate how China runs its media. This is a valid point, and one that I’m not disputing here. But Yahoo! is not obligated to provide media either. New York’s point #1 above is not about Yahoo! forcing U.S. child porn upon unsuspecting Chinese citizens, but about protecting humans from persecution.

And while I’m on child porn, it provides a nice metaphor. [Is there a corollary to Goodwin’s law that all Internet discussion eventually winds up at child porn metaphors?] Go type “sex

tourism” into your favorite search engine; there are parts of the world where the prostitution of children is so commonplace that you could argue that the local government condones it. This is a direct clash between the ethics of U.S. citizens and the participants in these businesses elsewhere (though I can only guess the extent to which the citizens of a sex tourism destination condone it all). So what do U.S. businesses do about this moneymaking opportunity? They walk away and leave what they consider to be unethical activity to those who don’t consider it unethical. It’d be nice to have a hand in shutting it down, but walking away is certainly the minimum threshold. Above, Google decided it would comply with the censorship requests, but walk away from any business that may lead to the torture of its users.

For my part, I’m walking away from Yahoo!. Let me note that I’m banging this out on a Microsoft keyboard, my backup PC is an IBM Thinkpad, and I generally understand that a company, an artificial entity consisting of thousands of people, is neither good nor evil. [See prior essay⁵.] But the Board of Yahoo! is only a few people, and for my tastes, they are being a bit *too* blatant in their efforts to support what I consider to be unethical. So I’m giving up on them. Which is not to say that I’m switching to Google; the author of an alternative search engine blog challenged his readers to go a day without Google, and to help us along, offers a list of 100 search engines that are neither Yahoo! nor Google nor MSN. I’m not sure why, but I’m personally partial to Clusty⁶.

Of course, Yahoo! is a conglomerate, not a search engine. I canceled my Yahoo! email account, which was just a wasteland of spam anyway, but then that means that I can’t get into my flickr account, because flickr sold out to Yahoo! a few years ago. And so it goes.

More next time.

⁵<http://fluff.info/blog/arch/00000106.htm>

⁶<http://clusty.com>