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Google: China decision painful but right

By Ben Hirschler

DAVOS, Switzerland, Jan 25 (Reuters) - Google Inc. co-founder Sergey Brin said his company's decision to self-censor its Chinese search system followed a change of heart over how best to foster the free flow of information.

Google said on Tuesday it will block politically sensitive terms on its new China search site and not offer e-mail, chat and blog publishing services, which authorities fear can become flashpoints for social or political protest. Those actions go further than many of its biggest rivals in China.

"I didn't think I would come to this conclusion -- but eventually I came to the conclusion that more information is better, even if it is not as full as we would like to see," Brin told Reuters in an interview in Switzerland.

Google, whose high-minded corporate motto is "Don't be evil," had previously refused to comply with Internet censorship demands by Chinese authorities, rules that must be met in order to locate business operations inside China -- the world's No. 2 Internet market.

"I know a lot of people are upset by our decision but it is something we have deliberated for a number of years," Brin said from the sidelines of the World Economic Forum conference.

At least for now, Google will offer just four of its core services in China -- Web site and image search, Google News and local search.

The voluntary concessions laid out on Tuesday by Google parallel some of the self-censorship already practiced there by global rivals such as Yahoo and Microsoft, as well as domestic sites.

"There is no question. Google would tell you that going into China is about making money, not bringing democracy," John Palfrey, author of a study on Chinese Internet censorship and a law professor at Harvard Law School, on Google's action.

"The practical matter is that over the last couple of years Google in China was censored -- not by us but by the government, via the 'Great Firewall,'" said Brin. "It's not something I enjoy but I think it was a reasonable decision."

In different political circumstances, Google already notifies users of its German and French search services when it blocks access to material such as banned Nazi sites in Europe.

"France and Germany require censorship for Nazi sites, and the U.S. requires censorship based on the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DCMA). These various countries also have laws on child pornography," he said.

The DCMA law requires U.S. Internet service providers to block access to Web sites violating copyrights on materials such as music or movies.

"I totally understand that people are upset about it and I think that is a reasonable point of view to take," Brin said of Google's compromise in China.

(Additional reporting by Eric Auchard in San Francisco)