

Google launches censored China site

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SHANGHAI, China, Jan 25 (AP) - Google Inc. launched a search engine in China on Wednesday that censors material about human rights, Tibet and other topics sensitive to Beijing - defending the move as a trade-off granting Chinese greater access to other information.

Within minutes of the launch of the new site bearing China's Web suffix ".cn," searches for the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement showed scores of sites omitted and users directed to articles condemning the group posted on Chinese government Web sites.

Searches for other sensitive subjects such as exiled Tibetan leader the Dalai Lama, Taiwan independence, and terms such as "democracy" and "human rights" yielded similar results.

In most such cases, only official Chinese government sites or those with a ".cn" suffix were included.

Google, which has as its motto "Don't Be Evil," says the new site aims to make its search engine more accessible in China, thereby expanding access to information.

Yet the move has already been criticized by media watchdog Reporters Without Borders, which also has chided Yahoo Inc. and Microsoft Corp.'s MSN.com for submitting to China's censorship regime.

"When a search engine collaborates with the government like this, it makes it much easier for the Chinese government to control what is being said on the Internet," said Julien Pain, head of the group's Internet desk.

However, technology analyst Duncan Clark said such criticisms probably wouldn't generate problems for Google's business elsewhere, given weak responses to previous cooperation between foreign Internet companies and Chinese authorities.

Past incidents "haven't seemed to gel into anything that could dissuade Google," said Clark, the managing director of Beijing-based consultancy BDA China Ltd.

Chinese Internet users said Mountain View, Calif.-based Google Inc.'s move was inevitable given Beijing's restrictions on the Internet, which the government promotes for commerce but heavily censors for content deemed offensive or subversive.

"Google has no choice but to give up to the Party," said one posting on the popular information technology Web site PCONLINE, signed simply "AS."

Google's move was prompted by frequent disruptions of the Chinese-language version of its search engine registered under the company's dot-com address in the United States.

Government filtering has blocked access or created lengthy delays in response time.

Google's senior policy counsel Andrew McLaughlin defended the new site as better serving Chinese customers.

"In deciding how best to approach the Chinese - or any - market, we must balance our commitments to

satisfy the interests of users, expand access to information, and respond to local conditions," McLaughlin said in an e-mailed statement.

McLaughlin said search results would be removed based on local laws, regulations or policies.

"While removing search results is inconsistent with Google's mission, providing no information (or a heavily degraded user experience that amounts to no information) is more inconsistent with our mission," he said.

There was no indication that Google would disable access to its .com site within China.

McLaughlin said the company wouldn't host its e-mail or blogging services in China that can be mined for information about users, and would inform users if information had been deleted from searches. Such messages appeared in searches for Falun Gong and other sensitive topics.

Clark said Google likely hopes to avoid the bad publicity incurred by Yahoo last year after it provided the government with the e-mail account information of a Chinese journalist who was later convicted of violating state secrecy laws.

"They want to avoid those kinds of headlines," he said.

Google hopes the move will shore up its competitiveness against both foreign competitors such as Yahoo and domestic ones like Baidu.com Inc., a Beijing-based company in which Google owns a 2.6 percent stake. Baidu.com is currently China's most popular search engine.

China has more than 100 million Web surfers and the audience is expected to swell.

Wang Lijian, a spokesman for China's Ministry of Information Industry which oversees Internet licensing, said he had not heard of Google's decision and had no comment.

Shares of Google rose \$1.99 to \$445.02 in early trading on the Nasdaq. The stock has traded in a 52-week range of \$172.57 to \$475.11.