“I don’t think it’s a question of taking on China. In fact, I am a great admirer of both China and the Chinese government for the progress they have made. It is really opposing censorship and speaking out for the freedom of political dissent, and that’s the key issue from our side. […] But there is also a broader pattern we then discovered of simply the surveillance of human rights activists [emphasis mine].” - Sergey Brin, interview with Philip Bethge of Der Spiegel, 2010.

“I can’t see a way to operate Google search in China without violating widely held international human rights standards.” - Lokman Tsui, Google’s former head of free expression in Asia and the Pacific, interview with The Intercept, August 10, 2018.

“It will be a dark day for internet freedom if Google has acquiesced to China’s extreme censorship rules to gain market access.” - Patrick Poon, China researcher at Amnesty International, August 1, 2018.

“#China’s extreme online censorship is well-known. Is there any way @Google can engage w/out joining not only that but also the surveillance & criminalisation that attaches to it? I don’t see it.” - David Kaye, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion & expression, August 16, 2018.

“There is simply no way that Google can feign a neutral stance while developing a search platform designed to serve not the general public but a violent, coercive, authoritarian regime. Censorship, information blackouts and outright propaganda are prime tools in the CCP’s arsenal of control, as evidenced in incidents large and small, recent and historic. The ongoing crackdown on lawyers and human rights activists and the outrageous campaign against ethnic minorities in Xinjiang province – all well documented by numerous media outlets, NGOs, the United Nations and the U.S. government – are but two examples in a trove of evidence demonstrating the CCP’s intentions.” - Chen Guangcheng, The Washington Post, August 27, 2018.

“Rumours violate individual rights; rumours create social panic; rumours cause fluctuations in the stock markets; rumours impact normal business operations; rumours blatantly attack revolutionary martyrs.” - Piyao, promotional video for launch of AI dissent monitoring tool, August 29, 2018.

Overview

On June 7, 2018, Google released its AI Ethics Principles as a means of helping to clarify the ethical decisions associated with Project Maven. In the “AI Applications We Will Not Pursue” section, it is claimed that Google will not “design or deploy” AI in the following areas:
1. Technologies that cause or are likely to cause overall harm. Where there is a material risk of harm, we will proceed only where we believe that the benefits substantially outweigh the risks, and will incorporate appropriate safety constraints.

2. Weapons or other technologies whose principal purpose or implementation is to cause or directly facilitate injury to people.

3. Technologies that gather or use information for surveillance violating internationally accepted norms. [emphasis mine].

4. Technologies whose purpose contravenes widely accepted principles of [...] human rights [emphasis mine].

I would like to make the case that Project Dragonfly has, at the very least, involved us “designing” technologies that violate the latter two of our four primary constraints (as discussed below). And I argue that ensuring that ethical flags can be raised during the design/exploration phase is a necessary condition for democratic ethical accountability. Further, I am backing the call for transparency and accountability with respect to Google’s ethical decisions raised by go/ethics-code-yellow. And hopefully situations such as b/112107148 can be avoided in the future.

An aside to my Chinese colleagues.

I have tried to convey that my concerns are not specific to just China, nor am I trying to suggest that I, as a North American, know better how to protect Chinese citizens than they do themselves. And I fully respect the view that one should prioritize the well-being of Chinese citizens.

But, I view our intent to capitulate to censorship and surveillance demands in exchange for access to the Chinese market as a forfeiture of our values and governmental negotiating position across the globe. Surveillance and oppression of dissidents, while perhaps pronounced in a country as large as China, is a worldwide phenomenon. I have cited recent worrying examples in the United States [3, 4, 5, 24], and the situation with our close ally, Saudi Arabia [17, 11, 12], perhaps goes without saying. At the moment, there is virtually no international support for Canada calling for the protection of Saudi Arabian dissidents [14], including from the United States.

I hope that one can respect a concern that agreeing to blanket surveillance (including of activists) in China could lead toward similar demands on activists in the United States (especially those that might lead to significant economic impact) and abroad.
We are a global company and, as far as I am aware, we have not made clear what our red lines are in this area internationally.

Violation of: Technologies that gather or use information for surveillance violating internationally accepted norms,” and “Technologies whose purpose contravenes widely accepted principles of […] human rights.”

One of the central technological components of Project Dragonfly is Google’s proactive censorship of queries and reportedly forcing users to logged in so that citizens’ queries can be directly monitored by their phone number [15, 16].

As clearly stated by Brin in his 2010 interview with Der Spiegel, and as quoted in the banner of this document, the censorship and tracking of queries in Dragonfly would be complicit with a broad pattern of “surveillance of human rights activists”. So far, critical statements have been released from: Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Access Now, Reporters Without Borders, and Human Rights in China. [Edit, August 28, 2018: 14 human rights organizations have now written a letter calling for us to cease this project.]

[Edit on August 24, 2018: Recent external analysis appears to come to similar conclusions: “It’s also interesting because in June, Google unveiled its own principles for ethical uses of its artificial intelligence programs, which are central to so many things that Google does. One of those principles, which would apply here because Google search uses artificial intelligence, was committed to not design or deploy “technologies whose purpose contravenes widely accepted principles of international law and human rights.” Well, the human-rights community has come out in strong condemnation of Google for its plan to deploy a censored search engine in China – Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders.”]

Complicity in the violations of the human rights of Chinese activists and ethnic minorities

Our support in the censorship and surveillance of Chinese dissidents would have serious repercussions. Beyond the oppression of well known figures [8, 9, 10], the United Nations is currently reporting that between 200,000 and 1 million Uyghurs have been disappeared into reeducation camps [6,7]; there was also a recent detailed internal talk on this subject. Surveillance plays a critical and unambiguous role in the maintenance of these “reeducation” camps, and there is a serious argument that Google would be complicit should it launch a surveilled version of Search. While
censorship is something I am very concerned about (particularly as a means of quashing political organizing), surveillance is likely to be directly used as part of campaigns violating human rights [18].

My resignation

I wrote this document because I believe that Google is largely composed of altruistic employees. But, due to my conviction that dissent is fundamental to functioning democracies, I am forced to resign in order to avoid contributing to, or profiting from, the erosion of protections for dissidents. There is an all-too-real possibility that other nations will attempt to leverage our actions in China in order to demand our compliance with their security demands. Indeed, this immediately began happening in the United States [2], and there is reason to worry [3, 4, 5, 24] about more direct parallels emerging over time.

(Edit, August 28: One could argue that Trump is now exploiting our alleged censorship compliance.)
(Edit, August 30: The UK foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt, is now explicitly calling for such concessions. And, more soberly, I am probably giving Trump too much credit.)

I have cherished working for Google and hold the vast majority of my colleagues in very high regard, both professionally and ethically. But I cannot work at a company that will not internally or publicly clarify its ethical red lines in areas that it is actively engaging. I would further like to reiterate my call for a response to the requests of go/ethics-code-yellow

A note to my manager and team

I’m extremely sad that our work is being caught in the crossfire. My manager and coworkers are some of the finest, smartest, and most hardworking people I’ve ever met. I’m truly sorry for the collateral damage.

Contacting me post-Google

I can be reached at both [redacted] and [redacted]. I’m not sure what my next step is. My announced final day at Google is Monday, September 3, 2018, but this is subject to minor change (after speaking with my management chain) Friday, August 31, 2018.

[2] https://twitter.com/marcorubio/status/1024668085654118402


[16] https://b.corp.google.com/issues/63347318


[19] https://plus.google.com/u/0/105694924338704480236/posts/AavbbxopWSJ


