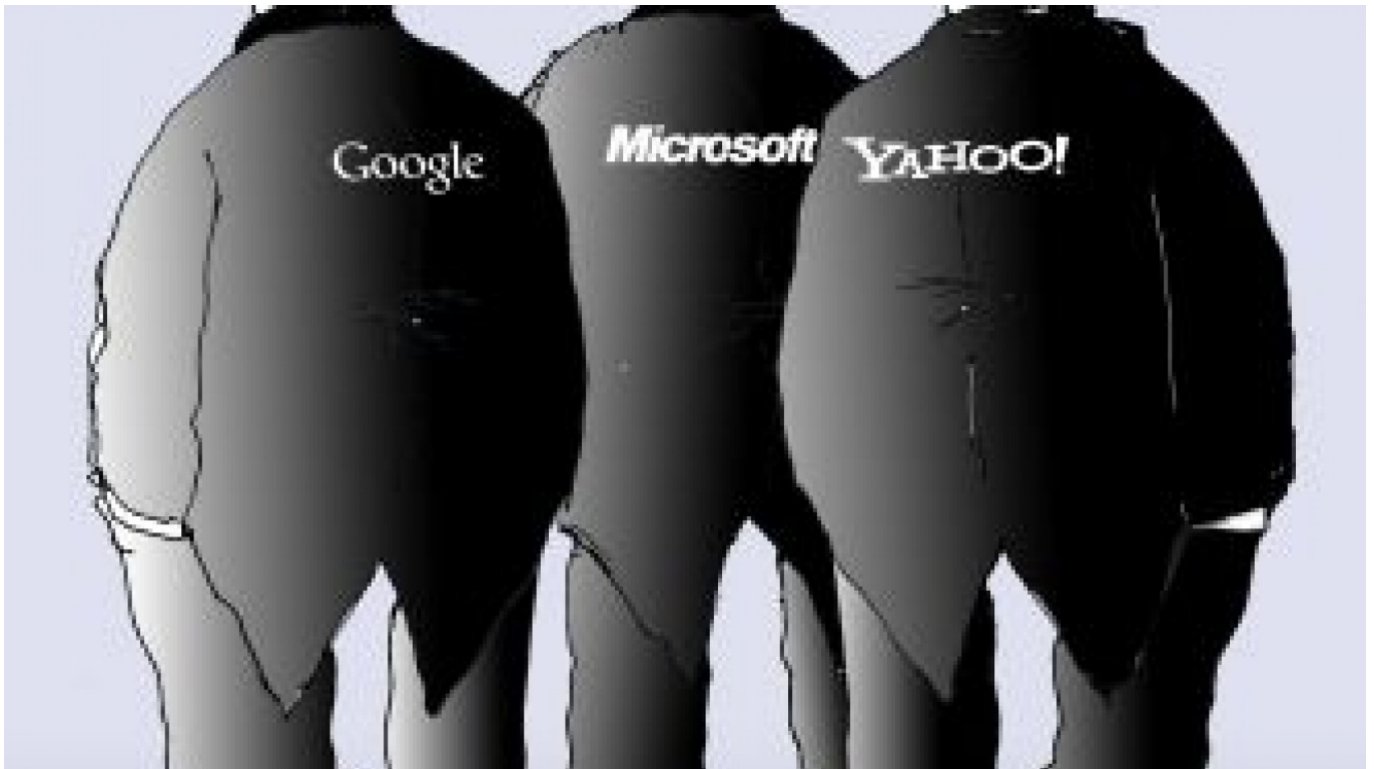


Big Money Merges With Big Brother

By [Guy Sorman](#)

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All over the world, Internet users entertain romantic delusions about cyberspace. To most of us web surfers, the Internet provides a false sense of complete freedom, power and anonymity.

Every once in a while, of course, unsolicited messages and ads that happen to be mysteriously related to our most intimate habits intrude. They remind us that we Internet users are, indeed, under constant virtual surveillance. When the watchers have only commercial motives, such spam feels like a minor violation. But in China or Russia, the Internet is patrolled not by unsolicited peddlers, but by the police.

So Russian human rights activists and the environmental organization Baikal Wave should not have been surprised when, in January, flesh-and-blood policemen confiscated their computers and the files stored within them. In the time of the Soviet Union, the KGB would have indicted these anti-Kremlin dissidents for mental disorders. This supposedly being the “new Russia,” cyber-dissidents are accused of violating intellectual property rights.

The employees at Baikal Wave were using

Microsoft-equipped computers. By confiscating the computers, the police could supposedly verify whether or not the Microsoft software that the activists were using had been installed legally.

On the surface, Microsoft and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's police look like strange bedfellows. But are they? Microsoft's representatives declared that they could not oppose the police actions because the Seattle-based company had to abide by Russian law. Such an ambiguous declaration can be interpreted either as active support for the Kremlin or, at the very least, passive collaboration. Moreover, in previous cases, Microsoft assisted the police in their investigations of nongovernmental organizations.

Clearly, human rights activists in Russia cannot and should not count on Microsoft as an ally in their efforts to build a more open society. But Microsoft's ambiguous — at best — behavior is part of a pattern. Indeed, the record of Internet companies in authoritarian countries is both consistent and grim.

Yahoo's record is also far from clean. In fact, it pioneered the active collaboration of Internet and high-tech firms with political repression. In 2005, Yahoo gave the Chinese police the computer identification code for a dissident journalist, Shi Tao. Shi Tao had sent a message in praise of democracy, which the censors had detected. Following Yahoo's lead, the police arrested him. Shi remains in jail to this day.

At that time, Yahoo's U.S. managers — just like Microsoft in Russia — declared that they had to follow Chinese law. Shi Tao, sitting in his jail cell, was undoubtedly pleased to learn that China is ruled by law, not by the Communist Party. After all, the rule of law is what Shi Tao is fighting for.

Google, at least for a short while, seemed to follow different guidelines in its Chinese business, appearing to adhere to its widely proclaimed ethical principle, "Don't be evil." To protest against censorship, the Silicon Valley-based company relocated from mainland China in 2009 to the still relatively free Hong Kong. On the Hong Kong-based search engine, Chinese internauts could read about Taiwan, the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 or the Dalai Lama. On mainland China's Google.cn, these sources — along with the results of searches using many other forbidden terms — were blocked.

Google's move seemed to reconcile its proclaimed libertarian philosophy with its business ethics. But that reconciliation did not last long. Google, after all, had accepted China's widespread censorship practices from the beginning of the company's operations in the country in 2006. After six months of life in Hong Kong, money talked: Google reinstated its mainland China service — and with the same level of censorship as before. In the end, Google, not the Chinese Communist Party, lost face.

Yahoo, Google and Microsoft have thus followed a strikingly similar road: Access to lucrative markets trumped ethical anxiety. The tools that they provide are politically neutral. Dissidents try to use them to pursue a democratic agenda. Police use them to detect and repress dissidents. Either way, Microsoft, Yahoo, and Google make money. This is similar to how IBM operated in the 1930s when it sold computing machines to the Nazi regime. The Nazis used these machines to make the destruction of their victims routine, countable and bureaucratic.

Should we be shocked that Internet companies put profits ahead of morals? After all, they are ordinary, profit-seeking corporations, just like the IBM of Hitler's era. Internet companies may be able to hide their true motives better than other companies behind ersatz, democratic-sounding slogans, but in the end they are advertising products like any other. In advertising or self-promotion, the choice of words is determined by customer expectations, not by managers' philosophy, as they mostly have none.

Capitalism is always a trade-off. We must live with unethical behavior by moneymaking corporations that provide us with useful new tools. These tools can be used by Iranian dissidents fighting dictatorship or by Tibetan dissidents trying to save their culture. They also can be used to compute the number of exterminated Jews, to arrest a Chinese dissident or to shut down a human rights group in Russia.

Microsoft in Russia or Google in China teach us that capitalism, although efficient, is not ethical. Entrepreneurs are greedy by definition. If they were not, they would go bankrupt. An open society will never be created or sustained by righteous entrepreneurs or be the mere byproduct of political engineering. Liberty, as always, remains the endeavor of vigilant, free men and women.

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