House to grill Web firms on censoring for China

By Hiawatha Bray, Globe Staff | February 14, 2006

America's biggest Internet companies will face questions about censoring information and stifling dissent in China from a House panel on human rights that is weighing legislation to restrict the companies' activities in countries with repressive governments.

Executives from Microsoft Corp., Yahoo Inc., Google Inc., and Cisco Systems Inc. will testify tomorrow before the human rights subcommittee of the House Committee on International Relations. The hearing will consider whether the companies have gone too far in censoring the Chinese Internet, and handing over information about Internet users under investigation by Chinese authorities.

"We are really going to try to ask very probing questions about, for example, Yahoo, their partnership with the secret police of China," Representative Chris Smith, a New Jersey Republican and chairman of the subcommittee. "How often have they provided information to the secret police?"

Smith has drafted legislation to set up an office in the State Department that would monitor Internet censorship in other countries, and any involvement in it by US firms. Smith also wants a law that would require American Internet companies to move their e-mail computers out of countries with repressive governments. This would put the data on these servers beyond the reach of these countries' investigators.

Yahoo admitted last year that it had provided the authorities with information about the Internet activities of Chinese journalist Shi Tao. That information led to a 10-year-prison sentence for Shi for publishing state secrets.

New questions about the extent of Yahoo's cooperation with the Chinese police arose last week when the French human rights group Reporters Without Borders said that in 2003, Yahoo provided information on a second Chinese citizen, Li Zhi, who was subsequently sentenced to eight years in prison for "inciting subversion."

"The secret police are brutal, they're thugs, and they're used with impunity to silence any form of dissent," said Smith. "No US corporation should be complicit in helping them find, convict, incarcerate, and torture these individuals."

But Yahoo spokeswoman Mary Osako said it's not that simple. "To us, the choice in China or other countries is not whether to comply with law enforcement demands," Osako said. "The choice is whether or not to remain in the country."

Osako said that Yahoo's presence in China provides greater access to Internet information for Chinese citizens, hastening the liberalization of the Chinese government. Yahoo and other US firms would be forced out of China if they did not comply with regulations.

Microsoft and Google are also under fire for their policies in China. Microsoft attracted criticism for censoring websites on its Chinese Internet service. The company's software prevented the publication of words like "freedom" and "human rights." Microsoft also shut down some sites run by Chinese citizens because of their political content. The company has since modified its policy. Controversial sites are left intact, but filtered so people using the Internet inside China cannot read them.

Google, the Internet's most popular search service, got into hot water for setting up a Chinese service that filters out politically controversial information and images.

While the other three companies run Internet services in China, Cisco makes network routing and switching equipment for Internet and telephone systems.

Critics contend that Cisco has actively aided Chinese authorities in using this equipment to spy on citizens' telephone calls and Internet messages.

http://www.boston.com/business/technology/articles/2006/02/14/house_to_grill_web_firms_on_censoring_for_china?mode=PF
Officials for Cisco, Google, and Microsoft said they would reserve comment until the hearing tomorrow. But the companies are not without defenders. James DeLong, a senior fellow at the Progress & Freedom Foundation, a free market-oriented think tank, said that the companies are playing a vital role in boosting China's access to the Internet.

"It seems to me we're better off to have them there," he said. DeLong added that US firms had no business trying to dictate human rights policy to the Chinese: "I don't think that American companies really ought to have their own foreign policy."

DeLong also had a few good words for the Chinese government. "I'm willing to cut the Chinese leaders a little slack," said DeLong.

"Many of them are genuinely dedicated to improving the well-being of their people." But DeLong said that the decay and corruption of post-Soviet Russia shows how difficult it is to combine economic growth and political liberalization. The Chinese, he said, have decided to emphasize economic growth first, while moving more slowly on political reform.

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