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Yahoo Says It Gave China Internet Data

Journalist Jailed By Tracing E-mail

By Peter S. Goodman
Washington Post Foreign Service
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HANGZHOU, China, Sept. 10 -- A co-founder and senior executive of Yahoo Inc., the global Internet giant, confirmed Saturday that his company gave Chinese authorities information later used to convict a Chinese journalist now imprisoned for leaking state secrets.

The journalist, Shi Tao, was sentenced last spring to 10 years in prison for sending foreign-based Web sites a copy of a message from Chinese authorities warning domestic journalists about reporting on sensitive issues, according to a translation of the verdict disseminated by the watchdog group Reporters Without Borders.

Speaking at an Internet conference in this eastern Chinese city, Yahoo's co-founder, Jerry Yang, said his company had no choice but to cooperate with the authorities.

"To be doing business in China, or anywhere else in the world, we have to comply with local law," Yang said, responding to a question about his company's role in the case. "We don't know what they want that information for, we're not told what they look for. If they give us the proper documentation and court orders, we give them things that satisfy both our privacy policy and the local rules."

"I do not like the outcome of what happens with these things," Yang added. "But we have to follow the law."

Yang's explanation drew spirited applause from many in the mostly Chinese audience -- made up of several hundred Internet executives and investors, who represent some of the better-educated and wealthier people in the country.

Yahoo's role in the imprisonment of a journalist is the latest in a



Jerry Yang, co-founder of Yahoo, said his company had no choice but to abide by the law in China. (By Eugene Hoshiko -- Associated Press)

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string of controversies surrounding the activities of global technology companies in China and their assistance to the state security apparatus. Many of the foreign technology powers that market themselves as forces for the free flow of information in other countries have made accommodations with an often repressive Communist Party government as they pursue business opportunities in a land of seemingly limitless potential.

Google, the popular Web search site, has been accused by Internet monitors based in the United States and Europe of preventing Internet users in China from accessing sites Chinese authorities deem sensitive, such as those carrying reports about Tibet, Taiwan and the banned religious sect Falun Gong. Cisco Systems has sold China much of the equipment authorities use to block access to such sites, though the company maintains that China's use of the gear is beyond its purview. Three years ago, Yahoo drew fire for reportedly signing a pledge in which it agreed to abide by all Chinese censorship laws -- an implicit promise to bar access to Web sites deemed off-limits.

The Shi Tao case has become particularly high-profile because it involves the imprisonment of a Chinese journalist at a time when the government is cracking down on domestic media that report on topics seen as challenging the state's authority.

Shi, 37, was a reporter for Contemporary Business News, a newspaper in the southwestern province of Hunan. He apparently used a Yahoo e-mail account to send a Chinese-language Web site based in New York a message from state censorship authorities. According to the Reporters Without Borders report, the e-mail warned domestic journalists about the perils of reporting on the anniversary of the 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, which ended in a massacre of hundreds of people.

According to the report, Yahoo gave state security authorities details about Shi's e-mail usage that ultimately allowed them to trace the message to a computer he used at the newspaper.

"We already knew that Yahoo collaborates enthusiastically with the Chinese regime in questions of censorship, and now we know it is a Chinese police informant as well," the watchdog group declared. "Yahoo appears to be willing to go to any lengths to gain shares of the Chinese market."

Yang characterized the state's demand for the information and Yahoo's ultimate compliance as "a legal process."

Asked specifically whether the information Yahoo provided was crucial to the case or merely incidental, Yang said he did not know. Shortly after the questioning, Yahoo canceled a news conference that had been scheduled, providing no further explanation.

The exchange over Yahoo's role in Shi's conviction was barely a footnote to a conference full of triumphant talk about the transformational power of the Internet. The keynote speech was delivered by former president Bill Clinton, who characterized China's Internet entrepreneurs as a progressive force for change in Chinese society. He pointed out that Internet reports played a key role in forcing the Chinese government to acknowledge and then

stamp out the deadly outbreaks of the SARS virus two years ago.

Clinton's trip to China was paid for in part by Alibaba.com, one of China's most successful Web commerce businesses. Yahoo recently purchased a 40 percent stake in the firm.

Clinton did not mention the Shi case in his speech. As he was leaving the hall, the former president declined to answer a question about the case before melting into a thicket of Chinese security and Secret Service officers.

Jack Ma, chief executive of Alibaba, said he first heard about the case on the morning of the conference and was surprised by the questions directed at Yang, his new partner.


"As a business, if you cannot change the law, follow the law," he said. "Respect the local government. We're not interested in politics. We're just focused on e-commerce."

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