

# Google case: ethical principle

Business, Company



It is rather difficult to talk about ethics as it involves different point of view based on different moral standards one has and based on different ethical principles one uses. This Google China-cases mostly talks about the ethical dilemma faced by the company, whether it should obey the local law or put its global ethical standards as its best interest. Obeying the local law will push them to do self-censoring, which then raise many criticism internationally.

Based on 'cultural relativism', it is said that ethics are nothing more than the reflection of a culture– all ethics are culturally determined, so that each firm should adopt the ethics of the culture in which it is operating. It has been explained before that China has an totalitarian political system contrasts with the Western culture which support civil rights and liberties. So, based on this theory, doing self-censoring may be considered as ethical. However, this pragmatic view won't be very suitable for justifying an action.

The restriction from the Chinese government regarding some sensitive political themes may be recognized by some international people as denying the human rights. Here, based on the rights theories, human beings have fundamental rights which establish a minimum level of morally acceptable behavior. Because of the censoring, Chinese people lose their freedom of speech, especially less freedom in receiving information. However, it is part of their law and political system, which should be accepted by every company who wants to conduct business in China.

Some Chinese people have accustomed with the censorship, not consider it as violating human rights, and support it for the sake of the nation. By self-

censoring their website, Google is complicit with the Chinese government's effort to restrict the freedom of speech. According to 'Kantian ethics', it is wrong toward treating people as means, since people should be treated as ends and never as means to the ends of others. When deciding that the benefits of operating in China outweighed the costs, Google used the 'utilitarian approaches'.

It holds that the moral worth of actions is determined by their consequences. An action will be judged as ethical and desirable if the balance of best consequences are over the bad consequences. What are the benefits and the costs should be measured carefully by Google. Google claimed that 'Google.cn' would provide better internet service to its customers in China while making more profit for the company. It also raised ethical awareness by making its users aware that some results were omitted, thus also put pressure on the other companies to do the same.

In addition, it is better to give Chinese users access to information, than to none at all. Those practical and ethical benefits combined with the increasing profit has been considered by Google as outweighing the negative effects of censorship. The negative effects for the company might be criticism for the inconsistency with the 'Don't be Evil' motto. For Chinese people, I think, there will be no significant net negative effects as the Chinese users will still get the censored search results, since the government would block the contents using the "Great Firewall".

After months criticism, Google shut down its Google.cn. It tried to regain its integrity and to protest implicitly the censorship in China. The reasons

might come because it realized it couldn't give better services to Chinese users due to many problems, it had denied the human rights, and also it gained the lower market share and profit rather than expected. It made greater harm for the company. In my opinion, China has different culture and law that should be considered before a company conduct business there. Each company should obey the rules in which it is operating.

Censoring is considered as denying human rights in many parts of the world – especially USA, but in China it should be done in order to gain greater advantages for the whole nation. The problem here is because Google has basic ethical principle of 'Don't be Evil' which contradict this kind of action. Moreover, it won't influence much to Chinese users whether Google stays there or not, as it has better local search engine – Baidu. That is why, considering the condition and all the consequences, it is better for Google to leave China.

Next, we can analyze this case based on Kantian perspective called 'Universalizability'. It means that the companies have the duty to commit only those actions which could be universally applied. It can be demonstrated by the question: "What if every company agreed to self-censor in order to gain access to China?". The answer is there will be unbeatable suppression of rights of freedom of speech and information. On the opposite question, the multinational corporations may influence the societal change and perhaps will improve the level of freedom of speech in China.