



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on November 23, 2016

Facebook Develops Censorship Tools to Gain Access to Chinese Market

To say that Facebook has a spotty record where privacy and censorship are concerned would be an understatement. While the social media giant has — at times — resisted the surveillance apparatus of the NSA and other U.S. government agencies, it has — on other occasions — gone out of its way to help build the culture of surveillance on which the surveillance state rests. Now, for the sake of gaining official access to China, Mark Zuckerberg’s company has developed tools to allow the Communist Chinese government unrestrained censorship of Facebook posts.



According to three current and former Facebook employees, Facebook “has quietly developed software to suppress posts from appearing in people’s news feeds in specific geographic areas,” [reports](#) the *New York Times*. Those former and current employees spoke on the condition of anonymity, since the software and its development are confidential. The software — created specifically to help Facebook get into the Chinese social media market — would take Internet censorship to a whole new level. In the past, Facebook has complied with government requests in nations such as Pakistan, Russia and Turkey, removing posts after receiving government requests to do so. As odious as that may be, this new software would allow the oppressive Communist regime in Beijing to skip the requests altogether. Rather than Facebook removing posts *after the fact*, Beijing will be able to keep them from showing up *in the first place*.

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As the *New York Times* article says:

Facebook does not intend to suppress the posts itself. Instead, it would offer the software to enable a third party — in this case, most likely a partner Chinese company — to monitor popular stories and topics that bubble up as users share them across the social network, the people said.

Facebook’s partner would then have full control to decide whether those posts should show up in users’ feeds.

And while the current and former Facebook employees are careful to say that the software has not yet been — and may never be — deployed, this does illustrate the company’s willingness to violate a major plank of its own mission statement to “make the world more open and connected.” After all, allowing a government which has violently oppressed its own people the ability to filter what those people can see and post is the exact opposite of “open and connected.”

While there is little doubt that Facebook would profit from access to China’s 600 million Internet users, Beijing would be the real beneficiary of any deal between the social media giant and the communist regime. Addressing the challenges Facebook faces — and the lengths to which it is willing to go to



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overcome those challenges — to gain access to China, the *New York Times* reported:

Still, some officials responsible for China's tech policy have been willing to entertain the idea of Facebook's operating in the country. It would legitimize China's strict style of internet governance, and if done according to official standards, would enable easy tracking of political opinions deemed problematic. Even so, resistance remains at the top levels of Chinese leadership.

Facebook appears poised to do whatever it takes to gain the Chinese market, even if it means handing the keys of censoring and monitoring Facebook posts to the Communist Party in China.

While this would be a major expansion of Facebook's spotty record concerning censorship, it would not be a great departure. As noted above, Facebook has cooperated with oppressive regimes in the past. The company has also taken it upon itself to [censor posts and filter users' timelines](#) right here in America for the purpose of furthering the political agenda of the leadership of the company. And even as the social media giant has [resisted calls for weakened encryption](#) and [fought against bulk search warrants](#), these actions appear to be more about protecting its own ability to mine the data of its users and grow its own profits than any real commitment to the privacy of those users. Evidence of this can be found in the unethical — and, in some places, *illegal* — way [Facebook tracks users across the Internet](#), often without either the consent or the knowledge of those users. That tracking even affects those with no Facebook account and who, therefore, could never have agreed to Facebook's ever-shifting policy on the subject. If that were not bad enough, Facebook has introduced "features" that are little more than [social/psychological experiments](#) with users as the unknowing subjects.

To top it off, while wearing a public face of promoting freedom, Facebook was reported to have private chat messages being [monitored by a CIA-backed company](#). Both Facebook and that company, Recorded Future, denied — or at least evaded — the claim.

The move to censor Facebook postings is also certainly not out of sync with China's policy of censorship and oppression. As this writer noted in a previous [article](#) last year, China passed a new national security law that expanded its already-draconian control over the Internet. While claiming that the new law was about protecting China from cyber-espionage, the reality is that it is aimed at silencing any and all dissent while allowing greater censorship and surveillance:

Part of the push for tighter controls over the Internet comes from the increase in activism among the Chinese populace, particularly younger, more tech-savvy citizens. While officials claim the measures are being put in place to protect national security, most of the deliberately ambiguous new law is aimed at curtailing dissent.

In the world of cyber-espionage, China is an emerging force to be reckoned with. While steadily hacking systems in the West — including the [White House](#) and the [Office of Personnel Management in D.C.](#) — Beijing is also taking steps to harden Chinese government systems against intrusion, both from within and without. In keeping with the totalitarian mindset so prevalent in Communism, China's most recent attempt to "protect national security" includes the typical draconian measures one would expect.

Zheng Shuna, a senior official at the National People's Congress (NPC), maintained the party line in her statement to media explaining the new law: "China's national security situation has become increasingly severe," she asserted, assuring that Beijing will "not leave any room for disputes, compromises or interference" when it comes to protecting national interests. And totalitarian regimes do not usually see anything as being outside of "national interests."



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Just six months before that new law was passed, Lu Wei, minister of the Cyberspace Administration of China, paid a visit to the United States. His visit was the seventh China-United States Internet Industry Forum and was held at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Washington, D.C. In December of 2014, Lu [addressed American officials and business executives who are at the top of the technology companies behind the Internet](#) — a medium he is very familiar with since he has spent much of his career censoring it. One of those companies was Facebook. Regarding whether Facebook would be allowed into China, Lu said, “I didn’t say Facebook could not enter China, but nor did I say that it could. Foreign Internet companies can come to China if they abide by the law. We could not allow any companies to enter China’s market and make money while hurting the country.” His point was well understood by Zuckerberg; Facebook would be allowed access to China — and the ability to make money on the backs of oppressed Chinese citizens — only if censorship tools were in place.

In September 2015 — six months after Beijing passed its sweeping new law to regulate, monitor, and censor the Internet even more than before — the “president” of the People’s Republic of China, Xi Jinping (who is also the general secretary of the central Communist Committee of China) visited the United States to address those same tech company executives. In the more than a year that had passed since Lu directly addressed American tech companies — including Facebook — Zuckerberg had visited China on several occasions to cultivate relationships there in order to gain access to that market. In March 2016, he posted to Facebook about a morning jog through Beijing, saying, “It’s great to be back in Beijing! I kicked off my visit with a run through Tiananmen Square, past the Forbidden City and over to the Temple of Heaven.”

One wonders if — while running through Tiananmen Square — the Facebook founder gave any thought to the hundreds who were murdered there by Communist police in 1989 while protesting for greater freedom. Also noteworthy is that Zuckerberg was able to post to Facebook while there. He probably used a VPN (virtual private network) to get around the restrictions on accessing “unapproved websites.” That irony was also likely lost on him.

During Xi’s visit to the United States, Zuckerberg got some face time, speaking with the Communist dictator in Mandarin. As the *New York Times* [reported](#):

Facebook is now shut out of China, with its irresistible market of 600 million internet users, creating a black spot in Mark Zuckerberg’s dream of making Facebook a global social network. Will Facebook end up being the biggest beneficiary of face time with Mr. Xi? Mr. Zuckerberg spoke with the president in Mandarin for what seemed like at least a minute when Mr. Xi greeted him before photos with tech industry leaders at Microsoft. (It was an elite crowd that included Apple’s Timothy D. Cook, Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, and IBM’s Virginia Rometty.)

From where reporters were standing in the back of the room, Mr. Zuckerberg’s chat was more than a cursory ‘ni hao’ and we could hear the distinct sounds of Mr. Zuckerberg’s accent floating to the back of the room. But we couldn’t decipher what he was saying. Did he just ask Mr. Xi outright for entry in the market?

Mr. Zuckerberg posted a photo of his big moment talking to Mr. Xi on his Facebook page. It was the first time he had talked to a world leader entirely in a foreign language, a “meaningful milestone,” he said. The post got more than half a million likes, including from China’s state media, *Global Times* and Xinhua (despite the national ban).

Of course, those “600 million internet users” — while being a huge market and offering Zuckerberg



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untold opportunities to make profits — deserve the same liberty still enjoyed here in America. That liberty includes unhindered access to information and the ability to communicate freely — even, and especially, about government abuses. That Beijing suppresses those rights while oppressing those people is no secret. That Facebook would assist that suppression and oppression is no surprise.

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