



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on November 30, 2018

Google Employees Demand Halt to Censored Search Engine for China

Hundreds of Google employees are publicly calling on their employer to cancel a project that would bring another censored search engine to China and likely abet the communist government's human-rights abuses.



The plan, known as Project Dragonfly, would bring Google's search engine and other products in China into compliance with Beijing's repressive Cybersecurity Law. An August [open letter](#) from a variety of human-rights organizations summarizes the project's most worrisome features:

According to confidential Google documents obtained by [The Intercept](#), the new search app being developed under Project Dragonfly would comply with China's draconian rules by automatically identifying and filtering websites blocked in China, and "blacklisting sensitive queries." Offering services through mobile phone apps, including Google's existing Chinese apps, raises additional concerns because apps enable access to extraordinarily sensitive data. Given the Cybersecurity Law's data localization and other requirements, it is likely that the company would be enlisted in surveillance abuses and their users' data would be much more vulnerable to government access.

Around the same time as that letter was published, more than 1,400 Google employees signed an internal petition against Dragonfly, and one employee [resigned in protest](#). Nevertheless, the company has proceeded with the project and refused to comment on it, prompting concerned employees to issue an open letter Tuesday "demanding that Google cancel Project Dragonfly" and "that leadership commit to transparency, clear communication, and real accountability."

The letter, which was initially signed by nine employees and has since been endorsed by more than 500 more, "is a bold step for employees of a company that prizes internal transparency but considers leaking information to be not 'Googley,'" observed the U.K. [Guardian](#). In fact, part of the company's official reasoning for not commenting on the project has been that news reports were based on leaks.

"Our opposition to Dragonfly is not about China: we object to technologies that aid the powerful in oppressing the vulnerable, wherever they may be," the employees write. While the Chinese government is one of the worst human-rights abusers in the world today, all governments have a propensity to stifle dissent, whether it be through gulags or through anti-sedition laws and "free-speech zones." Dragonfly, the employees charge, "would establish a dangerous precedent at a volatile political moment, one that would make it harder for Google to deny other countries similar concessions."

The employees note that Google's decision to proceed with Dragonfly "comes as the Chinese government is openly expanding its surveillance powers and tools of population control." Echoing the human-rights groups' August letter, they maintain, "Providing the Chinese government with ready



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access to user data, as required by Chinese law, would make Google complicit in oppression and human rights abuses.”

“Dragonfly would also enable censorship and government-directed disinformation, and destabilize the ground truth on which popular deliberation and dissent rely,” they continue. “Given the Chinese government’s reported suppression of dissident voices, such controls would likely be used to silence marginalized people, and favor information that promotes government interests.”

In 2010, Google [vowed](#) to cease censoring results from its Chinese search engine, come what may. The employees argue that many of them “accepted employment at Google with the company’s values in mind, including its previous position on Chinese censorship and surveillance, and an understanding that Google was a company willing to place its values above its profits.” However, they “no longer believe this is the case,” citing not just Dragonfly but other controversies in which the company has been embroiled in the past year. First was a contract to develop artificial intelligence for U.S. military drones that the company ultimately [chose not to renew](#) after thousands of employees signed a letter opposing it. Then came a [New York Times](#) report that Google had covered up allegations of sexual harassment against a number of executives, even going so far as to give one of them a \$90-million severance package; employees protested and staged walkouts, forcing the company to make some policy changes.

The employees close their letter with the declaration “We deserve to know what we’re building and we deserve a say in these significant decisions.” That may be so. But money talks, and the murmur of moolah from a 1.4-billion-person market may well drown out their plaintive pleas.



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