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ETHICS

Google's Dragonfly: The Ethics of Providing a Censored Search Engine in China

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24 Oct 2020



In 2018, a Google employee leaked that the world's largest search engine was attempting to

provide its service to China censored by the Communist Party. Google employees demanded explanations, protested, and even resigned over the secret Project Dragonfly. One whistleblower was motivated by moral concerns and lack of public scrutiny: “I’m against large companies and governments collaborating in the oppression of their people.” This left employees, human rights advocates, and Western companies and governments analyzing the ethics of corporate involvement with authoritarian regimes. Could a technology giant’s presence in China improve the lives of citizens or simply legitimize autocracy? Also, what factors should employees weigh in deciding to remain loyal to company strategy versus voicing moral concerns?

Learning Objectives

1. Analyze how to apply a sophisticated ethical analysis to company decisions involving government relations and human rights; 2. Examine the separate role of factual assumptions, company characteristics, and ethical principles driving a sound conclusion that can be clearly communicated and defended; 3. Understand how enlightened individual employee decisions must include an evaluation of corporate policies and the process through which those policies are selected; 4. Examine what factors determine if a company’s participation in a foreign country will strengthen an autocratic regime vs. have enough positive impact to improve citizen welfare.

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