

GOOGLE VERSUS CHINA (UNIT 1 GLOBAL NETWORKS AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES)

TNCs play a crucial part in the development and spread of global trade; internet technology is a key factor that has promoted the growth of an interconnected and 'shrinking' world. As a leading TNC that is also the number one world internet service provider, Google is therefore a very important global player. Recently, Google has come into conflict with China, a leading 'superpower' nation. The reason? China wants internet searches conducted inside its borders by its own citizens to be censored and restricted. Google, however, has refused to comply with China's wishes. Why is this the case and what can we learn about globalisation from this story?



(c) myuibe <http://www.flickr.com/photos/myuibe/4275949556/>

Photograph 1 Pro-democratic Chinese citizens built a 'memorial' for Google China

HISTORY OF GOOGLE AND INTERNET INFORMATION FLOWS

The Google search engine was founded in 1999 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin. Rival internet services, such as Lycos and Alta Vista, were rapidly overtaken when Google's popularity exploded and it became the world's number one search engine. Only Facebook now rivals Google in terms of the total volume of **global flows** of information that it channels.

Inventors Page and Brin, like many other internet and computing entrepreneurs, are, by nature, quite **ethically-minded** people (Google's corporate slogan is "Don't be evil").

They idealistically believe that global flows of internet information can help empower people around the world to live free, happy and successful lives as connected parts of a single **global network**. TNC bosses Page and Brin are liberals who remain morally opposed to political oppression and human rights abuses.

GOING GLOBAL: GOOGLE ENTERS CHINA

From the start, Google's management team have wanted to operate their business in China. While they may not personally approve of China's undemocratic political system, Google's bosses understand this is the world's largest emerging

Year	Event
1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Google is founded. One of its corporate mantras is: “Don’t Be Evil”
2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Google begins offering a Chinese-language version of Google.com. But the website, which cannot always be accessed, is slow and unreliable, apparently because of the extensive filtering performed by China’s licensed internet service providers
2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Google.com becomes completely unavailable in China. Access is largely restored within about two weeks. The company claims it has stood by its principles and has not subjected itself to Chinese laws and regulations
2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kai-Fu Lee, a former Microsoft executive, becomes Google’s global vice-president in charge of China and he announces a plan to establish a research centre in China
2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Google.cn is launched amid widespread criticism. Google agrees to block access to certain websites. It promises to tell Chinese users when search results are censored, however, and not to maintain any services that involve personal or confidential data, such as Gail or Blogger, on the mainland. The unfiltered Chinese-language Google.com remains available
2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eric Schmidt, chief executive, announces that Google will lead China’s internet market in spite of censorship issues and fierce competition from Baidu.com, its larger Chinese-grown rival
2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guo Quan, a Chinese human rights activist, vows to sue Yahoo and Google for removing his name from internet search results inside China. Mr Guo writes that “to make money, Google has become a servile Pekinese dog wagging its tail at the heels of the Chinese Communists”. Guo is sentenced to 10 years in jail in 2009 Google, Microsoft and Yahoo sign a set of guidelines designed to reduce the risk that their actions will lead to human rights abuses in China and other countries. The document, written together with human rights advocates, calls for companies to comply with censorship only when they receive a formal legal request to do so
2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chinese regulators criticise Google for making pornography available through its search engine Chinese regulators announce that they are “punishing” Google China for failing to remove pornographic content from its search results. The punishment includes a suspension of its ability to search foreign websites and its associative-word search function – a move that drives Google users away to rival Baidu. At one point, Google services becomes suspended
2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Google says it will end censorship of its search service in China and is prepared to pull out of the market. Attacks on its systems are carried out, allegedly by China-based computer hackers. Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, calls on Beijing to carry out a “thorough” and “transparent” investigation into the hacking that Google said were triggered by its announcement to stop censorship in China Google announces it has stopped censoring its search services on its local Chinese service after talks with Chinese authorities over whether it could continue to operate an uncensored service from inside the country failed. All search requests on Google.cn are now being redirected to its Hong Kong arm (Photograph 1)

Table 1 Google China timeline 1999-2010 (source: Financial Times)

market and a key global **superpower**. To *not* attempt to do business with China is inconceivable for any ambitious TNC seeking to maximise its profits. In 2000, quite early on in Google’s history, a Chinese-language version was established (Figure 1). However, it was difficult to use and experienced periods or unavailability due to government restrictions.

In 2006, Google agreed to work more co-operatively with the Chinese government, resulting in the launch of google.cn. Google agreed that it would act to block certain “politically sensitive” websites - but only on the condition that Chinese users of this service are actively made aware that their access is being

restricted (Table 1). From the outset, the alliance between Google and China was an uneasy one.

There were many moments of discomfort for Google’s management, for instance when a Chinese anti-government activist called Guo Quan complained to the western media that his name was being ignored on internet searches carried out using google.cn. Guo Quan was later sentenced to 10 years imprisonment by the Chinese government for speaking out about this. Around this time, growing number of western commentators began to voice concerns about Google’s behaviour in China and its apparent complicity in undermining freedom of speech for Chinese citizens.

Censorship in China

Founded by Chairman Mao Zedong, the People's Republic of China is not a democracy. For just over sixty years the country has been ruled by the Communist Party. China's rulers are intolerant of any criticism mounted against them by their own citizens. Harsh fines and prison sentences are frequently handed out to political opponents seen to be openly attacking official policies, such as the hated One-Child rule or the restrictive Hukou system (which denies rural migrants any urban residence rights).

In 1988, Chinese students demonstrated against communism in Tiananmen Square: hundreds of people are believed to have died in the army crackdown that followed. Many people in China still do not know the full facts about what happened that day, due to strictly enforced censorship of the press and internet by China's rulers. China is also far more determined than many nations to limit public access to online pornography. Internet access only became available in China in 1994, later than in other countries.

This case study shows us there are limits to globalisation and the sense of a **shrinking world** that we have come to associate with internet and transport technologies. For Chinese citizens, internet censorship means that information about other people, places and events is *not* always freely available. As a result, they may not experience the same sense of **time-space compression** that western geographers such as David Harvey (1989) have written about.

GOOGLE VERSUS CHINA

During 2009, a dispute over access to online pornography began to damage relations between the Chinese government and Google. Events at the start of 2010 finally pitted the technological TNC head-to-head against the rising superpower. In January, Google reported that computer hackers had gained entry to its main database and had broken into the email accounts of a number of Chinese human rights activists. Google's management suspect that the culprits were either Chinese citizens loyal to their government or possibly even Chinese government agents. The event coincided with an announcement by Google that it now planned to lift all search restrictions on google.cn – thereby making the service completely un-censored.

In March 2010, Google began re-directing Chinese users of google.cn to a parallel

uncensored service designed for Hong Kong users (although a territory of China, Hong Kong has different relaxed rules on censorship). As a result of this action, the Chinese government must now rely on its own internet controls to block access for any Chinese Google user attempting to search for information about officially unauthorised topics. If a Chinese citizen searches for details of, say, "human rights abuses in China", all that will now be displayed is a "page not found" message.

What are the implications of this?

- It is now made clearer than ever to Chinese internet users that their searches are sometimes censored.
- Google may lose custom in China; many Google users have already migrated to an alternative Chinese service called Baidu.
- However, many Chinese adults are in favour of state censorship. Some worry that the internet corrupts children. A recent film documentary called *Who took our children?* claimed that "internet addiction" is a problem afflicting China's children.

For now, Chinese people's access to free flows of information remains quite heavily restricted. China remains set apart from the rest of the world's global network of internet users due to its government's "Great Firewall".

KEYWORDS

Global flow A movement of money, goods, materials, people or information that helps build interdependency between places and contributes to globalisation.

Global network A network is an illustration or model that shows how different places are linked together. Geographers use the term global network to emphasise the many long-distance connections that exist between different places.

Shrinking world Thanks to technology, distant places start to feel closer and take less time to reach. This process is sometimes called "time-space compression".

Time-space compression A more technical expression of the "shrinking world" idea.

Glocalisation Strategies adopted by a TNC in order to help it win custom in local markets by adapting its products to suit local tastes, needs or customs. Also refers to the local sourcing of parts.

Superpower A term originally describing the USA, USSR and the British Empire. It refers to a nation with the means to project its power and influence anywhere in the world to become a dominant global force.

KEY POINTS

- Google is one of the world's leading technology TNCs.
- China is a global superpower but unlike the US and EU nations it is not a democracy.
- Chinese internet censorship means that its citizens are not as well connected with global networks of information as people in, say, the UK.
- Due to Chinese requests for censorship, Google's managers have found it hard to globalise their business without sometimes acting unethically according to their own moral standards.
- Synoptic link: Google's dilemma has wider implications for superpower relations between China and the USA.

What should the USA do? (Practicing Unit 3 synopticity)

“Google's clash with China is about much more than the fate of a single, powerful firm. The company's decision to pull out of China, unless the government there changes its policies on censorship, is a harbinger of increasingly stormy relations between the US and China.” (*Financial Times*, 19 January 2010).

This case study also has relevance for the study of *Superpower Geographies* in Unit 3. It is a synoptic case study, meaning that it draws on themes found in different Units and Sub-units of the Edexcel Geography Specification. In Unit 3, you will learn about how the USA and China are becoming rival superpowers. Given that Google is an American TNC, we can therefore ask: how is the tension between China and the USA affected by the Google controversy?

When President Obama sat down with Chinese leader Hu Jintao in Beijing recently to talk trade, climate change and economics, amongst other topics, he trod very carefully around the topic of internet censorship. However, he made it very clear that the USA disapproves of censorship, saying: “Freedoms of expression and ... access to information, and political participation, we believe are universal rights. They should be available to all people, including ethnic and religious minorities, whether they are in the United States, China or any other nation.” How do you think China's leaders view Obama's remarks?

Investigating globalisation

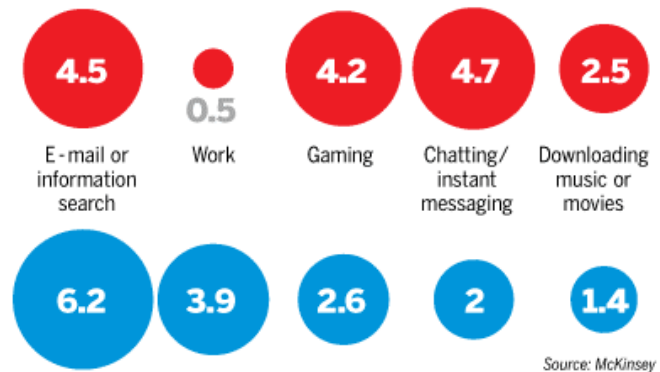
Read the following extract from a newspaper report about use of the internet in China. What evidence is there here of **globalisation**?

“Foreign companies have taken a long time to figure out – then adapt to – one of the key features of Chinese consumers: they do not like to type. ‘Typing is a pain in Chinese,’ explains Zhang Honglin, demonstrating how he has to enter a search word in Latin transcription, then pick the right character scrolling through sometimes dozens of different choices in a pop-up window. This is because the Mandarin language has many thousands of written characters. So when 35-year-old Mr Zhang sneaks away from his family's tobacco and liquor shop in Beijing to an upstairs internet café for hours on end, he navigates almost entirely using the mouse. Most internet portals have reacted by filling their pages with hundreds of colourful links competing for attention – creating a cluttered and disorderly view to the western eye but making life easier for Chinese users.”

A cyber-world apart

Chinese ● vs European ● web use habits

Average number of days per week on which a user performs an internet activity



Source: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a7bdfbae-054b-11df-a85e-00144feabdco.html>

Fact file

- **1994** - Internet first available in China
- **340 million** - Internet users in China
- **34%** - Percentage of internet users in China aged under 19
- **40** - Number of the world's 193 countries where some level of internet censorship exists (Other than China, Australia is another example)

Exam question practice zone

Explain how the internet has helped build a more interconnected world. (15 marks)

Examiner's tip: This is very similar in style and theme to an essay that appeared on Unit 1 in January 2010 (although the actual exam question focused on transport, rather than the internet). Here, your answer could explore ways in which the internet directly helps connect people together – through social networking sites, for instance. But you can also look more widely at the vital supporting role it plays allowing other global flows to function.

For instance, think about how the internet aids the tourist industry (online bookings help increase tourist flows); or remember that TNCs rely heavily on email to keep their different branches in touch with one another. Retailers like Marks and Spencer can order supplies of food and clothes quickly using email, speeding up flows of goods around the world. There are plenty of other possible examples.

The essay is marked using four level bands, as follows:

- **Level 1 (0-4 marks)** Short, simple statements only (perhaps outlining what Facebook is).
- **Level 2 (5-8 marks)** Some structure provided, either adopting an internet timeline approach or has more than one useful example of what is meant by interconnection (family, business connections).
- **Level 3 (9-12 marks)** Structured account dealing with different types of interconnectivity and different uses of the internet. May also mention 'shrinking world' ideas. At top end, may recognise other influences at work (e.g. internet bookings have grown in parallel with cheap airline expansion).
- **Level 4 (13-15 marks)** Well-structured account of how the internet, working in conjunction with other factors, has helped the growth of a variety of types of global network. May explicitly link different internet applications to different types of key flow.

REFERENCES

- Harvey, D. (1989) *The condition of postmodernity* Blackwell
- *Financial Times* (2010) 'Why America and China will clash' 19 January