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INFORMATION AGE

China Censors Your Internet

Beijing thinks Taylor Swift's '1989' is code for Tiananmen Square and must be blocked.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



By

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Taylor Swift is lucky she didn't wait till this year to release her hit album "1989." To her fans, the title refers to her birth year. To Beijing, it's a veiled reference to the Tiananmen Square massacre. Unless the U.S. stops it, China has found a way to bar anyone anywhere in the world—including Ms. Swift—from using certain Web addresses it finds politically offensive.

In October, Los Angeles-based XYZ.com, which operates several new Internet domains, made a deal with the Chinese government under which it will enforce Beijing's censorship globally. The registry will let China ban domain names everywhere based on Beijing's blacklist that includes "freedom," "liberty" and "democracy," as well as any reference to the Tiananmen massacre.

The registry says China has given it 12,000 words to ban from its Web addresses, which include the suffixes .xyz, .college, .rent, .protection and .security. Anyone in any country in the world will be denied use of these domains if their names include words that trouble Beijing's repressive leaders.

News of the plan was buried in an application from XYZ last month to the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or Icaann, the organization that is supposed to protect the open Internet, operating under a contract from the U.S. government. The Obama administration plans to give up the contract, and Icaann apparently no longer fears losing its role even if it violates freedom of speech, the core principle of the open Internet.

The great danger of the U.S. ending its protection over Icann has always been that authoritarian governments would find ways to censor websites globally by getting control over the root zone of web names and addresses. China in effect is now censoring .xyz addresses the same way it would like to censor .com, .org, etc.

In its application, XYZ says Beijing will add over time to the first 12,000 banned words. The registry hasn't disclosed the words, but they likely are similar to the ones used by the Internet censors who manage China's Great Firewall.

Here's how that will work in practice: Liberty University can use liberty.edu, but not liberty.xyz. Likewise, the foundation that funds the statue can use statueofliberty.org, but not statueofliberty.xyz. Human Rights in China uses hrichina.org but the "hr" means Beijing will block hrichina.xyz. Clicking on www.ts1989.com goes to Taylor Swift's official website, but click on www.ts1989.xyz and the result will be "This webpage is not available."

The industry blog that broke news of this censorship, Domain Incite, pointed out the risks of this kowtow. "The company clearly has compelling business reasons to comply with Chinese law. But is giving the Chinese government the ongoing right to ban tens of thousands of domain names internationally a step too far?"

In its application, XYZ asserts: "We believe that no parties have any legitimate reason to object to the introduction of this service." People around the world denied .xyz addresses have reason to object being censored by Beijing. If they had free speech to protest, many Chinese netizens would object to any legitimizing by Icann of censorship by Beijing. As the Electronic Frontier Foundation puts it: "Chinese bloggers and dissidents, some of whom have received sentences as severe as life in prison for speaking out online, might beg to differ with this assessment."

Icann could deny the XYZ plan, but its board and staff no longer seem to worry about oversight from the Commerce Department. The U.S. became a lame duck when the Obama administration announced its scheme to surrender the contract.

The Internet's stakeholders, including advocacy groups, would normally express loud outrage at this unprecedented plan to undermine free speech online. They may be distracted by the time-consuming but futile attempt to plan some new oversight structure for Icann to keep the Internet free in the absence of U.S. stewardship.

If this plan for Icann to enable global censorship by Beijing doesn't persuade the Obama administration of the risks of ending U.S. protection for the Internet, nothing will. Congress needs to turn up the heat on the Commerce Department for failing to oversee Icann. Congress should also continue to block Commerce from giving up the contract with Icann at least until there is a new administration.

China and other authoritarian regimes have made no secret of their goal to end free speech on the Internet globally. Censoring .xyz addresses is just the beginning. There's no reason the U.S. should assist Beijing's censors by ending American protection for the Internet.

