

Apple, Amazon help Chinese government censor the Internet

By Josh Varlin
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The Chinese government, with the assistance of American corporations, has launched a widespread crackdown on virtual private networks (VPNs), which allow Chinese Internet users to circumvent state censorship.

A government order to China's three telecommunications companies—all state-owned—demands that they restrict access to VPNs by February 2018. The order is apparently being implemented already, and Apple and Amazon have both joined in with the Chinese telecommunications companies in blocking VPNs.

VPNs allow for Internet users to access the Internet as if they were located in another country. For example, someone located in China can use a VPN to appear as if they are browsing in the United States, allowing them to access web sites blocked in China but not in the US.

Reports indicate that select VPNs, registered with the government and heavily monitored, will be allowed to continue operations. These VPNs will be used by approved companies, and the government will likely monitor traffic going through them.

While the Chinese government maintains a significant censorship regime and prevents most Chinese Internet users from accessing large portions of the Internet, including Facebook and Twitter, it has largely tolerated the use of VPNs. The relatively free Internet access provided by VPNs is essential for economic and academic pursuits, encouraging the Chinese government to turn a blind eye to some cracks in the "Great Firewall."

Chinese Internet censorship is seen by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as essential to maintaining its control over the population, including an increasingly restive working class. The Stalinist

CCP is concerned that the Chinese working class will learn its own history, including the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, and use the Internet to communicate in China and internationally.

President Xi Jinping has emphasized cybersecurity during his tenure under the banner of "cyber sovereignty." Additionally, the CCP's upcoming party congress is prompting the crackdown, with the *New York Times* noting, "Five years ago, ahead of a similar meeting, VPNs were hit by then-unprecedented disruptions."

CyberGhost, a Romanian VPN provider, had been under increasing pressure from the Chinese government prior to the new order. CyberGhost CEO Robert Knapp said, "We had seen the Chinese government putting more and more pressure on VPN providers in a technical sense—blocking our IPs, blocking the server infrastructure we were using, detecting traffic from certain sources."

US companies Apple and Amazon have collaborated with Beijing's anti-VPN campaign. Apple has removed popular VPN apps from its App Store for Chinese users.

In a statement to *TechCrunch*, Apple CEO Tim Cook noted that Apple would cooperate with any legally required censorship efforts: "We would obviously rather not remove the apps, but like we do in other countries we follow the law wherever we do business. We strongly believe participating in markets and bringing benefits to customers is in the best interest of the folks there and in other countries as well."

Amazon has also cooperated with Chinese censorship efforts. The Chinese company that runs Amazon Web Services (AWS) in China reportedly emailed its clients to warn them against VPN use.

Wired notes that, in the pursuit of access to the huge

Chinese market, US technology companies have collaborated in the CCP's censorship for years. Yahoo, Microsoft, Cisco, and LinkedIn have all cooperated with Chinese state censorship.

Wired also reports that Facebook is trying to find a way to get access to the Chinese market: "Facebook has reportedly worked on a censorship tool for the purposes of getting China's approval."

Beijing's actions are part of a wave of Internet censorship. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law on July 30 heavily restricting VPNs in Russia. The law also requires messaging apps to link users' phone numbers to their activity on the app, making anonymous usage much more difficult.

The Indonesian government and YouTube, a video streaming site owned by Google, have agreed to censor "extremist" content and "hate speech." While the Indonesian government claims it is not creating a "regime of censorship," these vague terms can be used to censor oppositional content as the government and its corporate partners deem fit.

Mainstream Western news organizations have criticized Apple's cooperation with the Chinese government in stifling the Internet. Farhad Manjoo, writing in the *New York Times*, notes that "Apple's quiet capitulation to tightening censorship in one of its largest markets is still a dangerous precedent."

The *Guardian* published an article by Shaun Walker on Friday highlighting human rights groups' reactions to Moscow's anti-democratic moves to restrict access to blacklisted web sites. The article quotes Human Rights Watch researcher Yulia Gorbunova, who said, "These laws negatively affect the ability of tens of millions of Russians to freely access and exchange information online."

While the press in the US and the United Kingdom criticizes Russian and Chinese censorship, similar activities conducted by the US-based Google and Facebook receive general praise and encouragement. Since the 2016 election, the *Times*, the *Washington Post* and other major news outlets have promoted a campaign against "fake news."

Over the past several months, Google has been restricting access to left-wing and anti-war web sites by reducing their prominence in search results. An investigation by the *World Socialist Web Site* broke this story, and the WSWS has documented it thoroughly.

Google justifies its censorship of left-wing views in the name of combating "fake news."

Leading progressive and anti-war sites, including *Democracy Now!* and *CounterPunch*, have been affected by Google's censorship. The *World Socialist Web Site* has been the most heavily affected, with traffic generated from Google searches declining by 67 percent since April.

As of this writing, no major US newspaper has acknowledged the effects that Google's new algorithm is having on left-wing web sites. Indeed, the *Post* and other papers have spearheaded the calls to combat "fake news." While criticizing the anti-democratic measures of Moscow and Beijing, the censorship by Washington and its corporate allies in Silicon Valley inside the United States is either praised or ignored by leading US and European newspapers.

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