

## Not Just Bystanders

Milton Friedman once wrote that businesses only have a responsibility to **increase their profits**. For interactions within the laws of a free society, this formula is an excellent approximation to the truth. But when a business is involved with the government of a fear society, not everything it might do to increase its profits is morally permissible.

Microsoft has decided to **block** Chinese bloggers who try to use words like "freedom", "democracy", "demonstration", "human rights" and "Taiwan independence". Contrary to **A Reasonable Man**, we think Microsoft is behaving wrongly here. Microsoft has no duty to prevent the Chinese government from oppressing its citizens, but it should not collaborate with such attempts by acting as an enforcer. This is the difference a man between watching a thug beat somebody up because he is too weak or poorly armed or frightened to intervene, and the same man intentionally blocking the victim's escape route, or offering the thug a heavier lead pipe.

As in the case of international aid which gets appropriated by the very governments that have caused the victims' poverty, a totalitarian oppressor can always arrange matters so that if one wants to help at all, one must collaborate with him and entrench his power. In the extreme case, terrorists do the same when they take hostages. At the other extreme, *any* trade (and some would say any government) creates an element of this moral dilemma, and there is room for disagreement about where a bystander becomes a collaborator. (The interesting movie **The Accused** also explores this issue.) We think that in this case Microsoft could and should have said no to imposing these restrictions, which are so odious to the culture in which it thrives and on which it relies. It said yes, and crossed the line.

Tue, 07/05/2005 - 10:29 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

## I think your analogy is a bit

I think your analogy is a bit off the mark. It's more like offering the victim a stick to fight back a little bit rather than offering him nothing until the government allows you to supply him with a machine gun.

Speaking of guns, should gun stores refuse to sell anything because

they're not allowed to sell everything? What about network television and radio in America? Are they morally obligated to stop broadcasting until all FCC censorship ends?

Was it immoral to open a bookstore in Nazi Germany? What if you could offer a lot of great books to people who would otherwise have no access them? You couldn't offer every book, but is this the same as giving a Nazi a larger pipe to beat your neighbor harder?

Is Microsoft operating in China a net good, or net bad for freedom? Will more ideas of freedom be spread through these blogs (even given the censorship) or less?

Perhaps euphemisms will arise to replace these banned words and phrases. Or maybe you can just purposefully misspell stuff. At any rate, banning ideas seems a lot harder to enforce than banning porn.

by Wile E on Tue, 07/05/2005 - 14:57 | [reply](#)

## Analogies

Obviously, I agree with Wile E.

To continue the other part of the analogy...it's not at all like blocking the victim's escape route. It's like building him a new narrow escape route. Obviously it would be better to be able to offer a wider one; but if the government would find and eliminate such a wide escape route, the narrow one is much better than the only realistic alternative: none at all.

**The World** seems to have ignored, or missed, the point of my post and the issue in Wile E's most important question: "Is Microsoft operating in China a net good or a net bad for freedom?" Likewise for Google and Yahoo.

Other good questions:

What is the alternative, and why is it better?

Who, besides irrational outsiders, is Microsoft hurting?

## Gil (A Reasonable Man)

by **Gil** on Tue, 07/05/2005 - 16:48 | [reply](#)

## Deferential

Your argument assumes the infallibility of the Chinese Government when it declares that they would find and close any escapes they want to, and denies any ill consequences they might suffer from doing so.

When people act deferentially about thugs, and avoid doing things the thugs disapprove of, then thugs needn't go through the trouble

of exercising their power, and displaying to the world their tactics.

This does aid them, and it constitutes abandoning the victims.

Suggesting that there are workarounds available is unpersuasive. If it's so easy to trick the Chinese government, why doesn't Microsoft do it instead of leaving it up to the censored bloggers?

*Is Microsoft operating in China a net good or a net bad for freedom?*

I deny that is the choice to be made here. And let me remind you that if the Chinese Government thought Microsoft was harmful then Microsoft would be thrown out entirely.

BTW, for what it's worth, I agree **The World's** analogy is flawed. But I don't see analogies as the main issue here.

-- Elliot Temple  
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Tue, 07/05/2005 - 22:31 | [reply](#)

## **Elliot, I'm confused. Ar**

Elliot, I'm confused.

Are you suggesting that Microsoft not operate in China, or operate there, but either openly or covertly defy the restrictions that the Chinese government has mandated?

by Wile E on Wed, 07/06/2005 - 00:33 | [reply](#)

## **Fallibility and Deference**

I'm not assuming that the Chinese government is infallible. But I am assuming that they're competent to test whether Microsoft is complying with simple restrictive measures.

I agree that it's possible to cooperate with thugs to an extent that would be immoral, but I think this is not even close to an example of that.

The restrictions are very minor, and the Chinese government has been practicing sophisticated information suppression long before Microsoft showed up there. Microsoft is giving the people a new tool to share ideas and information, with a few silly, minor, limitations. Getting kicked out for violating the laws would be bad for the chinese people, and bad for Microsoft.

I think that the Internet represents a dilemma for the Chinese government. The productivity gains that it offers are too great to pass up. But it's also going to allow the citizens the ability to understand what they're being denied and to organize opposition.

I suspect that the leaders know that their days are numbered and are just trying to postpone the inevitable.

It seems clear to me that Microsoft's contributions in China are helping the people, and accelerating their liberation. This is exactly the sort of peaceful evolution due to the spread of ideas that we

should be cheering on, not sniping at.

**Gil**

by **Gil** on Wed, 07/06/2005 - 01:21 | [reply](#)

## Re: Fallibility and Deference

Wile E,

I wasn't suggesting a course of action. I would advise you to look more to what I say instead of guessing what I may be trying to imply. If I wanted to say more, I would.

Gil,

Do you think there would be no side effects to the Chinese Government enforcing their censorship themselves?

The restrictions are not minor, and that isn't the point. Doing what they want to avoid getting thrown out is appeasement. The threat to kick Microsoft out isn't going anywhere, and there is nothing to stop the Chinese from asking for more.

That said, appeasement is sometimes tactically justified, and the Chinese Government may be incompetent at deciding what to ask for. So I might be tempted to support this action. But then I read quotes from the linked article like this:

*Microsoft said the company abided by the laws, regulations and norms of each country in which it operates.*

It is harmful to explicitly legitimise bad governments. And unnecessary.

I rather doubt the Chinese leaders "know that their days are numbered". That would amount to them believing their own ideals mistaken and unworkable.

I'm not sniping, I'm arguing. There is good here, but there are also parts worthy of criticism.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Wed, 07/06/2005 - 05:09 | [reply](#)

## Alternatives

Every company doing business in every country has to either comply with stupid, harmful regulations, or risk being forcibly forbidden from engaging in its business. This would be bad for the company, and bad for the customers of its goods and services.

It is not always appeasement to comply with these laws. It's a judgment call, and compliance is often better than the available alternatives.

Microsoft isn't electrocuting people, or transmitting their information

to a death squad. They're just generating a popup window that notifies the users that they can't use certain words or phrases in post titles. People can easily get their messages across using different expressions.

The whole point of my original post is that it isn't useful to criticize companies for not accomplishing perfection, when that's not a realistic possibility. What makes sense is to judge whether they are making good choices among actual alternatives. It's not better to forgo the good because it doesn't achieve perfection. Often, perfection is not an option. It's folly to let this imagined perfection become the enemy of the good.

It's helpful to know that there are aspects of a situation that are bad. But, before choosing to pursue another option, you must consider whether that option is actually better.

You didn't answer Wile E's questions, but you felt comfortable saying that Microsoft is in the wrong. That doesn't make any sense to me. It can only be wrong if there is something else to do that's better. Since you don't seem to know what that might be, how you can be confident that what Microsoft is doing is wrong?

**Gil**

by **Gil** on Wed, 07/06/2005 - 06:00 | [reply](#)

## What Law?

You say that Microsoft has to comply with Chinese laws. But as MSN itself has printed there is **no law** in China forbidding the use of the words in question:

The MSN Spaces code of conduct forbids the posting of content that "violates any local and national laws".

But while China's ruling Communist Party deals harshly with political dissenters, there is no Chinese law that bars the mere use of words such as democracy.

by **Alan Forrester** on Wed, 07/06/2005 - 13:22 | [reply](#)

## Re: Alternatives

Gil,

My primary point was just that I thought certain arguments given on the subject were poor.

I think Microsoft has the wrong view of the matter, and to some extent the wrong values. Thus it makes sense for me to say Microsoft is doing things wrong -- at the very least Microsoft is expressing the wrong attitude to the press. (But if they do that, it seems a very good bet their actions could use some improvements too.)

I don't need to know how to improve Microsoft to say this.

-- Elliot Temple  
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Wed, 07/06/2005 - 16:12 | [reply](#)

## No Law

Alan,

That's interesting. I suspect that, regardless of whether there is an explicit law involved, there were specifications that Microsoft had to meet to be permitted to provide the service. I highly doubt that Microsoft decided to forbid these words and expressions on their own. But, if it turns out that this is indeed what happened, I'll be happy to change my position.

None of us knows all of the details, which I think also argues against claims that Microsoft is acting wrongly.

I'm not saying that Microsoft is acting perfectly, just that the claims I've seen that they are acting immorally have been unsupported by valid arguments.

**Gil**

by **Gil** on Wed, 07/06/2005 - 16:33 | [reply](#)

## Microsoft PR

Elliot,

I'm happy to agree with you that Microsoft has a lot of work to do to improve their public messages and perceptions.

I *do* think that much of the negative perception is overblown, but I agree that they could and should do a better job of communicating their messages.

**Gil**

by **Gil** on Wed, 07/06/2005 - 16:38 | [reply](#)

## You are confusing yourselves

You, libertarians just hate to admit that within your ideas there is no practical bulletproof fence against oppression and coercion. And although you talk about coercion and freedom very much, the case with Microsoft exhibits your contradictions. Even if Microsoft were genuinely and actively helping Chinese government to oppress people half of you would disagree on whether Microsoft should be banned from cooperating with China or not. Half of you would always argue that Chinese government is responsible for oppression, not Microsoft.

On the other hand, asking Microsoft managers to be more "moral"

or to promote more freedom is just as ridiculous.

There is no solution to this problem within libertarian infrastructure.

I suspect even, that once a group of people has been given full "libertarian" freedom to organise their society as they want on a secluded island they will most likely end up with stronger people oppressing weaker people in a direct or indirect manner, asserting constantly and unequivocally that coercion is really bad. However, all non-libertarian folk will be immediately accused of being "tyrants" and "oppressors".

Your will never agree that nearly everything is good only up to a point.

by a reader on Mon, 07/18/2005 - 13:31 | [reply](#)

## Who is confused?

Aren't you judging Libertarianism by a different standard to everything else? Under democracy, fascism, cannibalism, or whatever else you personally might favor to Libertarianism, people are going to disagree about what the law should say. So why is that an argument against Libertarianism specifically? Libertarian infrastructure will resolve the disagreement one way or another, depending on the flavor of Libertarianism. So will democracy, depending on the flavor of democracy. So what?

You claim everything [meaning Libertarianism] is only good up to a point. But that's only relevant if you know of something that's better than Libertarianism. What?

by a reader on Mon, 07/18/2005 - 14:07 | [reply](#)

## Something better than libertarianism

The American political tradition is better than libertarianism.

by **Woty** on Mon, 07/18/2005 - 15:16 | [reply](#)

## Who is confused?

No, the problem is not that libertarians are in disagreement about everything. On the contrary, pluralism is a good feature of libertarianism. Your disagreement in this particular case just exhibits a contradiction in libertarianism. But you ignored the contradiction that I described. You prefer to argue about "sideway" point. The contradiction between theory and practice. In theory, libertarians favor freedom and despise coercion. But libertarianism fails to provide a reasonable and practical mean to achieve this. If Microsoft were genuinely oppressing Chinese people as paid for by Chinese government you would still argue that it is the Chinese government that pays for such service and is therefore responsible for oppression, not Microsoft.

If tobacco companies trick people into smoking which gives no

benefits to mankind whatsoever you would still argue that it is a free choice of every individual to smoke or not to smoke and that by putting pressure on tobacco companies would necessarily lead to coercion of just about every business on the planet.

And another interesting point you make: if I am not a libertarian you tell me off straight away. It is a second nature to any libertarian - to think that others are necessarily in favor of "fascism, cannibalism, or whatever".

by a reader on Tue, 07/19/2005 - 11:36 | [reply](#)

## Re: Something better than Libertarianism

The American political tradition is better than libertarianism.

To me, these are apples and oranges. The American political tradition is a specific tradition, actually implemented in the institutions of a society and actually functioning. Libertarianism is not an institution nor a specification of institutions but a property which, many people hope, the institutions of some future society may have.

Some - perhaps most - of them deny this. They think they have a blueprint for such institutions. For instance, some of them think that all that is needed is to repeal certain laws and pass others. So they are utopians, but I want to distinguish their utopianism (which, like all utopianism, is irrational) from their Libertarianism.

I entirely agree that the American political tradition is better than any institutions that might be set up today (say, at gunpoint) with the intention that they be Libertarian. On the other hand, I also think that one day the American political tradition itself will evolve into a better state, and that this state will have very Libertarian properties. (Though as some commenters above have pointed out, different people who call themselves Libertarians have conflicting ideas about what those properties are, in detail.) So *that* 'Libertarianism' will be better than today's 'American political tradition'.

by [David Deutsch](#) on Tue, 07/19/2005 - 13:19 | [reply](#)