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May 27, 2020

Mr. Sundar Pichai
Chief Executive Officer
Google LLC
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway
Mountain View, CA 94043

Dear Mr. Pichai:

I write to ask you to respond to troubling reports that your company has resumed its long pattern of censorship at the behest of the Chinese Communist Party.

These reports suggest that Google engineers may have changed the algorithms on YouTube to automatically censor certain criticisms of the Chinese Communist Party. In particular, Google engineers appear to have altered YouTube code to automatically block the Chinese terms for “communist bandit” and “50-cent party”—the latter term referring to a division of the Chinese Communist Party whose purpose is deflecting criticism from the Party by using sockpuppet accounts to spread online propaganda.¹ These reports follow in the wake of Google’s purported “mis”-translation last year of the phrase “I am *sad* to see Hong Kong become part of China” to “I am *happy* to see Hong Kong become part of China.”

Shortly after these reports were unveiled, YouTube dismissed the censorship of these terms as “an error,” but this purported “error” follows a long, disturbing pattern of Google censoring content to try to gain favor with the Chinese Communist Party. Until 2010, for example, you actively censored content through your search engine Google.cn, which operated in China. Despite your stated commitments to free speech, you were happy to censor if it meant obtaining more revenue; you shelved the Google.cn search engine only after you were targeted with a cyberattack. Indeed, as recently as last year, you were secretly working on a *new* censorship-based search engine, Project Dragonfly, development of which was paused only in the face of immense backlash internally.² Even worse, while Google.cn at least disclosed to users that it was censoring content, Google engineers designed Project Dragonfly to conceal that fact.

Unfortunately, your company is not alone in censoring content to curry favor with the Chinese Communist Party. Last year, Apple removed the Taiwan flag emoji from iPhones

¹ <https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/26/21270290/youtube-deleting-comments-censorship-chinese-communist-party-ccp>

² <https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/4/18250285/google-dragonfly-censored-search-engine-code-dead-employees-doubt>

operating in Hong Kong.³ And last fall, the NBA, famous for encouraging players and members to criticize American government officials, cracked down when individuals started criticizing officials in Beijing.⁴

This kowtowing is unacceptable. Selling out American principles to curry favor with communist officials is no way to run an American business—regardless of who else is doing it. Please respond to my office by June 12 with information about your censorship of terms critical of the Chinese Communist Party:

1. Identify any discussions you or other executives have had—and conclusions from those discussions—about the potential conflict between Google’s financial interest in developing products for the Chinese market and Google’s purported commitment to free speech and human rights.
2. Some reports suggest that this censorship problem first arose last fall. Identify when you became aware that YouTube was censoring this content and how much time elapsed between that time and May 26, 2020.
3. Identify any discussions you or other executives have had, the timing of those discussions, any conclusions arrived at during those discussions, and the results of any internal investigations about YouTube’s censorship of the Chinese terms for “communist bandit” and “50-cent party.”
4. Describe the date of, and circumstances surrounding, the changes that led YouTube to censor the Chinese terms for “communist bandit” and “50-cent party.”
5. Explain Google’s reason for censoring these terms.
6. Explain what consideration, if any, was given to Google’s history of censoring content on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party before this most recent censorship of terms critical of the Chinese Communist Party.
7. Explain whether Google or its partners had any conversations with members, representatives, or proxies of the Chinese Communist Party about these terms.
8. Explain what steps have been taken to ensure that the Chinese Communist Party cannot manipulate Google’s algorithms.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Josh Hawley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Josh" being particularly prominent.

Josh Hawley
United States Senator

³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-08/apple-pulls-taiwanese-flag-emoji-from-iphones-in-hong-kong>

⁴ <https://www.hawley.senate.gov/us-senator-josh-hawley-sends-letter-nba-commissioner-silver-blasting-nbas-decision-side-chinese>