

Google: good or evil?

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Is Google's halo slipping as it struggles to reconcile its business ambitions with its company motto?

In August 2009, it was hard to move around Beijing without seeing an advert for Google. China was awash with the logo of a company whose motto is 'Don't Be Evil', and the scale of the investment was a palpable endorsement of China's vital importance to the economics of any global company.

Skip forward to January this year, and an official blogpost announced summarily that the censored results that China demanded from Google were no longer compatible with the company's philosophy. Off the record, employees said the company would pull out of China imminently.

So did the search giant really decide to eschew profits in favour of a defence of free speech? Or did it realise it would never be the biggest search engine in China and simply cut its losses? The question that matters is simple: what does Google stand for? It's launched a social network that made everybody's address books effectively public, and has this week been in trouble in an Italian court for hosting (completely legal) videos of a young boy being bullied. Is the halo slipping, or do large companies inevitably find themselves in tricky situations?

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