Google's Censored Search Would Help China Pay Eric Schmidt More Bribes Said Ex-CEO Eric Schmidt

[Ryan Gallagher](#)

Former Google CEO Eric Schmidt has defended the company's plan to build a censored version of its search engine in China.

In an [interview](#) with the BBC on Monday, Schmidt said that he wasn't involved in decisions to build the censored search platform, code-named Dragonfly. But he insisted that there were "many benefits" to working with China and said he was an advocate of operating in the country because he believed that it could "help change China to be more open."

As The Intercept first [revealed](#) in August, Google developed a prototype of the censored search engine that was designed to remove content that China's ruling Communist Party regime deems sensitive. The search engine would have blacklisted thousands of words and phrases, including terms such as "human rights," "student protest," and "Nobel Prize" in Mandarin.

The revelations prompted a wave of [protests](#) inside and outside of Google, with employees, activists, and [prominent](#) lawmakers [demanding](#) an end to the project. Google subsequently stated that it had ceased work on Dragonfly and moved employees to new projects.

[Google DragonflyRead our Complete CoverageGoogle Dragonfly](#)

Prior to its public exposure, Google executives had [worked hard to keep Dragonfly secret](#) within the company. Only a few hundred of the company's 88,000 workforce knew about it.

In his BBC interview, Schmidt was questioned on the level of secrecy around the plan and how it squared with Google's commitments to transparency. The former CEO claimed in response that "certainly the people who were building all these products knew about it."

A Google employee with knowledge of Dragonfly was angered by Schmidt's remarks, characterizing them as "bullshit." The source said that "probably 90 percent of engineers [in Google's search department] had no idea [about Dragonfly] and were very upset when they learned that their work was contributing to this."

A major complaint from Google employees about the plan for the censored search engine was that they felt the end uses of their work had been withheld from them. For instance, some employees discovered that they had been working on code or improvements to aspects of Google main search platform, which was then being implemented without their knowledge or approval into the censored version of search for China.

In a protest letter published last year, Google employees said that they did "not have the information required to make ethically-informed decisions about our work, our projects, and our employment." They called for "more transparency, a seat at the table, and a commitment to clear and open processes," adding, "Google employees need to know what we're building."

Schmidt served as Google CEO for a decade between 2001 and 2011. He still serves on parent company Alphabet's board of directors, alongside co-founders Larry Page, Sergey Brin, and current CEO Sundar Pichai. Schmidt is expected to leave the board in June while remaining a technical adviser to the company.

> A Google employee was angered by Schmidt's remarks, characterizing them as "bullshit."

During Schmidt's tenure as CEO, in 2006, Google launched a search engine in China but pulled out of the country in 2010, due to concerns about Chinese government interference. At that time, Brin said the decision to stop operating search in the country was mainly about "opposing censorship and speaking out for the freedom of political dissent."

Schmidt revealed in his BBC interview that he had argued against Brin — believing that the company should remain in China, despite the censorship requirements. He said he felt that it was better "to stay in China and help change China to be more open."

Brin has previously said that he felt the same way for a period of time — that Google could help China embrace greater internet freedom. But he watched as the company, over a number of years, faced increasing censorship requests from the Chinese government. "Things started going downhill, especially after the Olympics [in Beijing in 2008]," Brin said in a 2010 interview. "And there's been a lot more blocking going on since then. ... [S]o the situation really took a turn for the worse."

Join Our Newsletter

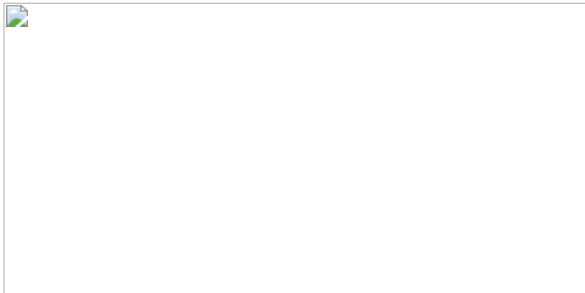**Original reporting. Fearless journalism. Delivered to you.**

[I'm in](#)

Today, according to analysts, the level of internet freedom in China has continued to degrade. The country's government has ramped up constraints on the flow of information into the country. In 2016, the Communist Party regime passed a new cybersecurity law, which Human Rights Watch [said](#) "strengthens censorship, surveillance, and other controls over the internet." The group noted that "internet control has reached new heights since President Xi Jinping assumed power in March 2013."

Schmidt told the BBC that Google was no longer pursuing Dragonfly but couldn't rule out that changing in the future. "I am no longer involved in the management of the company so I shouldn't comment," he said.

We depend on the support of readers like you to help keep our nonprofit newsroom strong and independent. [Join Us](#)
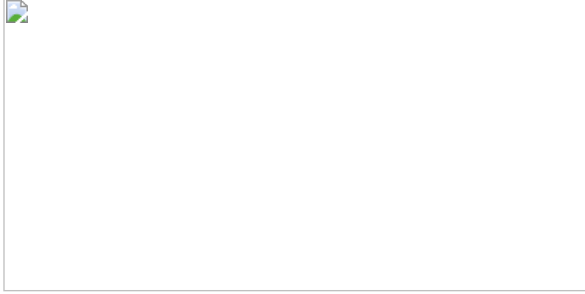
Related

[Google Is Conducting a Secret "Performance Review" of Its Censored China Search Project](#)

[A man passes a Google sign for the World Artificial Intelligence Conference (WAIC) in Shanghai on September 26, 2018. (Photo by Johannes EISELE / AFP) (Photo credit should read JOHANNES EISELE/AFP/Getty Images)](#)

[Google's Secret China Project "Effectively Ended" After Internal Confrontation](#)

[A woman and her child play on a Google sign at the World Artificial Intelligence Conference (WAIC) in Shanghai on September 26, 2018. (Photo by Johannes EISELE / AFP) (Photo credit should read JOHANNES EISELE/AFP/Getty Images)](#)

[I Quit Google Over Its Censored Chinese Search Engine. The Company Needs to Clarify Its Position on Human Rights.](#)

[Google Plans to Launch Censored Search Engine in China, Leaked Documents Reveal](#)

Contact the author: