

At Chinese Universities There's a Fee for 'Free'

November 18, 2010

Google's recent [whitepaper](#) [1] on censorship as a trade barrier has brought [renewed attention](#) [2] to the global economic impact of policies that curtail the free flow of information, especially those policies that have emanated from the Chinese government. But [reports](#) [3] that describe China's censorship regime have failed to mention an important – and often ignored – gear in China's machine of information control, one that has huge implications for governments, business, and academics alike and that strikes at the heart of our notion of “free flows of information”: For many university students in China, information from abroad is, quite literally, not free.

In 2003, the China Education and Research Network (CERNET), through which all Chinese universities connect to the Internet, instituted a data fee for access to internationally hosted websites. According to the regulation, the fee was implemented to promote the growth of domestic web content. “In order to encourage domestic communications,” the [document](#) [4] reads in Chinese, “a fee for international data downloads will be instituted while domestic data downloads will be free.”

While this policy has been [implemented inconsistently](#) [5] across institutions, many Chinese universities pass the “international data download fee” onto users of the network, the majority of whom are students of limited means. For example, the prestigious [Peking University](#) [6], [Tsinghua University](#) [7], and [Fudan University](#) [8] charge students for access to international websites, as do lesser-known universities such as the [Fujian University of Technology](#) [9], [Jilin University](#) [10], and [Three Gorges University](#) [11] (to name just a few).

The international data download fee does not apply to every foreign website: A small number of them can also be accessed free of charge. Each month, CERNET [announces](#) [12] a few newly white-listed IP addresses, usually corresponding to the websites of research services like [JSTOR](#) [13] and [Lexis Nexis](#) [14]; Google was [white-listed in 2005](#) [15]. But visiting other news and information portals – like [The New York Times](#) [16], [Wikipedia](#) [17], [The Journal of Infectious Diseases](#) [18], or even [international databases of graduate theses](#) [19] – incurs a long-distance fee. While China is not the only country where international and domestic bandwidth are sometimes priced differently – [South African ISPs](#) [20], for example, have [long](#) [21] [used](#) [22] tiered pricing to ration the country's scarce international bandwidth – China is rare in instituting a pricing structure whose *prima facie* purpose is the promotion of domestic business over foreign competitors.

You can call it 'data protectionism.'

Data protectionism also has implications that extend beyond the commercial. For a government that has long feared politically aware students, pay-per-view access to foreign ideas and discourse serves as a convenient way to [“prevent the infiltration of harmful information \[via the Internet\] from overseas”](#) [23] while also allowing the government to avoid accusations of widespread censorship. But *de jure* censorship or not, data protectionism has a chilling effect on access to information. As China's future business, government, and thought leaders develop research, entertainment, and communication habits that will last long after they leave academia, many are acclimating to a pseudo “intra-net,” one devoid of much of the world's knowledge.

Meanwhile, data protectionism has a systemic impact on Chinese institutions. For China's expanding academy, the potential to contribute to global knowledge is curtailed by a cost structure that discourages utilization of global resources; some [university](#) [7] [libraries](#) [24] even classify research databases and websites by whether or not the services are subject to the international data download fee. Data protectionism hurts those Chinese students who are hoping to enter an international workforce; they must compete with foreigners who have long had the world's information at their fingertips, without additional economic barriers.

For American businesses – both e-commerce companies and information services – data protectionism translates into lost potential customers. That is, unless these businesses decide to set up websites within China’s walls and to play by China’s rules. This means, among other things, monitoring hosted content and engaging in self-censorship: The [national telecommunications law](#) [25] prohibits websites from hosting or facilitating distribution of a wide range of material, including that which “harms the national interest” or “undermines social stability.” Non-compliant companies risk [losing their website and their business license](#) [26]. In other words, getting around data protectionism (and other impediments to foreign websites imposed by China) likely requires acquiescing to censorship demands.

Tiered pricing may be a necessary – though unfortunate – policy choice in nations with severe bandwidth limitations. But in China, data protectionism appears to have been implemented specifically to exclude international voices. Like more traditional forms of censorship, data protectionism restricts the unique potential of the Internet to facilitate the free flow of information and the spread of ideas across boundaries. It presents a barrier to international trade and creates a problematic precedent as other regimes, like Vietnam and Iran, look to China for tips on information control. So as the Department of Commerce [continues to investigate](#) [27] barriers to the information economy, we urge them to consider the impact of data protectionism and the importance of ensuring that global flows of information remain free.

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- [1] <http://googlepublicpolicy.blogspot.com/2010/11/promoting-free-trade-for-internet.html>
- [2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/17/technology/17google.html?src=mv>
- [3] <http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/news/2010/11/google-net-censorship-amounts-to-undeclared-trade-war.ars>
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- [20] http://www.telkom.co.za/about_us/mediacentre/press_release/articles/2010/article_1022.html
- [21] <http://www.islabs.co.za/ideas/index-all-local-only-websites-and-ftp-servers>
- [22] <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/19849962/BROADBAND-ADSL>

- [23] <http://www.hrichina.org/public/contents/article?revision%5fid=175119&item%5fid=175084>
- [24] <http://lib.hyit.edu.cn/dy/xszd/200711/131.html>
- [25] http://news.xinhuanet.com/tech/2004-05/09/content_4662723.htm
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