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## **Take action! Urge Microsoft not to assist human rights abuses**

Internet companies have an invaluable role to play in the realization of freedom of expression and information. But in China, Microsoft, Google and Yahoo are aiding repression, censorship, and violation of fundamental freedoms. Act now to put pressure on these companies to protect freedom of information and expression.

In December 2005 Microsoft cooperated with Chinese authorities to shut down the controversial blog of Zhao Jing (Michael Anti), a Beijing-based researcher for the *New York Times*, and an active critic of censorship in China.

The blog, which was hosted on servers located in the United States, was removed and was therefore censored not only in China but globally. Reacting to criticism, Microsoft claims to have implemented a new set of standards to ensure that they will only remove blogs when they receive formal legal notice from the Chinese government and that access will only be denied to users in China.

Microsoft's search engine MSN China filters the results of searches for politically sensitive terms, displaying a message in Chinese which states 'Certain content was removed from the results of this search'. Searches undertaken in June 2006 by AI produced this message for the words 'Falun Gong', 'Tibet Independence' and 'June 4' (the date of the Tiananmen Square massacre).

Furthermore, Microsoft has admitted that it responds to directions from the Chinese government by restricting users of MSN Spaces from using certain terms in their account name, space name, space sub-title or in photo captions. At the same time the company asserts that MSN Spaces do not filter blog content in any way. Amnesty International considers this claim to be at odds with the facts.

When Microsoft launched MSN Spaces in China in June 2005, attempts to create blogs with words including 'democracy', 'human rights' and 'freedom of expression' were blocked, producing the following error message (in Chinese): 'You must enter a title for your space. The title must not contain prohibited language, such as profanity. Please type a different title.' Tests by AI carried out in June 2006 demonstrated continued blocking of certain terms including 'Tiananmen incident' in the title of blogs.

As a result of such actions, Microsoft users in China are denied the ability to access the full range of information available internationally on human rights topics, including via websites and web pages of Amnesty International and other human rights organizations.

**Take action!** Urge Microsoft to stop assisting human rights abuses – in China and around the world.

These examples from China are only the latest examples of Microsoft's assistance to Government human rights abuse. In 2004, Microsoft released confidential information about nuclear whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu without his knowledge or consent to the Israeli authorities. A few months previously Vanunu had completed an 18-year prison sentence for exposing information relating to Israel's nuclear capabilities in the UK-based newspaper *Sunday Times*. Information handed over by Microsoft was initially used to prosecute Vanunu for his contacts with foreign media, in violation of the ban on contacting foreigners imposed on Vanunu by the Israeli authorities. These restrictions, which are themselves a violation of human rights, have just been extended for a further year. Though the judge in the ongoing Vanunu trial has now agreed not to use the information supplied by Microsoft, the information is in the hands of the Israeli authorities and could be used to continue to restrict his freedom and harass him further.

## Sample letter

Dear Mr. Gates:

I am alarmed that in the pursuit of new and lucrative markets, your company is contributing to human rights violations, in particular abuses to freedom of expression and information. This issue is especially evident in China. As a result, websites and web pages dealing with human rights, including many of those of Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, are inaccessible to internet users in China.

I was extremely disturbed by reports that Microsoft cooperated with Chinese authorities to shut down the controversial blog of Zhao Jing, a Beijing-based researcher for the New York Times. I am also concerned that MSN China filters the results of searches for politically sensitive terms and that MSN Spaces prevents users from using certain terms in their blogs.

Although I acknowledge the new policy recently adopted by Microsoft purportedly to address some of these issues, I remain deeply distressed by your company's evident willingness to support censorship.

The fact that the company acts in compliance with restrictive domestic law does not exempt it from its international human rights responsibilities if complying with such request contributes to human rights violations.

Internet companies have an invaluable role to play in the realization of freedom of expression and information – it shocks me that Microsoft would compromise this goal in pursuit of profit. Therefore I urge Microsoft to:

- Make publicly available all agreements between the company and the Chinese government with implications for censorship of information
- Put pressure on the Chinese government to remove blockages of terms included in MSN spaces and ensure the Chinese public have uninhibited access to the full range of information available on the Web in line with international standards on freedom of information and freedom of expression.
- Develop an explicit human rights policy, that states the company's support for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and complies with the principles articulated in the UN Norms for Business. In this light, make clear to the Chinese authorities as well as to the global community, that Microsoft is not willing to assist Governments in implementing their systems of internet censorship, or to provide information directed at restricting freedom of expression.

Thank you for your consideration of these demands.

Sincerely,

William H. Gates, Chairman  
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If you are a MSN customer, visit their support webpage at: <http://support.msn.com/>  
Click on MSN Search or MSN Spaces Abuses to send them a complaint about their active censorship of these products.

## Related documents

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGASA170072002>

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/business/resources.html>

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