

The internet in China

Bashing Baidu

State television fires on China's Google

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LAST year Google remembered its motto (“Don’t be evil”) and stopped co-operating with China’s censors. Since then, Google has found it much harder to do business in mainland China. The chief beneficiary was Baidu, China’s leading search engine. Its share of internet searches, already vast, grew to a dominant 75%.

Robin Li, Baidu’s Chinese-born, American-educated co-founder, is only 42 but one of China’s richest men. That makes him a target, despite his scrupulous efforts not to upset the ruling Communist Party. Since August 14th Baidu has been the subject of a series of damning investigative reports on CCTV, the main state-run broadcaster. Using undercover cameras, CCTV exposed Baidu employees apparently helping firms circumvent laws that bar unlicensed companies from advertising online. The reports also suggested that the lack of transparency in Baidu’s advertising system could lead advertisers to overpay. A Baidu spokesman refused to comment.

It was not the first time that CCTV has bashed Baidu. Reports in 2008 made similar allegations, prompting Baidu to apologise publicly. The latest attacks go further, though. It might seem a bit rich for the state broadcaster of a secretive, authoritarian country to chide Baidu for murkiness. And it certainly surprises some China-watchers. Baidu has done all it can to comply with the government’s whims. It is also a national champion: its shares are listed on New York’s NASDAQ exchange, and foreigners can’t get enough of them.

So what might the criticism signify? Is CCTV attacking Baidu for political reasons, or commercial ones? CCTV has a search engine, too, which hardly anyone uses. So do two other big government-run media outfits—the *People’s Daily* newspaper and the Xinhua news agency. CCTV, though state-run, is not just a propaganda outfit. It is also expected to make money through advertising (and it does). It must be tempting to nobble a rival.

That no other state-run media outlets carried stories on Baidu suggests this is not a government-orchestrated campaign against the company or the internet more generally. However, the Communist Party is wary of the influence of private internet companies, and no doubt keen to see that Baidu doesn’t get too big for its boots.

The party was slow to grasp how big the internet was going to be in China, and it missed its chance to own the digital commanding heights. So it tries to control them indirectly. On August 23rd, for example, Beijing’s Communist Party chief paid a friendly visit to the offices of China’s biggest microblogging site, Sina Corp’s Weibo, and suggested that it “absolutely put an end to fake and misleading information”. Sina Corp, a private firm, deletes postings that annoy the party within hours. Not quick enough, said the party chief.

Perhaps the most likely motive for CCTV’s attacks on Baidu is that its journalists are trying to do their jobs. Public anger about toxic food, corporate mismanagement and official corruption has

emboldened reporters. Journalists at CCTV led the extensive media coverage of a high-speed-rail crash at Wenzhou in July that killed 40 people, until the censors curbed them.

Such reporting embarrasses the party, which likes to boast that China builds big infrastructure projects faster and better than anyone else. The CCTV attack on Baidu could reflect a decision to go after a less protected target. Or not. This being China, no one knows for sure.