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Loop-hole lets 'Freedom' ring in Chinese MSN blogs

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MSN came under fire last week for releasing a Chinese-language version of its Spaces blog-hosting service that bans certain words from being used in blog titles, like "democracy" and "freedom." Critics complained that Microsoft was kowtowing to the Chinese government by censoring the blogs. On Tuesday cyber rights activist Bennett Haselton publicized a loophole that will allow Chinese bloggers to evade the built-in censorship by registering the blog on the MSN Web site in English. After registering for an English interface, the blogger can switch the language to Chinese and avoid the filter, Haselton says. He also recommends that Chinese bloggers use an alias to register a hotmail address, which is needed to access MSN Spaces, to avoid having the blog traced back to them. Haselton's Peacemakers advocacy group offers a program called the Circumventor, which people can use to get around what he calls the "Great Firewall of China," by hosting content on computers located outside the country. Another more recent program encourages people to adopt a Chinese blog. MSN declined to comment on the matter.

MSN isn't alone in wimping out. Google and Yahoo also have been criticized for acquiescing to restrictive Chinese online regulations. Haselton is philosophic on the matter. "It's easy to pontificate about how companies shouldn't cave in to Chinese censors, but the Chinese people themselves might prefer to have a censored version of the service over having no service at all," he wrote in an e-mail exchange. "I think it's hard for any company to be idealistic when they see a potential market of 100 million users. But it may end up being a one-two punch--big companies help Internet technology flourish in China by promising to censor themselves, and then smaller groups create technology that allows Chinese users to circumvent that censorship."

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About the author



Elinor Mills covers search and portal Web sites including Google, Yahoo and MSN, and Internet media.

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