

Microsoft considers China policy

By Darren Waters
Technology editor, BBC News website, Athens

A senior executive for Microsoft has said the firm could pull out of non-democratic countries such as China.

Fred Tipson, senior policy counsel for the computer giant, said concerns over the repressive regime might force it to reconsider its business in China.

"Things are getting bad... and perhaps we have to look again at our presence there," he told a conference in Athens.

"We have to decide if the persecuting of bloggers reaches a point that it's unacceptable to do business there."

"We try to define those levels and the trends are not good there at the moment. It's a moving target."

Selling to China

Earlier in the day, speaking at the Internet Governance Forum, Mr Tipson had defended the work Microsoft was doing in China.

At a session about openness he denied that some big businesses were "colluding" with certain governments.

He was joined in the debate by Art Reilly, senior director at Cisco Systems.

I don't think we should make corporations responsible for securing our freedoms.
Anriette Esterhuysen, Executive director APC

As the only two representatives of major business sat on the panel, they were the focus of accusations from some delegates that the companies were not doing all they could to enable freedom of expression.

Cisco was attacked at the forum for selling equipment to police in China, while Microsoft has been criticised for allegedly censoring blogs in the country.

Mr Tipson said: "We are maximising access to information to users in governments that Amnesty is targeting for its criticism.

"It's those users we have to keep our focus on."

Mr Reilly, senior director of strategic technology policy at Cisco was asked if the firm had any ethical problems with an alleged sale of router equipment to the Chinese police.

Human rights activists are concerned that the technology is being misused by some governments to track the online activities of people and to filter dissident comment.

He said: "We do not sell a different product in one country to another.

"It is essential that there are security and network management capabilities in a network that enable the free flow of information - it is the same technology used by parents and libraries to prevent children from accessing pornography for example."

He added: "We are not colluding with any country to do any specific filtering."

He said that he was not familiar with the sale of "any product to any particular entity in China".

Mr Tipson said it was a condition of companies to abide by the local laws in countries with whom they do business.

Mr Reilly said that there had been a "substantial increase in use and ability for information to flow in China" since Cisco entered the Chinese market in 1994.

There are now 120 million people online in China, up from 80,000 in 1994.

Advancing human rights

"The economic value in the internet is driving growth and development in educational opportunities [in China]," said Mr Tipson.

"Openness is often too segmented too narrowly into a discussion around freedom of speech," he added.

Mr Tipson said it was "critical not to portray the internet as a threat to governments".

"The internet is transforming the political culture of China. There is no question about it."

Fellow panellist, Anriette Esterhuysen, executive director of professional body APC, said: "I don't think we should make corporations responsible for securing our freedoms."

She said governments should be enforcing ethical policies on companies that are doing business with foreign governments.

There was also a feeling expressed by some that the internet was making progress as a tool for advancing human rights.

Andrew Puddephatt, who has worked for various human rights organisations, said: "Where access exists you can definitely get information and ideas on the net that you cannot get on conventional media. That is progress."

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