

Zuckerberg's evil Meta considered sharing user data with China

Story by Naomi Nix

Meta was willing to go to extreme lengths to censor content and shut down political dissent in a failed attempt to win the approval of the Chinese Communist Party and bring Facebook to millions of internet users in China, according to a new whistleblower complaint from a former global policy director at the company.

The complaint by Sarah Wynn-Williams, who worked on a team handling China policy, alleges that the social media giant so desperately wanted to enter the lucrative China market that it was willing to allow the ruling party to oversee all social media content appearing in the country and quash dissenting opinions.

Meta, then called Facebook, developed a censorship system for China in 2015 and planned to install a "chief editor" who would decide what content to remove and could shut down the entire site during times of "social unrest," according to a copy of the 78-page complaint exclusively seen by The Washington Post.

Meta chief executive Mark Zuckerberg also agreed to crack down on the account of a high-profile Chinese dissident living in the United States following pressure from a high-ranking Chinese official the company hoped would help them enter China, according to the complaint, which was filed in April to the Securities and Exchange Commission.

When asked about its efforts to enter China, Meta executives repeatedly "stonewalled and provided nonresponsive or misleading information" to investors and American regulators, according to the complaint.

Wynn-Williams bolstered her SEC complaint with internal Meta documents about the company's plans, which were reviewed by The Post. Wynn-Williams, who was fired from her job in 2017, is also scheduled to release a memoir this week

documenting her time at the company, titled “Careless People: A Story of Where I Used to Work.”

Chinese President Xi Jinping, center, talks with Zuckerberg, with Lu Wei, China's internet czar, at left, in 2015. © Ted S. Warren/AP

According to a memo in the complaint, Meta leaders faced aggressive pressure by Chinese government officials to host Chinese users’ data to local data centers, which Wynn-Williams alleges would have made it easier for the Chinese Communist Party to covertly obtain the personal information of its citizens.

“In countries with authoritarian leanings like China, stringent government controls over data flows are twisted into tools of censorship, surveillance, and repression,” Katitza Rodriguez, the Electronic Frontier Foundation’s policy director for global privacy, said in a statement.

“Once data is stored locally, companies are pressured to comply with Beijing’s demands or risk losing access to Chinese consumers.”

For years, Meta has cast China as a foe to a free global internet. In a 2019 Georgetown University talk, Zuckerberg warned that China was “exporting their vision of the internet to other countries.” The next year, then-vice president of global affairs Nick Clegg bemoaned in a Post op-ed that governments were following China’s lead to wall off the internet “from the rest of the world.”

Meta has also funded a nonprofit, American Edge, that has run campaigns criticizing China and TikTok, the Chinese-owned social media app.

The company’s anti-China commentary has intensified since DeepSeek’s AI assistant catapulted to the top of app stores in January, with the China-based company boasting that its AI technology was developed at a fraction of the cost of competitors from Meta and OpenAI.

In a Threads post, Meta’s chief global affairs officer, Joel Kaplan, wrote that the company would work with “the Administration to keep the US at the cutting edge of AI and make sure the global AI standard is based on our shared values, not China’s.” Zuckerberg noted in January that the company would partner with President Donald Trump to “push back on governments around the world that are

going after American companies and pushing to censor more,” adding that “China has censored our apps from even working in the country.”

“One of the top priorities for President Trump is the West winning this critical [AI] race and yet for many years Meta has been working hand in glove with the Chinese Communist Party, briefing them on the latest technological developments and lying about it,” said Wynn-Williams, who is now a technology policy consultant. “People deserve to know the truth.”

Meta spokesman Andy Stone Stone said in a statement that it was “no secret” the company was interested in operating in China.

“This was widely reported beginning a decade ago,” he said. “We ultimately opted not to go through with the ideas we’d explored, which Mark Zuckerberg announced in 2019.”

‘Project Aldrin’

Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg delivers a speech in Beijing in 2013. © Andy Wong/AP

A decade ago, Meta saw China as an unconquered and highly lucrative opportunity, with millions of untapped internet users — more than existed in the American market by some estimates. Chinese sellers were already buying scores of ads on Facebook through resellers to target customers outside the country, according to Wynn-Williams. Zuckerberg told top executives including COO Sheryl Sandberg and former communications and public policy head Elliot Schrage that bringing Facebook to China would fulfill the company’s mission of connecting the world.

“If we want to have more of our services available in China in 3 years, I think we need to start intensively working on this now,” he wrote in a 2014 email contained in the complaint.

Zuckerberg had publicly demonstrated his interest in the country. The CEO wrote a blurb for CCP Secretary Xi Jinping’s book, “The Governance of China,” and displayed a copy on his desk when China’s then-deputy head of the

propaganda department of the ruling party, Lu Wei, visited him. Zuckerberg also gave a 20-minute speech in Mandarin to university students and asked Xi, by then the leader, to give his unborn baby daughter an honorary Chinese name, according to a New York Times report.

The complaint alleges that behind the scenes, Zuckerberg assembled a “China team” in 2014 to develop a version of its services that could be legally offered in China — a project code-named “Project Aldrin” after the astronaut Buzz Aldrin, who landed the first manned spacecraft on the moon.

Meta was eager to demonstrate its willingness to cater to the demands of the Chinese Communist Party. In July 2014, Meta employees prepared a draft letter for Zuckerberg to send to Lu, saying the company had already worked with the Chinese Consulate in San Francisco to “take down terrorist sites that are potentially dangerous for China” and offering “to work more closely with all your embassies or Consulates around the world,” according to an email contained in the complaint. A spokesperson for the consulate said in a statement that it was “not aware of the situation.”

To strengthen their negotiating power, Meta leaders also considered bending their long-standing privacy rules for the benefit of the Chinese government. In August 2014, members of Meta’s privacy team discussed whether to confirm to the Irish data protection commissioner that Hong Kong users would still be afforded the same privacy protections as users in the United States and the European Union, according to the documents. Days after meeting with Meta’s China negotiating team, the privacy team was willing to weaken Hong Kong users’ rights, according to an email exchange contained in the complaint.

“In exchange for the ability to establish operations in China, FB will agree to grant the Chinese government access to Chinese users’ data — including Hongkongese users’ data,” one privacy policy staffer wrote.

A photo of Zuckerberg jogging in downtown Beijing’s notorious smog in 2016 prompted a torrent of astonishment, mockery and amusement on Chinese social media.© Ng Han Guan/AP

By 2015, Meta and Chinese officials started negotiating a more detailed plan for the company to operate in China later that year, according to the complaint.

Under one iteration of the proposed agreement, Hony Capital, a Chinese private-equity firm, would be responsible for reviewing and deciding whether content posted by China-based users, including foreigners traveling to the country, was “consistent with applicable law,” according to a copy of the proposal sent to Lu.

To aid the effort, Meta built a censorship system specially designed for China to review including the ability to automatically detect restricted terms and popular content on Facebook, according to the complaint. The company agreed to hire at least 300 content moderators to support the system, the documents show.

Following a review of the system with the Cyberspace Administration of China, government officials expressed concern that the U.S. government would be able to access Chinese users’ data stored outside the country, the documents show.

In 2015, Lu was removed from his post and was subsequently sentenced to 14 years in prison over bribery charges.

Despite losing one of its chief regulatory promoters in the country, Meta continued to pursue the China market. In 2017, Meta covertly launched a handful of social apps under the name of a China-based company created by one of its employees, according to the complaint.

That same year, Meta restricted the account of Guo Wengui, a wealthy Chinese businessman and critic of the Chinese government, after Zhao Zeliang, a top internet regulator in the country, suggested taking action could demonstrate the company’s willingness to “address mutual interests,” according to the complaint.

“If there is nothing we can do [about Wengui’s account], there will be an impact on our cooperation,” Meta officials concluded according to internal notes about a meeting contained in the complaint. Later that year, Meta took down a page affiliated with Wengui and restricted his account, citing violations of its content rules.

By 2019, Meta had abandoned its China ambitions just as the Trump administration was waging a fierce battle against China over trade.

Now, Meta aims to benefit from Washington's aggressive stance on China. Zuckerberg told employees during a companywide meeting this year that its business would be helped if China-based TikTok ends up being banned in the United States.

"They are one of our main competitors," said Zuckerberg, according to a recording of the meeting heard by The Post. "That's a card we get to turn to."