

Google Earth increasingly compliant with censorship requests: US intelligence report

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Google has becoming increasingly compliant to government requests to block purportedly sensitive information -- including images of Tibet, military installations and even a General Electric research plant -- according to a new report prepared by the Open Source Center for the Bush Administration's Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell and reports circulated online about areas Google has blocked or blurred.



The research report was not approved for public release but was leaked to *Secrecy News* ([view pdf](#)). It is prepared entirely on public information -- so called "open source" intelligence. But it paints a picture of an increasingly pliant global communications juggernaut, willing to do business with authoritarian

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regimes and US government agencies at the expense of transparency.

China, for instance, has an "online geographical information security management and coordination group" which regularly browses online mapping sites.

"When problems are discovered, they are either raised with Google's China headquarters or through diplomatic channels," the report says.

"Google has been very cooperative in the course of communications," a Chinese spokesman remarked.

Among the areas Google blurs out in China includes, not surprisingly, Tibet/Xinjiang Province. Other areas of Asia that have been clouded include northern areas of Pakistan -- it's unknown why or who might have requested the omission.

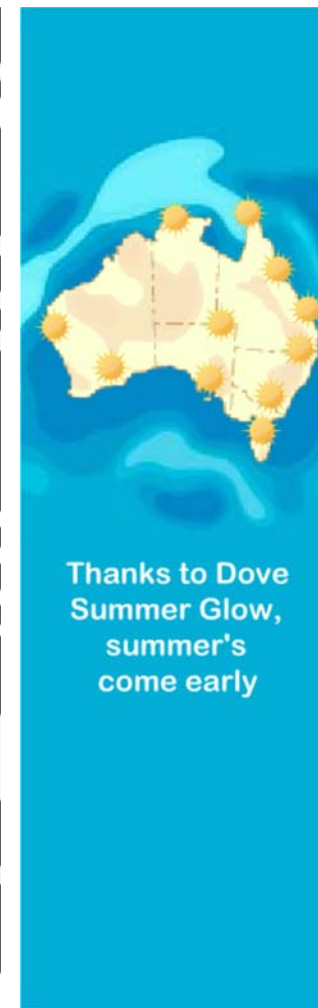
Google also censors certain sites in India. India may also be taking measures to hide their facilities from satellites. According to the report, "India's army announced that it had taken evasive measures against the "intrusive photographs of strategic installations."

Google sometimes uses older images to replace existing ones to erase, say, the movement of troops in Iraq. After a January 2007 report that terrorists were attacking British bases based on Google Earth imagery, Google replaced images of these sites with photographs taken before the war. The report also claims that al Qaeda militants used Google Earth to target oil facilities in Yemen.

They also blotted out a British eavesdropping base and Trident nuclear facilities in Scotland.

Myriad nuclear power plants and military installations have been blurred out. For a partial list, see IT Security's "[51 Things You Aren't Allowed to See on Google Maps.](#)"

General Electric's main plant missing





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Think countries are the only ones benefiting from Google's largesse?

* General Electric World Research Laboratories and General Electric Main Plant in Schenectady, NY are blocked in Google, according to [IT Security](#). The multibillion-dollar US company's website says the research component hosts more than 3,000 of "the best and brightest researchers spread out at four multi-disciplinary facilities around the world."

* William Hurt's Home: This actor's home outside of Paris is hazy.

* Playland Amusement Park in Rye, NY: Google will not let you in on the fun at this amusement park, which boasts arcade games and 45 major rides.

Given that the US intelligence report was prepared only from open sources, it seems likely that Google has complied with other requests to censor or blur out information. The US report cites no instances of the US asking for changes in Google's database, though IT security cites dozens of instances where the company has blocked out viewing access to US military sites -- including the White House.

Some countries are even developing Google Earths of their own in response to the threat of satellite transparency. Digital Thailand is building one; India's Space Research Organization plans another in late 2008, and China too plans "China Earth, Google China, or Images China," that will supposedly make its debut in 2009.

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