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Facebook and Baidu - Take That Google



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The rumors of a deep partnership between Facebook and Baidu, the Google of China, are all over the trades this week. The purpose would be to help establish Facebook's footprint in China, the largest population of socially and digitally connected consumers in the world.

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Many are already critical of this approach by Facebook. Why would the social giant choose a company famous for search instead of one of the more established social platforms like Qzone/Pengyou, RenRen or even Sina's Weibo (China's version of Twitter)? These networks are growing, and already have proven histories of compliance with the Chinese government's strict censorship laws. Facebook enters the equation with many hurdles to overcome, the biggest of which, attracting users, can't easily be solved by partnering with a world-class search company.

Furthermore, many are critical in general of Baidu who exists in a world that has all but removed Google from its ecosystem. While they've tried to establish relationships with the likes of Microsoft for English search results and American content companies like Sony and Warner to help minimize the perception that they help power the illegal download business in China, they haven't solved all of their own very daunting problems. Unlike Google, they do not have a very large footprint in email to give them a launch pad for a new social service, and also unlike Google they are strictly monitored by the Chinese government to prevent any unregulated or inappropriate search results. Many Chinese users mourned the

loss of Google in China in early 2010, indicating that some segment of the Chinese audience may not respond well to a social network associated with the government-endorsed search engine.

But take a step back from social media as the endgame and you start to see that this partnership could actually make perfect sense for Facebook for many reasons.

The first and most important factor is that today Baidu commands 75+ percent of all keyword searches in China, and they are still growing. Baidu is expected to be bigger than Yahoo on a worldwide scale within one year, with a global footprint that will rival or exceed Google's footprint in its key markets, North America and Europe. And everything that Baidu does is just fine with China. Imagine Facebook using Baidu's compliance technology to put them immediately into the good graces of the Chinese government. There's no one better to help Facebook make the transition from a "freedom of speech" platform to a "near freedom of speech platform" than a lightning-fast search giant that's already tackled Chinese censorship restrictions.

Another reason this partnership makes sense is the fact that Baidu is actually much more than just a powerful search engine. For one, they have developed an advanced understanding of the Chinese language(s), making them well-suited to help Facebook build effectively translated versions of all their products. Baidu also runs the Chinese version of Wikipedia (Baidu Encyclopedia), giving them a deep

breadth of social content and the ability to improve the organic appearance of a Chinese version of Facebook within their own engine. They've also developed a new Box Computing platform that can deliver much richer content into a user's search box, including things like social games and applications; more leverage to help Facebook establish their user-base in China.

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