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# Google + China: Q-and-A with Mara Hvistendahl

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*For more insight into the "Google + China" story, we turned to Mara Hvistendahl, a Shanghai-based journalist who has written on a broad range of China-related topics. Her work includes an exploration of "The Great Forgetting: 20 Years After Tiananmen Square" in The Chronicle of Higher Education, as well as "Conscience of a Nationalist" for The New Republic; additionally, last year, Shanghai Scrapinterviewed Hvistendahl about the topic of China's "patriotic" hackers.*

*Below is a short Q-and-A that Jeff Wasserstrom conducted with Hvistendahl via e-mail.*

**JW: Since I know you've tracked issues relating to hacking and the Chinese Internet in general for some time, can you think of 2 or 3 things that *China Beat* readers could read to help them put the current headlines relating to Google into perspective?**

**MH:** First, a lot of coverage has pointed out that Google has a minority of the market in China, and that's true. But the people who use Google and Gmail tend to be among China's elite – academics, businesspeople, and other professionals. (After all, there are many reasons to prefer uncensored search engines and encrypted e-mail that have nothing to do with human rights.) These people don't always have the VPNs necessary to bypass the Great Firewall, and Google's withdrawal would put the Chinese government in an awkward position with this group. They have gotten used to living without Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter, but losing Google would be different.

Then again, people have underestimated the Chinese government before.

Second, many Westerners imagine Chinese hacking as the work of some central government cyber-bureau. I looked into this in [a feature I wrote for Popular Science](#) last year, and the truth is that many cyber-battles are fought by independent hackers scattered across China. They number at least 400,000, according to one conservative estimate – enough to hold [a conference](#) in Beijing every October. They have a nationalistic zeal that misfit American hackers lack. And their relationship with the Chinese government is fluid.

Incidentally, one Chinese hacker I trailed for the Popular Science piece briefly worked for Google after leaving China. He is now at another American institution, and I have no evidence that he has ever hacked for the Chinese government, or that he continues to hack. But it's an interesting link.

**JW: If you could ask the head of Google one question and get a straight answer to it, what would that be?**

**MH:** Why? Why make this announcement now? Businesspeople I've spoken with seem genuinely stumped. Is this really about staying true to the company motto? Or is it a calculated decision directed at preserving Google's global image?

Also, what's up with [changing the Google.cn logo](#) to the [Four Great Invention](#) today?

**JW: When you are wrestling with topics like this, what are the first two sites you go to online?**

**MH:** [The Dark Visitor](#) This the obsessive quest of one man – intelligence analyst Scott Henderson – to explain how Chinese hackers operate. Scott's work figured prominently in my Popular Science article.

[China Digital Times](#) Though probably already familiar to your readers, this remains a great source for round-ups of breaking China news, especially on tech issues.

**JW: I've heard you are working on a book. Since we've pointed our readers to articles you've done in venues like the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *New Republic*, I think**

**some of them would be very interested in seeing that longer work when it comes out. Can you tell us any details about the topic, the publisher, and when it is due out?**

**MH:** My book is called *The X-Y Problem*, and it's a narrative nonfiction work about sex selection and gender imbalance in Asia and Eastern Europe. It will be published in 2011 by [Public Affairs](#).

The book grew out of [a feature I wrote](#) for *Virginia Quarterly Review* on China's sex-ratio imbalance. I reported the piece in a Jiangsu province county where the sex ratio at birth is 152 boys born for every 100 girls, according to recent Family Planning Commission data. Later I expanded my research to India, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Caucasus countries.

Most journalism on this topic tends to focus on the cultural traditions that encourage son preference. I instead emphasize the link between sex-ratio imbalance and economic development – and connect what's happening in Asia to new sex selection technologies in the West. I also look at the pernicious side-effects of tens of millions of "surplus" males: an increase in international marriage brokering, sex trafficking, and other forms of instability.

**Tags:** [Google](#)