



January 28, 2022

**Subject: Censorship by Apple**

Dear Chair Durbin, Ranking Member Grassley, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

As the Committee considers legislation to address the power of Big Tech, we write to share our research and longstanding concerns regarding Apple’s censorship on behalf of the People's Republic of China and other repressive regimes.

GreatFire, an organization dedicated to fighting internet censorship, started monitoring Apple’s censorship in November 2013, when Apple decided to remove our “FreeWeibo” application from the Chinese App Store.<sup>1</sup> Apple did not even wait for the intervention of any Chinese judicial authority to determine if our app had actually broken any Chinese law. It collaborated with the Chinese authorities and dealt with our app the same way it has continued to deal with many more apps: by enforcing arbitrary and politically motivated censorship to ensure its financial interests.

In 2019, we launched **AppleCensorship.com**, a website monitoring Apple’s removal of apps on its App Stores around the world. Over the last three years, we have uncovered numerous cases of app removals, particularly in China, where Apple collaborates with the Chinese authorities by enforcing arbitrary and politically motivated censorship to protect its financial interests.

Our research<sup>2</sup> has produced the following key findings:

- Apple proactively removes apps that allow Chinese citizens to circumvent censorship, all without the need for the authorities to intervene. None of the top 100 “virtual private network services” (VPNs) in the United States App Store are available in China.
- In October 2019, during the Hong Kong protests violently suppressed by the police, Apple removed HKmap.live, an app used by protesters to report aggressive police movements and the use of tear gas.<sup>3</sup>
- AppleCensorship.com counts 191 “News” apps currently unavailable in China’s App Store. The New York Times app was removed in January 2017. Quartz was removed during the Hong Kong protests in 2019.
- More than 26% of all apps tested were found to be unavailable in China, when the

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<sup>1</sup> Our app was republishing censored posts from Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter.

<sup>2</sup> <https://applecensorship.com/censored-on-the-app-store-new-report-shows-the-staggering-scale-of-app-censorship-by-apple/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/apple-hkmap-live-app-hong-kong-china-police-protesters-used-target-ambush-police-2019-10-10/>

average for other countries is around 11% and when less than 5% of all apps that we tested in the U.S. App Store were unavailable.

- A study that we conducted with Tibetan human rights groups and released in June 2019 revealed that at least 29 Tibetan-themed apps dealing with news, religious study, tourism and even games are being censored by Apple.<sup>4</sup>
- In September 2021, we detected the removal of Bible and Quran apps in China.
- In June 2020, Apple removed two podcast apps, Pocket Casts and Castro, after the developers refused to censor content on their platforms.
- Two RSS reader apps, Reeder and Fiery Feeds, were removed in September 2020 for content deemed “illegal in China”.

Apple’s censorship is not limited to China and affects all countries where Apple operates:

- In November 2021, Apple’s removed the “Smart Voting” app developed by the team associated with Russian political opposition leader Alexei Navalny. The app, which informed its users about candidates for the Parliamentary elections and their political affiliation, was removed just as polls opened. Apple went further by contacting private messaging app Telegram to request the removal of content (i.e. a chat bot) related to Navalny’s campaign. Telegram published a statement condemning the move but stating it had to comply with Apple in order to avoid being removed from the App Store.
- In June 2021, our research on LGBTQ+ related apps revealed that, out of approximately 150 LGBTQ+ apps identified, 61 apps were partially unavailable. China came second in terms of unavailability, with 27 LGBTQ+ apps unavailable in the country, just behind Saudi Arabia (28 apps unavailable) and before United Arab Emirates (25 apps unavailable). In total, 1377 instances of LGBTQ+ app’s unavailability were found in 152 countries (only Australia’s, Canada’s and US’ App Store contained all the tested apps).<sup>5</sup>
- In addition to targeted removal, that is to say removals of apps in the App Store of the requesting country, which result from alleged “legal violations”, Apple also responds to governments’ requests made on the basis of alleged violations of Apple’s own “Platform Policy”. Such takedown requests, mostly originating from authoritarian regimes like China and Russia, led to approximately 30,000 removals in 175 countries between January 2019 and December 2020.

The list of compromises by Apple over the last five years is not limited to censorship on the App Store. For example, Apple’s own podcasting app remains available in China, as Apple proactively removes “sensitive” podcasts.<sup>6</sup> Although there are too many compromises that threaten human rights to be fully listed here, in 2021 only, Apple:

- facilitated access by the Chinese authorities to iCloud data for Chinese users;

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<sup>4</sup> <https://en.greatfire.org/blog/2019/jun/apple-censoring-tibetan-information-china>

<sup>5</sup> <https://applecensorship.com/apple-is-enabling-censorship-of-lgbtq-apps-in-152-countries-new-report-finds/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://techcrunch.com/2019/06/04/apple-restricts-chinese-podcasts>

- decided not to release its new “Private Relay” feature in China and other countries<sup>7</sup>; and
- censored Chinese consumers by preventing them from engraving “sensitive” content on their Apple products (iPads or Airtags).<sup>8</sup>

Apple discloses almost no information on app removals, hiding the full scope of compliance with Chinese censorship. In some cases, apps’ developers or publishers were not aware of their app’s unavailability until we contacted them. In October, 2017, Senators Cruz and Leahy wrote to Apple asking questions about censorship in its China App Store. In Apple’s response, the company admitted to having removed 674 VPNs from the China App Store at the request of the Chinese government. These VPNs would have allowed Chinese citizens to skirt censorship restrictions.

Apple was widely condemned after this revelation – yet five years later Apple has only increased its censorship efforts in China and has continued to proactively work to restrict freedom of expression for its Chinese customers.

Apple has even hosted apps on its App Store run by a China Paramilitary Group (the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps) accused of participating in forced labor of Uyghurs and under U.S. Magnitsky sanctions.<sup>9</sup>

Apple’s so-called Transparency Reports do not reveal which apps have been censored, and remain questionably vague on the reasons, legal or not, behind this censorship.

The resulting opacity has become Apple’s true trademark: from how it curates content on the App Store; to how it implements its arbitrary “App Store Guidelines”; to what data it communicates to governments; to the deals the company makes with even the most repressive regimes in the world<sup>10</sup>. Apple conceals almost everything about its operations.

Apple’s record-high financial results are the result of a strategy that has relied significantly on Apple’s alliance with the Chinese authoritarian government. This alliance comes with a cost. In order to do business in China, Apple has abandoned its values, ethical standards, and principles. Apple has actively worked to suppress the rights and freedoms of their customers, even when the company was not pressured to do so by Beijing. We believe that the time is overdue for Apple to put a halt to such unethical and immoral behavior.

We remain at your disposal should you have any additional questions.

With warmest regards,



Benjamin Ismail  
Project Director  
AppleCensorship.com



Charlie Smith  
Co-Founder  
GreatFire.org

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<sup>7</sup> Belarus, Colombia, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkmenistan, Uganda, and the Philippines.

<sup>8</sup> <https://citizenlab.ca/2021/08/engrave-danger-an-analysis-of-apple-engraving-censorship-across-six-regions/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theinformation.com/articles/apple-hosts-apps-run-by-china-paramilitary-group-accused-of-uyghur-genocide>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theinformation.com/articles/facing-hostile-chinese-authorities-apple-ceo-signed-275-billion-deal-with-them>