

Silicon Valley's accidental war with the far right

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Google and other Silicon Valley giants are increasingly being targeted by the extreme right amid efforts to crack down on what is described as hateful speech

Silicon Valley is finding itself entrenched in battle with the far right over ground rules for the digital world, a conflict that mirrors the polarization of American politics in recent years.

The recent firing of a Google engineer for questioning the internet

giant's diversity efforts, which ignited a backlash from the "alt-right" and fueled charges of hypocrisy, is just one example.

Facebook has been accused of suppressing conservative voices and skewing information presented in its news feed.

Twitter has banned accounts from far right activists for violating its terms on "hate" speech.

Paypal refused to transmit donations to a group in Europe seeking to turn back refugees, claiming it does not support activities that promote "hate" or "violence."

And even Airbnb canceled accounts ahead of a white nationalist rally for promoting discrimination in violation of the terms of the home-sharing platform.

Activists on the extreme right have responded with an outcry against the tech giants and have begun migrating to alternatives for [social networking](#) and money transfers.

The conflict has caught Silicon Valley off-guard, amid a political onslaught from critics as online platforms grow in importance.

In Silicon Valley, "you've got a bunch of people who are interested in technology who would prefer to be apolitical," said Bob O'Donnell, consultant for Technalysis Research.

"They are being dragged into these decisions and being put into a difficult spot."

O'Donnell acknowledged that the big tech firms may allow bias to filter into their business operations because "Silicon Valley and northern

California are heavily Democratic and heavily focused on political correctness."

The flare-up of tensions come with the tech sector roiled by accusations of discrimination, sexual harassment and a lack of diversity despite the idealism espoused by its leaders.

Evolving from 'fake news'

Alan Rosenblatt, a digital strategist for left-leaning groups, said alt-right activists are frustrated because they have been unable to exploit online platforms as much as they would like.

"It traces back to the whole 'fake news' issue" starting in the 2016 election campaign, Rosenblatt said.

Rosenblatt said social networks such as Facebook and Twitter were correctly working to crack down on disinformation, such as the erroneous report about a child sex ring in a Washington pizza restaurant in an effort to tarnish candidate Hillary Clinton.

It was appropriate, Rosenblatt argued, to suspend accounts "pushing alt-right messaging that is either hateful or disinformation."



Silicon Valley firms such as Airbnb are grappling with efforts to promote inclusion while banning users promoting extreme views

President Donald Trump, he argued: "is the greatest enabler of the alt-right. He gives political coverage to their attacks on diversity and workplace fairness."

Tensions have flared at Google over the firing of engineer James Damore, who published a "manifesto" which claimed "biological differences" were a key factor in the low percentage of women in technology jobs.

Google said Damore's memo went too far in advancing "harmful gender stereotypes" but his dismissal fueled criticism that the tech giant was ignoring diverse viewpoints.

Damore said in an essay Friday that Google had become an "echo chamber" intolerant of open debate.

"How did Google, the company that hires the smartest people in the world, become so ideologically driven and intolerant of scientific debate and reasoned argument?" he wrote in the Wall Street Journal.

Elaine Ou, an engineer at a financial technology company, offered a similar comment in a column for Bloomberg: "Silicon Valley won't solve its gender issues if [political correctness](#) shuts down every conversation."

In a sign of the fractious atmosphere, Google canceled a "town hall" meeting intended to air viewpoints on diversity, sexism and free speech, citing worker safety concerns.

Google chief executive Sundar Pichai said in a memo to staff that despite the cancellation he wants a "frank, open discussion" and that "all of your voices and opinions matter."

'Hijacked' the discourse

Some analysts argue a small group of activists are trying to impose their will on the [tech sector](#).

"A small group of social terrorists have hijacked the rational discourse led by society's most accomplished, intelligent, and promising organizations," said a blog post by John Battelle, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and journalist.

Thomas Main, a political science professor at the City University of New York's Baruch College, said the latest developments reflect a realization that the internet may not be the utopia for political discourse that some had imagined.

"In some ways the internet is an ideal speech situation," he said.

But extremist "trolls," Main said, "are polluting the environment and you need some gatekeeping function."

Main said the gatekeeping function "is a big problem" because "we don't want government going in" and it's not clear if the digital companies are positioned to handle this.

"I'm searching for a better solution," he said.

O'Donnell said social networks and other digital companies may end up splintering along political lines in the same manner as the media industry.

"We may see over time an evolution where one social network is more left leaning and another is right leaning," he said. "It has become so challenging to remain in the middle."

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