

Facebook, Twitter, Google and where Silicon Valley's money comes from

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Tech companies face dilemma after conundrum after balancing act, and now the spotlight is on their funding sources.

There's Saudi money. Russian money. And let's not forget money from ads and fake news that add fuel to the raging fire of cultural, racial, political and religious divisions in the United States and elsewhere.

There are questions surrounding Russian investor Yuri Milner's investments in Facebook and Twitter after a New York Times report that showed Kremlin-backed money was included in those investments. (Milner pushed back against the report, saying it's all a part of doing business, and saying the timing of his investments don't coincide with suspected Russian meddling into the 2016 U.S. presidential election. He also said, "just to be Russian, suddenly, is to be under suspicion.")

In addition, Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, the billionaire [tech](#) investor who has holdings in Apple, Twitter and Lyft, has been arrested. News of what the Saudi government is calling a crackdown on corruption - dozens are being held - emerged over the weekend.

"We need to talk about this money because, boy, is there a whole lot of it - and as the world's moneyed dictators, oligarchs and other characters look for more places to park their billions, mountains more will be coming to Silicon Valley," columnist Farhad Manjoo wrote in the New York Times.

A recent Bloomberg report showed that Facebook and Google helped push anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee ads in swing states during the elections - a glaring contrast to the publicly espoused views of the companies and their chief executives. Facebook and Google have advocated for immigrants. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has dined with refugees. Both he and Google CEO Sundar Pichai have called for support of Muslims.

During last week's Senate Intelligence Committee hearing about Russian ads and fake news, Sen. Kamala Harris, D-California, asked the general counsels of Facebook, Twitter and Google how much profit they made from Russian propaganda surrounding the 2016 elections. The companies had no response.

There are plenty of other recent examples of tech companies profiting from hate and misinformation, from PayPal providing payment support to hate sites such as JihadWatch to Google continuing to cash in on ads on [fake-news](#) sites.

Where do the companies draw the line? Should they?

Also, what's a principled tech user to do when it seems no tech [company](#) is conflict-free? The introspection and push for changes that seem necessary at this point isn't limited to the tech companies - we use their products, too.

We're coming to find out that "anything you use that's financially free might have another cost to it," said Ann Skeet, director of Leadership Ethics with the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, in a phone interview with SiliconBeat Tuesday.

"Companies respond to customers and markets," Skeet added. Maybe that means "not using a site for a while until certain conditions are met."

She said many of these [tech companies](#) began with, and still have, good intentions.

As they've grown and made money from various sources and users, some of whom do not share those good intentions, "they have to decide: Is that the business they want to stay in?" Skeet said.

And amid troubling times in tech, Silicon Valley historian Leslie Berlin, who has written "Troublemakers," a book about the tech industry's rise here, said in an interview with this publication last week: "We can't lose sight of how important these companies have been for pushing economy forward, and for really enhancing people's lives. (The problems) are the flip side of how important they have become to us."

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