

Tech leaders to make peace, or press their case, with Trump

December 13 2016, by Michael Liedtke



In this Thursday, Oct. 27, 2016, file photo, Apple CEO Tim Cook speaks during an announcement of new products, in Cupertino, Calif. Technology leaders are about to come face-to-face with President-elect Donald Trump after fiercely opposing his candidacy, fearful that he would stifle innovation, curb the hiring of computer-savvy immigrants and infringe on consumers' digital privacy. On Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2016, Silicon Valley luminaries and other technology leaders are headed to Trump Tower in New York to make their peace, or press their case, with Trump and his advisers. Cook is one of the CEOs expected to attend. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

Silicon Valley leaders were among Donald Trump's most outspoken opponents during the presidential campaign. On Wednesday, though, many of them will come face-to-face with the president-elect for the first time since the election.

The tech industry had multiple concerns about candidate Trump, among them fears that he would stifle innovation, curb the hiring of computer-savvy immigrants and infringe on consumers' digital privacy. Those worries may not have abated, but that's not stopping technology leaders from heading to Trump Tower in New York to make their peace—or press their case—with Trump and his advisers.

The CEOs planning to attend include Apple's Tim Cook, Alphabet's Larry Page, Microsoft's Satya Nadella, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Intel's Brian Krzanich, IBM's Ginni Rometty, Oracle's Safra Catz and Cisco Systems' Chuck Robbins.

Facebook's chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, will be on hand instead of its CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, who was one of many tech executives to express misgivings about Trump's pledge to deport millions of immigrants.

TECH VS. TRUMP

It could be a prickly meeting.

No other industry was more open in its contempt for Trump during the campaign. In an open letter published in July, more than 140 technology executives, entrepreneurs and venture capitalists skewered Trump as a "disaster for innovation."

And Trump's denigration of Mexicans, his pledge to deport millions of immigrants now living in the U.S. illegally, and his crude remarks about women were widely viewed as racist, authoritarian and sexist by an industry that prides itself on its tolerance.

Trump, in turn, sometimes lashed out at the industry and its leaders.

He lambasted Bezos for the campaign coverage of his newspaper, The Washington Post, and suggested that Amazon could face antitrust scrutiny if he were elected.

Trump also rebuked Cook for fighting a government order requiring Apple to unlock an encrypted iPhone used by a shooter in last year's terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California.

And Trump's repeated screeds against immigrants raised fears that he might dismantle programs that have enabled tech companies to hire tens of thousands of foreign workers with the skills to write computer programs, design web pages and build mobile apps.

The industry is also worried that Trump might try to undermine "net neutrality," a regulation requiring internet service providers to offer equal access to all online services. Trump's harsh characterization of the media as dishonest and unfair has raised other fears that he might even try to restrict free speech online.

OUT OF STRIFE, PEACE?



In this June 16, 2014, file photo, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos walks onstage for the launch of the new Amazon Fire Phone, in Seattle. Technology leaders are about to come face-to-face with President-elect Donald Trump after fiercely opposing his candidacy, fearful that he would stifle innovation, curb the hiring of computer-savvy immigrants and infringe on consumers' digital privacy. On Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2016, Silicon Valley luminaries and other technology leaders are headed to Trump Tower in New York to make their peace, or press their case, with Trump and his advisers. Bezos is one of the CEOs expected to attend. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, File)

Some in Silicon Valley think the industry's best move would be to keep its distance until Trump changes his tone. Former Google executive Chris Sacca, now a tech investor, argues that industry leaders should steer clear of the meeting altogether.

Sitting down with the president-elect "would only make sense after Trump has given public assurances he won't encourage censorship, will stop exploiting fake news, will promote net neutrality, denounce hate

crimes, and embrace science," Sacca said. "If and until then, tech figures who visit are being used to whitewash an authoritarian bully who threatens not just our industry, but our entire democracy."

Most of the companies with executives attending Wednesday's meeting declined to comment ahead of the gathering.

In an article published in USA Today, IBM's Rometty indicated she intended to press Trump to introduce more educational programs to teach people the skills needed to fill technology jobs—a key issue for most industry leaders. Rometty says IBM plans to hire 25,000 workers during Trump's four-year term, including 6,000 next year.

Oracle's Catz said in a statement that she plans to tell Trump "that we are with him and are here to help in any way we can. If he can reform the tax code, reduce regulation, and negotiate better trade deals, the U.S. technology community will be stronger and more competitive than ever."

Other tech institutions are also signaling an end to the animosity.

The Internet Association, a trade group whose members include Google, Facebook and Amazon, praised Trump in an open letter last month for his use of Twitter and other digital tools to help him get elected. The letter also appealed to Trump's emphasis on the economy, citing statistics estimating that the internet sector accounted for nearly \$1 trillion of the country's gross domestic product.

Some conservatives say they're actually worried that Trump might get too friendly with tech. Peter Flaherty, the president of the National Legal and Policy Center, charges that big technology companies exploited their close relationship with President Barack Obama "to feather their nests and push for policies that benefit them at the expense of the American worker."

Trump spokeswoman Hope Hicks said by email that the president-elect "looks forward to meeting with this important group of industry leaders and true innovators."

COMMON GROUND: TAX CUTS

The technology industry already supports one of Trump's ideas. He has promised to temporarily reduce the corporate tax on foreign profits from the current 35 percent to 10 percent to give U.S. companies an incentive to bring their overseas cash back home.

It's a cut that Cook has been pushing Congress to make because Apple has \$216 billion, or 91 percent of its total cash, in overseas accounts. Other tech companies in line to benefit the most from a tax reduction include Microsoft, Cisco, Microsoft and Google's corporate parent, Alphabet.

But Trump might not be doing many other favors for technology companies given his history of holding grudges against his opponents, said Larry Irving, a former government affairs executive for Hewlett-Packard who now runs a consulting firm.

"Everything Trump has done so far suggests that he rewards loyalty and punishes disloyalty," Irving said. "The tech industry better have some pontoons ready."

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