

People in Silicon Valley are losing their minds after a famous investor said its culture is bad for startups and society

Kif Leswing

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 sam altman

Sam Altman, the president of Y Combinator. Drew Angerer/Getty

- **Sam Altman, one of the most powerful people in the startup world, says the debate about political correctness in San Francisco is bad for startups and smart people.**
- **His blog post on the topic drew heated reactions both from people who agree with him and from those who say his ideas are dangerous.**

If Sam Altman, the president of Y Combinator, wanted to start a furious debate with his latest blog post, he certainly succeeded.

[In the post](#), published Thursday, he argued the climate of political correctness in San Francisco and Silicon Valley was "very bad for startups" and said it was easier to express controversial ideas in China than in California.

The essay, titled "E Pur Si Muove" — Italian for "And yet it moves" referencing a quip the heretic scientist Galileo Galilei said on his deathbed — drew swift and strong reactions from both supporters and detractors.

Here's his point:

"Restricting speech leads to restricting ideas and therefore restricted innovation — the most successful societies have generally been the most open ones. Usually mainstream ideas are right and heterodox ideas are wrong, but the true and unpopular ideas are what drive the world forward. Also, smart people tend to have an allergic reaction to the restriction of ideas, and I'm now seeing many of the smartest people I know move elsewhere."

He says ideas the San Francisco intellectual climate have rejected include "pharmaceuticals for intelligence augmentation, genetic engineering, and radical life extension."

In Altman's view, people who have criticized those ideas for businesses have cast the entrepreneurs behind them as "heretics," like how the Catholic Church sentenced Galileo to house arrest for (correctly) saying the Earth revolves around the sun.

"This is uncomfortable, but it's possible we have to allow people to say disparaging things about gay people if we want them to be able to say novel things about physics," Altman wrote. "Of course we can and should say that ideas are mistaken, but we can't just call the person a heretic."

Altman runs the most prestigious tech-startup accelerator in Silicon Valley, Y Combinator, but in recent years has increasingly expressed [interest in political ideas](#).

One of his experiments — related to the concept of basic income, in which every resident regularly receives a sum of money with no conditions attached — is a program that gives 100 people in Oakland, California, \$1,000 to \$2,000 a month.


And he had to shoot down rumors last year that he would run for governor of California.



The reaction

Users can't post comments on Altman's blog, but many people who read his thoughts on political correctness were eager to respond.

Altman had defenders from the venture-capital and entrepreneurship worlds, but he also drew scores of critics in technology writers, activists, business professors, and even rank-and-file employees at big tech companies.





It got heated.

Sam Altman  @sama 14 Dec
E Pur Si Muove: blog.samaltman.com/e-pur-si-muove

EricaJoy to The World  
@EricaJoy

Sam. Really? Genetic engineering is a controversial idea. Bitcoin is a controversial idea. Putting them on the same footing as "gay people are evil" legitimizes the latter as something that is worthy of consideration and debate.

11:14 AM - Dec 14, 2017

 11  31  386 

Sam Altman  @sama 14 Dec
E Pur Si Muove: blog.samaltman.com/e-pur-si-muove

 **Susan Fowler**   
@susanthsquark

I dunno if China is the shining example of "free speech" and "lack of political correctness" we should be striving for. Remember Liu Xiaobo, the labor camps, the golden shield? I remember. hrw.org/news/2017/06/1...

11:01 AM - Dec 14, 2017

China: Democratic Voice Liu Xiaobo Dies in Custody

The death of Chinese dissident and public intellectual Liu Xiaobo, winner of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, lays bare the Chinese government's ruthlessness toward peaceful proponents of human rights and...

hrw.org

6 6 114

Sam Altman  @sama

14 Dec

E Pur Si Muove: blog.samaltman.com/e-pur-si-muove

sarah kunst 

@sarahkunst



Ffs this idea that Sf techies cant speak their minds to share their shitty racist/sexist thoughts is so stupid. Name one of your funders who's been run out of town on a rail for their toxic beliefs. You aren't the marginalized group you're the babies who can't take disagreement.

10:55 AM - Dec 14, 2017

19 47 318

Kevin Werbach

@kwerb



This @sama blog and the subsequent debate make me terribly sad. The people who are best positioned to be the solution to the degradation of discourse in America are part of the problem. blog.samaltman.com/e-pur-si-muove

6:18 AM - Dec 15, 2017

E Pur Si Muove

Earlier this year, I noticed something in China that really surprised me. I realized I felt more comfortable discussing controversial ideas in Beijing than in San Francisco. I didn't feel...

blog.samaltman.com



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9



Azeem Azhar 

@azeem



This essay on free speech is ... well I don't know where to begin.

But sadly written by one of Silicon Valley's most revered factotums.

blog.samaltman.com/e-pur-si-muove

Shallow analysis. Unsupported assertions. Ignores years of real work done across disciplines around these issues.

3:02 PM - Dec 14, 2017

E Pur Si Muove

Earlier this year, I noticed something in China that really surprised me. I realized I felt more comfortable discussing controversial ideas in Beijing than in San Francisco. I didn't feel...

blog.samaltman.com



14



15



64



Matthew Garrett

@mjg59



blog.samaltman.com/e-pur-si-muove is representative of the absolute worst thing about tech culture - the idea that technological progress is more important than anything else

12:08 PM - Dec 14, 2017

E Pur Si Muove

Earlier this year, I noticed something in China that really surprised me. I realized I felt more comfortable discussing controversial ideas in Beijing than in San Francisco. I didn't feel...

blog.samaltman.com



9



74



201



Parker Thompson 



@pt

I'd love to see someone start an anon google doc to list these, for those of us not smart enough to have unspeakably good ideas.

If it can work for naming sexual harassers, it can work for this!blog.samaltman.com/e-pur-si-muove

11:09 AM - Dec 14, 2017

E Pur Si Muove

Earlier this year, I noticed something in China that really surprised me. I realized I felt more comfortable discussing controversial ideas in Beijing than in San Francisco. I didn't feel...

blog.samaltman.com

 10  3  35



 [View image on Twitter](#)



Bear Conditioning

@aphyr



A gentle reminder, @sama, that homophobia led to the chemical castration and suicide of Alan Turing. blog.samaltman.com/e-pur-si-muove

11:12 AM - Dec 14, 2017

 16  225  538

Ann-Marie Alcántara

@itstheannmarie



lol Sam was honored by @glaad this year with an award for advancing "LGBTQ acceptance" glaad.org/releases/sam-a...twitter.com/sama/status/94...

11:02 AM - Dec 14, 2017

Sam Altman to be Honored for Empowering LGBTQ Inclusion in Tech at GLAAD Gala San Francisco

GLAAD, the world's largest LGBTQ media advocacy organization, announced today that it will honor entrepreneur and investor Sam Altman with the Ric Weiland Award at the GLAAD Gala San Francisco at...
glaad.org

1 1 2

Altman's defenders said they felt constrained to pursue or express controversial ideas, and they cited the backlash to the post as proof of Altman's point.

On Hacker News, Y Combinator's message board, [the post has more than 690 comments](#), many of them supportive of Altman's argument.

Anil Dash  @anildash

14 Dec

So @sama has articulated the way many guys in Silicon Valley feel about "free speech". It's not a very sophisticated or informed view, but it's pretty common and he's influential, so it's worth identifying why it's dangerous and wrong. blog.samaltman.com/e-pur-si-muove

Benedict Evans 

@BenedictEvans



An honest and sincere question: is there anyone you know with a different opinion on any social issue that you do not believe absolutely to be a vicious and evil bigot, or an enabler thereof?

2:55 PM - Dec 14, 2017

52 9 115

Andrew Lee

@startupandrew



The replies to this tweet do a pretty good job of making Sam's point. twitter.com/sama/status/94...

2:48 PM - Dec 14, 2017

5 9

Firas Durri

@firasd



Often when I see American Twitter and writers being vitriolic about some startup, I feel like the company should launch its products here in India instead. Bring the expensive bus, the expensive juicer, whatever. We won't lose our minds yelling about it. twitter.com/sama/status/94...

9:40 AM - Dec 14, 2017

2 8 36

George Staikos

@grstaikos



It's like everyone he criticized just volunteered to prove his point in the follow-ups. twitter.com/sama/status/94...

4:38 AM - Dec 15, 2017

2 2

Gab: Free Speech Social Network

@getongab



Is Sam coming around on political correctness being cancer? 🤔👎 twitter.com/sama/status/94...

1:43 PM - Dec 14, 2017

6 35

Tom Giles

@tomgiles



This. So much this. twitter.com/sama/status/94...

6:44 AM - Dec 15, 2017 · Los Angeles, CA

1 1

Sondre Rasch

@SRasch



As a founder from Norway, Sam is describing something I've noticed too, and appreciate someone being principled enough to say it out loud

(Although I am perhaps more optimistic on SFs behalf) twitter.com/sama/status/94...

3:26 PM - Dec 14, 2017

 1  




Austen Allred 

@AustenAllred



My favorite part is the replies absolutely proving Sam's point twitter.com/sama/status/94...

5:18 PM - Dec 14, 2017

 6  4  34



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