

Will the lack of ideological diversity doom big tech companies?

Declan McCullagh from the **May 2018** issue - view article in the **Digital Edition**

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When it comes to software, Silicon Valley understands the threat of monocultures. If 100 percent of computers run the same code and malware authors discover an exploit, 100 percent of computers will be vulnerable to the same attack. Fortunately, the way to reduce such risks is straightforward: Increase diversity.

Alas, this insight seems limited to software. Technology executives have yet to fully recognize the risks posed by the potent political monocultures forming inside their own companies.

We've reached the point where many tech employees in the San Francisco Bay Area who happen to be libertarian or conservative feel compelled to keep their views secret. Others, open about their opinions, report that they've suffered career setbacks for being insufficiently progressive, even as their outspoken left-of-center colleagues who spent 2016 sporting "I'm With Her" hats have not.

Even some self-identified liberals are dismayed at what they view as a toxic monoculture. Tim Ferriss, a startup advisor and investor, moved to Austin after living for 17 years in San Francisco. "Silicon Valley also has an insidious infection that is spreading—a peculiar form of McCarthyism masquerading as liberal open-mindedness," he

posted on Reddit in November. "I'm as socially liberal as you get, and I find it nauseating."

This climate is unhealthy for employers as well. Companies such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Apple are increasingly likely to miss opportunities to develop products that can appeal to the half of the nation that cares little for left-of-center politics.

That's created market opportunities for substitute services, from Gab.ai (a Twitter alternative) to Brave (a web browser), from InfoGalactic (akin to Wikipedia) to Voat.co (a chat board site much like Reddit)—each of which advertises itself as committed to protecting free speech, privacy, and a diversity of viewpoints. D.tube, a decentralized video sharing site, boasts that, unlike YouTube, it is "not able to censor videos" due to built-in technological constraints.

For CEOs of billion-dollar companies who are famously paranoid about competition from upstarts, this is a remarkable unforced error. (Google employees are well aware that they occupy a campus owned by Silicon Graphics before its bankruptcy, while Facebook's headquarters used to be Sun Microsystems'. Mark Zuckerberg kept the old Sun sign around to remind employees of what their fate could be.)

The current climate means that tech companies are likely to miss out on good workers who don't quite fit in. The brilliant nonconformists who helped to create the computing and internet industries—and launched the Burning Man festival along the way—would likely fail

an initial human resources résumé screen today. Yet Silicon Valley has thrived in part because its history is populated by figures like *Whole Earth Catalog* editor Stewart Brand, novelist Ken Kesey and his LSD-fueled "Merry Pranksters," phone hacker Cap'n Crunch, inventor Douglas Engelbart, and the late Electronic Frontier Foundation co-founder John Perry Barlow. Time was, the counterculture co-existed and even overlapped with conservatives and libertarians. Barlow, for example, was chairman of Wyoming's Sublette County Republican Party and a coordinator for Dick Cheney's 1978 congressional campaign. He also was a lyricist for the Grateful Dead.

The Bay Area could transform itself from fruit orchards to a trillion-dollar economy precisely because it lacked a political monoculture. Take David Packard and Bill Hewlett, who founded what would become Silicon Valley's largest employer and first great corporation. The two were avid outdoorsmen who together bought a 28,539-acre ranch east of San Jose for hunting deer and wild pigs.

Packard in particular was a prominent supporter of conservative causes: He became a trustee of the American Enterprise Institute and Stanford University's Hoover Institution and served as Richard Nixon's deputy defense secretary. He was also unapologetic about his politics, warning in 1992 that "the Democratic Party has been the party of socialism since President Roosevelt's term."

William Shockley, creator of the transistor, ran for the California GOP's Senate nomination in 1982. Ron Conway, an early investor in

Google and PayPal, is a self-described conservative who worked on Nixon's 1968 campaign. According to one of his longtime friends, Steve Jobs voted for Ronald Reagan; according to Steve Wozniak, he was influenced by Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. T.J. Rodgers, the now-retired CEO of Cypress Semiconductor, assigned Rand's writings to his management team, and DoubleClick's Kevin O'Connor gave his son "Rand" as a middle name. As recently as 2008, then-presidential candidate Ron Paul could show up at Google and find a standing-room-only employee audience.

Today's Silicon Valley, on the other hand, seems to repel smart people who are insufficiently progressive. Billionaire investor Peter Thiel, arguably the region's most prominent conservative, is moving to Los Angeles because of the Bay Area's "intolerant, left-leaning politics," according to *The Wall Street Journal*. Andrew Torba, founder of Gab.ai, explained to *The Guardian* why he too had left: "As a conservative, a Christian, and a Trump supporter I felt like I couldn't speak freely without being shunned or attacked for having a different opinion."

Entrepreneur Marc Andreessen has said he knows of exactly two people in Silicon Valley who voted for Donald Trump. "I guarantee there are Trump supporters in Silicon Valley who feel like they can't say so," he added. "What does it do to someone who feels literally like they cannot express themselves? That is such an unhealthy place to get to."

The atmosphere inside Google has become especially toxic, according to a lawsuit filed by James Damore against his former employer. The software engineer has buttressed his case with nearly 100 pages of posts shared openly among employees, including one in which a manager announced that he maintains a blacklist of workers who hold differing views on religion. "'Legitimate world views' 'Conservative Christianity,'" read another. "I admire your tolerance, but pairing those two phrases still sounds like an oxymoron to me."

Those posts appeared before Damore circulated his controversial memo within the company. Afterward, he says, the tone darkened. One colleague predicted that "a good number of the people you might have to work with may simply punch you in the face." Others likened conservative coworkers to "this cancer within our culture."

Google will have a chance to defend itself, and the courts may well decide there was no unlawful discrimination involved in Damore's firing. But management's decision to tolerate (encourage?) such extreme single-mindedness aligns Google's parent company, Alphabet Inc., even more hermetically with one side of the culture wars. (Twitter wasn't helped, either, by Project Veritas' release of undercover videos in which current and former employees appear to disparage Christians and discuss "shadow banning," or preventing other users from seeing someone's public posts.)

All this comes during a time of unfortunate regulatory overreach targeting technology companies. Even before Damore's lawsuit,

conservatives had begun to propose treating social media platforms as public utilities. Missouri's Republican attorney general is investigating Google, a move that should worry any CEO who remembers how states helped to kick off the antitrust case against Microsoft from two decades ago. Congress is considering a bill to weaken the federal law that shields internet companies from liability for their users' crimes, while Facebook is on the defensive over allegations of social media addiction and its role in spreading "fake news." President Trump claims Amazon has been ducking its taxes. And the head of the Federal Communications Commission calls Silicon Valley "a much bigger actual threat to an open internet than broadband providers."

A wave of populist anger may never crest against the technology industry, but for the first time in recent memory, such a scenario looks possible. If 100 percent of major technology companies share the same monoculture, 100 percent of them become vulnerable to the same threats: lost market opportunities, alienated employees, and newfound regulatory enthusiasm. If only there were another option.

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