




# Tech's terrible year: how the world turned on Silicon Valley in 2017

From the #DeleteUber campaign to fake news, the industry found itself in the crosshairs this year – and it was a long time coming, experts say



 Uber was among Silicon Valley giants that faced a public backlash in 2017. Photograph: Michael N/Pacific/Barcroft Image

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**W**hen Jonathan Taplin's book *Move Fast and Break Things*, which dealt with the worrying rise of big tech, was first published in the UK in April 2017, his publishers removed its subtitle because they didn't think it was supported by

evidence: “How [Facebook](#), Google and Amazon cornered culture and undermined democracy.”

When the paperback edition comes out early next year, that subtitle will be restored.

“It’s been a sea change in just six months,” Taplin said. “Before that, people were kind of asleep.”



In the last year, barely a day has gone by without a scandal placing technology companies in the spotlight, whether for [sexual harassment](#), [livestreamed murder](#), [Russian influence operations](#) or [terrorist propaganda](#).

Tech’s annus horribilis started with calls to [#DeleteUber](#), but the way things are going it will end with calls to delete the entire internet.

“2017 has definitely been a year when tech has found there is a target painted on its back,” said Om Malik, a venture capitalist. “The big companies have been so obsessed with growth that there’s been a lack of social responsibility. Now the chickens are coming home to roost.”

The surprise election of Donald Trump acted as a catalyst for scrutiny of the platforms that shape so much of our online experience. Even so, it’s taken many months for the enormity of their role to sink in.

## How big tech finally awakened to the horror of its own inventions



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Perhaps the biggest wake-up call has been the [showdown in Washington](#). Congress summoned representatives from Facebook, Twitter and Google to testify over their role in a multi-pronged Russian operation to influence the 2016

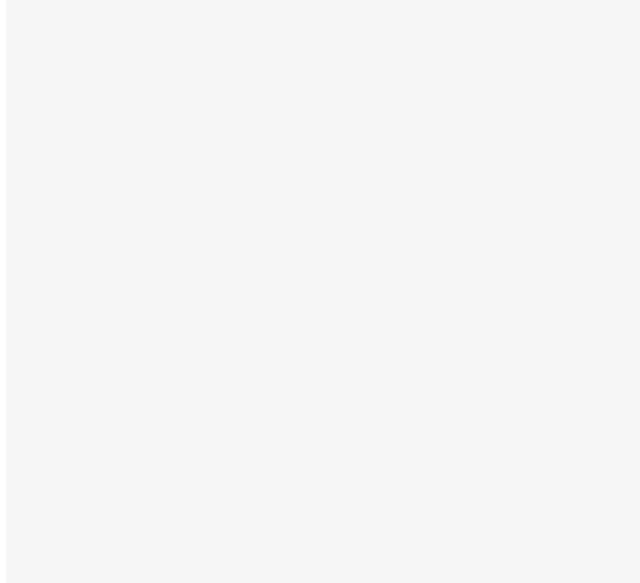
presidential election. All three companies admitted that Russian entities bought ads on their sites in an attempt to skew the vote.

In [Facebook's case](#), fake accounts pushed divisive messages in swing states; Google [found similar activity](#) across its paid search tool and YouTube; and on [Twitter, armies of bots and fake users](#) promoted fake news stories that were favourable to Donald Trump. Similar patterns were identified around the Brexit vote.

“The election shows the stakes involved here,” said Noam Cohen, author of *The Know-It-Alls: The Rise of Silicon Valley as a Political Powerhouse and Social Wrecking Ball*. “In the past, to be a critic of [Silicon Valley](#) was to say the smartphone is making us dumb. Now it's incompatible with democracy.”

It's not been the only example of technology companies monetising and distributing unpalatable content and acting surprised when it's uncovered.




In March, the Times of London revealed that YouTube had paid, via an advertising revenue share, Islamic extremists to peddle hate speech, leading to a [boycott from many major advertisers](#). A second boycott started this month after brands discovered that their ads were [appearing alongside content being exploited by paedophiles](#).



In May, the Guardian’s investigation into Facebook’s content moderation policies revealed that the social network flouted [Holocaust denial laws except where it feared being sued](#). Four months later, Pro Publica discovered that Facebook’s ad tools could be [used to target “Jew haters”](#).

Facebook’s chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, later said she was “disgusted” and “disappointed that our systems allowed this”.

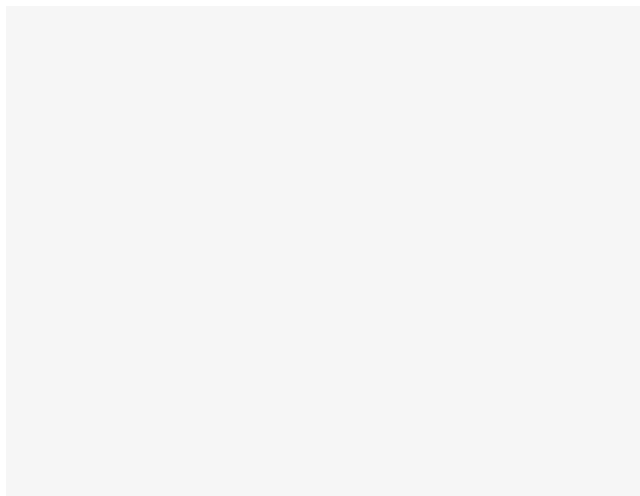


   Representatives of Facebook, Twitter and Google testify before lawmakers in October. Photograph: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Taplin finds the technology companies’ standard response of “Oops, we’ll fix this” frustrating and disingenuous.

“Come on! What were you thinking?” he said. “If I can target women who drink bourbon in Tennessee who like trucks, then of course I could use it for dark purposes.”

The deepening pockets and growing influence of companies like Facebook, Amazon, Google and Apple has raised concerns that they



have become Goliaths, [threatening the innovation](#) Silicon Valley was once known for.

You only have to look at Snap to see what happens [when you nip at the heels](#) of a tech titan like Facebook: first, it makes an offer to buy you – a strategy that worked with Instagram and WhatsApp – and, if that fails, it eliminates you.

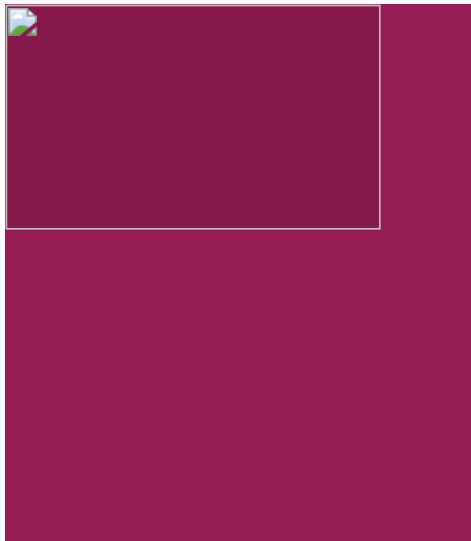
In Snap's case, this meant watching Facebook clone all of Snapchat's features – awkwardly at first, but relentlessly until Snapchat's potential slice of the advertising market shriveled to a sliver.

“[The Snap CEO] Evan Spiegel is having his hat handed to him,” Taplin said, noting how Snap's stock had plummeted since the company went public in March.

As power consolidates into the hands of a few, the best a startup can hope for is to be bought by one of the tech giants. This, in turn, leads to further consolidation.

So the five largest tech companies – desperate to avoid the kind of antitrust regulation that disrupted IBM and Microsoft's dominance – are flooding Washington with lobbyists, to the point where they [now outspend Wall Street two to one](#).

“Regulation is coming,” said Malik. “We have got to prepare for that. Everybody has figured out that we are the enemy number one now because we are rich and all the politicians smell blood.”



It doesn't help that there's a rising number of former Silicon Valley engineers and business leaders who have [morphed into tech dissenters](#), complaining about the addictive properties of the platforms and call for people – particularly children – to unplug.

In November, Facebook's founding president, Sean Parker, said the social

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network knew from the outset it was creating something addictive, something that exploited “a vulnerability in human psychology” – a damning critique somewhat undermined by the fact that it was being delivered from the

top of an enormous money pile generated by that exploitation.

The vast wealth on display in Silicon Valley – in the private commuter buses, sprawling campuses and luxury condos – does little to endear the companies and their employees to the rest of the world. Like it or not, tech workers have become the shining beacons of prosperity and elitism, shining a bit too brightly at a time of increasing income inequality.

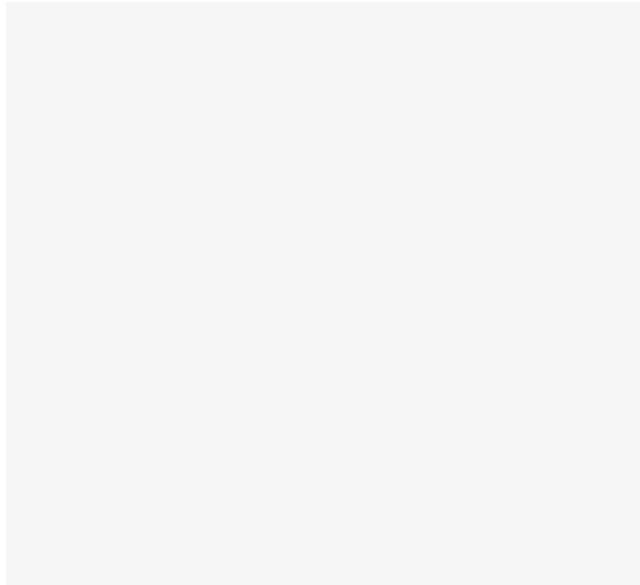
The fact that [\\$700 internet-connected juicers can raise \\$120m](#) in funding before

folding adds to the sense that Silicon Valley has lost its grip on reality.

“Silicon Valley at its core wants to solve problems. I just think we’ve lost touch with the types of problems that actual people need solving,” said Ankur Jain, who set up Kairos Society to encourage more entrepreneurs to solve problems where everyday people are being financially squeezed, such as housing, student loans and job retraining in the face of automation.

“People are so removed from the rest of the ecosystem in Silicon Valley that these problems feel more like charity issues rather than issues that affect the vast majority of the population,” Jain said.

For Malik, many of the problems stem from the fact that Silicon Valley companies have remained “wilfully ignorant” of the fact that “at the end of every data point there is a human being”.



All the problems to have arisen over the last year are particularly jarring given the tech companies' continued insistence that they are doing good for the world.

“It’s a form of gaslighting to have these companies doing so many harmful things telling you how great they are and how much they are helping you. It’s another form of abuse,” Cohen said.

Malik agreed. “Silicon Valley is very good at using words like empathy and social responsibility as marketing buzzwords, but they are terms that we need to internalise as an industry and show through our actions by building the right things,” he said. “Otherwise it’s all bullshit.”