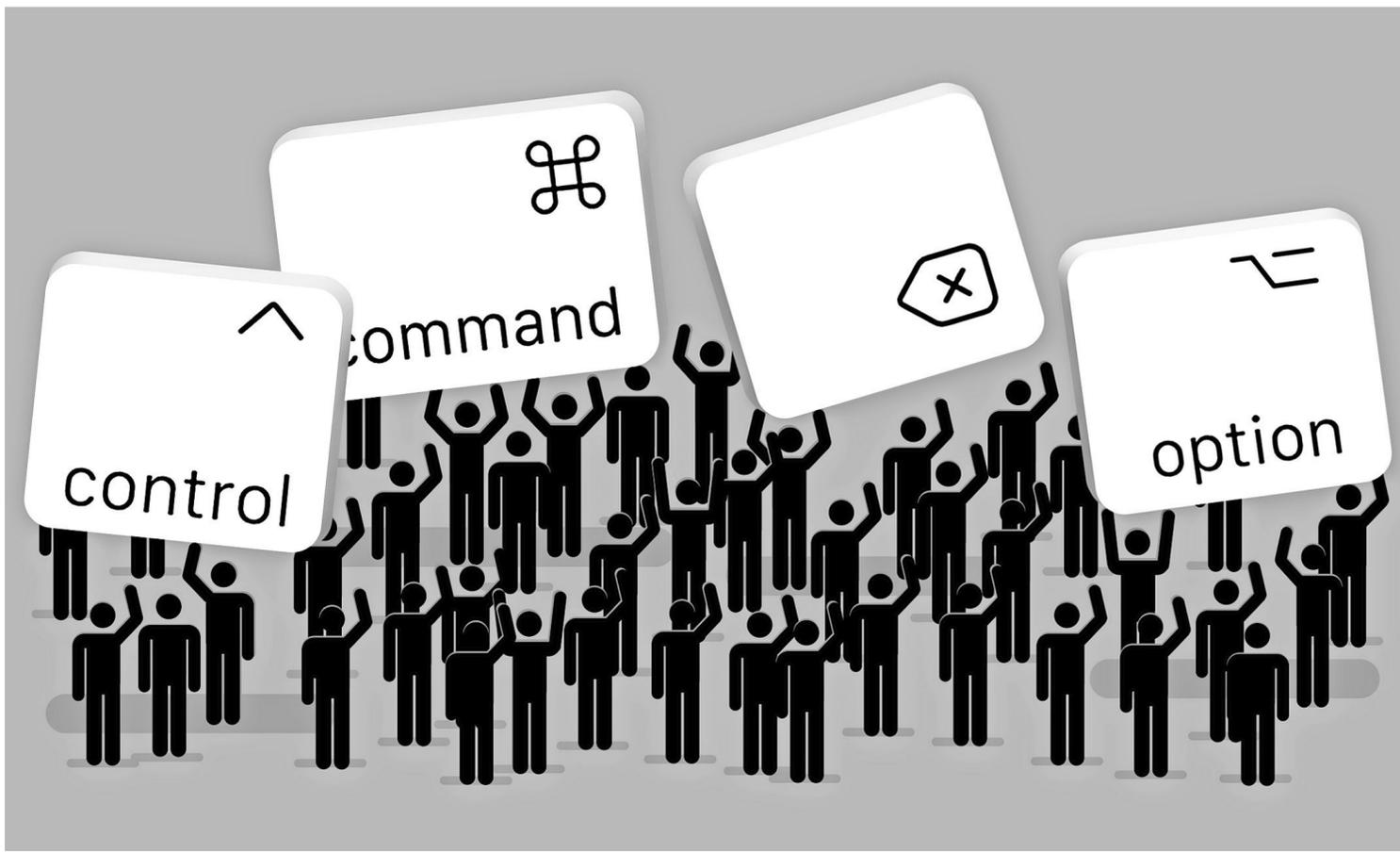


BUSINESS



DOUG CHAYKA

Reining in their own giant boss



Farhad Manjoo

STATE OF THE ART

For a few hours last week, just about everything at Google ground to a halt. At 11 a.m. local time on Nov. 1, in a movement that rolled like an angry and jubilant tide around the globe, more than 20,000 employees walked out to protest the company's long history of protecting executives accused of sexual harassment.

Then the walkout was done, and the media's bright glare returned to the midterm elections. A Google spokesman told me that its executives were now pondering workers' demands, which include specific changes to hiring and management policies, but the company had no comment beyond that.

However Google responds, little at the internet search giant — and, perhaps, little in Silicon Valley — will be the same again.

For two years, regulators, lawmakers, academics and the media have pushed Silicon Valley to alter its world-swallowing ways. But outsiders have

few points of leverage in tech; there are few laws governing the industry's practices, and lawmakers have struggled to get up to speed on tech's implications for society. Protests by workers are an important new avenue for pressure; the very people who make these companies work can change what they do in the world.

Their effectiveness at pushing the industry to address issues is already clear. Last summer, a worker-led movement at Google contributed to its decision to abandon Project Maven, a plan to work with the Pentagon on software for targeting drone strikes. Workers at Amazon and Microsoft are also calling on their companies to shift the ways they work with law enforcement.

But the Google walkout suggests something bigger could be afoot.

In just a week, the organizers used Google's own collaborative tools, and leveraged its open company culture, to create a wide-ranging movement. Their demands reflect the comments and suggestions of more than 1,000 people who participated in internal conversations about the walkout. They include points of view that have long been marginalized in tech — of minority workers, for instance, and of contractors, the industry's second-class citizens.

The walkout's organizers told me that they were aiming to keep that movement alive — to ask the most important questions about how their company operates in the world, and to

inspire those in other parts of the tech industry to take up similar arms.

"Something we've discussed as a group, something we've locked arms over, is that we're assembled now," said Claire Stapleton, a marketing manager at Google-owned YouTube who created the internal discussion forum in which organizers planned the walkout.

"We have an incredibly engaged group of people, and we aren't going to stop escalating this," she continued. "The group isn't really going to back down from this or a host of other things. The walkout was not like a blowing-off-steam exercise."

Organizers used Google's collaborative tools and leveraged its open company culture.

after he was accused of coercing a woman to perform oral sex in a hotel room (a charge that he denies but that the company found credible).

The organizers said their aims were far larger, though, than sexual harassment and abuse.

"Our discussions expanded very quickly," Ms. Stapleton said. "What is it that we want the company to be, and what should we do with the power that we very quickly see we are harnessing? Is Google for good? Do we think

that technology is toxic? Are we navigating through a host of complex issues online in a positive way?"

Speaking to Ms. Stapleton and several of her fellow organizers, I was struck by their intoxicating optimism. They brimmed with confidence about their capacity to push for a new moral, ethical and social framework in tech. And because Google's culture is a model for the industry and much of corporate America, they saw the idea of changing the company as part of a larger social and political struggle to make a dent in the universe.

"I think what we did was disprove the myth that it's too hard to take collective action," said Celie O'Neil-Hart, who works in YouTube's marketing department. She described the meticulous way that she and other organizers of the walkout distilled the thousands of discussions flowing through their group into a list of demands. Their secret? Google's own technology.

"I was getting hundreds of pieces of feedback on these demands, but ironically thanks to Google's products, like Google Groups and Docs and comments, I was able to get this constant stream of real-time feedback from a collective group of hundreds of Googlers, all while doing my day job," Ms. O'Neil-Hart said. She noted, too, that many Googlers had been hired for their work-endless-hours drive; now that drive was marshaled in the service of a movement.

The description by Stephanie Parker,

a policy specialist at YouTube, of organizing the protest sounded like designing and releasing a new Google product, but with a more passionate and personally invested group.

"It was really fun to see my fellow employees flex the skills that a lot of them had developed at Google — their program management skills, their marketing skills, their P.R. skills, but in the service of this movement," she said.

A lot about the walkout was particular to Google's culture, which has always encouraged a more open form of debate than many tech peers. Companies more consumed with secrecy — Facebook, for instance, or Amazon or Apple — may be less tolerant of a large number of employees who use their tech skills to go rogue.

But such a prospect is not out of the question. Tech workers have endless options when it comes to employment; the tight labor market gives them greater leeway in voicing their concerns, and the promise that their voices are valued gives them an expectation that they can effect change.

"I didn't think this would happen, but it's amazing to see," said Ellen Pao, a venture capitalist who sued her former firm, Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, for sexual harassment and now works at the nonprofit group Project Include.

"It's another point of pressure — maybe the most powerful one yet," she said. "And until recently, there really hasn't been much pressure at all."

A good election doesn't mean Facebook can relax

ROOSE, FROM PAGE 7

scale means that even people who work there are often in the dark. Some days, while calling the company for comment on a new viral hoax I had found, I felt like a college R.A. telling the dean of students about shocking misbehavior inside a dorm he'd never visited. ("The freshmen are drinking what?")

Other days, combing through Facebook falsehoods has felt like watching a nation poison itself in slow motion. A recent study by the Oxford Internet Institute, a department at the University of Oxford, found that 25 percent of all election-related content shared on Facebook and Twitter during the midterm election season could be classified as "junk news." Other studies have hinted at progress in stemming the tide of misinformation, but the process is far from complete.

A Facebook spokesman, Tom Reynolds, said that the company had improved since 2016, but there was "still more work to do."

"Over the last two years, we've worked hard to prevent misuse of Facebook during elections," Mr. Reynolds said. "Our teams worked round the clock during the midterms to reduce the spread of misinformation, thwart efforts to discourage people from voting and deal with issues of hate on our services."

Even with all Facebook has done, the scale of misinformation still often feels overwhelming. Last month, a viral post falsely claimed that Cesar Sayoc, the suspect in the attempted bombing of prominent liberals and news organizations, was a secret Democrat participating in a "false flag" conspiracy. The post racked up nearly 80,000 shares, more than any post by

The New York Times, The Washington Post or Fox News during the entire month of October.

When the news on Facebook was not blatantly false, it was often divisive and hyperpartisan — exactly the kind of thing Mark Zuckerberg, the company's chief executive, has said he wants to combat by using Facebook to "bring the world closer together." Nearly every day, the stories that got the most engagement across the network came from highly partisan sources — mostly conservative outlets like Fox News, Breitbart and The Daily Caller, with a handful of liberal pages like Occupy Democrats and The Other 98% thrown in — that skewed heavily toward outrage and resentment.

Even the anti-abuse systems the company put in place after the 2016 election have not gone smoothly. One of the steps Facebook took to prevent Russian-style influence campaigns was to force political advertisers to verify their identities. But the company left a loophole that allowed authorized advertisers to fill the "paid for by" disclaimer on their ads with any text they wanted, essentially allowing them to disguise themselves to the public.

Facebook has framed its struggle as an "arms race" between itself and the bad actors trying to exploit its services. But that mischaracterizes the nature of the problem. This is not two sovereign countries locked in battle, or an intelligence agency trying to stop a nefarious foreign plot. This is a rich and successful corporation that built a giant machine to convert attention into advertising revenue, made billions of dollars by letting that machine run with limited oversight, and is now frantically trying to clean up the mess that has resulted.



Facebook's war room at its headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif., where workers monitored election-related content on the social network.

As the votes were being tallied on Tuesday, I talked to experts who have paid close attention to Facebook's troubles over the past several years. Most agreed that Election Day itself had been a success, but the company still had plenty to worry about.

"I give them better marks for being on the case," said Michael Posner, a

professor of ethics and finance at New York University's Stern School of Business. "But it's yet to be seen how effective it's going to be. There's an awful lot of disinformation still out there."

"On the surface, for Facebook in particular, it's better because some of the worst content is getting taken down," said Jonathan Albright, the

research director at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. Mr. Albright, who has found networks of Russian trolls operating on Facebook in the past, has written in recent days that some of the company's features — in particular, Facebook groups that are used to spread misinformation — are still prone to exploitation.

"For blatantly false news, they're not even close to getting ahead of it," Mr. Albright said. "They're barely keeping up."

Jennifer Grygiel, an assistant professor at Syracuse University who studies social media, said that Facebook's pattern of relying on outside researchers and journalists to dig up misinformation and abuse was worrying.

"It's a bad sign that the war rooms, especially Facebook's war room, didn't have this information first," Professor Grygiel said.

In some ways, Facebook has it easy in the United States. Its executives and engineers are primarily English-speaking Americans, as are many of the content moderators doing the work of policing the platform. The country also has a strong independent press, law enforcement agencies and other stable institutions that are capable of filling in some gaps. And Facebook is highly incentivized to behave well in the United States and Europe, where its most important regulators (and the bulk of its advertisers) are.

It is hard to imagine Facebook extending the same kind of effort to prevent misinformation and interference in Madagascar, Armenia or El Salvador, all of which have upcoming elections. And if you think Facebook will spin up a 24/7 "war room" to help

Tax to aid homeless in tech hub is approved

SAN FRANCISCO

San Francisco measure is seen as a response to the city's housing crisis

BY KATE CONGER

Voters in San Francisco have approved a tax increase on the city's largest businesses that would nearly double its budget for services for the homeless, a measure seen as an effort to hold wealthy technology companies accountable for exacerbating the local housing crisis.

Tech executives have poured money into the campaigns for and against the measure. Jack Dorsey, the chief executive of Twitter and the payments company Square, spent \$125,000 to oppose it, while Marc Benioff, the chief executive of Salesforce, spent \$2 million to support it. Salesforce contributed an additional \$5 million to the campaign in favor of the initiative, known as Proposition C.

Mr. Benioff and Mr. Dorsey sparred on Twitter over Proposition C in October, fueling a debate that coursed through the tech industry before the election. The battle continued in the days before the vote, with Mark Pincus, the co-founder of the online game company Zynga, writing on Twitter Saturday that Proposition C was "the dumbest, least thought out" initiative and asking his followers to vote against it.

Mr. Benioff argued that San Francisco's businesses needed to take a more aggressive role in dealing with the city's crisis in homelessness.

"What we do matters, and we can improve the world," Mr. Benioff said. "We can't just be part of the problem."

The final results showed that three of every five people who voted supported the measure.

"I think what's been so incredible about this measure is we've seen an overwhelming amount of support from the community," said Sam Lew, the manager of the campaign favoring the initiative. "If there is a legal challenge, there will be thousands of San Franciscans who will fight against it."

Opponents of the measure may challenge the results. A state Supreme Court ruling last year raised questions about whether tax increases proposed by voters for specific causes needed the same two-thirds majority to pass as those proposed by elected officials.

The San Francisco City Attorney's Office is seeking a court order to resolve the confusion, asking the city's Superior Court to affirm that special tax increases proposed by voters can be passed with a simple majority vote.

Jess Montejano, a spokesman for the No on C campaign, expressed confidence that Proposition C's failure to meet the two-thirds threshold meant it would never take effect. "Despite outspending the No on C campaign by at least four to one, the Yes on C campaign failed to earn the two-thirds voter support necessary for San Francisco to ever see a penny that Proposition C promised," Mr. Montejano said.

"I give them better marks for being on the case. But it's yet to be seen how effective it's going to be."

stop meddling in Nigeria's February elections, I have a bridge in Lagos to sell you.

It's worth asking, over the long term, why a single American company is in the position of protecting free and fair elections all over the world. But that is the case now, and we now know that Facebook's action or inaction can spell the difference between elections going smoothly and democracies straining under a siege of misinformation and propaganda.

To Facebook's credit, it has become more responsive in recent months, including cracking down on domestic disinformation networks, banning particularly bad actors such as Alex Jones of Infowars, and hiring more people to deal with emerging threats.

But Facebook would not have done this on its own. It took sustained pressure from lawmakers, regulators, researchers, journalists, employees, investors and users to force the company to pay more attention to threats of election interference.

Facebook has shown, time and again, that it behaves responsibly only when placed under a well-lit microscope. So as our collective attention fades from the midterms, it seems certain that outsiders will need to continue to hold the company accountable, and push it to do more to safeguard its users — in every country, during every election season — from a flood of lies and manipulation.