

THE SHAME OF WORKING FOR THE ASSHOLE COMPANIES OF SILICON VALLEY

Ashamed to work in Silicon Valley

Wall Street has long been the industry people love to hate. But as big tech's reputation plummets, suddenly a job at Facebook doesn't seem so cool



Silicon Valley has taken over Wall Street as the political bogeyman of choice. Photograph: Jeff Chiu/AP

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When Danny Greg first moved to San Francisco to work at Github in 2012, he used to get high-fives in the street from strangers when he wore his company hoodie.

These days, unless he's at an investor event, he's cautious about wearing branded clothing that might indicate he's a techie. He's worried about the message it sends.

Greg is one of many people working in tech who are increasingly self-conscious about how the industry – represented by consumer-facing tech titans like Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Twitter and Uber – is perceived: as underregulated, overly powerful companies filled with wealthy tech bros and “brilliant assholes” with little regard for the local communities they occupy. Silicon Valley has taken over from [Wall Street as the political bogeyman of choice](#), turning tech workers – like it or not – into public ambassadors for the 1%.

“I would never say I worked at [Facebook](#),” said one 30-year-old software engineer who left the company last year to pursue an alternative career. Instead, at dinner parties he would give purposefully vague responses and change the subject. “There’s this song and dance you learn to play because people are quick to judge.”

Now wealthy white geeks go to Stanford and then waltz into a VC or tech firm

Like Wall Street before, the tech industry is a justifiable punchbag. “MBA jerks used to go and work for Wall Street, now wealthy white geeks go to Stanford and then waltz into a VC or tech firm.”

Patrick Connelly, founder of health-tech startup Corevity, also sees the Wall Street parallels.

“The focus of [Silicon Valley](#) used to be innovation with the wonderful bonus of money on the side of that, but those two things seem to have switched – just as the pencil-pushing mentality of finance in the 70s became the champagne lifestyle in the 2000s,” he said. “People have come to have too much swagger and not enough insights.”

With that swagger comes bad behavior, as highlighted at Uber, the subject of a litany of scandals including allegations of [sexual harassment](#), [intellectual property theft](#) and driver [manipulation](#).



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Former Uber CEO Travis Kalanick has been held up as the typical Silicon Valley ‘brilliant asshole’. Photograph: Danish Siddiqui/Reuters

“We have this habit of highlighting and celebrating brilliant assholes like Steve Jobs and [Uber co-founder and ousted CEO] Travis Kalanick, when the reality is they are awful human beings,” said Greg, head of technology at e-commerce startup [Brandless](#), adding that it is women and people of colour who tend to bear the brunt of their behaviour.

“It reminds me of stories that came out of Wall Street in the 1980s, when sexism was part and parcel of the culture,” he added. “Stories like that become public very quickly and people find out and paint tech with one brush.”

Some of this behaviour stems from the hubris that positions profit-seeking corporations as benevolent forces in the world.

“You are selling ads, you’re not really making the world a better place,” noted the former Facebooker. “But most people drank the Kool-aid.”

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It’s a view echoed by one current Googler in her 20s, who is embarrassed by tech companies’ cluelessness about their reputation outside of the Silicon Valley bubble.

“Internally I don’t think they have a good read on how they’re perceived,” she said, citing the backlash after it was discovered that ads were appearing around videos [promoting extremist views on YouTube](#) or the investigation into possible Russian interference in the US election, [including buying ads](#) on Google, Facebook and Twitter.

“[Googlers] will say ‘why are the papers making a big deal out of this, I don’t get it’. Are you fucking joking? These people don’t realise the scale of what they are doing,” she said.

“Some of these folks aren’t the most socially gifted people and therefore suddenly having a culture encouraging this experience for them bleeds into everything, giving them a sense of self-importance and entitlement. It’s effectively like dealing with children all the time,” Greg said, referencing his time at Dropbox when people would “fly around the office on these stupid scooters and skateboards”.



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At an Apple store in France, activists painted the window to protest the company’s tax evasion. Photograph: Anne-Christine Poujoulat/AFP/Getty Images

The combination of the toxic culture in some tech companies combined with rising inequality and gentrification in local communities leads to “aggression and suspicion”, he added.

Greg first experienced this in San Francisco in 2014, when protesters would picket [the tech shuttle buses](#), which had become a symbol of gentrification and a lack of community engagement, and display signs saying “techies go home”.

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“Being in tech puts a badge on you. Things are going bad for a large section of the economy in this area and here’s a shiny beacon of people getting paid far too much for what they do. It’s a very easy target especially if you mark yourself as one,” he said.

Greg mentions one particularly excruciating clash, captured on video, where a group of Dropbox employees awkwardly tried to move a bunch of local kids off a soccer pitch.

All of this feeds into the perception that techies are, according to the former Facebooker, “pod people” who aren’t part of the community.

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“You wake up, get the shuttle bus, go to the bubble of campus and order food via an app when you get home. You are not a citizen, just a bizarre leech who makes money,” he explained.

While there’s still plenty of fodder for the satirical TV show Silicon Valley, Greg is hopeful the industry can become less embarrassing. When hiring for his own team he screens interviewees carefully to weed out “covert brilliant assholes”.

“There’s a large and growing number of people who have negative emotions about how it is right now and really want to change it.”

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