Amazon’s plans for a New York office are under new scrutiny

A month ago, when Amazon announced that it would build regional offices in New York and Virginia at great expense to the taxpayers there, I wrote that it had misunderstood the moment:

> *Perhaps the furor over Amazon’s regional offices will blow over. But it’s hard not to feel today as if the company misread the room — overestimating the public’s appetite for a billion-dollar giveaway to one of the world’s biggest companies, and underestimating the public’s ability to raise hell on- and offline. Amazon may yet feel that pain, in the long run.*

Today, Amazon met the room: 150 protesters who showed up to the first New York City Council hearing about the plan. According to reports from the scene, demonstrators’ concerns start with the $3 billion in incentives that New York plans to give Amazon in exchange for locating there — and, it says, creating 25,000 jobs. Here’s Leticia Miranda in *BuzzFeed*:

> *”You’re worth a trillion dollars,” New York City Council Speaker Corey Johnson told the company, prompting applause and cheers from protesters in the hall. “Why do you need our $3 billion when we have crumbling subways, crumbling public housing, people without healthcare, public schools that are overcrowded?”*
>
> *New York City Economic Development Corporation’s President James Patchett defended the deal at the hearing, along with Amazon’s vice president of public policy Brian Huseman and*

> *Amazon's HQ2 search executive Holly Sullivan. Both Patchett and Huseman* ***referenced an estimated $27.5 billion in tax revenue*** *for the state and city over the next 25 years as a result of the project.*

At times, Amazon executives sounded tone-deaf – as in this exchange captured by Shirin Ghaffary at *Recode*:

> *Johnson criticized the company for making no mention of the potential impact on the city's crumbling public transportation infrastructure, aside from a plan to build a helipad.*
>
> *"Amazon will be paying for the helipad," said Huseman – a clarification that was met with sarcastic laughs from the crowd.*
>
> *"I would hope so!" said Johnson.*

But as reporters were quick to add, the protests may not matter: the City Council lacks the authority to halt the deal, which was made in secret with New York State and the city's Economic Development Corporation.

Still, Amazon has stepped up its lobbying efforts since the deal was announced, J. David Goodman reported in the *New York Times.*

> *For weeks, executives in charge of the company's public policy have been making frequent flights to New York City from their offices in Washington, D.C. They visited the Queensbridge Houses, the nation's largest public housing development, a short walk from the future site of the Amazon offices, and have held meetings with community groups.*
>
> *This month, the company hired SKDKnickerbocker, a prominent political consulting and public relations firm that has advised several Democratic campaigns and whose roster*

> *includes influential strategists like Anita Dunn, a top White House official in the Obama administration. Devon Puglia, a former spokesman for the city comptroller, is leading the firm's work on Amazon.*

There's evidence that the goodwill tour is paying off: last week, a Quinnipiac University poll found that 57 percent of New Yorkers say they approve of the deal, while only 26 percent disapprove.

But it's not unclear to me that Amazon has the situation under control. Even as its executives work to calm residents in Long Island City, a group of employees is calling the company out for what it says are unfair working conditions. It's part of a unionization campaign launched on Wednesday. Here's Josh Eidelson:

> *Employees backing the union effort said in interviews Tuesday that the issues at the warehouse include safety concerns, inadequate pay, and 12-hour shifts with insufficient breaks and unreasonable hourly quotas, after which they lose more of their day waiting unpaid in long lines for security checks.*
>
> *"They talk to you like you're nothing — all they care about is their numbers," said Rashad Long, who makes $18.60 an hour and commutes four hours a day to work at the warehouse. "They talk to you like you're a robot."*

The campaign promises to bring new scrutiny to the company at a time when it is more reliant than ever on positive public opinion. The recent history of cities that experience tech booms is that all those highly paid new employees drive up housing costs, pushing longtime residents out of their neighborhoods. Winning them over is going to require more than a promise to pay for the helipad.

Democracy

How WhatsApp Fuels Fake News and Violence in India

Timothy McLaughlin is the latest to explore WhatsApp's effects on India:

> *A former employee in Facebook's India operations said the company was largely focused on bolstering two key metrics: the number of monthly active users and time spent on the platform. They failed to identify disinformation and false news flooding Facebook. This content then began to "migrate" to WhatsApp. "The thing about Facebook is that, as a company, unless it is knocked down it won't learn," says the former employee, who would only speak on condition of anonymity. […]*
>
> *Meanwhile, the delay in a green light for the payment platform drags on. The company is now turning its focus to launching first in other countries, Daniels told the Economic Times, the clearest sign yet that the delay has become a large enough issue to force a rethinking of business strategy.*

"Yellow Vests" Are Sharing So Many Conspiracy Theories About The Strasbourg Shooting That Facebook Groups Are Locking Their Comments

A shooting in eastern France has led to widespread conspiracy theory posts on Facebook connected to the Yellow Vest protests, Ryan Broderick reports:

> *One of the most prevalent conspiracy theories within the Yellow Vest groups started after a user uploaded a photo of a tweet on their computer screen to a group with around 37,000 members called "France Is Angry." The post claims that the official Twitter account for the Grand Est and Bas-Rhin region, where Strasbourg is located, warned people to stay away from the Christmas market an hour before the attack took*

> *place.*
>
> *What the user didn't seem to understand — along with the 6,000 other people who shared this post — is that timestamps on tweets are user-specific. If you don't set-up your timezone properly on Twitter, it can lead to tweets showing the wrong timestamp.*

What Google's CEO told Congress about China — and what he didn't

Colin Lecher performs a close reading on what Sundar Pichai said about Project Dragonfly during Tuesday's hearing:

> *Pichai also made it clear that, whether the company currently has no "plans" to launch the product, Google certainly hasn't halted work completely. In fact, it has continued to devote substantial resources to the project. While saying the effort was "limited," Pichai at one point said Google had devoted about 100 people to it, although The Intercept has reported the number is closer to 300. "I'm happy to, you know, consult, be transparent as we take steps toward launching a product in China," Pichai said, suggesting there are ongoing conversations about what that future may bring for China.*

Google CEO Sundar Pichai: Fears about artificial intelligence are "very legitimate," he says in Post interview

Pichai continued to avoid the hardest parts of the Dragonfly question in a subsequent interview with Drew Harwell and Tony Romm:

> *When asked if it's possible that Google might make a product that allows Chinese officials to know who searches for sensitive terms, such as the Tiananmen Square massacre, Pichai said it was too soon to make any such judgments.*
>
> *"It's a hypothetical," Pichai said. "We are so far away from*

> *being in that position.”*

Google studies steps to open representative office in Vietnam, government says

Google may open an office in Vietnam due to a local law aimed at cracking down on dissenters, Mai Nguyen reports:

> *The news comes as a controversial cybersecurity law is set to take effect next month, requiring global technology firms to open local offices and store data in the country.*
>
> *“Google is studying steps to open a representative office in Vietnam,” the website quoted Kent as saying on Tuesday, and adding that Google would abide by laws of the host nation, while ensuring it does not contradict international laws.*

Elsewhere

Bomb threat at Facebook’s Silicon Valley HQ sparks evacuation

There was apparently nothing to this, but it was a scary moment in a year that had previously seen a shooting on the YouTube campus.

Facebook and ZeniMax settle legal battle over Oculus VR and stolen secrets

ZeniMax Media and Facebook settled their long-running legal dispute over the creation of the Oculus Rift VR headset, which ZeniMax had claimed was the result of stolen trade secrets. Terms of the settlement were not disclosed.

How Facebook Schemed Against Its Users

Kashmir Hill unwinds the mystery of how a sex worker was repeatedly outed to her clients, under her real name, by Facebook’s People You May Know feature. A possible culprit:

the company's decision, made public in last week's release of documents by UK parliament, to collect Android contacts and call data without explicitly seeking user permission:

> *As usual, Facebook's machinations are shrouded in mystery to the detriment of its vulnerable users. If Facebook would be more forthcoming about the information it's collecting about its users and how it uses that data, whether for advertising or for People You May Know, then users like Leila could protect themselves. But Facebook prefers to be vague, whether because it's "proprietary information" or information that would disturb its users enough to abandon the platform altogether.*

Revealed: Google's 'two-tier' workforce training document

Julie Carrie Wong gets a hold of Google's training manual for dealing with temps, vendors, and contractors — TVCs — who make up 49.95 percent of the company's workforce. Among other things the documents warn Googlers never to buy TVCs T-shirts as a thank you, suggesting instead that employees send them a nice note via Google+. This is not a joke.

> *The risks Google appears to be most concerned about include standard insider threats, like leaks of proprietary information, but also — and especially — the risk of being found to be a joint employer, a legal designation which could be exceedingly costly for Google in terms of benefits.*

> *Google's treatment of TVCs has come under increased scrutiny by the company's full-time employees (FTEs) amid a nascent labor movement at the company, which has seen workers speak out about both their own working conditions and the morality of the work they perform.*

Google relents and transfers Duck.com to DuckDuckGo

Google acquired Duck.com in 2010 when it bought something

called On2 Technologies. It was always hilariously petty that the the company redirected Duck.com to Google, even after DuckDuckGo had risen to become a prominent (if terribly named) competitor. In any case, Google has now relinquished the domain to DuckDuckGo.

How Do You Recover After Millions Have Watched You Overdose?

Police and bystanders are routinely posting images of drug users passed out in the throes of their addiction. It has made recovery more complicated for many of those addicted, write Katharine Q. Seelye, Julie Turkewitz, Jack Healy and Alan Blinder:

> *Addiction experts say the videos are doing little else than publicly shaming drug users, and the blunt horror of the images may actually increase the stigma against them. Users themselves disagree on whether the humiliation helped them clean up their lives.*
>
> *"We're showing you this video of them at the worst, most humiliating moment of their life," said Daniel Raymond, deputy director of policy and planning at the Harm Reduction Coalition, an advocacy group. "The intent is not to help these people. The intent is to use them as an object lesson by scapegoating them."*

2018 Was the Year Historians Went Viral on Twitter. Here's How They Made Their Fantastic Threads.

Rebecca Onion writes about the charming phenomenon of Twitter historians going viral by providing timely context around current events:

> *"Probably the best thing about a Twitter thread is speed," Joshua Rothman, of the University of Alabama, wrote in an email. Rothman posted a thread about the 19th century writer Charles Ball's experience of family separation during the*

> *slave trade just as we were learning about the worst effects of the Trump administration's border policies. "For historians, even writing an op-ed might have a delay of a couple of days. But Twitter allows for the transmission and circulation of historical knowledge and context in real time, as events are unfolding. And even though that speed does lead to less careful consideration than a lot of people might like to see, the news cycle moves so quickly that context sometimes never appears unless it's provided on the spot."*

Launches

Facebook redesigns Life Events feature with animated photos, videos and more

This is fine.

Giphy launched a keyboard extension and sticker maker for iOS 12 users

It is insane to me that a GIF library is still an independent business in December 2018.

Takes

Google still has no answers for YouTube's biggest problem

Julia Alexander says Sundar Pichai owed Congress better answers to their questions about YouTube:

> *As it stands, YouTube's community guidelines regarding hate speech and hateful content are somewhat vague. Videos that promote "violence against or has the primary purpose of inciting hatred against individuals or groups based on certain attributes," violate the company's terms of service, but that doesn't include videos that pose a question. A video called "What is Frazzled.rip?" or "What is Q Anon" would be*

> *allowed on the platform, even though the recommended videos just off to the side create a dangerous rabbit hole for people to fall into.*
>
> *Understanding how to fix this problem means understanding how people are using — and abusing — the system. It's something that neither Pichai nor Wojcicki have an answer to right now.*

Congress' confused Google hearing shows why lawmakers need to regulate the company.

Will Oremus says Congress was unfairly maligned for their dumb-sounding questions after yesterday's Pichai hearing:

> *Tempting as it is to mock members of Congress whose questions evinced confusion (Poe was not the last to mistake the iPhone for a Google product), the lesson here is not just that our lawmakers are old and out-of-touch. That neither Poe nor most Americans understand how Google's vast digital surveillance network operates is not an indictment of them; it's an indictment of Google.*
>
> *Yes, the company offers a "privacy checkup" that walks users through an array of settings, as Pichai pointed out to lawmakers. But like rival Facebook and others in the online advertising game, it also tracks and targets people in all kinds of ways that remain opaque even to industry experts. These companies benefit from our ignorance because it's easier to use their services when we're not fully aware of the trade-offs to our privacy. And to some extent, they also benefit from Congress' ignorance because it allows them to dismiss tough questions on technicalities.*

The State of Technology at the End of 2018

It's always worth reading Ben Thompson's thoughts on the state of play in the tech industry — especially when his thoughts mention me by name in the lead item! But here is the rest of

his argument in a nutshell:

> *This, then, is the state of technology in 2018: the enterprise market is thriving, and the consumer market is stagnant, dominated by the "innovations" that a few large behemoths deign to develop for consumers (and probably by ripping off a smaller company). Meanwhile a backlash is brewing on both sides of the political spectrum, but with no immediately viable outlet through competition or antitrust action, the politics surrounding technology simply becomes ever more rancid.*

Why Jack Dorsey in Myanmar Isn't the Problem; You Are.

Burmese writer Saya Iwasaki tells everyone to lay off Jack Dorsey for tweeting about his recent 10-day silent meditation in Myanmar:

> *The truth is that there is no absolute truth. Who are you to say Dorsey can or can't go to Myanmar? It's completely different if he's having tea with the the people who are truly to blame for the genocide. Is it so wrong for Dorsey to highlight the beauty of a country that has been so misunderstood by foreign media? This is by no means an endorsement of his privilege. Simply put, Myanmar could use more critical thinking from the world especially now, so that its economy can sustain and change continues. It's been a democracy for six years after fifty+ years of colonialism and military dictatorship.* ***Six years after fifty years of oppression.*** *When a problem is happening, is the solution to ignore it or address it in an actionable way?*
>
> *There is so much to Myanmar that is hidden by the headlines, that its international identity has become two words: the Rohingya crisis. There is no doubt that there is an atrocity happening with an estimated 43,000 and possibly a lot more missing or dead, and that justice must be served. However, if you're challenging the Myanmar government for not doing its*

> *job enough, what have you done today about America's systemic racial injustices against African-Americans, or the separation of kids from their parents along the border?*

And finally …

The 50 Worst Things On The Internet In 2018

Katie Notopoulos and Ryan Broderick do us the great disservice of preserving some of the worst things seen online this year, including a Tide Pod Fleshlight, Sonic the Hedgehog curry, and a series of memorably terrible TikToks.

Read it if you dare.

Talk to me

Send me tips, comments, questions, and public comment about Amazon: casey@theverge.com.

https://www.theverge.com/2018/12/13/18138600/amazon-new-york-protests-city-council-union