

Ethical Failings in Silicon Valley



... and what you can do about them

Danny Colligan

4/15/11

Stanford ACM Presentation

Outline

1. Motivation
2. Examples
3. Responses
4. What can we do?

Why?

- Should be concerned with the moral consequences of our actions
- We prefer ethical behavior in our community and in our workplace
- Don't want our work to harm others
- Don't want to be forced to do immoral things professionally

What?

- Stuff that your grandma could understand (not super technical -- no DRM, copyright, net neutrality, etc.)
- Local: Silicon Valley companies
- Focus on technology companies (so not: financial firms, energy firms, etc.)

Narus



- Owned by Boeing, located in [Sunnyvale](#)
- Sells "real-time traffic intelligence" equipment that was used in Egypt's [crackdown](#) on the recent democratic movement



- Other clients include governments of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia
- Similar offenders: [McAfee](#) (owned by Intel), [Siemens](#), Nokia, [Cisco](#)

Palantir



- Headquartered in [Palo Alto](#)
- Involved in a [conspiracy](#) to [intimidate](#) and [disrupt](#) supporters of WikiLeaks on behalf of the US Chamber of Commerce and Bank of America

[Glenn Greenwald](#): "What is set forth in these proposals for Bank of America quite possibly constitutes serious crimes. Manufacturing and submitting fake documents with the intent they be published likely constitutes forgery and fraud. Threatening the careers of journalists and activists in order to force them to be silent is possibly extortion and, depending on the specific means to be used, constitutes other crimes as well."



PayPal



- Headquartered in [San Jose](#), owned by eBay
- [Refused](#) to process payments to WikiLeaks
- [Temporarily refused](#) to process payments for Bradley Manning's defense fund ([reinstated](#) after public outcry)



- Similar offenders: [Amazon](#), [Visa](#), Mastercard, [Apple](#), [PostFinance](#), [Bank of America](#)

Jeppesen Dataplan



- Based in San Jose, owned by Boeing
- Perform "extraordinary rendition" flights for the CIA where detainees are abducted and tortured
- Currently [being sued](#) by ACLU on behalf of Ahmed Agiza, Abou Elkassim Britel and Binyam Mohamed



Yahoo!



- Based in [Sunnyvale](#)
- Helped Chinese Communist authorities [identify](#) and jail journalist Shi Tao and writer Wang Xiaoning

[Reporters Without Borders](#): "We already knew that Yahoo! collaborates enthusiastically with the Chinese regime in questions of censorship, and now we know it is a Chinese police informant as well"



Shi Tao



Facebook



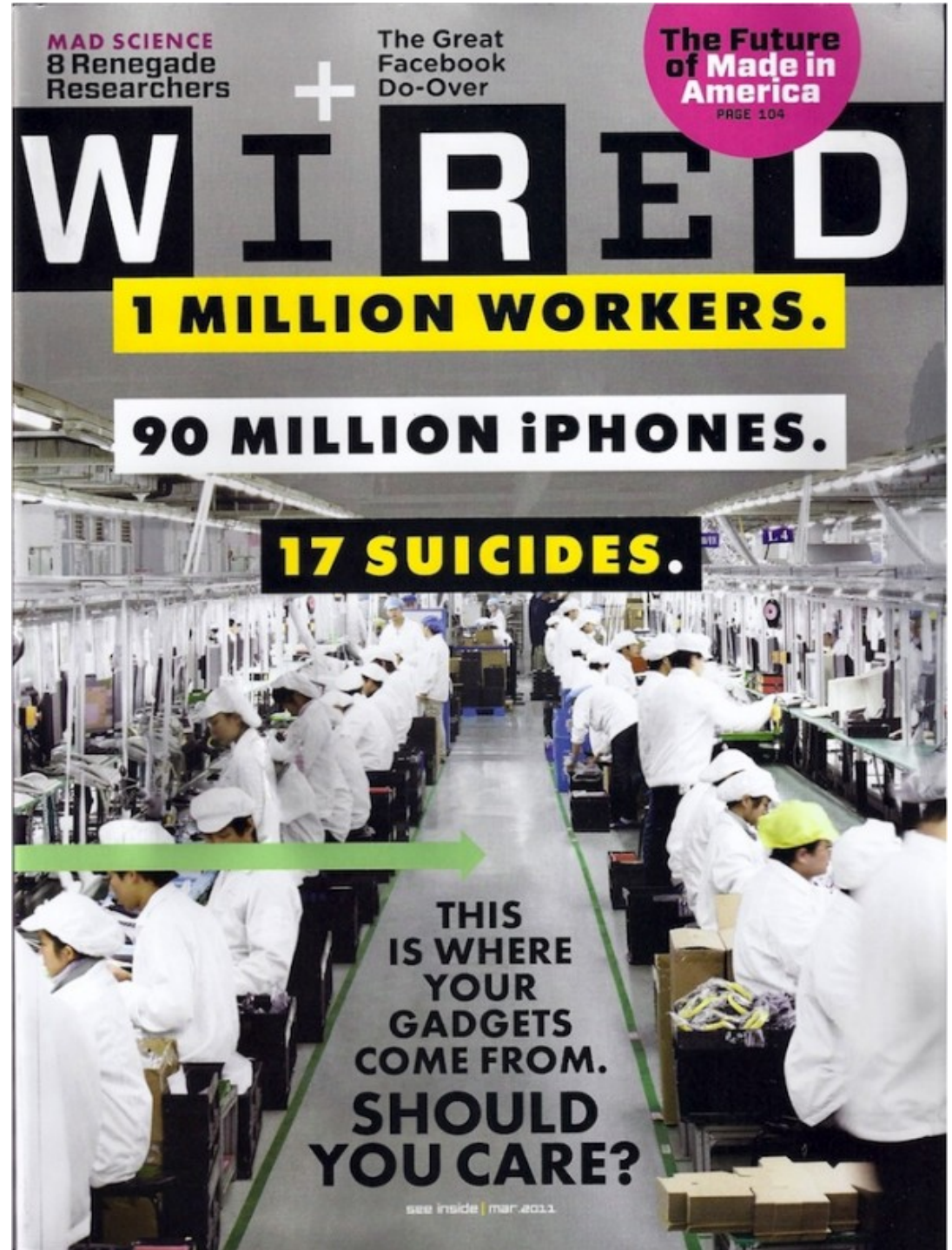
- Suppresses activism by [taking down pages](#) of progressive groups
- Stifles criticism of Facebook by [censoring](#) search results and [taking down](#) pages
- [Prohibits](#) advertisements about certain topics, such as marijuana policy
- Provided a speaking platform for war criminal [George W. Bush](#)



Apple



- Located in [Cupertino](#)
- Working conditions in Chinese factories drive many laborers to [suicide](#)
- Similar offenders: Dell, [Hewlett Packard](#)



AT&T



- Collaborated in the NSA's [warrantless wiretapping](#) program
- San Francisco (Folsom street) branch of operation revealed to the public by [Mark Klein](#)
- Similar offenders: [Verizon](#), BellSouth, SBC



- Shifts revenue around to [offshore tax havens](#) to avoid paying taxes
- [Collaborated](#) with the Chinese government in [censoring](#) search results about political topics such as the Tiananmen Square Massacre (since stopped)



More!

- [Labor](#) violations
- Environmental offenses
- Weapons / War
- And so on...

Responses (1/6)

But what about company X? They are doing bad stuff too! Why didn't you include them?

- This list was not meant to be exhaustive



the Corporation
a film by Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott & Joel Bakan

Responses (2/6)

But what about all the good stuff these companies do?

- The good that these companies might do does not excuse their unethical behavior
- The point is not to achieve a "balance" of good and bad practices ... the point is to eliminate the bad



Responses (3/6)

Company X is doing stuff way worse than company Y in your presentation... how dare you morally equate them!

- Certainly, some of the companies in this presentation are doing worse things than others
- I don't mean to imply that they are morally equivalent, simply that they are all undesirable



Responses (4/6)

But their advertisers / clients / customers are making them do this! Isn't that a justification for these actions?

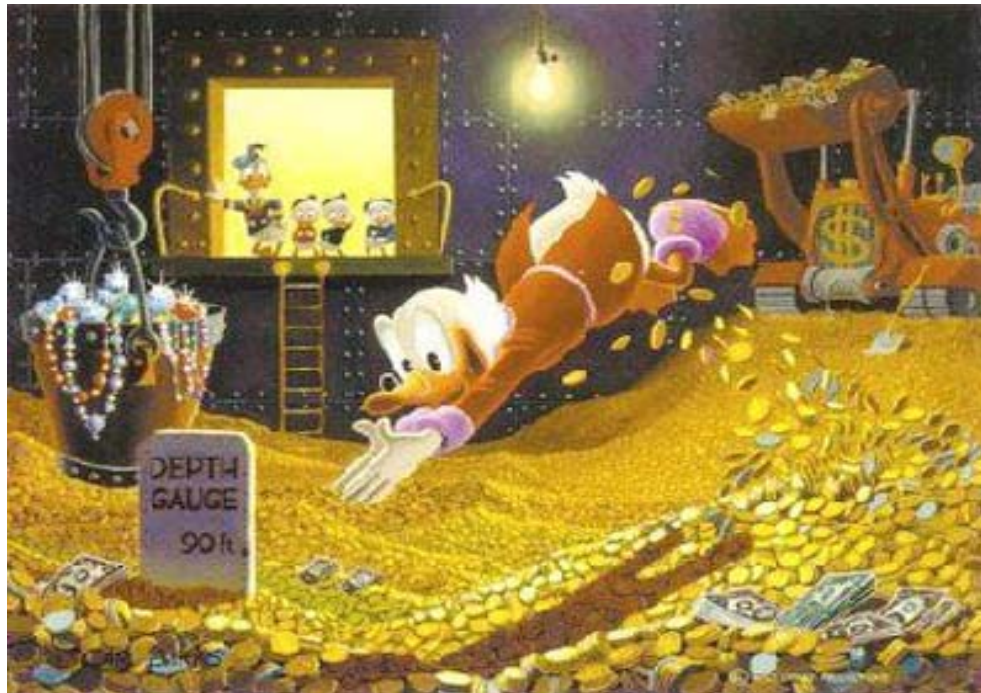
- No, it's not
- "[Just following orders](#)"



Responses (5/6)

But not doing these bad things will cut into profits!

- Of course -- corporations are behaving this way precisely because it is profitable
- There is no market for morals



Responses (6/6)

But this is, like, every company in Silicon Valley!

- That's exactly the point: moral failings are pervasive in Silicon Valley
- Corporations often have no incentive to act morally, and therefore don't
- There is no "good" company that is immune from these pressures

What can we do? (1/5)

ACM report card

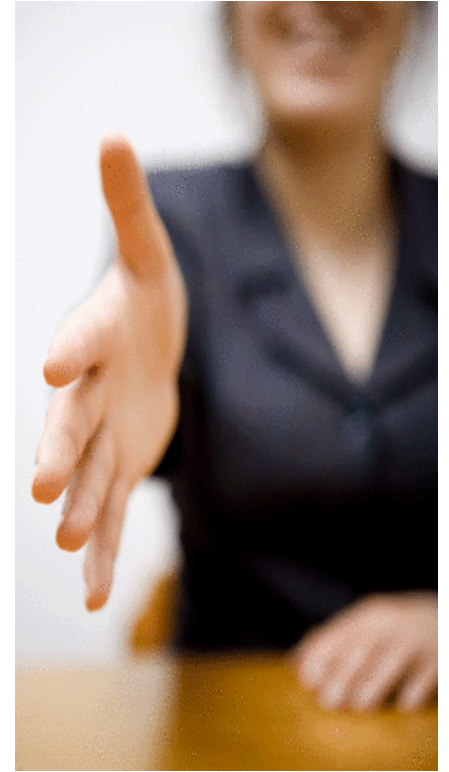


- Publish report on how local companies conform to a set of ethical standards
- Punish poorly behaving companies with bad publicity, reward good behaving companies with positive publicity

What can we do? (2/5)

Ban offending organizations from Stanford

- Ban recruiters from campus
- Prevent representatives from speaking
- Reclaim company-affiliated buildings



What can we do? (3/5)

Unionize

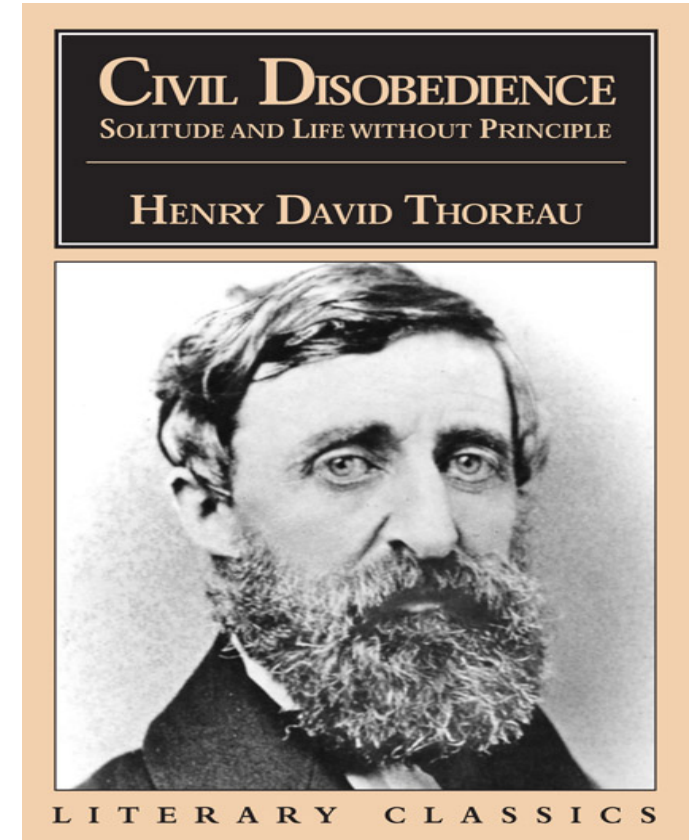
- Formation of "ethical unions"



What can we do? (4/5)

Direct action

- Protests
- Civil disobedience
- etc.



What can we do? (5/5)

Again, this is hardly an exhaustive list. There are plenty of other things to do...

Questions?



"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"