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'Pick a Side': Russia Invasion Dilemma for U.S. Big Tech

By Joshua Melvin for AFP

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U.S. tech giants were under intense pressure to pick a side regarding Ukraine's invasion, at once facing calls to stand against Moscow's internationally condemned war but also Kremlin retribution for resistance.

Services like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have a unique power because of their global reach and ubiquity, but they are profit-motivated companies so a stridently principled stand can be bad for business.

Since Moscow attacked its neighbor Ukraine this week, the besieged nation has urged firms from Apple to Google and Netflix to cut off Russia, while Facebook said its service was curbed for refusing to bend to Kremlin demands.

Twitter, which faced fines and slower service last year over government orders to remove

certain content, reported Saturday its network was "being restricted for some people in Russia."

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"Western companies have provided an online space for Russians to get information about the atrocities their government is committing in Ukraine," tweeted Alina Polyakova, president and CEO of the Center for European Policy Analysis.

"The Kremlin is moving aggressively to hide the truth," she added.

Some of the companies have so far taken measured steps. For example, Facebook's parent Meta and YouTube have both announced restricting Russian state-run media's ability to earn money on their platforms.

"We're pausing a number of channels' ability to monetize on YouTube, including several Russian channels affiliated with recent sanctions," a company statement said.

"In response to a government request, we've restricted access to RT and a number of other channels in Ukraine," it added, referring to Russian state-run TV.

'Spreading misinformation'

Ukraine's defiant government, which has urged its people to battle Russian forces, has asked for help from all quarters, including Apple's CEO Tim Cook.

"I appeal to you... to stop supplying Apple services and products to the Russian Federation, including blocking access to the Apple Store!" Ukraine's digital minister Mykhailo Fedorov wrote in a letter he posted to Twitter Friday.

Cook, tweeting a day before, wrote that he was "deeply concerned with the situation in Ukraine" and that the company would be supporting local humanitarian efforts.

Big tech companies have struggled with how to deal with authoritarian governments, including Russia, where Google and Apple complied last year with government orders to remove an opposition app and faced outrage.

As the crisis in Ukraine has escalated, tech companies have been accused of not doing all they could to stifle dangerous misinformation regarding the invasion.

"Your platforms continue to be key vectors for malign actors — including, notably, those affiliated with the Russian government — to not only spread disinformation, but to profit from it," US Senator Mark Warner wrote to Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google's parent Alphabet, on Friday.

Warner, who also sent letters to Meta, Reddit, Telegram, TikTok and Twitter, went on to accuse YouTube of continuing "to monetize the content of prominent influence actors ... publicly connected to Russian influence campaigns."

Tech companies have long vaunted themselves as defenders of free speech and democratic values, yet they have also been criticized for reaping many billions in advertising revenue on platforms that can have a harmful impact on users.

The invasion comes at a time when the dominant social media platform, Facebook, has been hit by a historic drop in its value due to worries over a mix of factors like slowing growth and pressure on its key ad business.

But experts urged a principled stand, especially in a case freighted with the gravity of the Ukraine invasion.

"It's appropriate for American companies to pick sides in geopolitical conflicts, and this should be an easy call," Alex Stamos, a former chief security officer at Facebook, tweeted Friday.

Another ex-Facebook worker, Brian Fishman, echoed that sentiment in a tweet: "Don't let humanity's worst use your tools."

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