

## Quinn: Silicon Valley becomes epicenter of social change

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What, some readers of the San Jose Mercury News and San Mateo County Times may have wondered, does that have to do with us?

A lot, it turns out. The decision by the Human Rights Campaign to place the ad, with an enormous image of a sign saying Arkansas was closed for business "due to discrimination," is one of the latest signs of Silicon Valley's growing symbolic power for causes of all stripes.



FILE - In this June 2, 2014, file photo, Apple CEO Tim Cook speaks at the Apple Worldwide Developers Conference event in San Francisco. Cook says that

In recent years, the tech industry has developed an uncanny ability to attract national attention, whether it wants it or not. The issues includes the NSA surveillance controversy, the diversity of the tech industry's workforce, the recent venture capital gender-discrimination case, and another so-called "religious freedom" law in Indiana.

For advocates, tying a social issue to the tech industry can raise its profile. And key tech leaders, adept at Twitter and social media, are willing to rally the troops to fight for certain causes, mostly of a progressive nature. Apple CEO Tim Cook, Marc Benioff of [Salesforce.com](http://Salesforce.com) and other tech leaders chimed in over the past week about both Arkansas' and

Indiana's legislation, which supporters say protects the rights of the religious but opponents claim threatens to enshrine discrimination in the law.

Twenty years ago, Silicon Valley was an isolated bubble, oddly unconnected to the social issues that were churning in America. Its leaders, if they did speak out, kept their policy talk to business issues, such as taxes, trade agreements and securities law.

Now, organizers and companies recognize that Silicon Valley is the new Hollywood. Consumers have a personal connection to technology products and services, amplifying the interest when the industry is involved in an issue.

"The balance of power is certainly shifting toward Silicon Valley," said Matt Mahan, chief executive of Brigade, a startup offering a civic engagement platform. Tech companies such as Facebook and Google have considerable reach. "That's a perfect storm for tech leaders to be evoked as advocates of social causes or play a bigger role in the political system."

The Human Rights Campaign targeted readers in the two newspapers (as well as the online edition of The Wall Street Journal) to elicit help from tech leaders courted by states for the jobs and businesses they might bring, said Jason Rahlan, HRC's communications director.

"Governors are focused on bringing home the bacon," he said, and the ad makes the point that Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson is "actively courting Silicon Valley investment."

Do Cook's tweets against anti-gay measures matter more than Instagram posts from celebrities, such as Miley Cyrus? "I can't say which voices are more impactful," Rahlan



*This full-page ad from the Human Rights Campaign ran in The Mercury News on Sunday.*

said. "It has been tremendously encouraging to see the leaders in the high-tech industry speak out."

So far, the results have been mixed. On Tuesday, the Arkansas legislature passed the measure. Gov. Hutchinson is expected to sign it. And in Indiana, the national backlash against the new law continued. The governors of Connecticut and Washington imposed a ban on state-funded travel to the Hoosier state and Wilco canceled its May 7 show in Indianapolis.

When it comes to other social issues, however, the tables are often turned on the Valley, and the tech industry comes to represent what is wrong about America.

Let's take income inequality. When 142 shuttle drivers, spread out over five tech firms, voted whether to unionize in February, it was national news, because the stark contrast between wealthy tech workers and the poorly paid drivers who shuttle them from high-end homes to luxurious offices was an easy-to-grasp symbol of the wealth gap in this country.

The Silicon Valley success story "cuts both ways," said Derecka Mehrens, executive director of Working Partnerships USA, which along with the AFL-CIO and other groups recently launched Silicon Valley Rising, an effort to bring labor issues to the attention of tech leaders. "If you look at regions around the country, Silicon Valley is on top of their list as a model. But what we want to put a spotlight on is that economy comes with costs."

Labor is betting, not without reason, that any win for valley contract workers will reverberate nationally, she said.

This new symbolism, of course, comes with risks. Apple could lose customers who don't like to be reminded that the maker of their smartphone is against what they may think is a law protecting their religious freedom. And the target on the valley's back means every misstep or lawsuit will receive an outsized, maybe unfair, share of attention.

That is the price of success.

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