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Headline: Does Big Tech's green credentials really stand up?

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At the end of October, e-commerce giant Amazon launched its 'Climate Pledge Friendly' program in Europe, creating a badge for products with sustainable certifications sold on the platform. Image: AFP/JOHANNES EISELE.

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In recent months, the GAFAM group of Big Tech companies — Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft — have ramped up announcements affirming their commitment to tackling climate change. Could this be a sign of Big Tech's genuine desire to go green or is it merely an exercise in greenwashing?

At the end of October, the e-commerce behemoth Amazon made news with the launch of its "Climate Pledge Friendly" program in Europe, creating a platform for products with sustainable certifications sold on the website. The initiative covers products spanning beauty, fashion, grocery, household, office and electronics.

This dedicated section of the website encompasses more than 40,000 products certified by various programs, such as Fairtrade International and the Carbon Trust. Amazon hopes the initiative will guide consumers and encourage them to make more environmentally friendly choices.

It may seem like a commendable effort, but the 40,000-product selection is merely a drop in the ocean, according to campaigners from the British arm of the non-profit organization Greenpeace, who point out that Amazon ships four to five billion packages a year worldwide.

"Amazon sells millions of products and this latest initiative covers just a tiny fraction of the total. By certifying only a limited range of goods, Amazon is implicitly admitting that the rest of its business model isn't up to scratch," Will McCallum, senior campaigner at Greenpeace U.K., told British newspaper The Guardian. "The environmental and climate crises we are facing demand more than token gestures and piecemeal action."

This is a point of view shared by Frederic Bordage, founder of the GreenIT collective of experts.

"Amazon destroys products returned by customers when it is cheaper to do so. Therefore, selling sustainable products while persisting with these practices poses a problem. You can do what you want in parallel, but as long as you're destroying new [products], the impact of that action will be reduced," the French sustainable IT specialist told ETX Studio.

Towards carbon-free business for Google, Apple and Microsoft

Amazon is not the only Big Five tech firm to have recently rolled out an initiative in favor of the environment. Facebook launched its "Climate Science Information Center" last Sept. 15, which

features factual and up-to-date resources, as well as actionable steps users can take in their daily lives to help combat climate change.

But Bordage warned, “We can say great, that’s progress! But let’s not forget that Facebook’s economic model is based on our available human brain time and our data. The more time you spend on Facebook, the more the social network builds your profile and the more money it makes. But what makes IT’s negative impact on the environment is directly dependent on the time we spend at our screens.”

At the same time, ahead of Global Climate Change Week in early October, the web search giant Google announced a pledge to run its entire business on carbon-free energy by 2030 — objectives that Facebook, Apple and Microsoft also have in sight.

Focusing attention on a single aspect of the environmental crisis

For Bordage, as ambitious as these initiatives may be, they are still a long way from addressing the problem in its entirety.

“The environmental crisis we are experiencing is essentially similar to a boat with several holes: exhaustion of halieutic resources, global warming, collapse in biodiversity, etc. The GAFAM companies focus attention on just one hole, but forget all the others. So when Google announces that it’s going carbon free, that means it’s addressing one cause of the environmental crisis — the climate — while at the same time overlooking all the others.”

The expert also highlighted an ambiguity in the discourse of Big Tech, who, on the one hand, take concrete action in favor of the environment, but which remains small in scale compared to their volume of business — like Amazon launching its sustainable product platform while continuing to destroy unsold products.

“What would be really responsible from the GAFAM companies would be for them to rethink their economic model. Of course, that’s not easy — let’s not be too quick to judge,” said the GreenIT founder. “But maybe the first thing to do could be to stop talking to us just about the climate, but instead about the various environmental crises, which are interdependent. And that includes IT and the use of rare metals in building our devices.”

Between July and September 2020, the cumulative turnover of the GAFAM group of companies stood at \$265 billion (around P12.8 trillion). CC

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