

# Young tech moguls try to change world with pet projects

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Google's Sergey Brin puts his money where his meat is, funding the world's first test-tube hamburger in a bid to change the way the world eats. Tesla's Elon Musk pushes space tourism as a down payment on ensuring our intergalactic salvation. And Amazon's Jeff Bezos buys the Washington Post because, well, he hasn't said.

Driven by bravado, benevolence, boredom or perhaps equal measures of each, deep-pocketed and increasingly young CEOs in Silicon Valley and beyond are taking their money, power and fame and using it to plant flags in all kinds of surprising places.

And unlike in the valley's olden days, when successful tech pioneers quietly assembled philanthropic powerhouses or lobbied to protect open space, there's now a land rush by tech's young titans to leave their mark on the world - and maybe save it in the process, one newspaper or in-vitro burger at a time.

"This trend is driven by some weird amalgam of guilt and ego and a desire to help the planet, but it's like everybody wants to be Bono now," said author Michael S. Malone, long a keen observer of valley culture.

"They want to do good, but they also want to make themselves look good in the process. It's really just another form of one-upmanship."

Either way, the stampede is on. Whether it's Bezos with the "10,000 Year Clock" he's helping build inside a West Texas limestone mountain and his Blue Origin spaceflight startup, or Facebook founder and CEO

Mark Zuckerberg's \$100 million campaign to jump-start public education, the new moguls of online commerce and social media are fanning out with outsize dreams and a ton of cash. Brin, in particular, is one busy paradigm-shifter, pushing wind power and [driverless cars](#), even as he sports Google Glass eyewear while hawking humane hamburgers.

Some of these executive endeavors are simply hobbies or personal statements writ large. Oracle's Larry Ellison buys tennis tournaments, Asian art and exotic cars. Yahoo chief Marissa Mayer created a spreadsheet of ingredients for cupcake recipes. And Zuckerberg, acting on his passion for hunting and killing his own food, shot a bison and had the head mounted on a wall at Facebook headquarters.

While some of these activities may conjure up memories of the late billionaire Howard Hughes and his plywood-clad Spruce Goose, futurist Paul Saffo cautions that "quirky" may be the wrong adjective. "Silicon Valley," he said, "is full of ideas that seemed silly until they took off like a rocket and changed the world.

"And while Musk and Bezos with their space efforts may have personal goals that raise eyebrows, this is important stuff - opening up space for commercial ventures may eventually get us out of the gravity well of Earth."

Regis McKenna, a Silicon Valley veteran and Apple's first marketing guru, describes a long local legacy of techies converting their professional success into global good will, but adds that "they didn't brag about it and a lot of the philanthropic work was done under the radar."

"At one point," McKenna says, "Silicon Valley was known as the private foundation capital of the world, but today these sorts of things have become much more visible."

While local luminaries of the tech world have occasionally taken sharp career detours after finding success in their primary field (remember Atari pioneer Nolan Bushnell's ill-fated foray into the land of Chuck E. Cheese?), the trajectory of entrepreneur-CEO-altruist seems increasingly woven right into the valley's DNA. Tech engineer turned philanthropist turned Hollywood producer Jeff Skoll may be the textbook example, first finding success at eBay and then giving away a billion dollars to deal with water and nuclear issues by the time he was 46. But he's got more and more company on the dance floor.

"Once entrepreneurs get a big win under their belt, they'll often tackle things they weren't comfortable with before that," said Dale Partridge, the 28-year-old founder and CEO of online clothes-and-accessory "social-good retailer" Sevenly. His 2-year-old firm, which donates \$7 from each sale to a different charity every week, has "grown to 50 employees and revenues of eight figures."

Not everyone buys the purity-of-motive argument. Karen Brosi, a Palo Alto financial planner and tax expert, heard the Brin-burger story and thought: "That's just too weird. Or I see Larry Ellison buying an island in Hawaii and it seems like some of these guys have more dollars than sense."

Then there's Musk and Bezos, with their fascination with outer space.

"There are so many places in the world where these guys could make a significant difference with their dollars and you're going to take me on vacation to the moon?" Brosi said. "It makes me want to grab them by their ties and say, 'What are you thinking?'"

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## BIG SIDE PROJECTS

Corporate chieftains and their ambitious if sometimes quixotic side projects:

Sergey Brin, Google co-founder: A huge offshore wind power development to pump up the East Coast power grid; a driverless car; Google Glass; test-tube hamburger.

Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook: Founded Start-up:Education foundation with \$100 million in an attempt to transform public schools, starting with Newark, N.J.; shot and killed a bison as a way to show he's "thankful for the food I have to eat," and had the head mounted on a wall at work.

Elon Musk, founder and CEO of Tesla: Working on "The Hyperloop," a new high-speed transportation system that he says will take riders from Los Angeles to San Francisco in a half-hour; launched SpaceX to develop rockets that would open up space travel and eventually enable people to live on other planets.

Larry Ellison, co-founder and chief executive of Oracle: Made a brief cameo appearance in the 2010 movie "Iron Man 2"; bought a 50 percent share in a top U.S. tennis tournament; collects exotic cars; won the America's Cup in Spain in 2010 and his Team Oracle USA is currently defending the title in San Francisco; bought most of Lanai, Hawaii's sixth-largest island.

Marissa Mayer, former Google executive and president and CEO of Yahoo: A passionate baker, she once created a spreadsheet of ingredients for cupcake recipes, saying, "My hobbies actually make me better at work"; has invested in tech startups like crowd-sourced design retailer Minted and car-sharing marketplace Getaround.

Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon: To encourage more "long-

term thinking" on the planet, he's helping build a clock inside a West Texas mountain that will keep time for the next 10,000 years; bought the Washington Post for \$250 million of his own money; to open space travel to paying customers, he launched Blue Origin, a human spaceflight startup borne of his fascination with space travel, including "space hotels, amusement parks and colonies for 2 million or 3 million people orbiting the Earth."

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