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The Odd Philosophy Behind Jeff Bezos's Weird Investments

By Robinson Meyer



Reuters

So Jeff Bezos is buying *The Washington Post*, transferring ownership of the newspaper from one century, and one kind of coastal wealth, to another. And, on Twitter, after the "Whoa!" reactions died down, and the various financial justifications filtered out, and the questions about his political stewardship of paper went unanswered, another kind of Bezosalia began to circulate...

...namely, *all the weird stuff Jeff Bezos owns*.

Oh, yes, he founded and still serves as the CEO of Amazon.com, the retail behemoth that began selling books and now sells almost everything: [Web hosting](#) (to both Instagram and the NSA), [tablets of its own design](#), [magenta and green carriers for your pet ferret](#). But he also founds or invests in ventures of a more eclectic interest, including:

Business Insider, an aggregator and finance news site founded by Henry Blodget. Bezos invested \$5 million in BI earlier this year. [According to the Post's Andrea Peterson](#), BI has upped its reporting game since.

Blue Origin, a private company which hopes to lower the cost and improve the reliability of manned spaceflight. Blue Origin **unveiled** its prototype, a gumdrop-shaped spacecraft, *Goddard*, in 2007, and **crashed it** (by accident) in 2011. Its staff includes rocket scientists and it tinkers away in Texas.

The Long Now Foundation, a non-profit which famously hopes to build a clock -- a big mechanical one -- that **fulfills** the inventor Danny Hill's dream:

"I want to build a clock that ticks once a year. The century hand advances once every 100 years, and the cuckoo comes out on the millennium. I want the cuckoo to come out every millennium for the next 10,000 years."

Hill joined Stewart Brand (publisher of the *Whole Earth Catalog*) to form the Long Now foundation, into which Bezos has invested "at least \$42 million," according to a *Wall Street Journal* report last year. So far, the Long Now Foundation has drilled into the side of a mountain in Texas.

Recovering, from the seafloor, the rocket engines that took Apollo 11 to the moon. In April, Bezos led a team of deep sea divers to photograph the engines "in situ" and recover some of the most important chunks of ex-rocket. "We want this hardware to tell its true story, including its 5,000-mile-per-hour re-entry and subsequent impact with the ocean surface," he **told** the *LA Times*.

Even NASA was excited about the recovery of the Apollo 11 rockets. "We look forward to the restoration of these engines by the Bezos team," NASA administrator Charles Bolden said, "and applaud Jeff's desire to make these historic artifacts available for public display."



The Apollo 11 F1 rocket's thrust chambers on the ocean floor (Bezos Expeditions)

And perhaps NASA is the key to understanding these rich man's toys. In Blue Origin and the Apollo 11 recovery, there's a hope and respect for space flight. Outer space inspires Bezos, who was five when Armstrong took his first step, and he explicitly hopes it will inspire others too: "We're excited to get this hardware on display where just maybe it will inspire something amazing," he wrote afterwards.

It's foolhardy to search for psychological insights into anyone's assemblage of investments, to play

Freud to a capitalist inkblot, but I wonder if the *Post* fits loosely into a broad Bezosian vision. The Long Now Clock isn't just a weird, West Coast doohickey: it's a statement about the length and scope of human life and achievement. A span of time 10,000 years-long dwarfs the ages of Christianity, the Great Pyramids, and the human use of writing. Linguists estimate that complete language change -- a language mutating to the point where no word is recognizable -- takes 10,000 years. This is the scope, and the hope, of the Long Now: trusting in human life beyond its historically minuscule squabbles.



Scientists examine the thrust chamber after it was raised from the seafloor. (Bezos Expeditions)

The Long Now's shorter term projects reflect a similar ideal. As the novelist Robin Sloan [wrote about back in 2009](#), its [Seminar Debates](#) couch themselves in the tenets of kind argument. Here's how a Long Now debate works, [according to Sloan](#):

Take two debaters, Alice and Bob. Alice goes first, presenting her argument. Then Bob stands up, and before he can present his counter-argument, he has to *summarize Alice's argument* to her satisfaction. So it's basically an exercise in empathy and good faith. If Alice agrees that he's got it right, then Bob proceeds with his argument--and when he's done, Alice has to recapitulate it to *his* satisfaction.

Long Now debates foster, and are meant to foster, all the values which healthy democratic debate is itself supposed to embody: trust, coherence, respectful argument grounded in evidence. Listen to rhetoric about the worth of newspapers and you may hear about a few of those values, too.

It seems Jeff Bezos, a resident of crunchy Washington state, has gone and invested in ventures that reflect an idiosyncratic set of values. His portfolio in the agglomerate seems midcentury, nostalgic, American, while aspirational, philosophical and future-minded. Perhaps he sees a common thread among them, a trust in something robust, progressive and ongoing, in something that might be called civilization. In these days, when the American planning apparatus seems haggard and impoverished, a rich guy pumping money into newspapers, planning on and fascinated by the continued flourishing of

the human species, is a welcome thing.

Meanwhile, Bezos's day-to-day project, Amazon.com, with little sympathy, disembowels the systems that for a century stewarded American ideas.

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