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Shaping the new World Order

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A few of the alumni in Silicon Valley gathered at the historic California Theater in San Jose. Calif. From left, Evan Reece '01, Lifftopia; Charlie Hale '06, Pinterest; Samab Trankle '12, Netflix; Atheln Cat '05, Pinterest; Rob Webb '01, Lifftopia; Matt Cohen '01, Pinterest; Corley Hughes '98, Product Hunt.

Members of the Israeli parliament were ready with questions. The deputy foreign minister was on hand. The proceedings in the Knesset were being broadcast on Israel's equivalent of C-SPAN so the entire country could watch Google explain why it had decided to change the designation of the Palestinian Territories on its online map to Palestine.

CHARLIE HALE '06, there to represent Google, stepped up to the lectern.

Hale, a government major who studied with Colby Middle East expert Professor Guilain Denoeux, recalled the experience. "Just sitting in the Knesset and watching two members debate the '67 borders—watching that in person was just a really humbling experience," he said.

Humbling, but not intimidating.

As policy manager for Google[x] and Maps, Hale explained to the members of parliament that the Internet giant was following the lead of the United Nations and other international organizations—and he was aware of the political implications. "It ended up going all right," Hale said of the 2013 appearance. "They recognized we were trying to be respectful and thoughtful about our decision, but obviously they had a different view and voiced that strongly."

As a student Hale, whose first job out of Colby was with the State Department in Cairo, didn't expect that he would be immersed in Middle East policy as the representative of a global tech giant. Now he knows views of private companies like Google oftentimes have as much weight as a government's.

WELCOME TO THE NEW WORLD ORDER.

Hale is just one of many young, smart liberal arts graduates in tech/social media who are quietly shaping the world we live in. Colby philosophy majors are leading financial-technology firms. History majors are launching successful tech-based companies, and theater and dance majors are leading social media policy teams. The common denominator for this generation of Colby graduates? The ability to nimbly consider, analyze, and execute in an online environment that changes before your eyes—and then suddenly changes again.

Hale recounted his experience before the Knesset over coffee in a wooden booth in the cavernous community room at the headquarters of Pinterest, his present employer in San Francisco's hip SOMA (South of Market) district. Since moving on from Google, where he developed policy on everything from geopolitical issues to drone delivery systems and self-driving cars, the bearded, bespectacled Hale is now exploring privacy, copyright, and other issues relating to Pinterest's expansion to Europe and other parts of the world.

He brings a lot of knowledge to bear, but more importantly, he says, he knows how to learn. "The best qualities you can have are humility and an inquisitive mindset to learn from other people and to read and collate and research," Hale said. "Certainly a liberal arts degree tends to create that kind of thinker. I credit Colby with instilling that curiosity and appreciation of multidisciplinary approaches to solving problems."

And complex problems they are.



Also at Pinterest, head of policy **ADELIN CAI '05** mulls the risk of disturbing content being posted to "pinner's" boards. Graphic violence and gore, material that may promote harmful behavior like eating disorders—images like these can ruin a user's experience of the Pinterest platform. "A piece of content can have different meanings depending on the person collecting it," said Cai, a Singapore native who majored in international relations and theater and dance at Colby en route to a master's degree in public administration from Cornell.

A gory image might be appropriate—if posted for educational purposes by a medical student. A bloody battlefield photo might have legitimate historic significance. Or either image could have been posted by someone with a prurient interest in gory photos. "We want to be mindful of how that image is going to be pinned."

With her policy team, Cai grapples with these questions and considers how to determine

SHAPING THE NEW WORLD ORDER

**TRAINED TO THINK,
COLBIANS HELP
SHAPE TECH/SOCIAL
MEDIA—AND THE
WAY YOU LIVE**
BY GERRY BOYLE '78
PHOTO BY MARK HANAUER



CORLEY HUGHES '98 grew her career quickly, thanks in part to the lessons she learned during her time at Colby, and in particular with Pugh Family Professor of Economics David Findlay.

Hughes started her career as an analyst at Merrill Lynch, where she helped launch the company's online trading platform. That experience sparked her love of technology, which ultimately led her to join Microsoft at the company's headquarters back in her home state of Washington. She was quickly recruited to the company's product team responsible for MSN and given the task of expanding the business in international markets.

"When I'm presented with a new challenge I say to myself, 'Wow, I've never done this before but I'm sure I can figure it out.' You have to be prepared to do things for the first time, over and over and over again," Hughes said. "That ability to repeatedly venture into the unknown helps you build up a lot of inner strength. Success in new areas gives you the confidence that you can tackle anything."

Hughes puts this skill to use today in her current role as chief operating officer of Product Hunt, a San Francisco-based startup that bills itself as "a discovery site that helps you find your next favorite thing." At Product Hunt she is surrounded by talented 20-somethings who grew up in a world where they have never known a day without Google, mobile phones, and on-demand information. Hughes says this only makes her current role more interesting: "I get to see technology through the eyes of the next generation. We have fascinating debates about the long-term impact technology will have on real-life social interactions."

She says at Product Hunt she draws on the risk-taking and critical thinking skills she learned at Colby. "You get comfortable with how to take an idea and shape it," Hughes said. "You quickly learn that the most efficient way to get the best outcome is to leverage the experience and critical thinking of the people around you." The lesson learned? "Be curious, ask thoughtful questions, and know when something is outside your area of expertise. These traits help you move fast and get the most out of everyone in the company."

"When you work in the content moderation space, you're always catastrophizing, anticipating how bad-news cases could arise."

—Adelin Cai '05, head of policy, Pinterest

appropriate context for material. Previously, she tackled difficult questions like these at Twitter, anticipating where the fast-morphing medium was headed and where to draw the lines. "When you work in the content moderation space, you're always catastrophizing," Cai said, "anticipating how bad-news cases could arise."

Cai has learned that making policy is about tradeoffs. Is a policy enforceable? Does it open the company up to complaints of subjective enforcement? "Sometimes it's a tough decision, but there's no perfect decision," she said.

How to reach it? By considering a problem from multiple viewpoints: product and engineering, operations, sales, and legal, she said. Her team also collects as much information as possible—about operational impact, user sentiment, or other pieces of quantifiable data—all used to determine if a course of action is acceptable. Cai also brings to bear a highly sought-after skill: the ability to work effectively with others to solve very challenging and complex problems.

And challenging they are, sometimes seemingly overwhelming—at least from the outside. Consider **MEREDITH BLASCOVICH '07**, Colby government major and soccer player, who was fresh from Mayflower Hill when she helped launch several Google's ad products. That led to a succession of jobs that grew rapidly in scope. Strategist for Google Display, senior strategist for YouTube, YouTube lead for Latin America, global product marketing manager for Facebook. "A degree in government, where most of my classes focused on international relations, prepared me well for having a global mindset, empathy and working with people from all over the world," Blascovich wrote in an email from Menlo Park.

But still, don't her responsibilities seem overwhelming?

Sometimes, Blascovich said, but working at scale is a learnable and key skill. "When I started at Google, Sheryl Sandberg was our VP of my department," Blascovich wrote. "A value she instilled in people in her [organization] was scale—if you see a problem, try to fix it in a way that is efficient and effective for as many people as possible."

"I do think [tech innovations] are making the world a better place,"

—Alex Russell '08, product manager, Google



Expertise? In the tech/social media world, it's something you acquire fast. "Unless you're complacent, every day you've never done your job before," said **EVAN REECE '01**, cofounder of the groundbreaking online ski-resort ticketing platform Liftopia.

In 2005 Reece and a partner started Liftopia after stints in the budding online travel industry. A global studies and German double major and a diehard skier, Reece believed advance purchase online ski ticket sales would help resorts plan better, operate more efficiently, and encourage skiers to hit the slopes more. "It wasn't rocket science," he said, but Liftopia was first to execute the idea.

Slow out of the gate (Reece almost had to sell his car to pay his rent leading up to Liftopia's first round of fundraising), the San Francisco-based startup steadily gathered speed and now has more than 200 affiliated resorts and 40 employees—including COO **ROB WEBB '01** and CFO **MATT COHEN '01**.

Webb, an English and government double major, brought law and business degrees from the University of Chicago and online product development experience. Cohen, a history major, brought a business degree from the University of Texas and experience in finance. Reece self-effacingly claims to have "a random unique quality of helping people communicate."

The three longtime friends say they can thank Colby not only for the knowledge gleaned from their respective studies but for teaching them, as Reece put it, "how to work and how to learn."

"We're faced all the time with the need to figure something out," Cohen said. "All three of us feel very capable of that. We needed a new loan and I'd never gotten a loan before; I figured it out. I'm negotiating two huge leases; I've never done it before but I'll figure it out."

"You have to be prepared to do things for the first time over and over and over. You build up a lot of inner strength to look at something and go, 'Wow, I've never done this before but I'm confident I can figure it out.'"
—Corley Hughes '98, chief operating officer, Product Hunt



ALEX RUSSELL '08 AND BRYAN SOLAR '08, longtime entrepreneurial partners, describe this tide of tech advances as "kind of like being in the Renaissance."

They should know. The Colby first-year roommates now occupy adjacent desks as part of a Google product development team after Google acquired their company, TownHound, this year. The tech startup, the pair's first venture after business school (Stanford for Solar; Dartmouth for Russell), helped restaurants more efficiently connect with local customers. It followed Main Street Partners, a nonprofit they founded to help businesses succeed in Boston's inner-city neighborhoods.

The pair's entrepreneurial drive was sparked at Colby where, with Michael King '08, they started Lazy Mule Laundry, a campus laundry service. "We got that first taste," Solar said, in a video call from Google headquarters. "That little ember just flamed up."

Now the ember is blazing, as Russell and Solar have traded a small office in a storage plant in San Francisco's Meatpacking District for Google's sprawling complex at Mountain View. Instead of eating tuna sandwiches and sleeping on inflatable mattresses after late nights at the office, they focus solely on making the new product (they can't say just what it is) as good as possible. "Once we get it right, we've got all the scale of Google's resources and infrastructure," Russell said.

As Russell and Solar are scaling up, others have found similar inspiration scaling down.



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Some, like Solar and Russell, start small and go big. **Sue Gouws Korn '91** has done the opposite, as her career has moved from equity research to financial planning in traditional financial services to startups that cater to low-income and underserved populations. “I started on Wall Street and worked my way to Main Street, though it was really Market Street, because it was San Francisco,” Korn said.



Bryan Solar '08 and Alex Russell '08 spoke of Google's true meritocracy, a culture that accepts all kinds of people, including some who are “next-world brilliant.” And while some of the products coming out of tech these days may seem frivolous, they say, many are life-changing, including those with groundbreaking medical applications.

She recently took over as vice president of finance and planning and analysis at Opportun, a 10-year-old financial technology company that serves “credit invisibles”—low-income customers who otherwise would tap payday loans and pawn shops.

Before that Korn cofounded Vouch, a startup that served a similar population but asked borrowers to have family and friends guarantee portions of loans. The company

recently shut down after two years when the concept proved successful but the company couldn't raise enough operating capital.

“We never got big enough to make our conclusions statistically significant,” she said.

The experience of starting a company from scratch was very different from Korn's earlier experience with Providian Financial and other big financial services firms, and she says it drew on her time as a philosophy and mathematics double major at Colby, with a ton of music thrown in. “There's no jazz a cappella? Start one,” she said of her Colby experience. “A children's theater? Start one. Trying to take risks. That's how you become an entrepreneur.”

And how you set your sights on goals that may be as much altruistic as financial.

At Oportun, Korn talks about how she and her 20-something colleagues connect customers to their first affordable loans, money that may pay for a first car or relocate for a job.



At Pinterest, Cai and Hale say they are getting people to improve their lives by helping them to pursue their passions and hobbies or adopt a healthier way of living. At Liftopia, the Colbians at the helm said their aim is to get people skiing—a healthy outdoor activity. “We're not trying to get people to look at their phones more or be on the Internet more,” said Webb.

Solar and Russell spoke of Google's true meritocracy, a culture that accepts all kinds of people, including some who are “next-world brilliant.” And while some of the products coming out of tech these days may seem frivolous, many are life-changing, including those with groundbreaking medical applications. “I do think they're making the world a better place,” Russell said.

That may be happening on a big scale, a small scale, and even in the work culture itself. Many of the Colby grads said their lives in tech in some ways mirror the way they chose to live on Mayflower Hill.

“We treat people really well,” said Liftopia's Reece, “kindly and respectfully, but we expect high performance from them ... I think that was a lot of what Colby was for me.” ©