



Ohanian is constantly thinking about how technology can help promote social change.



THE INNOVATOR

*How Reddit co-founder
Alexis Ohanian
conquered the Internet*



Alexis Ohanian

Profession: **Co-Founder of Reddit & Initialized Capital**
Location: **San Francisco, California**

Inspiration is often found in the simplest of places. For Alexis Ohanian, it struck during a Sunday stroll in London's Hyde Park. As a student enjoying a semester abroad at the time, he stumbled upon Speaker's Corner, a public space devoted to free speech. Ohanian had never seen anything like it before. He watched as, one after another, people would stand up on an old-school box and rant while crowds would then form and debate. What if, he wondered, he could just distribute that same concept more broadly, and make it accessible to anyone with an internet connection?

Two years later, right out of college, Ohanian and his roommate Steve Huffman decided to turn the idea into reality. What happened next reads like a movie script. The pair spent three weeks and \$12,000 to build a website. "It was exhilarating and also terrifying," remembers Ohanian. "Steve and I had no idea what we were doing, but we knew enough to build the first version of Reddit and get it online as soon as possible to see how our users would use it." Not only did they like it, they kept coming back. Within 18 months of his college graduation, the site was acquired by publishing giant Condé Nast and Alexis Ohanian was a 23-year-old multimillionaire.

If you have not heard of Reddit, the online forum allows registered users to 'upvote' or 'downvote' content, which can include anything from a photograph to a news story, or post their own material and comments in themed communities known as subreddits. Unlike Twitter or Facebook, all content on Reddit is organized around these communities of passion, which makes for lively and authentic conversation.

It is also wildly popular. Today the site boasts over 300 million unique visitors each month and is ranked among the top trafficked websites in the world, making Ohanian one of the most influential men in Silicon Valley.

At 34, the genial, charismatic and strikingly tall six-foot-five tech entrepreneur is also experiencing a newfound fame for an altogether different reason. Ohanian is engaged to tennis superstar Serena Williams, who recently gave birth to the couple's first child. Fittingly, the engagement was announced to the world in the most modern of ways, with a poem posted by

Williams in a subreddit, of course: "At the same table we first met by chance...Down on one knee/ He said 4 words/And/ I said yes," read the verse.

As he embarks on the wonderful adventure of fatherhood, Ohanian has had little time to reflect on his career, but graciously agreed to an interview with AGBU. "It's been incredibly rewarding and humbling to see how far Reddit has come," he says.

Just how far Ohanian has developed personally is equally as impressive. Born in Brooklyn, New York, Ohanian was raised an only child by his Armenian father, Chris, and German-born mother, Anke. As a very young child, he spoke German at home, but says one of his earliest memo-

ries was his great-aunt Vera pulling him aside and explaining to him what it meant to be Armenian. "It must have been around my birthday (April 24) because she told me about our family's story of survival (and loss) during the genocide and how important it was that I make the most out of all the opportunity I'd been given."

He also remembers there always being a copy of the *AGBU News Magazine* in the house. When the family moved to suburban Maryland in Ellicott City,

Ohanian is engaged to tennis superstar Serena Williams, and the couple just recently welcomed their first child.



however, suddenly they became the only Armenians in the neighborhood. Ohanian's parents worried he would lose his connection to his culture, so they decided to send him to AGBU Camp Nubar during the summer.

"That camp normalized my Armenian-ness," remembers Ohanian. "I'm only Armenian on my father's side, but I have always felt like a proud Armenian, explaining to anyone even at an early age who we were and what our people were about. The only Armenians I knew were related to me, though, so it wasn't until Camp Nubar that I was immersed in Armenian language, culture, stories and food."

During the school year meanwhile, Ohanian became increasingly interested in computer programming after taking a Pascal programming class. He enrolled in a number of community college courses to develop his skills. Always very supportive, his parents encouraged his interest by buying him his first 486 SX computer. "They took a big chance when I was a kid by buying me that first computer because it cost them a lot of money they didn't have and they had no idea how it even worked. But they trusted me to take it apart, put it back together, and independently learn how powerful this new technology was."

Years later, as he was launching Reddit, his mother Anke was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. She has since passed away, but not before Ohanian was able to fulfill what he considers his proudest accomplishment: "I called my mother to tell her we'd sold Reddit (back in 2006) and let her know that all the support and love she and my dad had given over the years had been worth it."

After selling Reddit, Ohanian could have sat back and kicked up his feet, but instead stayed on to manage the company as its spectacular growth soon began to attract internet-savvy celebrities and politicians such as Stephen Colbert and Barack Obama, keen to participate in Reddit's Ask Me Anything (AMA) Question and Answer sessions.

Ohanian is also constantly thinking about how technology can help promote social change. In 2010, he took a break from Reddit to volunteer in Yerevan with the international non-profit Kiva, for four months. "It was an amazing experience. It was my first trip, and though I've since gone back a few times, helping establish that first lender and borrower microfinance network created so many

memories and relationships that I'm grateful for."

Alexis and his co-founder Steve came back to Reddit in 2015. Ohanian's current role involves supporting external-facing branches of the company including sales, business development, communications, marketing and policy. Still, he admits, he sometimes cannot keep himself from doing more. "We've got some really great product and design people, so sometimes I can't help myself but make design and product suggestions. I'm constantly thinking about how to level up the Reddit brand, business, and product."

Over the past several years he has launched the travel-search site Hipmunk

In April, Ohanian expressed his views against President Donald Trump's immigration ban. In an open letter posted on the official Reddit blog that has since been viewed nearly two million times, he called the executive order "deeply un-American" and "potentially unconstitutional." Describing himself as not only the son of an undocumented German immigrant, but also as the great-grandson of refugees who fled the Armenian Genocide, he eloquently argued in favor of welcoming both groups, immigrants and refugees. "We are a nation of immigrants, after all. In the tech world, we often talk about a startup's 'unfair advantage' that allows it to beat competitors. Welcoming immigrants and

“

I WANT TO STAY HUNGRY. I REALLY BELIEVE MY RESOURCES ARE BEST USED TO HELP PROJECTS THAT MAKE THE WORLD BETTER.

”

(acquired by Concur) and an early stage venture capital firm with over \$160 million in assets under management called Initialized Capital. The fund has already invested (usually the first check) in four billion-dollar companies: Zenefits, Coinbase, Instacart, and Cruise (acquired by General Motors).

Somehow he also found the time to publish a book about his success story. *Without Their Permission: How the 21st Century Will Be Made, Not Managed* provides an excellent guide to creating and investing in tech start-ups and makes a powerful argument that the power of the internet will transform the global economy in a post-financial-crisis age.

Since then the genial and motivated entrepreneur has also adeptly used his platform as a political activist, taking a leading role in organizing opposition to the controversial Stop Online Piracy Act and the Protect Intellectual Property Act, recent efforts by Congress to regulate content on the internet. The campaign was so successful the media proclaimed Ohanian the Mayor of the Internet. Even former president Obama posted his appreciation: "Wish I could upvote every one of you for helping keep the internet open and free," he wrote.

refugees has been our country's unfair advantage, and coming from an immigrant family has been mine as an entrepreneur."

"Without them, there's no me, and there's no Reddit," he added. "Let's not forget that we've thrived as a nation because we've been a beacon for the courageous—the tired, the poor, the tempest-tossed."

While the new father's activism might slow down temporarily in the near future Ohanian hopes to continue setting an example for others. He recommends that aspiring tech entrepreneurs do more than just learn to code. "Surround yourselves with people who make you better," he says. "Ship as soon as possible and talk to your users/customers. And finally, know why you're doing it—this will evolve over time, but you need to know why because you will find countless moments when you need to tap into that."

For Ohanian, the why is about not just making his own dent in the universe, but making that universe a better place to live. When it comes to giving back, Ohanian admits he could always do more, saying he does not want to get too comfortable. "I want to stay hungry. I really believe my resources are best used to help projects that make the world better." 🍌