

What makes Elon Musk tick? I spent months following the same people as him to find out who fuels his curious worldview

Publication Date: 2023-09-23

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Section: Technology

Tags: Elon Musk, X, Internet, Artificial intelligence (AI), Tesla, Computing, features

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/sep/23/what-makes-elon-musk-tick-david-runciman>



What's it like to be Elon Musk? On almost every level it is impossible to imagine – he's just too much. Musk is the hands-on head of three mega-companies, one (Tesla) wildly successful, one (SpaceX) madly aspirational, one (Twitter/X) a shambles. He has plenty of other businesses on the side, including The Boring Company (which makes hi-tech tunnels), Neuralink (which makes brain-computer interfaces), and his current pet favourite xAI (mission: "To understand the true nature of the universe"). He is the on-again, off-again richest human being on the planet, his personal net worth sometimes fluctuating by more than \$10bn a day as the highly volatile Tesla share price lurches up and down. He is the father of 11 children – one of whom died as an infant, and from one of whom he is currently estranged – with three different women, which to his own mind at least seems to make him some kind of family man. He has 155 million followers on Twitter/X (we'll call it Twitter from now on for simplicity's sake), which is more than anyone else. Only a very few people – Barack Obama (132 million), Justin Bieber (111 million) – can have any idea of what that is like. However, unlike Obama, who follows 550,000 accounts on Twitter, Musk follows only 415. That anyone can copy (or at least they could, before the platform recently changed its code so you can now only see a small handful of users' followers rather than the full list). So that's what I did, spending this past summer following the exact same accounts Musk follows and no one else, to see what the world looks like from inside his personal Twitter bubble. I wanted to be a fly on the wall in the room with the people who are shaping the thoughts of one of the most influential, and unpredictable, individuals on the planet. I should add that I've never followed anyone else on Twitter before – I've never even had a Twitter account – so it was all new to me. What can I say? It's pretty mind-blowing. Musk's Twitverse is not so weird in the ways you might expect, given his reputation as an "alt-right", take-no-prisoners cyber troll. Some of it is highly conventional. He follows the official accounts of a fair few of the world's Most Important People – Sunak, Macron, Modi, Von der Leyen, the EU, the US state department, the royal family – which means his timeline is occasionally cluttered up with the banalities of government press releases and happy birthday greetings to the Prince of Wales. Musk never engages with these accounts – I'm guessing he barely notices them. It looks like little more than a hat-tip to the top table of world affairs: "Hi guys, I'm here too," is what he's saying. He also follows BBC Breaking News, which means he gets to hear about flash floods in Tiverton as they happen. It's just for show. He has barely concealed contempt for the BBC, which he regards as a pillar of the pointless legacy media. (He loathes the Guardian too, but we'll come to that.) At the same time as blowing virtual smoke up the arses of his fellow world leaders, a lot of the accounts he follows are there to blow plug-in smoke up

his arse. His timeline is peppered with posts from assorted Tesla boosters, such as Tesla Owners Silicon Valley, Car Dealership Guy and a slew of other happy investors in his business, who spend their time telling the big boss how amazing he is and wetting themselves at each new rollout or share price spike. Musk does engage with these people. He feeds them goodies like a dog owner might treat his pets, with little hints about what's coming next. Some of these accounts even revere his mother, Maye Musk (according to her Twitter bio, a "Bestselling International Author/Doctor of Dietetics/Supermodel") – who was invited to give the keynote this summer at the annual gathering of the Silicon Valley Tesla crowd. Musk, as a family man, likes that. But in between all the fawning and being fawned on is where the real action is. Musk mainly follows a bunch of contrarian, lib-baiting men (they are almost all men, with the notable exception of Josie Glabach, AKA the Redheaded Libertarian, a prolific tweeter of "alt-right" talking points, self-described as "Student of History · Daughter of Liberty · Weirdest haters you've ever seen · Keeper of Receipts · Do No Harm But Take No Sh*t · 1776"). From these accounts a distinct worldview emerges, one that Musk does not actively promote but tacitly endorses, with likes, retweets and the occasional emoji of encouragement. During the time I was following what he followed, four big issues dominated his little corner of the Twittersphere. First, like many of those on his timeline, Musk is up in arms about gender transitioning for children and the wider exposure of kids to what he sees as a politicised sex education (or sexualised politics). Musk shared a photo of a pregnant woman saying: "Is it a boy or a girl?" and a man responding: "We'll let the kindergarten teacher decide." Second, there is a strong pro-Russia vibe. Many of those he follows are deeply sceptical of the Ukraine-leaning sympathies of most western politicians – Boris Johnson, about whom no one in Muskworld otherwise cares, is cast as a supervillain in this context, the man who supposedly scuppered the chances of a Russia-friendly peace deal after the invasion in 2022 with his nonsensical Churchillian pretensions. Zelenskiy is treated as a joke. Third, this is a hotbed of Covid scepticism. Musk follows Jay Bhattacharya, Stanford professor of medicine and one of the co-authors of the Great Barrington declaration, which advocated lifting almost all Covid restrictions and allowing herd immunity to develop. Around Bhattacharya are a host of like-minded critics of what they see as government overreaction and overreach in response to the pandemic. They spend a lot of their time goading government officials who are now under the spotlight in public inquiries around the world examining, with hindsight, the costs and benefits of lockdown. The tone is contemptuous: anyone who championed lockdown at the time might just be forgiven for blind panic; but anyone who still defends it now is clearly a shill or a stooge. Finally, lapping round the edges of all this is a steady lament for the end of western civilisation. Musk follows a host of accounts that celebrate classical heritage and traditional architecture ("Why can't we make buildings like that any more?" is a common refrain). He follows Aesthetica ("Aesthetics | History | Chivalry | Fantasy | Vitalist Artist") and The Knowledge Archivist ("Useful knowledge from the lives of the Greatest People in History"). He likes military history and tales of heroism and derring-do. And along with many of those he follows, he thinks we are committing slow collective suicide by not having enough children – declining birthrates across the developed world mean giving up on the future or handing it over to machines. Many of those who love what Musk is doing for the car industry also love what he's doing for procreation: he's keeping his own end up. Still, it's worth saying what Musk's Twittersphere is not. It's not Trumpy. There are very few Trump enthusiasts here and Musk himself – who says he voted for Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020 – for a while seemed to favour Ron DeSantis, whose campaign he helped to launch with a disastrous interview on Twitter Spaces that was memorable only for the catastrophic failure of the tech. There is little or no climate scepticism. Tesla describes itself as a clean energy company, and Musk does not seem to doubt that radical action on global warming/heating/boiling is needed. That he wants to do it himself – and make vast sums of money out of it – doesn't alter the fact that Covid scepticism and climate scepticism, which often go together, don't here. He follows Greta Thunberg and does not troll her, though whether that's because he is interested in what she has to say or just because she's a Very Important Person is not clear. In the past he has even called her "cool". In fact, he doesn't really troll anyone, apart from stock analysts who short the Tesla share price (Jim Cramer, host of Mad Money on CNBC, is a favourite punchbag). He may have learned his lesson after he mocked a disabled Twitter worker, Haraldur Thorleifsson, in March for doing "no actual work" and had to issue a grovelling apology ("I would like to apologize to Halli for my misunderstanding of his situation. It was based on things I was told that were untrue or, in some cases, true, but not meaningful.") Whenever Musk intercedes with the various excitable types he follows, it is often to inject a note of caution. For instance, when lockdown pushback tips over into outright vaccine denialism, Musk sometimes tries to set the record straight in his inimitable deadpan style: "To be frank, we're lucky to have modern medicine." When his timeline was abuzz – as periodically happens – with rumours that the federal government was about to let slip its cache of evidence that extraterrestrials are real and have visited, Musk responded with: "I have seen zero evidence of aliens fwiw." That "for-what-it's-worth" is a quintessential Muskian humblebrag. He happens to think that on many questions his view counts for an awful lot. This may look like megalomania. But given the tsunami of attention even his smallest thoughts receive, it is also a fair reflection of fact. In an interview posted by Tucker Carlson – whom Musk both follows and promotes (he provided Carlson his own platform after he was fired from Fox News), and who absolutely does believe the US secret state is covering up its alien encounters – Musk explained that there were three reasons to be doubtful. First, because he knows more about space than anyone else: he of all people would have heard something, and he hasn't. Second, because everyone should recognise that the US military is only interested in increasing its budget, which would skyrocket if it could show that the little green men were already here. And third, because Musk himself would have to be part of the cover-up, and anyone who knows him knows that he would never miss out on the chance to get the most retweets in human history, as would

surely happen when he posted the big reveal. At that point, both he and Carlson collapsed in uncontrollable laughter, Carlson because he is a sycophant, Musk because he seems to find the whole thing genuinely hilarious. Like many people who flirt with conspiratorial thinking without ever diving in, the closest Musk will get to endorsing the paranoid fantasies that fly around on his timeline is to respond: "Interesting", "Good question" or just plain "I". Underneath one of Carlson's meandering tours around Jeffrey Epstein, the Clintons, Ukraine, Hunter Biden and the rest, Musk limits his response to: "Raises interesting questions." He wants to come across not as a 21st-century crazy, but as an enlightenment rationalist who takes nothing for granted, has no faith in received opinion, and likes to do his own thinking. But what he really resembles is an over-stimulated child: the endlessly questioning, often infuriating schoolboy who has started to read for himself and no longer believes what the teachers are telling him, without quite knowing what he believes instead. In truth, Musk plays up to his persona as a socially awkward naïf asking the questions others shy away from. He is proudly on the autistic spectrum and believes – like Greta Thunberg – that his Asperger's gives him insights that are only available to those who don't take the conventional social cues to follow the herd. "Affective autism > effective altruism?" is one of his mantras. In an interview in which he discusses his unhappy childhood, Musk describes the existential crisis he suffered as an 11- or 12-year-old, when he realised that human beings had almost no understanding of the true nature of the universe: religion couldn't explain it, and science was still relatively clueless. We are just flailing around in the dark, lost and alone. He concluded that the only thing for it was to "increase the scale and scope of civilisation" – intergalactically if necessary – so as to arrive at something better: more people and more ideas means better answers to the biggest questions. He hankers to be less lost, less alone. *** What is so remarkable about Musk is that he remains recognisably the same restless, madly grandiose, oddly vulnerable child he was back then. But he's a child with \$200bn in his back pocket and a near-limitless capacity for mischief. The scale of Musk's wealth and influence, coupled with his willingness to behave as though he had neither, makes him almost impossible to pin down. His engagement with his Twitter feed is madly promiscuous and frequently baffling (how, apart from anything, does he have the time?). One day it's all Tesla or SpaceX promos. The next it's his tuppence worth on issues great and small. When someone posts about Listerine cool mints circa 2007, he responds: "Still the most effective breath mint afaik". You'd think maybe someone was being paid to do this for him, but no one would dare be so banal other than the man himself. You'd think maybe someone was paying him to do it, until you realise no one – certainly not Listerine – could pay him enough. Yet there's the other Musk too: along with the child behind the businessman, there's always the businessman behind the child. Musk's Twitter persona is simultaneously an authentic expression of his extremely unusual personality and a transparently contrived effort to market the platform by marketing himself. A lot of what's on Musk's Twitter feed are tweets about Twitter, in which Musk takes a personal interest because he owns the damn thing. So when people share their views about what they love about Twitter – and loathe about its latest rival, Threads – Musk responds with smiley faces and tears of laughter and little thought-burps of his own love for the platform. He wants you to know he's a Twitter fan too, fwiw. Which is about \$44bn. In the great summer 2023 battle with Threads, along with challenging Mark Zuckerberg to a cage fight (which could just as easily be the work of the child behind the businessman or the businessman behind the child), Musk has done his best to try to establish what makes Twitter different and worth sticking with. His pitch is simple. It is real in the way that Zuckerberg's products – and particularly Instagram – are not. Yes, being on Twitter might mean that people are mean to you, but at least that means you are facing reality. As Musk put it in July: "It is infinitely preferable to be attacked by strangers on Twitter than indulge in the fake happiness of hide-the-pain-Instagram." More than that, he says Twitter is where you go to get your worldview challenged, which won't happen anywhere else in our increasingly siloed online world. And Twitter is also where you go to get your laughs. Which is odd, because on Musk's feed almost no one ever challenges his worldview and almost no one ever says anything remotely funny, even though the tone is relentlessly – one might say depressingly – jocular. In two months of following what Musk follows, I don't think I laughed once. Maybe that's just me. There are lots of jokes. Here's one from the World of Engineering account: "What happens when a computer engineer fails flirting with a waitress? Error in connecting to the server." Musk liked that one. I suppose it is funny, in the sense that it's funny-peculiar to think that anyone might think that flirting could be viewed as a success/fail operation, like writing code. But it's not funny ha-ha. Overall, Musk's timeline is heavy on parody, light on wit. He follows the Not Jerome Powell account, which has as its core function trolling the chair of the Federal Reserve but spends much of its time posting unflattering photos of Hillary Clinton or of Volodymyr Zelenskiy looking sad. The lib-baiting in general takes the form of juxtaposing progressive views with pictures of unappealing people doing dumb things. Typical example: a photo of a fat man in pink leggings and a hideous blue top with the tagline: "Just so you know ... This is the guy calling you a Nazi on the internet." It's exhausting. Musk's choice of accounts to follow is not ideologically homogeneous – there is a range of views here – but it's not remotely challenging. He doesn't follow anyone making a serious case for the things he despises – liberalism, the mainstream news media, gender diversity, Ukraine. When he comes across those viewpoints, it's just by chance and he can ignore them. The only pro-Ukrainian comments I saw on his timeline either came from the state department or from Greta Thunberg, who shares the view of most of her generation that Zelenskiy is a hero. They might as well have come from the royal family. Musk doesn't care. What changed over the summer was not Musk's attitude to anything out there in the world, but his attitude to Twitter itself. What appeared on his timeline shifted dramatically, but only because it started to get cluttered up with ads and promoted tweets as Musk moved to monetise the loss-making business. To be honest, as someone new to the platform, I'd been quite enjoying it until it became just another hideous mess of mindless marketisation. Still, I

got to see a version of what the algorithm thinks someone like Musk might want to buy. It was a mix of ads for nifty tech-bro gear – backpacks, running shoes – and an amazing number of promos for the movies *Oppenheimer* and *Napoleon*. You don't have to be Einstein (whose biographer, Walter Isaacson, has just published a biography of Musk) to work out that these movies might be thought to appeal because Musk sees himself as belonging in their company. No question that somewhere in his head the biopic of his own life is running in the background. Many of the not-Einsteins on Musk's timeline helpfully made that point to him – see the *Napoleon* film, Elon, it might have been made for you! Then it all changed again, once the platform ceased to be Twitter and became X. Like much of what Musk does, the overnight rebrand was both unexpected and heavily telegraphed. He'd spent months saying that Twitter couldn't carry on as it was. One of his calling cards as an entrepreneur is simultaneously to talk up and to trash his own businesses. Tesla, he says, is either going to win the future or it's already effectively worthless. Twitter was going to have to become an all-purpose platform for everyday life (payments, communication, content provision) or it was done. Musk admires the Chinese and particularly apps such as WeChat that have colonised much of Chinese life, going way beyond anything Twitter was capable of. He bought the platform to try to turn it into an everything app, fully aware that he risked turning it into a nothing app instead. This all-or-nothing approach is an essential feature of the Musk worldview. If I had to give it a name I'd call it upbeat apocalypticism. He's relentlessly cheery when contemplating coming catastrophe. His approach to his mooted fight with Zuckerberg – which his online cheerleaders were greatly looking forward to on the assumption that their man was bound to win, despite his opponent being a trained jiu-jitsu champion – was to post jokes about the chances of his dying in there. His philosophy is not so much nothing ventured, nothing gained, as everything ventured, then let's see who's still standing. He genuinely seems to lack a fear of failure, or of looking ridiculous (as he does now the fight has been cancelled). Whatever happens, it's still better than being the 11-year-old him, contemplating the empty unknowability of the universe. What helps to fuel this outlook is the fact that the stakes genuinely aren't as high for Musk as they would be for everyone else. When he bid \$44bn for Twitter it looked extraordinarily reckless – as well as typically impulsive – a view that seemed to be confirmed when he tried to pull out of the deal only to be told that his hands were tied. The Tesla share price was in freefall at the time, and Musk's personal net worth was tanking with it. But during the time I was sharing his timeline – just a couple of months – his net worth increased by more than the amount he paid for Twitter. Buying the business turned from a mad gamble into a cheeky bonus in a matter of weeks. In June, Tesla announced, to much fanfare, that it would share its charging points with General Motors to encourage the adoption of electric vehicles. This was dressed up as a typical piece of quirky Muskian philanthropy. But as various commentators on his timeline pointed out, on the day the announcement was made the market capitalisation of Tesla increased by more than the total net worth of GM. Just 50 years ago, GM employed 700,000 people in the US alone. Now it's a plaything for Musk to message his concern about the future. And still he keeps getting richer. It's a world turned upside down. *** Upbeat apocalypticism is also the outlook of many of the accounts he follows. For instance, ZeroHedge – a libertarian, rightwing blog put together by the Bulgarian ex-banker Daniel Iandjiiski – has as its motto a line from *Fight Club*: "On a long enough timeline, the survival rate for everyone drops to zero." ZeroHedge sees looming disaster everywhere – rampant inflation, the collapse of fiat money, bubbles bursting, unhinged liberalism eating into the fabric of society. Yet at the same time, its tone suggests what fun it's all going to be: not only to be proved right but think of all the money to be made as the world ends. Musk is similarly short on pretty much everything – democracy, Europe, universities, the dollar – except intelligence, and even there he's worried about what's coming with AI. But he can't resist a well-engineered machine. He likes to follow accounts that post pictures of cool-looking stuff (this is a world where "cool" is the ultimate term of approbation): weird buildings, curious patterns in nature, pleasingly shaped gadgets (Victorian pencil sharpeners, blown-glass ornaments) and lots and lots of images of space (Black Hole is a particular favourite). He follows accounts called *How Things Work* and *Oddly Satisfying*. His engagement with all this information is overwhelmingly visual: his use of words is usually laconic to the point of incoherence – and in interviews he struggles to complete his sentences and is often repetitive – but he just loves looking at arresting images. Essentially, his tastes are torn between the classical and the futuristic. Musk divides human experience in two: the past is primarily aesthetic, the future is overwhelmingly algorithmic. That means much of western Europe exists for Musk as a kind of glorified heritage park (unless he can build another Tesla gigafactory there). Every day someone on his Twitter feed will post a picture of a French chateau, or Roman temple, or Cistercian abbey, or Oxbridge college, and express themselves awestruck by its beauty. For Musk, an Oxbridge college and a Roman temple belong in the same category: a gorgeous and essentially moribund relic of the past. The UK in particular features in the Muskian outlook as a place whose time has been and gone. We are churches, thatched cottages, red pillar boxes. It's like the episode of *Friends* when they came to London: nothing but a backdrop for a story that doesn't concern us. The only exceptions to this are, first, the Royal Society, which Musk seems to respect (Britain still has some cool scientists) and the *Guardian*, which he sometimes notices publishing things he really doesn't like. When he came across a retweet on 9 July of a *Guardian* article titled *A eulogy for Twitter*, he responded: "'The Guardian' specializes in laboriously pedantic propaganda." For someone who says he's on Twitter to have his worldview challenged, he's not that keen on having his worldview challenged. Following Musk's timeline helps build up a picture of how the world looks from inside his head. It's like the old *New Yorker* cartoon *View of the World from 9th Avenue*, in which 10th Avenue looms large, the rest of the US small, and the rest of the world barely gets a look in. But this one doesn't feature New York. For Musk, nowhere in the US looms very large, nor does much of the rest of the planet. Sometimes he notices China, or India, but most of the time he sees only what's in front of his face, or what's well

beyond other people's ken. Tesla factories are big, but there's not much else that stands out before we reach outer space. Everything in between feels oddly insubstantial – there is, for instance, a lot of Ricky Gervais talking about the difference between dogs and cats. Between the here and now and a future that exists beyond anything we would currently recognise, Musk doesn't really have a point of view. He is extraordinarily present and almost impossibly remote. He is clearly a genius and he is also a fool. He is the spirit of the age. • David Runciman is professor of politics at Cambridge University. His latest book, *The Handover: How We Gave Control of Our Lives to Corporations, States and AIs*, is published by Profile Books at £20. To support The Guardian and Observer, order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.