

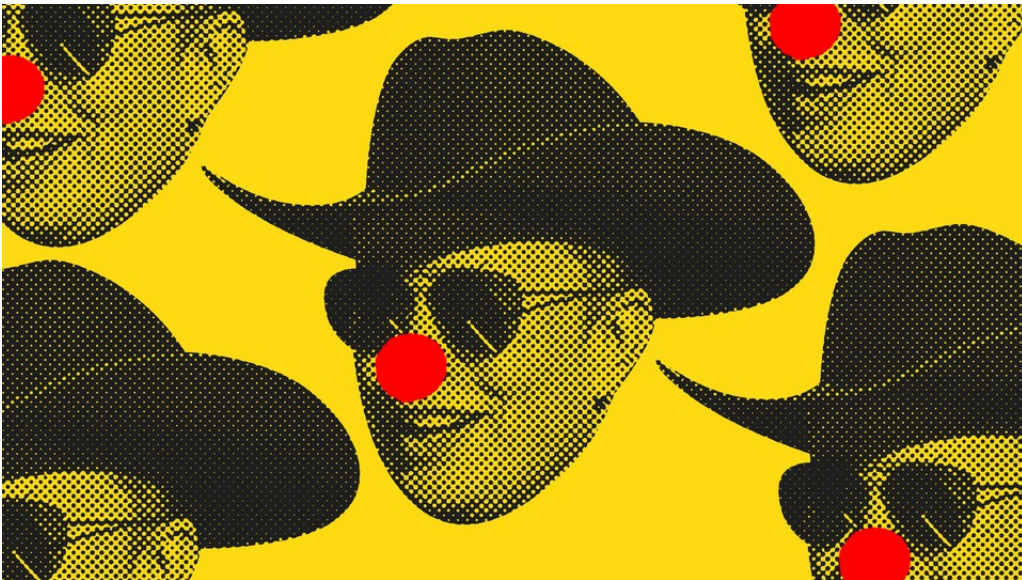
# Elon Musk, Baloney King And Mega Scam BS God Of Anti-Trust Violations

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## Elon Musk, Baloney King And Mega Scam BS God Of Anti-Trust Violations

The world's richest man has invented a new way to disregard the truth.

By [Ian Bogost](#)



Suzanne Cordeiro / Getty; The Atlantic

You can call Elon Musk a lot of things. Agent of chaos. Savvy investor. Obsessive [workaholic](#). But the tech-industry analyst Benedict Evans has a different suggestion. He [calls](#) Musk a "bullshitter who delivers." I'd go even further: Musk exemplifies a new kind of bullshitter, one we haven't really seen before. Call it the "bullionaire," maybe: an unusual purveyor of infantile jackassery, whose unfathomable wealth makes it possible, and even likely, that he'll carry out even the most ridiculous plan.

Musk didn't start an electric-vehicle business, but the one he [muscled his way into](#), Tesla, became one of the most valuable companies on Earth last July. Once in charge, he decided that "CEO" was a stupid title and made himself the "[Technoking](#)" instead. From that throne, Musk oversaw the manufacture of far fewer vehicles than Ford, a company worth one-16th as much (and which Musk once [compared to a morgue](#)). Musk also *is* the CEO of SpaceX, a private company with an impressive fleet of reusable rockets that land upright just like they take off, as in an episode of *Jonny Quest*. His capacity to rule such an organization might be explained partly by the technoking's claim [to have previously been an alien](#). Musk became so concerned that superintelligent machines—another kind of alien, really—might overtake humanity, he [committed millions](#) to defend against their rise.

One day in 2016, Musk got irritated at traffic. "Traffic is driving me nuts. Am going to build a tunnel boring machine and just start digging," he tweeted. "It shall be called The Boring Company." That would have been a funny joke if he hadn't actually started a company by that name and secured contracts to bore tunnels under actual U.S. cities, such as Las Vegas and Miami. The tunnels carry—get this—Tesla vehicles, which [create](#) traffic jams when enough of them fill the tunnel (which is really just an expensive road).

The Boring Company also made a flamethrower. Which isn't boring, I guess. Looking to pay for his subterranean-car-tunnel enterprise, Musk [remembered](#) that the 1987 Mel Brooks film *Spaceballs* made a joke about funding its production via sales of swag, such as lunch boxes and flamethrowers. So he made flamethrowers—barely legal, because they "only" ignited a wall of fire up to 10 feet. Soon after, on Twitter, Musk [denied](#) a "rumor" that he planned to manufacture, Uruk-hai-style, a zombie apocalypse to spur demand for said flamethrowers. All 20,000 units sold out.

When Musk does things, they tend to start with tweets. In 2018, the same year he made flamethrowers, Musk tweeted that he had "funding secured" to take Tesla private at \$420 a share (it's a pot reference, if you didn't know). The stock was trading at around \$360 at the time, making the doobie-smokin' price a substantial premium. The plan tanked, the stock dropped 100 points, and the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission investigated Musk for securities fraud. Eventually, he agreed to pay \$20 million, and Tesla itself had to pay the same. Today, correcting for a five-for-one split, TSLA trades at the equivalent of more than \$5,000 a share. The company is worth \$1 trillion.

[Read: Of course Elon Musk wanted Twitter](#)

All that wealth inspired more deeds, and more tweets. This year, Musk decided that he liked tweeting so much, he wanted to buy 9 percent of Twitter. So he did, because it cost only a couple billion dollars, and he has roughly 270 billion of them. The problem is, he was supposed to file a disclosure with the SEC once he passed 5 percent equity in the company, and he delayed doing so by a few days. The stock rose by almost 30 percent when the news got out—which also meant Musk had saved a bunch of money by filing late. Musk was going to join the board, then he wasn't, then it came out this morning that [he offered to buy the whole company](#) for \$43 billion in cash (again, he's got a lot of money).

Elon Musk says or does absurd and even stupid things, but then those absurd and stupid things end up paying off.

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The philosopher Harry Frankfurt wrote a famous article about bullshit in the 1980s, which became a bestselling 2005 book called *On Bullshit*. Both bullshitters and liars are trying to get away with something. But unlike the liar, who demonstrates an awareness of and concern for the truth in order to evade it, Frankfurt argues that bullshitters just don't care about truth at all. Instead, a bullshitter strives to achieve their goals, whatever those goals are. For some of them, that amounts to hearing themselves talk. For others, it involves deception or even fraud.

At first blush, the Muskian variety looks very different. He doesn't seem like a man who is indifferent to the truth so much as one who is passionately devoted to the act of blowing raspberries. He named the models of Tesla S, 3, X, and Y, a [leetspeak](#) rendition of sexy. He made a pot joke about taking the company private. He joked (maybe?) about renaming Twitter as "Titter"—you know, like boobs?

But his raspberries serve another function: They fill up a flotilla of trial balloons that, bound together by his wealth, can lift a house into the sky. Money talks, and bullshit floats. That's how Musk turned a dumb pot gag into a government investigation into a hundred-billion-dollar payday. It's how he got all of Twitter's power users to accept that he was their new overlord this morning. Musk is indifferent to the truth because he has dominion over it.

[Read: What Trump did in Osaka was worse than lying](#)

Having a billionaire bullshitter fills a strange sausage roll of feelings: awe, jealousy, inspiration, terror, irritation. Like it or not, Musk really did make electric cars viable and desirable. He really did help inaugurate a new age of private aerospace. He really did make somewhat badass flamethrowers that he really sold and shipped to people who watched too much *G.I. Joe* in the 1980s.

Musk's schtick works because he's the unusual, unfathomably wealthy person who actually spends very large amounts of time and money on random things. Most billionaires are boring. They hoard wealth and then offload it into a family foundation for tax benefits and eternal glory, or they push it into hedge or venture funds. They avoid the spotlight. Some pursue flights of fancy, as [the other billionaire-begun space start-ups](#) show. Others pursue Carnegie-style philanthropy, dressing power in the vestments of generosity.

But Musk appears to goof around. He does *whatever the heck he wants*, however stupid it might be. In a world where so much wealth is concentrated in the hands of so few, that stupidity can be a sort of comfort. What would you do if you were that wealthy? The numbers say: nothing interesting. You'd use the money to make more money. At least Musk is having a good time.

But a billionaire is also terrifying, because you just don't know what he's doing next. The anthropologist David Graeber, in his 2018 screed on [bullshit jobs](#), argued that work loses meaning when there's a gap between its pretense and its reality. For most people with such jobs, the gap arises in the worker's own mind. Store greeters or telemarketers might know that their job is useless or even actively harmful, but they have to pretend that it's not in order to get through the day, appease their boss, and make a living.

[Read: The paradox of caring about 'bullshit' jobs](#)

In Musk's case, that anxiety is outsourced to all the rest of us. When Musk tweets a joke, it might also be an actual plan that he intends to carry out. He may not even know whether that's the case, but his preposterous wealth and predilection for risk always leave the option open. A much-less-massively wealthy but very weird individual such as Peter Thiel makes threats and plans in secret. That feels worrisome—what's he up to? The billionaire hides right out in the open. That feels even worse. (Vladimir Putin, whose wealth is unknown but has been [speculated](#) to exceed \$200 billion, is another, different kind of billionaire—one with graver whimsies.)

In this sense, Musk has introduced a new tenor to bullshittery, one that Harry Frankfurt did not anticipate. Most bullshitters can't close the gap between pretense and reality even if they wanted to. *Bullshit* used to mean what's neither true nor false. Now it describes a state where anything, no matter how absurd, has the *potential* to be true. Call your flamethrower guy. Buy a social network. It's no big deal—unless it is.