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## Elon Musk's Texts Shatter the Myth of the Tech Genius And Reveals Silicon Valley Cartel To Be Pack Of Asshole Frat Boys

The world's richest man has some embarrassing friends.

By [Charlie Warzel](#)

A photograph of Elon Musk covered in empty text-message bubbles



Yesterday, the world got a look inside Elon Musk's phone. The Tesla and SpaceX CEO is currently in litigation with Twitter and trying to back out of his deal to buy the platform and take it private. As part of the discovery process related to this lawsuit, Delaware's Court of Chancery [released](#) hundreds of text messages and emails sent to and from Musk. The 151-page redacted document is a remarkable, voyeuristic record of a few months in the life of the world's richest (and most overexposed) man and a rare unvarnished glimpse into the overlapping worlds of Silicon Valley, media, and politics. The texts are juicy, but not because they are lurid, particularly offensive, or offer up some scandalous Muskian master plan—quite the opposite. What is so illuminating about the Musk messages is just how unimpressive, unimaginative, and sycophantic the powerful men in Musk's contacts appear to be. Whoever said there are no bad ideas in brainstorming never had access to Elon Musk's phone.

In no time, the texts were the central subject of discussion among tech workers and watchers. "The dominant reaction from all the threads I'm in is *Everyone looks fucking dumb*," one former social-media executive, whom I've granted anonymity because they have relationships with many of the people in Musk's texts, told me. "It's been a general *Is this really how business is done?* There's no real strategic thought or analysis. It's just emotional and done without any real care for consequence."

Appearing in the document is, I suppose, a perverse kind of status symbol (some people I spoke with in tech and media circles copped to searching through it for their own names). And what is immediately apparent upon reading the messages is that many of the same people the media couldn't stop talking about this year were also the ones inserting themselves into Musk's texts. There's Joe Rogan; [William MacAskill](#), the effective altruist, getting in touch on behalf of the crypto billionaire and Democratic donor Sam Bankman-Fried; Mathias Döpfner, the CEO of Axel Springer (and the subject of a recent, [unflattering](#) profile); Marc Andreessen, the venture capitalist, [NIMBY](#), and prolific blocker on Twitter; Larry Ellison, the founder of Oracle, who was recently [revealed](#) to have joined a November 2020 call about contesting Donald Trump's selection loss; and, of course, Jack Dorsey, Twitter's co-founder and former CEO. Musk, arguably the most covered and exhausting of them all, has an inbox that doubles as a power ranking of semi- to fully polarizing people who have been in the news the past year.

Few of the men in Musk's phone consider themselves his equal. Many of the messages come off as fawning, although they're possibly more opportunistic than earnest. Whatever the case, the intentions are unmistakable: Musk is perceived to have power, and these pillars of the tech industry want to be close to it. "I love your 'Twitter algorithms should be open source' tweet," Joe Lonsdale, a co-founder of Palantir, said, before suggesting that he was going to mention the idea to members of Congress at an upcoming GOP policy retreat. Antonio Gracias, the CEO of Valor Partners, cheered on the same tweet, telling the billionaire, "I am 100% with you Elon. To the mattresses no matter what."

[Read: Elon Musk, baloney king](#)

Few in Musk's phone appeared as excitable as the angel investor Jason Calacanis, who peppered his friend with flattery and random ideas for the service. In the span of 30 minutes, not long after Musk's bid to take the company private, Calacanis suggested a five-point plan for Twitter that would introduce a membership tier, creator revenue splits, algorithmic transparency, and changes to the company's operations—including but not limited to moving the company from San Francisco to Austin. After pledging his loyalty ("You have my sword," he texted Musk), Calacanis pushed new ideas for weeks. "Just had the best idea ever for monetization," he wrote out of the blue, before suggesting a way that users could pay Twitter in order to spam their followers with promotional DMs.

"Imagine we ask Justin Beaver to come back and let him DM his fans ... he could sell 1m in merchandise or tickets instantly. Would be INSANE," he wrote, apparently adding an unfortunate instance of autocorrect to the historical record. According to the court document, Musk didn't respond. Later on, Musk chastised Calacanis for trying to whip up public investments to finance Musk's acquisition. This leads to a string of messages that read straight out of *Succession*:

**Musk:**

*Morgan Stanley and Jared think you are using our friendship not in a good way*

*This makes it seem like I'm desperate.*

*Please stop.*

**Calacanis:**

*Only ever want to support you.*

During Musk's April media frenzy, the billionaire frequently demonstrated a shallow understanding of Twitter, [suggesting](#) contradictory policies such as banning spam and bot armies but also leaving up all content that is "legal." (Spam, bot armies, and crypto scam hawkers are all technically legal.) Many of the ideas coming from his peanut gallery were equally poor. Döpfner, who is in charge of numerous media companies, including *Insider* and *Politico*, offered to run Twitter for Musk but seemed woefully unprepared for the task. In a novel-length text, Döpfner laid out his "#Gameplan" for the company, which started with the line item: "1.), Solve Free Speech." He alluded to vague ideas such as making Twitter censorship resistant via a "decentralized infrastructure" and "open APIs." He's similarly nonspecific with his suggestion that Twitter have a "marketplace" of algorithms. "If you're a snowflake and don't want content that offends you pick another algorithm," he wrote Musk.

At one point in early April, Musk appears infatuated with his own idea to replace Twitter with a blockchain-based payment-and-messages system. In a string of texts to his brother, the entrepreneur Kimbal Musk, he manages to convince himself that the idea could be huge and a way to crush spam while preserving free speech. In this preposterous scenario, users would have to pay a fractional amount of the cryptocurrency Dogecoin to post or retweet. Roughly 10 days later, Musk sends a different text noting that "blockchain Twitter isn't possible."

[Read: Elon Musk already showed us how he'll run Twitter](#)

The texts also cast a harsh light on the investment tactics of Silicon Valley's best and brightest. There's Calacanis' overeager angel-investing pitches, and then you have the more chill tactics of people like Andreessen, who in a tossed-off Twitter DM offered Musk "\$250M with no additional work required." "Thanks!" Musk responded. In a separate exchange, Musk asks Ellison if he'd like to invest in taking Twitter private. "Yes, of course," Ellison replies. "A billion ... or whatever you recommend." Easy enough.

"This is one of the most telling things I've ever seen about how investing works in Silicon Valley," Jessica Lessin, the founder of the tech publication *The Information*, [tweeted](#) of the Andreessen exchange. Indeed, both examples from the document offer a look at the boys' club and power networks of the tech world in action. Is it surprising that rich people (including one of the world's 10 richest men) are throwing money at their friends the way you might on a low-stakes poker night? Not really—and especially not when that man is the richest man in the world. But the eagerness to pony up for Musk and the lazy quality of this dealmaking reveals something deeper about the brokenness of this investment ecosystem and the ways that it is driven more by vibes and grievances than due diligence. Looking at these texts, it seems much easier to understand Andreessen Horowitz's recent \$350 million investment in WeWork founder Adam Neumann's [new real-estate start-up](#), or Bankman-Fried's [admission](#) that most venture-capitalist investments are not "the paragon of efficient markets" and driven primarily by FOMO and hype. "Like, all the models are made up, right?" he infamously told *Bloomberg* last April.

What's immediately clear is that many of the men in Musk's phone are having fun with his Twitter escapade. It is an opportunity to blithely throw shit at the wall and see what sticks. They toss out phrases like "hard reboot" and "Day Zero. Sharpen your blades boys"—to cleave through what they see as an unnecessary and ineffective workforce, perhaps. They imagine massive revenue opportunities and sweeping changes that only they can usher in. For this crew, the early success of their past companies or careers is usually prologue, and their skills will, of course, transfer to any area they choose to conquer (including magically *solving free speech*). But what they are actually doing is *winging it*.

"I'm on 20 threads with people," the former social-media executive told me. "And it's literally like, *Damn, they were just throwing shit at the wall*. The ideas people were writing in, in terms of who would be CEO—it's some real fantasy-baseball bullshit." Despite all the self-mythologizing and talk of building, the men in these text messages appear mercurial, disorganized, and incapable of solving the kind of societal problems they think they can.

There is a tendency, especially when it comes to the über-rich and powerful, to assume and to fantasize about what we can't see. We ascribe shadowy brilliance or malevolence, which may very well be unearned or misguided. What's striking about the Musk messages, then, is the similarity between these men's behavior behind closed doors and in public on Twitter. Perhaps the real revelation here is that the shallowness you see is the shallowness you get.

[Charlie Warzel](#) is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of [Galaxy Brain](#), a newsletter about the internet and big ideas.