

MUSK BUYS MEDIA PROMOTION TO COVER UP HIS SOCIOPATH SICKNESS

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Elon Musk is a singular visionary driving humanity toward a better future—or at least that's what he and his admirers want us to believe. For the past two decades, supporters and news outlets have praised him for the bold narratives he's woven around Tesla and SpaceX, and by extension allowed him to evade scrutiny and become the world's richest man. Any time Musk sends a tweet, you can check his replies to see the devotion of his millions of followers.

As his profile has been elevated by relentless media attention, Musk has become the figure everyone was looking for: a powerful man who sold the fantasy that faith in the combined power of technology and the market could change the world without needing a role for the government. (Just don't talk about the billions in subsidies that kept his companies going over the years.)

But that collective admiration has only served to bolster an unaccountable and increasingly hostile billionaire. The holes in those future visions, and the dangers of applauding billionaire visionaries, have only become harder to ignore.

Tesla's trouble

As CEO of Tesla, Musk's plan was to use luxury vehicles to fund a more affordable electric car. The Model 3 was supposed to be that vehicle, starting at \$35,000. But the current starting price is \$46,990, and most buyers end up paying even more. Teslas are supposed to be the model for "green" automobility, but the emissions required for the production of each individual vehicle are on the rise, and there are persistent problems with production quality which means they're at risk of not lasting as long as vehicles from other carmakers.

More importantly, those vehicles don't have a clean, green supply chain. Around the world, mining companies are salivating at the opportunity presented by a shift to battery-powered vehicles because they're so much more mineral-intensive than the ones we drive today. The International Energy Agency expects demand for battery minerals to soar by 2040, including up to 2,100 percent for cobalt and 4,200 percent for lithium.

But that extraction comes with serious consequences for local environments and nearby communities. In 2019, Tesla was named in a lawsuit over the deaths of children in the Democratic Republic of Congo who died mining cobalt at sites owned by British mining company Glencore. Despite talking about cobalt-free batteries, Musk proceeded to sign a deal with Glencore in 2020 to supply its Berlin and Shanghai factories. The lawsuit was dismissed in November 2021, but in April of this year, an investigation from Global Witness found that Tesla was among a number of companies that may be getting minerals from mines using child workers in the DRC.

It may be easy to overlook consequences that exist at the other end of Tesla's supply chain, but these problems extend deep into the heart of its manufacturing operation. Black workers dubbed the company's Fremont factory "the plantation" after being subject to racist abuse and a number of women described sexual harassment at the facility as "nightmarish." Meanwhile, workers at the Nevada Gigafactory are suing after a mass firing of over 500 people, following reports that Musk praised workers in Tesla's Shanghai factory for "burning the 3 am oil" by working 12-hour shifts and six-day weeks while sleeping on the factory floor.

To top it off, Tesla's customers are also being put in harm's way. Its vehicles have slammed into highway medians, emergency vehicles, transport trucks, and more, while using its supposedly self-driving Autopilot feature. Musk continually misleads the public about how safe and capable the system really is, even as the U.S. traffic safety regulator is poised to recall hundreds of thousands of vehicles. And Tesla is just the tip of the iceberg.

A self-serving future

Elon Musk has wielded a virtual monopoly on how we think about the future, but will his visions really deliver better lives for most people in our society? For all the tech industry's talk of "disruption," keeping us all trapped in cars for decades into the future by equipping them with batteries or upgraded computers doesn't feel like much of a revolution.

A much more sustainable alternative to mass ownership of electric vehicles is to get people out of cars altogether—that entails making serious investments to create more reliable public transit networks, building out cycling infrastructure so people can safely ride a bike, and revitalizing the rail network after decades of underinvestment. But Musk has continually tried to stand in the way of such alternatives.

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Elon Musk has a history of floating false solutions to the drawbacks of our over-reliance on cars that stifle efforts to give people other options. The Boring Company was supposed to solve traffic, not be the Las Vegas amusement ride it is now. As I've written in my book, Musk admitted to his biographer Ashlee Vance that Hyperloop was all about trying to get legislators to cancel plans for high-speed rail in California—even though he had no plans to build it.

Several years ago, Musk said that public transit was "a pain in the ass" where you were surrounded by strangers, including possible serial killers, to justify his opposition. But the futures sold to us by Musk and many others in Silicon Valley didn't just suit their personal preferences. They were designed to meet business needs, and were the cause of just as many problems as they claimed to solve—if not more.

As Musk sets our collective sights on Mars, a town in south Texas and nearby wildlife reserve are being sacrificed on the altar of his personal ambition. SpaceX recently fired employees who wrote an open letter asking it to distance itself from its increasingly controversial CEO, while astronomers and Indigenous groups have expressed concern about what Starlink is doing to the night sky. Meanwhile, scientists will tell you living on Mars won't be an easy task. In service of his dreams, Musk is purposefully obscuring those challenges.

Finding new inspiration

In crafting his future visions, Musk draws on the libertarian tendencies of Robert Heinlein and a technocratic longtermism inspired by Isaac Asimov's Foundation series, not to mention the dreams of Nazi-turned-NASA rocket engineer Wernher von Braun. Future visions cribbed from the pages of science fiction—often of the dystopian variety—and reshaped to fit the desires of the richest man in the world don't serve the broader public. But there are other authors who provide very different answers to the questions of technology and the future.

In 1985, Ursula K. Le Guin took aim at this "imperialistic kind" of science fiction that inspires Musk, in which "space and the future are synonymous: they are a place we are going to get to, invade, colonize, exploit, and suburbanize." The renowned novelist explained that science fiction is not actually about the future; it's about us and our thoughts and our dreams. But when we get confused about that, "we succumb to wishful thinking and escapism, and our science fiction gets megalomania and thinks that instead of being fiction it's prediction."

That's exactly where we find ourselves now: having our future dictated by powerful people who seek to recreate the space colonies or dystopian virtual reality worlds they read about as kids without considering the consequences. Kim Stanley Robinson, whose Mars trilogy helped inspire some of the recent interest in colonizing the red planet, has called Musk's plan "the 1920s science-fiction cliché of the boy who builds a rocket to the moon in his backyard" and one that's dangerously distracting us from the real problems we face here on Earth.

For Le Guin, part of the problem is how we tell the human story: as one where a singular hero aggressively pushes it toward resolution, whether it's the hunter with their bow or the Great Man driving society forward. It also infects our conception of technology, positioning it as "a heroic undertaking, Herculean, Promethean, conceived as triumph"—or as a call to "build"—rather than "the active human interface with the material world" and the more mundane technologies we rely on every day.

Make no mistake: there is a need for people to think about the future and what a better one looks like, especially as we face serious challenges like the climate crisis. But we also need to question the idea of "progress" being sold to us and who it ultimately benefits. The tech industry enjoys casting itself as our savior, delivering empowerment and convenience, but along with it has come an unprecedented expansion of surveillance, an erosion of workers' rights, and the empowerment of white nationalist and fascist groups.

For years, Elon Musk sold us fantasies to distract from the reality of the future he's trying to build, and to get people to accept his growing belligerence. What we really need right now is not more cars, colonization dreams, and technokings, but a collective project to improve the lives of billions of people around the world while taking on the immediate challenges we face regardless of whether it generates corporate profits. That's something Elon Musk can never deliver.