

Scientist vs SHOWMAN



By Ali
Amiri
Staff writer

A new biography of Elon Musk was published yesterday, written by Walter Isaacson, the journalist whose previous works have chronicled the lives of Steve Jobs, Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci and Benjamin Franklin. It comes eight years after another biography, written by Ashlee Vance, which traces Elon Musk's life from his childhood up to the time he spent at Zip2 and PayPal, and then onto SpaceX, Tesla, and SolarCity.

Portraying the puzzling billionaire entrepreneur who is currently running six companies all at once has taken Isaacson two years, during which he shadowed Musk's every move, sat at meetings with him, and had late night talks with the eccentric owner of X – formerly known as Twitter. In addition, he has interviewed Musk's family, friends, and associates to gain a deeper understanding of him.

All the fuss about Amazon's already No. 1 bestseller, which opens with a quote from Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple, is an indicator that the cult of billionaire gurus is only getting stronger.

Today's relentless capitalism, with mainstream media at its disposal, shows a biased inclination towards those who top the Forbes billionaires list, cruelly sidestepping the ones who spend their lives helping humanity achieve collective gains.

These modern-day gurus are almost always praised for their perseverance in their efforts to "change the world," while rarely this critical question is raised: for better or for worse?

But who is this enigmatic "world-changer" constantly dominating headlines, really? Is he a genius rocket scientist working 80 hours a week for the sake of humanity, or just a showman tycoon who cares only about making money out of thin air?

Elon Reeve Musk was born on June 28, 1971, in Pretoria, South Africa, to a well-to-do family. Growing up under apartheid, he "was shy and awkward at school" and "didn't have many friends," according to his mother, Maye Musk. He was also bullied by peers, and at one point was so badly beaten that he was hospitalized for two weeks.

At the young age of 10, Elon developed an interest in computing and video games, and soon after took up the habit of founding – or confounding – companies, running and selling them when a good bid arrived. The list of enterprises he participated in is long, including names such as Zip2, PayPal, SpaceX, Starlink, Tesla, Neuralink, and Twitter, which he then rebranded as X.

Musk's education is by all standards unimpressive, as he holds a modest Bachelor of Arts in Physics. In 1995, he dropped out of a PhD program in materials science at Stanford University only two days after being accepted. Yet, through his immaculate business intuition which led him to venture into the markets where government money was abundant, especially through his investments in Tesla, he was able to accumulate a legendary wealth. But, through the years, Musk has shown a significant disregard for others' pockets and wellbeing.

Richest man on Earth

On November 13, 2021, US veteran senator Bernie Sanders tweeted: "We must demand that the extremely wealthy pay their fair share. Period."

He was not pointing anybody out, even though some of the world's richest people are among the most cunning tax evaders. No, Sanders' was a generic "tax the rich" tweet, to which Musk replied, in a shameless act of trolling, "I keep forgetting you're still alive," referencing Sanders' old age.

It's not a befitting position for anyone to oppose such a reasonable sentiment, let alone someone who aspires to save humanity from extinction, and lead them to a brighter future.

He also doubted that \$6 billion – roughly two percent of his wealth – could help with solving the problem of world hunger.

In October 2021, David Beasley, head of the U.N. food agency, congratulated Musk on Twitter for reportedly earning \$36 billion in a single day. "1/6 of your one-day increase would save 42 million lives that are knocking on famine's door," he wrote.

A few days later, Musk tweeted back at him, saying, "If WFP can describe on this Twitter thread exactly how \$6B will solve world hunger, I will sell Tesla stock right now and do it."

During the controversy, Musk seemed clueless as to what "starvation" is and how can swaths of the population dealing with it be saved by just half a dollar a day.

Still, not wanting to pay a fair amount of tax or seeking proof how money can help the very poorest of the Earth show only the tip of the iceberg of Musk's – and some of his peers – unethical principles when it comes to other people's pockets. Musk has shown a great propensity for disregarding other people's finances through using his status to influence stock markets and cryptocurrencies. He has at quite a few turns played with the markets. The most well-known, disruptive case came when he falsely claimed that he had secured funding to take Tesla private, misleading investors. He has also helped bump or dump cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin and Dogecoin, as a result of which so many people have lost their money.

All these instances scream irresponsible conman, not trustworthy leader of mankind.

Media personality

With 156 million X followers, Elon Musk is the most-followed person on the platform he now owns and controls. With myriads of devotees hanging on his every word, he is at a unique position to

propagate his ideas and advance his agendas.

However, some of his ideas are unscientific, and some others are conspiracy theories. Musk's espousing of such conspiracy theories have damaged the reputation of the platform, causing it to lose money. Yet, he was defiant when CNBC reporter David Faber pressed him in a live interview on May 16, 2023, about whether his promotion of them is hurting X's reputation with advertisers.

"I'll say what I want to say, and if the consequence of that is losing money, so be it," said the "free speech absolutist," whose platform has recently come under fire for allowing more hate speech to appear than before.

It looks as though Musk deeply believes that there is no such thing as bad publicity. He comes across as someone who is content to be called out over even hated, as long as he is making headlines left and right.

All this ill-thought-out headline-making makes one wonder whether he's even capable of thinking clearly. It casts doubt on the validity of his business strategies and bold claims of knowing what's best for humanity.

Mars colonizer

Musk has set himself up with the noble task of saving humanity. From warning against population decline to efforts to make humankind a space-faring creature – helpful in the case of an inevitable Armageddon – to worrying himself with the dangers of artificial intelligence, he has crusaded tirelessly to enlighten us mortals and show us the true path to salvation.

Although planning to make interplanetary travel a reality is truly admirable, aspiring to colonize Mars and trying to sell the idea that not only it's possible, but also necessary, is downright foolish. In a bid to ensure that human consciousness would live on, Musk wants to put humans on the Red Planet.

A month or so after Musk unveiled his plans to colonize Mars during the International Astronautical Congress in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 2016, the American astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson told Nicola Davis of The Guardian that in order to "ship a billion people to Mars and have them live there as they are living on Earth, you'll have to terraform Mars."

A sci-fi word from the 1940s, terraform means transforming a planet so as to resemble the earth, especially so that it can support human life.

"If you had the power of geoengineering to terraform Mars into Earth," continued the respected astrophysicist, "then you have the power of geoengineering to turn Earth back into Earth."

Tyson's idea is, by all appearances, the better one for saving humanity. We do already have a planet that could potentially sustain life for centuries to come, given that we pool our resources together and solve the problems facing human life on Earth: climate change, poverty, famine, war, and so on.

"The argument that if we trash Earth we need another planet doesn't work," warns Tyson, further clarifying that he doesn't believe that "escaping Earth and leaving others behind to die is the most sensible solution out there."

Yet, unfortunately, the sensible words of a real scientist are dwarfed by the delirious ramblings of a bizarre billionaire, who is apparently unable to relate on a human level to the people around him, or further away.

Scientist vs showman

Some people might be under the impression that Musk is a genius scientist who primarily concerns himself with building rockets and spaceships and turning humanity into a space-faring species. He does a lot to expand that image, posting pictures of himself gesticulating near launch pads, or sharing via X news of SpaceX's advancements.

