

## 23121 The Guardian view on Elon Musk's Twitter takeover: the unfulfilled promises pile up

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Elon Musk is a fan of the science fiction writer Isaac Asimov. When his spacecraft company SpaceX successfully sent its Falcon Heavy rocket payload into orbit around the sun in 2018, the cargo included a digital copy of the author's classic work: the Foundation trilogy. One of the main protagonists in that series is the Mule, a mutant, megalomaniacal telepath who uses his powers to inspire fanatical loyalty, upend history and conquer the galaxy. No one could miss that Mr Musk has a Mule-sized desire to own the future.

His plan to make humanity a multiplanetary species includes nuking Martian polar ice caps to release carbon dioxide, warm the red planet and make it more hospitable for human life. Yet Mr Musk has a history of making promises he has never delivered on. His disease-curing "brain-machine interface" is way behind rivals. In his defence, the billionaire inventor has disrupted the car industry with his Tesla electric vehicles to save the planet. He has become an iconoclast in the public imagination.

Mr Musk has a large ego and billions of dollars to burn, and inspires such fervour in devotees that his utterances cause stampedes into often worthless investments such as bitcoin. The world's richest man possesses such self-belief that he seems willing to bet his own fortune on his instincts. The truth may be rather more prosaic: Mr Musk is a good engineer, but he is even better at fostering a cult of personality so large that fans invest in him, not his products.

More recently, Mr Musk's "free speech maximalism" has led to him tweeting a fringe conspiracy theory, calling for Ukraine to give up occupied land for peace, and pledging to reverse Donald Trump's Twitter ban. None of these bode well for democracy. Such utterances also risk scaring off big advertisers.

Mr Musk says "buying Twitter is an accelerant to creating X, the everything app". But this sounds like another prophecy destined to remain unfulfilled. Many worry that that may be what Mr Musk is largely about. Tesla is the foundation of his vast fortune. Yet shares in the company are down 40% from last year. Competition from Chinese companies threatens Tesla's bottom line, but so does Mr Musk's inability to satisfy regulators that its cars can be used safely without someone at the wheel. Self-driving cars remain today, like many of Mr Musk's ambitions, more fiction than fact.

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